

# The RETURN

TERRY SUTTON

of the

## UNKNOWN WARRIOR - 1920

In the last edition of the *Newsletter*, Vice-Chairman John Gerrard gave an interesting account of the part Dover Marine Station played in the reception of the Unknown Warrior and explained why a plaque was being prepared on behalf of the Dover Society, to mark the spot where this national hero was landed on arrival from France in 1920.

How the remains of the Unknown Warrior were selected makes an interesting story, somewhat hidden in myths and rumours that have gathered around the event of seventy-seven years ago.

At first the idea of a tomb for an Unknown Warrior in Britain was not well received - the French already had a similar idea for Paris - but eventually King George V gave his consent and the orders went out to senior British Officers in France, a country still recovering from the ravages of the 1914-18 war.

Groups of British soldiers, each under an officer, went independently and secretly to four of the biggest battlefields - Aisne, Arras, Somme and Ypres - where crude wooden crosses marked the spots where "Tommies" were buried.

Each group, armed with shovels and a sack, located a cross that indicated the identity of the soldier below was not known. The remains were exhumed, placed in the sack, and taken by field ambulance to a temporary chapel at St. Pol in Northern France.

The four sets of remains were guarded there over-

night and next day a high-ranking British officer - some reports say he was blindfolded - entered the chapel and touched one of the bodies, all of which were covered by Union flags.

That one body, inside a plain coffin, was taken to Boulogne where its last resting place in France is already marked by a plaque. With the coffin went sacks of soil dug from the spot where the soldier had died, so that the earth of France that he was defending would cover the warrior's last resting place in Westminster Abbey.

On 10th November 1920 the body, still wrapped in the sack and in the plain coffin, was placed in a larger oak coffin designed and presented by the British

The PLAQUE to be Unveiled on SATURDAY, 17 MAY

**Near this spot on the 10th November 1920  
the body of the Unknown Warrior  
was brought ashore from HMS Verdun  
on the way to its final resting place  
at Westminster Abbey.**

The Dover Society 1997

Undertakers Association. Then, with great ceremony, it was taken aboard the British warship, HMS *Verdun*, which sailed from Boulogne to Dover. HMS *Verdun* - selected because its name honoured battlefield bravery of the French - was escorted across a mist-shrouded Channel by six destroyers.

At Dover people lined the cliffs and other vantage points to see The Unknown

second anniversary of the signing of the Armistice.

And so, the man who is buried among kings at the Abbey could have been any one - one of the gentry, a professional soldier, a factory worker, even a rogue. But whoever he was he represents all those hundreds of thousands of British troops who died for their country but whose identities are unknown except to God.



The Unknown Warrior is received into Britain. The cortege moves along the Admiralty Pier.

*Dover Express photograph - from Bob Hollingsbee's collection*

Warrior return home. At the Admiralty Pier representatives of the nation were waiting and Dover's civic leaders were among those there to pay homage. With great ceremony the Warrior's coffin, and the sacks of soil, were loaded into a baggage van and taken by railway through Kent where people lined the track all the way to London. Next day the remains of the Unknown Warrior were carried in procession through the streets of London to be finally laid to rest at Westminster Abbey on 11th November 1920, the

Little is known about what happened to the three bodies at St. Pol that were not selected. It is believed that they were buried somewhere in France, along with their Tommy comrades, their gravestones marked 'Unknown'.

Information gleaned from the *Dover Express*, other newspapers and books, including *The Story of the Unknown Warrior* by Michael Gavaghan.)