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Independence Seaport Museum Lends USS Olympia Gangway Board to Tomb Guards of the Unknown Soldier

The long-term loan forges a physical connection between the two organizations ahead of centennial anniversary

Philadelphia, PA (December 2019) – As the centennial anniversary of the transport of the Unknown Soldier of World War I from France to the United States approaches in October 2021, Independence Seaport Museum has loaned a gangway board from the USS Olympia to the Tomb Guards of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery for long-term use in their headquarters.

On October 25, 1921, Olympia – Admiral Dewey's flagship at the battle of Manila Bay – set sail from Le Havre, France to the Washington Navy Yard carrying the remains of the Unknown Soldier, braving a documented hurricane and violent waves that nearly caused the casket to be lost at sea.

The board is loaned by the ship’s steward, Independence Seaport Museum in Philadelphia, to honor the relationship between the Olympia and the Tomb Guards of the Unknown Soldier.

“In her service period, 1895 to 1922, Olympia became the very symbol of the American Navy,” said John Brady, president and CEO of Independence Seaport Museum. “This culminated in the honor of bringing the body of the Unknown Soldier home. To this day Olympia is the symbol of a nascent modern Navy representing the Sea Services’ sacrifices to our liberty and freedom. Having an element of the ship at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier cements this relationship.”

Gangway boards were used to welcome visiting dignitaries and regale them with symbols of the United States; this board could be understood as a silent witness to the Unknown Soldier’s ceremonial reception aboard Olympia.

The gangway board will be safely displayed within a purpose-built conference table in the center of their ready room, in which all guard preparations occur.

“The more that we can connect ourselves with the past with what we do in the present gives us pride in our mission and what we do,” said Capt. Harold L. Earls IV, Commander of the Guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. “We don’t only get to read about the role Olympia played – we get to see pieces of Olympia every day when we conduct our mission, every day when we get back from guarding the Unknowns, from walking the mat 24 hours a day, rain or shine … we’ll walk past this gangway board and
see and remind ourselves of the *Olympia*, remind ourselves of what the sailors [and marines] went through when they went through that hurricane carrying the Unknown across."

The story of the perilous journey across the Atlantic Ocean is little known. The Unknown Soldier’s casket was too big to fit through *Olympia*’s doors; Captain Henry Wyman ordered it lashed topside on the aft weather deck and put under marine guard for the entire voyage. The huge waves of the storm even reached the pilot house and flooded the ship’s interior decks. So strong were the winds that Lieutenant Graves Blanchard Erskine directed his marine guard to lash themselves to the ship’s railings to prevent them from being washed overboard while guarding the Unknown Soldier. Nevertheless, through the brave deeds of the ship’s 400-plus company, the ship safely arrived at the Washington Navy Yard on November 9, 1921.

The long-term loan will serve as a lasting bond between *Olympia* and the Tomb Guards of the Unknown Soldier. The two organizations look forward to working together to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the journey.

For more information about Independence Seaport Museum and *Olympia*, visit [www.phillyseaport.org](http://www.phillyseaport.org).

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**About Independence Seaport Museum**

Independence Seaport Museum deepens the understanding, appreciation and experience of the Philadelphia region’s waterways through history, science, and art, plus experiences on the water. Along with National Historic Landmark ships Cruiser *Olympia* and Submarine *Becuna*, the Museum is home to a boatbuilding workshop, Citizen Science Lab, and a Makerspace. Guests can explore the river with small boat rentals, on-water programming, and one of the largest maritime art and artifact collections in North America. Independence Seaport Museum is the premier, year-round destination on the Penn’s Landing waterfront. See our full schedule of programs and events at phillyseaport.org.

**About the Society of The Honor Guard, Tomb of the Unknown Soldier**

The Society of The Honor Guard, Tomb of the Unknown Soldier (Society) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization committed to protecting and enhancing the welfare and image of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier (Tomb) and the soldiers (Tomb Guards) who stand guard, past and present.