

United States Army Sergeants Major Academy NCO History

Sergeant Danyell Wilson

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Class 56

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History is being made this year in Class 56 of the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy. This year, females make up 16 percent of the class. This is the highest so far. To be a part of history is great, but to make history paves the way for others. History is being made for all women in the United States Army and for women just like me, African-American women. This research was conducted on an African-American female that has not only made history, but will continue by soon attending this great academy.

Sergeant Danyell E. Wilson became the first black female in history to earn the prestigious tomb guard badge and become a sentinel at the Tomb of the Unknowns on 22 January 1997. Born in 1974 in Montgomery, Alabama, Wilson joined the Army in February 1993. Before earning the tomb badge, she was a military police officer assigned to the Military Police Company, 3rd United States Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard) (D. E. Wilson, personal communication, September 19, 2005). She completed testing and a rigorous eight-month trial period and became part of the Honor Guard Company of The Old Guard, the oldest and one of the most elite units in the U.S. Army. Sergeant Wilson became only the second woman to receive the honor. Sergeant Heather Lynn Johnsen was the first, receiving the badge (Pair Make History).

The Tomb of the Unknowns, near the center of the cemetery, is one of Arlington's most popular tourist sites. The Tomb contains the remains of unknown American soldiers from World Wars I and II, the Korean Conflict and (until 1998) the Vietnam War (Hammond 3). Each was presented with the Medal of Honor at the time of interment and the medals, as well as the flags which covered their caskets, are on display inside the Memorial Amphitheater, directly to the

rear of the Tomb. Inscribed on the Tomb are these words: **"Here Rests In Honored Glory An American Soldier Known But To God"**

The Memorial Amphitheater has been the scene of the funerals of some prominent Americans (such as General John J. "Black Jack" Pershing) as well as the site of both Memorial Day and Veterans Days celebrations. The Memorial Amphitheater, once called "America's Temple of Patriotism," according to Philip Bigler (9). The Tomb of unknowns (also known as the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier) is guarded 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, and in any weather by Tomb Guard Sentinels. Sentinels, all volunteers are considered to be the best of the elite 3<sup>rd</sup> United States Infantry (The Old Guard), headquartered at Fort Myer, Virginia.

After members of the 3<sup>rd</sup> U.S. Infantry became ceremonially qualified, they are eligible to volunteer for duty as sentinels at the Tomb. If accepted, they are assigned to Company Echo of The Old Guard (Wilson). Each soldier must be in superb physical condition, possesses an unblemished military record and be between 5 feet, 10 inches and 6 feet, 4 inches tall, with a proportionate weight and build. An interview and a two-week trial is required to determine a volunteer's capability to train as tomb guard.

During the trial phase, would be sentinels memorize seven pages of the Arlington National Cemetery history. This information must be recited verbatim in order to earn a "walk." A walk occurs between guard changes. A daytime walk is one-half hour in the summer and one hour in the winter. All night walks are one hour.

If the soldier passes the first training phase, "new-soldier" training begins. New sentinels learn the history of Arlington National Cemetery and the grave locations of nearly 300 veterans.

They learn the guard-change ceremony and the manual of arms that takes place during the inspection portion of the Changing of the Guard. Sentinels learn to keep their uniforms and weapons in immaculate condition (Wilson).

The sentinels will be tested sentinels will be tested to earn the privilege of wearing the silver Tomb Guard Identification Badge after several months of serving. First, they are tested on their manual of arms, uniform preparation and their walks. Then, the Badge Test is given. The test is 100 randomly selected questions of the 300 items memorized during training on the history of Arlington National Cemetery and the Tomb of the Unknowns (Who are the Tomb Guards). The would-be-badge holder must get more than 95 percent correct to succeed. Over 500 Tomb Guard Badges have been awarded since it was created in February 1958.

The Tomb Guard Identification Badge is a temporary award until the badge-holding sentinel has honorably served at the Tomb of the Unknowns for nine months. At that time, the award can be made a permanent badge, which may then be worn for the rest of a military career. The silver badge is an upside-down, laurel-leaf wreath surrounding a depiction of the front face of the Tomb. Peace, Victory and Valor are portrayed as Greek figures. The words “Honor Guard” are shown below the Tomb on the badge.

On March 25, 1926 orders were sent down directing the formation of an armed military guard at the Tomb, during daylight hours only. Too many visitors to the cemetery were using the original crypt as a picnic table (Peters 67).

On July 2, 1937, the guard was increased in size, and ordered to begin 24-hour shifts. The mission of the Guard of Honor, Tomb of the Unknown Soldier is to be

responsible for maintaining the highest standards and traditions of the United States Army and this Nation while keeping a constant vigil at this national shrine. Also, prevent any desecration or disrespect directed toward the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

The Tomb Guard Quarters is staffed using a rotating Kelly system. Each relief has the following schedule: first day on, one day off, second day on, one day off, third day on, four days off. Then, their schedule repeats.

There are three Relief's assigned to the Tomb Guard Platoon, each consisting of 9 enlisted soldiers (they use the same break-down as a Light Infantry Squad). The heights are equal on each Relief, with the tallest assigned to the 1st Relief: the heights for the 1<sup>st</sup> relief are from 6'2" to 6'4", the 2<sup>nd</sup> relief is from 6' to 6'2" and for the 3<sup>rd</sup> relief 5'11" to 6'. Each Relief is commanded by a Staff Sergeant (E-6) and has two "Teams", each consisting of an Assistant Relief Commander (E-5) and 4 Sentinels (E-4 and below), for a total of 9 soldiers per Relief. The Headquarter (HQ) Relief consists of the Sergeant of the Guard, Assistant Sergeant of the Guard, the Primary Trainer and a Driver.

Bigler stated, "If you have ever watched the Changing of the Guard, you will have noticed that not all Guards do the same thing (12)." The Tomb is completely run by Non-Commissioned Officers (NCO). One of the first reactions of visitors at the Tomb, is to comment on how tall the soldiers are. While you might not notice the difference in height, a Tomb Guard can tell what Relief is working just based on their height.

The Changing of the Guard The guard is changed every hour on the hour Oct. 1 to March 31 in an elaborate ritual. From April 1 through September 30, there are more than

double the opportunities to view the change because another change is added on the half hour and the cemetery closing time moves from 5 to 7 p.m.

An impeccably uniformed relief commander appears on the plaza to announce the Changing of the Guard. Soon the new sentinel leaves the Quarters and unlocks the bolt of his or her M-14 rifle to signal to the relief commander to start the ceremony. The relief commander walks out to the Tomb and salutes, then faces the spectators and asks them to stand and stay silent during the ceremony.

The relief commander conducts a detailed white-glove inspection of the weapon, checking each part of the rifle once. Then, the relief commander and the relieving sentinel meet the retiring sentinel at the center of the matted path in front of the Tomb. All three salute the Unknowns who have been symbolically given the Medal of Honor. Then the relief commander orders the relieved sentinel, "Pass on your orders." The current sentinel commands, "Post and orders, remain as directed." The newly posted sentinel replies, "Orders acknowledged," and steps into position on the black mat. When the relief commander passes by, the new sentinel begins walking at a cadence of 90 steps per minute (Who are the Tomb Guards).

The Tomb Guard marches 21 steps down the black mat behind the Tomb, turns, faces east for 21 seconds, turns and faces north for 21 seconds, then takes 21 steps down the mat and repeats the process. After the turn, the sentinel executes a sharp "shoulder-arms" movement to place the weapon on the shoulder closest to the visitors to signify that the sentinel stands between the Tomb and any possible threat. Twenty-one was chosen

because it symbolizes the highest military honor that can be bestowed -- the 21-gun salute.

Duty time when not "walking" is spent in the Tomb Guard Quarters below the Memorial Display Room of the Memorial Amphitheater where they study Cemetery "knowledge," clean their weapons and help the rest of their relief prepare for the Changing of the Guard. The guards also train on their days off. The Guards of Honor at the Tomb of the Unknowns are highly motivated and are proud to honor all American service members who are "Known But to God."

“The Sentinel's Creed are the 99 words we live by. The words bring vast emotions to the surface when spoken by a Sentinel. We tend to stand a little taller, back a little straighter and our head just a little higher. These words capture the true meaning of why we are Tomb Guards. Whenever a Tomb Guard salutes a commissioned officer, they always say in a loud voice: *"Line Six, Sir!"* (Who are the Tomb Guards)

Sergeant Danyell E. Wilson has lived the Sentinel's Creed and the Creed of the Noncommissioned Officer. Sergeant Wilson is now a Sergeant First Class. Her contributions made reflect great credit upon herself, the NCO Corps and the United States Army.

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