

FIRST FEMALE GUARD AT THE TOMB OF THE UNKNOWNNS – ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY

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An inch shy of six feet, the sergeant epitomizes the spirit of The Old Guard. With a spotless M-14 rifle at port arms, the impeccably uniformed troop stands ready at the Tomb of the Unknowns. In March, Sergeant Heather Lynn Johnsen became the first woman to earn the prestigious tomb guard identification badge, an honor afforded to only 389 soldiers since it was created in 1958. “There is no higher honor, there is no greater honor,” she said. “I can’t think of anything else I’d rather do for my country than to guard the unknowns.” The badge is a temporary award until the sentinel has honorably served at the Tomb of the Unknowns for nine months. Then it will be a permanent part of her uniform.

The 3rd U.S. Infantry, The Old Guard, is the oldest continuously active unit in the Army. Because it is a combat arms unit, The Old Guard did not allow women into its ranks until 1994 when the 289th Military Police Company was attached to it.

Johnsen, an MP who served in the Reserves as a personnel administrative specialist, joined the unit in 1994. After serving in The Old Guard for one year, in June 1995 she applied for training as a tomb sentinel. “My desire to guard the unknowns was always there,” she said. “It didn’t matter to me if I was the first or the eighth.”

After nine months of memorizing and reciting the history of Arlington National Cemetery and the Army, polishing shoes, and perfecting her uniform, after hundreds of bone-jarring heel clicks, Johnsen passed the final written test.

Johnsen said examiners didn’t cut her any slack, but they didn’t stiffen the standards either. “I don’t think it was any more or less difficult than it would be for any male sentinel,” she said.

“Once you prove yourself as a soldier and a sentinel, then you can earn the tomb guard identification badge. I would not be here if I had not proven myself.”



Johnsen made her first walk at the tomb in a pair of low quarters that belonged to her former squad leader, Sgt. Daniel Torrez is now an instructor at the Military District of Washington Air Assault School. By Torrez's recollection, Johnsen is a strong leader and soldier. As a team leader, Johnsen counseled two marginal soldiers lagging in physical training. He credits her with turning them around.

"She's highly motivated all the time," said Torrez. "She'll probably finish her tour as assistant commander of the relief and get promoted to staff sergeant."



Johnsen's new co-workers hold similar opinions of her. SFC Anthony Mills said he knew when he first started working with her that she had what it takes to become a sentinel. "Sgt. Johnsen is a great soldier," said SFC Samuel Smith, sergeant of the guard at the tomb. "I'd be proud to serve with her anywhere."

Only one other female has volunteered for training as a sentinel (as of 1994), but she ultimately chose to withdraw. Still, Johnsen said she hopes other women will be encouraged by her achievement. "I'd hate to think of myself as the one and only," she said. "I would love to see more female soldiers give it a try and make it."

