

Today in History

November 11

A lot of things have happened on this date in our nation's history.

1831 -- Nat Turner, who led fellow slaves on a bloody uprising in Virginia, was hanged. Turner, an educated minister, believed he was chosen by God to lead his people out of slavery. Some 60 whites were killed in the two-day rampage.

Perhaps it is fitting that on this date in **1885**, a man destined to become one of the greatest generals World War II, George Patton, was born.

1889 -- Washington was admitted to the Union as the 42nd state.

1938 -- Kate Smith first performed "God Bless America" on her weekly radio show. Irving Berlin wrote the song for her. Today, to honor US troops, Major League Baseball teams now perform "God Bless America" between the top and bottom half of the seventh inning in lieu of having the crowd sing the traditional "Take Me Out to the Ball Game."

November 11 is most famous for the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month. In 1918, World War I ended with the signing of the Armistice. That event brought November 11 into the focus of the American public. Americans commemorate Veteran's Day. It is the day we honor our veterans for their service to our country. Thank a vet for their service today!

On November 11, 1918, at 5:00 a.m. local time, the Treaty of Versailles was signed, bringing the Great War, later known as World War I, to an official close. The shooting officially stopped at 11:00 a.m. But those six hours between 5:00 and 11:00 were among the bloodiest of the war. The Allies lost almost 11,000 additional men in those six hours. Why? I don't have time to go into it all, but it really doesn't make much sense to me. Troops were ordered to continue advancing and killing, even though victory was already official. Go figure.

The United States entered the war by declaring war on Germany on April 6, 1917, after everyone else had been fighting for three years. Contrary to popular rumor, the US did not enter the war because of the German U-boat sinking the *Lusitania*. That event happened almost two years before the US finally entered the war (May 7, 1915). For the record, the Germans took out ads in US newspapers advising Americans not to book passage on the ship. So generally even US passengers would have to admit they were warned in advance.

What did bring the US into the war was Germany's unrestricted submarine warfare. To many, the *Lusitania* caused so much outrage in the US that many wanted to go to war. But the US government knew that the *Lusitania* was not just a passenger ship. It was carrying munitions. Germany and Great Britain were in a declared war, and the US knew it. Any ship carrying any type of war supplies was fair game if the intended destination was a belligerent nation. Only in the relatively modern age have the munitions the ship carried been discovered, proving that the Germans were right all along.

The addition of US forces that arrived in France on June 25, 1917, to the Allied side did eventually turn a stalemate into an Allied victory. Germany was actually winning the war, but couldn't beat the superior US Army. The tide turned relatively quickly once the US was involved.

Germany got the blame for the war, and the bill, and that had a lot to do with the economic problems Germany experienced for several years. The resulting economic upheaval paved the way for a man who was a corporal in the German army in WW I to rise to power. His name was Adolph Hitler.

The "war to end all wars" caused the deaths of somewhere between 20 million and 50 million people, depending on which estimates you believe. Nine million of the dead were soldiers, and another 21 million soldiers were wounded. The USA lost a little over 200,000 troops in the war, way fewer than any other major belligerent country.

The war did not end all wars. One German soldier told an American that the Germans hadn't been properly licked, they just knew when to quit. Then he said to give the Germans 20 years and they would be back. Less than 21 years later, an even bigger war, World War II, was in progress. Much of World War II was fought over the same ground as World War I.

In 1921, President Warren G. Harding dedicated the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery. In case you don't know, in the tomb originally contained the remains of an unknown soldier killed during World War I. The "unknown" soldier was later identified through DNA testing, and now it is known as the Tomb of the Unknowns. I can think of few things that indicate how much America cares about our war dead than what happens there.

The Tomb is guarded by a Sentinel 24 hours a day. Since 1930, there has never been a moment when the Tomb was unguarded. Sentinels guarding the Tomb have carried on in rain, sleet, hail, shine, or snow. The heat in the summer does not stop them. Not even hurricane Isabel stopped them. Sentinels refused to stop doing their job even when they were given permission to because of the hurricane.

Sentinels are between 5'10" and 6'2" tall, and his waist cannot exceed 30". There is a lot to being a Sentinel. Their duty continues at least a minimum of two years. During that time, they live in a barracks under the Tomb. Sentinels must study over 170 of the most notable people laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery. He must know who they are and where they are interred. In other words, being a Sentinel is not easy.

It takes hours to prepare the uniform for the 30 minutes of guard duty. The Sentinel's uniform has no folds or wrinkles. It is free of all lint before the Sentinel takes his post.

On his shoulder, the Sentinel carries a rifle with a bayonet attached. His gloves are wet to help prevent losing his grip on the rifle. He takes 21 steps to march across the Tomb. He stops, then he does an about face. He always carries the rifle on the shoulder away from the tomb, so after his about face, he changes his rifle to the outside shoulder. He pauses for 21 seconds, before

marching the 21 steps back across the tomb. Why 21 steps and 21 seconds? It is for a 21-gun salute – the highest honor given by the military.

I've sent the story of the Sentinels before, and my friend Scott Schrader sent this email in response, and with his permission, I share it with you:

Rex:

When I was in high school, we went to DC for a trip. We visited several monuments including Arlington. When we arrived at the Tomb of the Unknowns, we saw the Sentinel standing in attention and not marching. After about a minute, we learned why. A man in street clothes who was obviously a Sentinel too (as evidenced by his haircut) came out, walked over to the Sentinel standing at attention, and proceeded to tie his shoe. His shoe had come untied and he could not bend down to tie it lest he wrinkle his uniform. After having his shoe tied, he resumed his march. It was pretty neat.

D. Scott Schrader

Who are these men with such devotion to duty? They are part of the Third United States Infantry Regiment ("Old Guard"). Think about it. They carry on through the coldest night or day. Regardless of snow, ice, or cold, the Sentinels continue to guard the Tomb. Regardless of how hot it gets, or how bright the sun, the Sentinels continue their duty. No amount of wind or rain has ever stopped them. Hail has never stopped them. It's actually quite amazing when you think about it. The Sentinel is changed every 30 minutes.

Inscribed at the Tomb is "Here rests in honored glory an American soldier known but to God." It has been many years since it was even possible for a Sentinel guarding the Tomb to have actually known who might be inside.

The Sentinels don't know whose remains they are guarding, but honestly, can you think of anything that says we care any louder than their continuous duty? No other country makes such an effort to retrieve its war dead. No other country tries so hard to find the remains of its military personnel killed or missing in action. Americans have actually been killed in battle trying to retrieve the body of a fellow serviceman. Somehow, if we don't find one MIA presumed dead, we consider it a failure. Perhaps it is, but if you judge by other countries, we have the lowest failure rate in the world.

Originally this was celebrated as Armistice Day, which was a day to celebrate the end of the war and honor those men (and women) who have served in the armed forces. In World War I, over 200,000 young Americans lost their lives. Then came World War II, and then Korea. It was decided to make it "Veterans Day," to honor all those who served in all wars.

While Memorial Day honors those who have sacrificed their lives for their country, Veteran's Day is dedicated to honor all men and women, both living and deceased, who have served in the nation's armed forces. Veteran's Day is celebrated on November 11th, regardless of the day of the week on which it falls.

I hope you will remember the reason we celebrate today. It is not for the parades, and it isn't to give old men a chance to be in the parades. Today we honor them as the heroes who served our nation, all of whom are prepared to fight for our freedoms on a moment's notice. Remember that a lot of the men they fought with did not come home. Thank you veterans for all you have done for our country, and us. God bless you.

I hope you enjoyed today's history lesson.

Rex L. Hogue

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