

THE MOST DIFFICULT DECISION OF ALL



Sergeant Younger had to select the first of Unknowns from four flag-draped caskets.

"Take as long as you need, sergeant," the officer said as a young American serviceman began to pace and listen for God's guidance in the choice of the Unknown Soldier.

THE thunder of the guns of World War I had long been stilled. Most of the boys who had served were already accustomed to the feeling of being back in civvies. But with all that over, it was still urgently clear that something remained undone.

When the boys had come marching home, faces were missing in the formations. Faces . . . missing in action, believed dead.

Congress hit upon the something which was lacking, an expression

of the nation's gratitude to those who had served and died, unhonored and unidentified. By doing honor to them the country in a way would also be honoring those who had served and lived.

Accordingly on March 4, 1921, legislation was enacted for the burial in Arlington National Cemetery of an unknown soldier from World War I. In doing him special honor the country would be paying symbolical tribute to those many other unknowns in final bivouac far from their homeland.

Thus it happened there arose in Arlington the striking yet starkly simple monument with the solemn inscription: "HERE RESTS IN HONORED GLORY AN AMERICAN SOLDIER KNOWN BUT TO GOD."

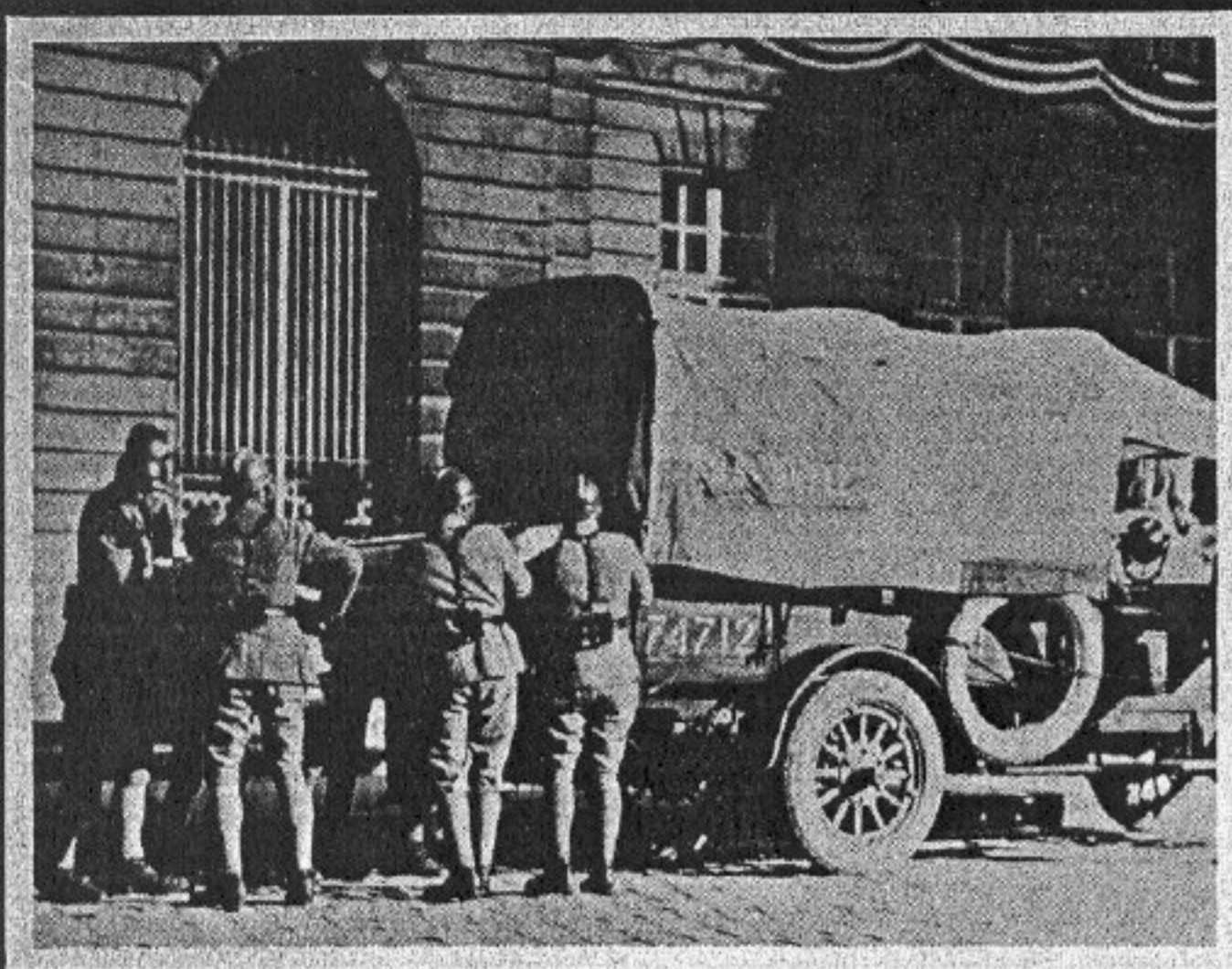
The task of selecting the unknown serviceman to be reinterred in Arlington went to the Quartermaster Corps, official supervisor of military cemeteries since Civil War days. And the choice would by no means be a narrow one; more than 1,600 unidentified American war dead lay buried abroad.

This was not an easy assignment. Before the unknowns were buried at one of the four cemeteries which had once been the main battle line in France, every possible avenue of identification was explored.

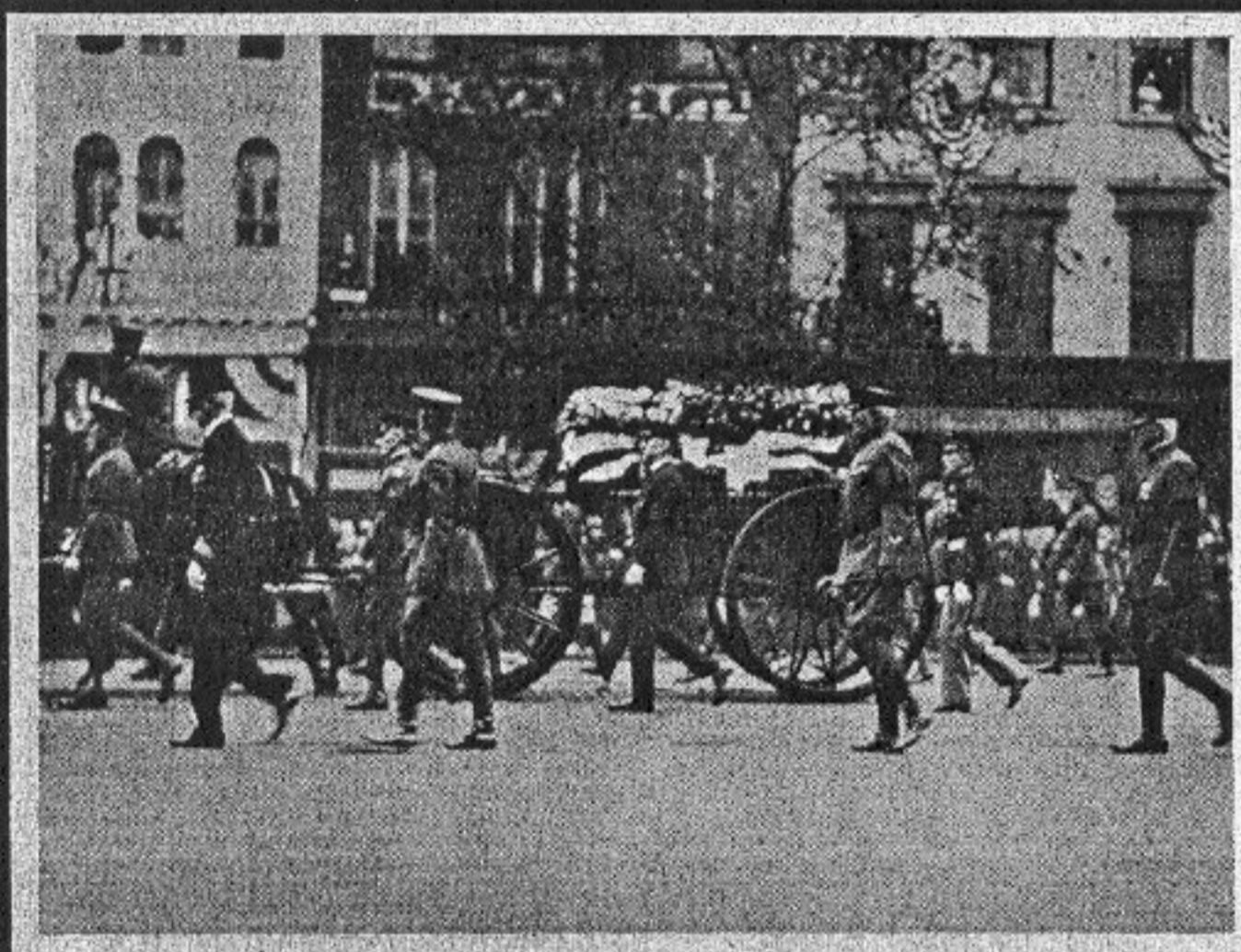
Scientific investigations by experts of the Graves Registration Service could yield no identity of these men. Pathologists, dental technicians, chemists and fingerprint specialists cooperated to the fullest extent humanly possible. Chemists soaked any metal objects found in a solution of diluted hydrochloric acid to remove rust, and many hundreds of the dead had been identified by just a fragment of their identification discs (now known as dog tags), or a faint engraving on a watch.

No clue, however minute, was overlooked. Sometimes a number on the works of a watch, or a scrawl on a tiny piece of paper, a faint laundry mark, teeth fillings, evidence of an earlier leg or arm fracture or even a ring brought about an identification. When all of these tests (plus many others) failed, the investigators could only sign affida-

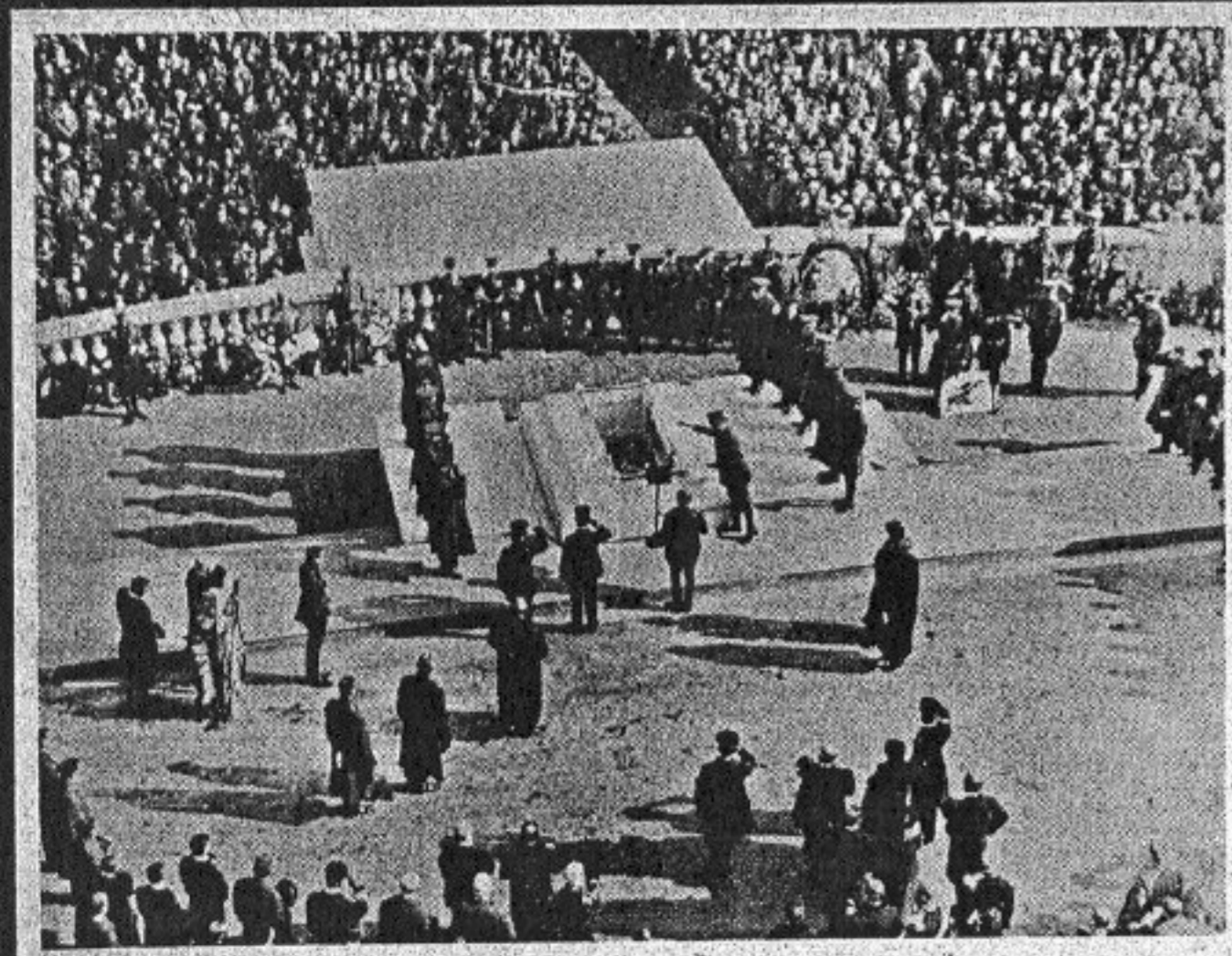
by SSgt. Charles V. Christian
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Photos—US Army



First of the bodies of the Unknowns arrives at the Hotel de Ville, Chalons.



Funeral parade for Unknown Soldier passes down Pennsylvania Avenue.



Unknown Soldier is committed to a final grave at Arlington Cemetery.

vits that they could not provide even the slightest identification of these more than 1,600 men.

On October 22, 1921, seven months after the authorization by Congress, the body of an unknown was disinterred from each of the four French cemeteries at Meuse-Argonne, Aisne-Marne, Somme and St. Mihiel. Four other unknown bodies were selected as alternates in case the exhumations might, at the last minute, reveal the identity of one of the four unknowns originally selected.

Under a guard of honor these four flag-draped coffins were transported to the Hotel de Ville at Châlons-sur-Marne and placed on four catafalques prepared for them. An officer escorted each of the unknown soldiers. When the officers reached their destination they presented the burial papers of their respective charges to the officer directing the ceremonies (a major of the Quartermaster Corps). These papers revealed the location of the unknowns' original graves, and the cemeteries from which they were removed. At this time the major destroyed these papers by solemnly burning them. Now there was no written line or word to associate these dead men with the world they had known.

During the night of October 23rd, a French and American Honor Guard entered the Hotel de Ville under orders and rearranged the four caskets, placing them in different positions than what they occupied upon their arrival at the hotel.

Four days earlier, six men had been selected at random from the American forces occupying Germany. They were ordered to report to Coblenz, Germany, for special duty. From there they proceeded by train to Chalons-sur-Marne to be interviewed by the Commanding General of the area. They were told that one of them would select the Unknown Soldier to be buried in Arlington Cemetery.

As the dawn broke on October 24th, the following announcement was made: "By order of the Commanding General, Sergeant Edward F. Younger will report to the Hotel de Ville for the purpose of selecting the Unknown Soldier."

At 10 o'clock Sergeant Younger presented himself at the Hotel de Ville. An officer met him there and handed him a spray of white roses and told him "... proceed to the caskets and place the flowers on any one of them that you feel to be your choice. Take as long as you need, sergeant."

As the sounds of a hymn from the French military band outside filled the room, Sergeant Younger faced the four caskets and moved toward them. He walked slowly around the coffins and paused. Then he walked around them a second time. As he started to walk around them for a third time he stopped by impulse in front of the third casket from his left. He approached that one and with a trembling hand placed the flowers on that coffin of the man who would now forever be referred to as the Unknown Soldier.

