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(Theme music)

Voiceover: The following is a production of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library. Bringing citizens and citizen soldiers together through the exploration of military history, topics, and current affairs, this is *Pritzker Military Presents*.

(Applause)

Williams: Welcome to *Pritzker Military Presents* with author Patrick K. O'Donnell discussing his book *The Unknowns: The Untold Story of America's Unknown Soldier and WWI's Most Decorated Heroes Who Brought Him Home*. I'm your host Jay Williams, and this program is coming to you from the Pritzker Military Museum and Library in downtown Chicago and is sponsored by Grove Atlantic Press. This program and hundreds more are available on demand at PritzkerMilitary.org. On Armistice Day 1921 the remains of an unknown American soldier who had fought and died in France during the First World War were reinterred at a new memorial at Arlington National Cemetery. While the monument only held the remains of one soldier, he represented the sacrifice of thousands of soldiers who had given their lives during WWI but whose identities were never known. To bear the body from the Capitol to Arlington National Cemetery, General John Pershing, leader of the American Expeditionary Force in France, selected eight of the most decorated men who had served in the war. Together, they represented the story of America's role in the Great War, much as the Unknown Soldier continues to do. In his book *The Unknowns*, Patrick O'Donnell examines the lives and service of those eight men in order to tell the larger story of American service in WWI. These include a cowboy who relived the charge of the light brigade; an American Indian who heroically breached mountains of German barbed wire and captured more than sixty Germans; a salty New Englander who dueled a U-boat for hours in a fierce gunfight; and a tough New Yorker who sacrificed his body to save his ship. The backgrounds and sacrifices of the eight body bearers revealed an America that was diverse, courageous, and indomitable. This distinct American spirit would continue to shape global events throughout the twentieth century and beyond. O'Donnell illuminates the saga behind the creation of the monument and enlivens the story of the tomb by giving voice to those who served. Bringing together exhaustive research and captivating narrative, O'Donnell crafts a timeless tale about answering the calls of duty, courage, and brotherhood. Through the stories of these eight men, O'Donnell humanizes the First World War, the most influential event of the early twentieth century, and evaluates the shadow its legacy continues to cast upon all our lives. Patrick K. O'Donnell is a best selling military historian and an expert on elite units. He is the author of eleven books, including *Washington's Immortals*, *We Were One*, and *Dog Company*. He is also the recipient of several national awards. He served as a combat historian in a marine rifle platoon during the battle of Fallujah. Today he speaks as an expert on espionage, special operations, and counterinsurgency. He provided historical consulting for DreamWorks' award-winning miniseries *Band of Brothers* and for documentaries produced by the BBC, the History Channel, Fox News, and Discovery. Please join me in welcoming Patrick O'Donnell back to the Pritzker Military Museum and Library.

(Applause)

O'Donnell: Thank you. It's good to be home. I've been coming to the Pritzker since it opened up, and it's always special to come back and talk about my latest project, *The Unknowns*. I was in a cab today, and I went around to the various Barnes and Nobles here in Chicago and signed books. The cab driver asked me, "How do you find your stories?" And I told him, "The stories find me." And that's not cliché at all. *The Unknowns*

is no different. I mean, with *Washington's Immortals* I found a rusted sign that said, "Here lie 256 Continental Soldiers, Maryland Heroes," and I wanted to know the backstory behind that sign. With *We Were One*, for some reason I was put in the platoon that had the most casualties during the Battle of Fallujah. The story found me. *Give Me Tomorrow*--it's a book on the Korean War. When I came back from Fallujah I asked my parents not to come. The men that asked me if I wanted a ride to the train station were marines from the 1950s that told me that they had--they had held a hill against all odds in the Chosen Reservoir, and that was *We Are One*. And with *The Unknowns*, it's sort of related to Fallujah in one way or another. I was asked by the battalion commander of Fallujah to give a guided tour for his marines in France, and I gave them a guided tour of Normandy and the various landing points--Sainte-Mere-Eglise. But then we went to Belleau Wood, and at Belleau Wood, exactly one hundred years ago to this day the Marine Corps in the Second Division, the army, saved Paris from a major German drive. And as we were walking around the shell holes and craters in Belleau Wood, some of which they could bury a small house, the trees in Belleau Wood still contain mustard gas from shells that are lodged in there. The world's moved on, but Belleau Wood is still locked in WWI. And we were there with men that I was in Fallujah with, and it was kind of this meeting of generations. It was the Fallujah generation, and it was the WWI generation. And it was there that I realized, it's like today's generation is a forgotten generation and so was the generation that won WWI. That WWI generation is the generation that changed the world; they remade our world. It was a generation that changed everything, and it was WWI that the former Ottoman Empire, which all of the marines that I was with impacted. It was a place that almost killed us. And it was that sort of realization that I wanted to tell that story. And as we walked around, we walked to a place called Hill 142, which was a key inflection point in the Battle of Belleau Wood. And on 142, it was sort of the high ground--it was the highest ground at Belleau Wood. And here the 49th company, which is a band of brothers of this book the Unknowns--I tell their whole story through the war. This book is multiple stories within one story. It's the story of the Unknown Soldier, it's the story of the body bearers, it's the story of the 49th company, it's also the story of the American Expeditionary Forces in WWI. And in 1918 the 49th company on June 6th, sort of WWI's D-Day if you will--was charging through the week. They were facing incredible machine gun fire from maxims. Many men were dropping, but they kept going. And they had to--their objective was Hill 142, which was held by a battalion of Germans. And this small company believe it or not was able to dislodge them. They were also--they held the hill, and they braced for a counterattack, which they knew was gonna come within twenty or thirty minutes. After they captured the hill they dug in as quickly as they could, and Ernest August Janson, who is a body bearer in this book--he's one of the main characters in this book--was in his shallow fighting hole, and he heard the thud of a grenade, and the Germans were screaming--they're charging the hill. But off in the distance in his per-view he could see several Stalheim camouflage helmets, and German machine gunners were setting up their maxims. They were about ready to sweep Hill 142, but Janson let out a war cry and charged at those machine gunners and disrupted what would have been a fatal attack on Hill 142. The rest of the 49th company and other elements were able to then charge that position and secure the hill. In the process he was very badly wounded. As I was with the marines, it was found out that Janson was the first Medal of Honor for the Marine Corps in WWI. He was also, what I found out, was a body bearer for the Unknown Soldier. And I was--what's a body bearer? A body bearer is someone who actually physically returns the remains or carries them. But I found out that General Pershing personally selected him. And I wanted to know who the others were--who the other men were. There might be a story there. And that began my quest, which started in

2010. I went back to France three times with the marines, first with the 5th Marines, and then with the Wounded Warrior regiment. And I started to develop the story. And it's an extraordinary story. It's a story of not only, as I mentioned, our greatest war memorial, which is largely an unknown story, it's a story of the man who selected the Unknown, who's a Chicagoan--also an unknown story. It's a story of these eight men who General Pershing selected, and it's a story of the AEF. And general Pershing was very careful to select eight men from three of the branches of service--the Army, the Marine Corps, and the Navy--but also combat specializations within that--those groups. There was field artillery; there was cavalry. It's hard to believe it but there were actually mounted troops in France, and one of these body bearers was in that story. And it's an amazing story. A story of the Meuse Argonne, a suicide missions. It's the story of combat engineers. It's not guys who build things; it's guys who breach the wire. Corporal Thomas Saunders was a Native American whose job was to take a pair of wire cutters and breach a hole in the German wire, mounds of German wire, for the advancing infantry. Story of the field artillery--forgotten story. I mean, this is the 75s--French 75s--that moved up with the infantry as it advanced. It's a story of the big guns. The coast artillery a branch that doesn't exist anymore. But this is rail guns--these were guns that were so big they moved around by rail. Some of the heavy guns actually were former battleship artillery pieces that were put on rails. It's all of these stories that kind of blend together that tell the story of *The Unknowns*, and I'm so pleased with the result of the book that it's not an individual story-by-story type thing. This is an integrated narrative that's very much boots on the ground immersive, and it tells the story of the AEF, which is a remarkable story that most people don't have any clue about. In 1917 the United States was completely unprepared for war. Its army of 220,000 regulars was in line with Belgium, sixteen or seventeenth in terms of nationalities. And literally overnight General Pershing had to transform that army of regulars into over four million strong at the end of the war. And this is that extraordinary story. And they had to also defeat the greatest army in the world at that time, the German army, which had not largely been defeated. And that is part of the extraordinary story that's told in *The Unknowns*. It goes through--it begins with all of these men meeting in Washington D.C. And it begins with Edward Younger, too, the Chicagoan that I mentioned. And that's an amazing story because--let me kind of go forward and then go backward. The preface of this book begins with Edward Younger, the Chicagoan, who is a doughboy in the 9th infantry regiment of the Second Division. The Second Division included the 4th brigade, which included the Marine Corps. And this was one of Pershing's most elite units. And Edward Younger had been in the toughest combat. He had been in Vaux near Belleau Wood. He had been in Soissons, St. Mihiel, in an epic battle that most people have never heard of, the Battle of Blanc Mont Ridge, an impregnable fortress that the French took--tried to take for three and a half years, and had tens of thousands of casualties. And Edward Younger somehow was able to get to the crest of Blanc Mont along with the Second and the marines, who took the ridge, against all odds, this *Guns of Navarone*, this impregnable fortress, in one or two days. But he was severely wounded. Younger was then back in action for the Meuse Crossing at the last day of the war, which this book covers in great detail. But in 1921 Edward Younger was--he went home, and then he went back to Europe, and in October 1921 he was--he was one of the members for a procession that included the Unknown Soldier and four unidentified bodies from the major cemeteries of France: the Meuse Argonne, Belleau Wood, St. Mihiel where he had fought, and the Somme. An unknown was brought out, and there were roughly 2,200 Americans that were unknown soldiers in WWI, and it was hoped that all could be identified. But there was a movement in the United States prior to this to select an unknown because France and England had both chosen Unknown Soldiers or Tombs of the Unknown. And these

four bodies were removed from the cemetery, and they were brought to Chalon, France, where Edward Younger and six other men were part of a procession. And that night a general officer from the United States was gonna select the Unknown Soldier, but France, later including Andre Maginot, who was administrator of pensions at the time, said to us, "We used a regular grunt to select the Unknown." And at this last second it was decided to use a doughboy and not a general officer, a man that had been through the hell of WWI, to select the Unknown. And Chicagoan Edward F. Younger was chosen that night, because of what he went through with the Second Division in the 9th infantry. And this awesome responsibility, you know, comes to him that morning, and he's nervous. He doesn't have any idea--he doesn't know what to do. He prays, and he's given a clutch of white roses and told to select the Unknown from four caskets that are draped with American flags. Chopin's Funeral March is playing in the background, there's white roses on the floor. And he looks at the American caskets, and he looks at the American flag, and he says that's the most sublime I've ever seen the American flag. And he walks--he paces, he's not able to decide what to do. And he prays again, and for whatever reason his hand is guided towards the one casket. He says that he feels that the man in that casket was somebody that had fallen next to him in battle. And he places the roses on the casket. These are just some of the stories that are in *The Unknowns*. The other body bearers in this book are extraordinary. Let me give you a few details on a few of them. James Delaney is a tough Boston, Massachusetts navy gunners mate that had been in the service since he graduated from high school. His body was inked with tattoos. He had served on numerous ships. In 1917 President Wilson--in March 1917 President Wilson had decided--this is prior to our entry into WWI--that we needed to arm merchant ships with naval gun crews. And crews were given to merchant ships along with artillery. And they were bolted--typically five-inch guns were bolted on top of the deck of a merchant ship, and it was given a crew, a navy crew. They lived with the crew of the merchant ship and endured what they endured. But their job was to protect the merchant ship. They were known as the naval guards, and James Delaney was one of them. And he was assigned to what was known as the USS Campana, a merchant ship. And Delaney and his fifteen-men crew sailed to France, and they were on their way back, and their voyage was suddenly interrupted in the Bay of Biscay by a torpedo. They realized they were under attack. The--this book is, as I mentioned, very immersive. And I spent a lot of time not only with the American archives but also the German archives. And this book tells the story of Delaney's adversary that day, Captain Lieutenant Victor Dieckmann, who at this time was almost a U-boat ace, and a U-boat ace is somebody who sinks fifty ships. Dieckmann had sunk scores of ships at this point. He realized that his torpedoes were precious; he didn't have many left. So he did what he always did. He surfaced, and he went to his deck gun. And the plan was basically to take out what he thought was an unarmed merchant ship. And the crew of U-boat 61 started to fire at the USS Campana and James Delaney. And what ensued was a several-hour running gun battle. The Campana tried to outrun the submarine. It's hard to believe, but the submarine on the surface with its diesel engines was actually quite fast. And the two groups were shelling each other. And this book chronicles, for the first time, this multi-hour gun battle where hundreds of rounds were fired on both sides. And Delaney's crew was actually--their eardrums were bleeding because they had fired so many rounds. But Victor Dieckmann was very wise and kept his U-boat far enough off out of the gun's range, out of Delaney's guns range, that most of the shells fell either forward--mostly forward of the ship, and there were massive plumes of water, but none of them hit. He knew that if any of the shells hit they could pierce the U-boat's hull and potentially would not be able to submerge, which would make the U-boat useless. So they continue to shell, and they continue to pursue both sides. It's a cat-and-mouse kind of pursuit.

Eventually the U-boat shells hit home. They damage the engine room. They were near the engine room of the *Campana*, and Delaney's men were also running very low on ammunition. So Captain Oliver, who was a New Yorker, decided to surrender his vessel rather than have all of the men killed. And they surrender, and James Delaney is taken prisoner. He is one of the early prisoners of war in the Great War. And what's so incredible about the story is that Victor Dieckmann spoke perfect English, and he was able to speak with James Delaney and have a conversation. And I was able to find the original logs from U-boat 61, and some of these original conversations. And he talks about everything from the mood and spirit of America to President Wilson to the strength of the fleet. James Delaney didn't reveal much at all. In fact, he was actually pretty snarky about his answers. And Dieckmann was a very wise man, knew exactly what was going on. But in this kind of space, these men, these six men--the six men from Delaney's crew including the captain were taken aboard the U-boat, and what ensues is like if you've ever seen the movie *Das Boot*, this is very similar. They undergo incredible stresses. They're hit with depth charges. They encounter a Q-ship. This is a merchant ship that actually is a war vessel that had hidden compartments that once the vessel emerges, the compartments are revealed--deck guns are revealed, and they try to take out the U-boat. They got through a minefield, and it's all of these stresses that are in this story that are just absolutely incredible. And they're related in James Delaney's words as well as Victor Deickmann's words. And you're really put into a German WWI U-boat, which is quite an extraordinary story for an American. I won't get into all the details, but I'll leave it at that. Those are just some of the--that's one of the stories in this book, along with Samuel Woodfill. Many of the men in the book are Medal of Honor recipients. And Samuel Woodfill was one of Pershing's favorites. He was considered one of the most heroic members of the AEF by General Pershing himself. And his story goes back--he's a regular. He fights in multiple campaigns. He's had over, you know, fifteen years of experience even before the Great War. He's a hunter, but Samuel Woodfill in the Great War is given command of a company. He's an enlisted man but he's promoted to an officer. And his job in 1918 in the Meuse Argonne is to penetrate one of the most difficult and toughest defenses of all of WWI, the Hindenburg Line. He's to make a probing attack and to do reconnaissance in an area that's just absolutely completely fortified. And the reader is introduced to Samuel Woodfill in a shell hole where he's sleeping. He's sleeping in about three feet of water, but as he says, "You can sleep anywhere when you're tired." And he's sleeping in a shell hole, and his body is covered with scores of lice and fleas, which he calls cooties. And one's actually crawling up his neck as he's in this shell hole submerged in water, he's floating and sleeping. After he wakes up he's told that his company has to make this reconnaissance in force against the Hindenburg Line at Cunel, some of the toughest defenses. And this is something that the Germans had years to develop. Fixed fortifications, barbed wire, machine guns with interlocking fields of fire. It was a complete deathtrap. And these guys--Samuel Woodfill, were only going into this with simple Brody helmets. They didn't have any body armor or anything like that. They had '03 Springfields for the most part, and if they were lucky they, like Samuel Woodfill, had a 45. That was it. And he had to go through into the jaws of death. That morning his men mounted--they got up, they went over the top, and they assaulted the German position, and immediately about ten of his men were slayed by German machine gun fire. Gas started coming in, high explosive artillery hells. He pushed forward, but he soon found himself nearly alone as he was going forward. Many of his men around him were dropping. There were machine gun nests everywhere. And he was an excellent hunter. Samuel Woodfill took aim at one of the machine gun nests, which was in a church steeple. He was able to fell that man with his '03 Springfield. Another key man took that guy out. That nest was taken out. Continued to push forward.

Slayed several machine gunners that were on another nest that was killing his men, but at this point he was particularly all alone and continued to push forward into this, you know, nearly impossible situation. Kind of picture the opening scene of *Saving Private Ryan*. That's kind of the visualization I have and I've seen on some of these fixed situations. This guy keeps pushing forward though. And he lands into a shell hole, and it's--inside of that shell hole is mustard gas, which is persistent. It sometimes lingers in shell holes. He gets a face-full of mustard gas. He's not able to put his mask on. Keeps pushing forward. And as he's pushing forward he sees a machine gunner that's aiming right at him. Takes him out with his 45. Another machine gunner comes in to try to take out Woodfill. He takes him out again, and another machine gunner starts to lunge at him, and at that point, Woodfill--his 45 jams, and he's about to die, but near him is a pickaxe. And he's able to take the pickaxe and slay--basically kill the man or nearly kill the man that's coming at him. And he's able--as this man lunges again he then fells him again with the pickaxe and is able to stop the attack. Took out three machine gun nests single handedly. He was able to regroup with some of his men that came forward. They more or less accomplished their mission, and they went back, and the commanding officer said, "What happened?" "I got a few." (Laughs) And later General Pershing gives him the Medal of Honor for those—for that day. But these are some of the extraordinary stories that are in *The Unknowns*. It's told in a chronological manner. It's told in a narrative history that really puts you there into their positions and their stories. Another individual in this book is a member of the US Navy. I think the navy story in WWI is a largely forgotten story. And Charles Leo O'Connor is no exception. He's a water tender with the US Navy, one of the lowliest jobs there is. And he's in the bowels of the USS Mount Vernon. And the Mount Vernon--in WWI, the navy didn't have many ships. They had pre-Civil War--they had Civil War levels of shipping at this point, believe it or not. And one of the things that they did to augment the shipping--'cause there was a massive need to take hundreds of thousands of men from the United States to France. One of the things that they did was to seize German ships. And the USS Mount Vernon was formerly a German merchant ship. And it was the size—nearly the size of the Titanic. It was a massive ship. And it basically at the beginning of the war, it went to near Maine and it was afraid that--they were concerned that they would be victim to the British or the French navy. So they went to the United States, and what happened was the ship was interned along with the crew and any of the passengers, and for about a year just lingered. But the ship had--not only was it extraordinary in its size and speed, but it also was carrying millions of dollars worth of gold bullion, and the US government seized it along with the ship. It was given a new dazzled color pattern of paint to ward off U-boats, and it was also given a crew, navy crew including Charles Leo O'Connor. And Charles Leo O'Connor was in the bowels of the ship. He was shoveling coal. And his job was, as water tender was to shovel coal and to monitor the boilers in the ship, and this is an extremely dirty task and tough job. This gentleman, he was muscular--he was like 6'2" and just pure muscle from shoveling coal. And made several transatlantic voyages on the Mount Vernon. They had transported troops back and forth. In September 1918 they were bringing our boys home, many of them wounded, but many of them also had influenza, and this is another great story of the Great War. I mean, this is a pandemic that killed on a conservative estimate fifty million people, some say as many as a hundred million because the numbers in China and India are not known. Hundreds of thousand of troops were impacted by influenza or the Spanish Flu, including many of these wounded men that were on the Mount Vernon. So the ship had--was a plague ship in many ways. It was dealing with this virus that was running rampant on board its decks. Things looked good on the ship, though, on the return voyage. There was a rainbow, which the experienced mariners--it was a warning sign. Literally minutes later a torpedo

slammed into the hull of the USS Mount Vernon, right where Charles Leo O'Connor was tending the boiler. And he had to make split second decisions. The men in that compartment--there was also the ship. There was a water tight bulkhead that had to be closed. He had to decide between the men and the ship and his life. Those are some of the stories that are in this book. And at that I'll take your questions. Thank you.

(Applause)

O'Donnell: Yes.

1: In total, 'cause I haven't had a chance to look at any part of the book yet, how many Medal of Honor recipients were there among the eight?

O'Donnell: There were two.

1: Just two?

O'Donnell: Two, and then the other men received Distinguished Service Crosses or Navy Crosses. And what I think is interesting though is Edward Younger, who was not decorated other than receiving two Wound Chevrons. But it's the service that he performed that's extraordinary and interesting. And it's like in all wars, many men are not decorated, but it's the story of those that were on the ground or on the deck in the sharp point that is the important part of *The Unknowns*. And it's the story that I think General Pershing wanted told. He wanted the story of the whole war from its different components, including as I mentioned the field artillery, the combat engineers, the cavalry, the navy, the marine corps, the army, the infantry. All these elements come together to tell the larger story of the American Expeditionary Forces in WWI, which you know, I mean in many ways is a story--we look around. It's not something that is widely known, even in a hundred years. And it's the reason why I wanted to chronicle it in *The Unknowns*. It's to tell a story of this generation that changed the world. And what I mean by that is the world went from a world of empires and monarchies to--in many ways, these monarchies went away--it was the old world to the new world. It's the change of militaries. I mean, the United States changes from Spanish American War tactics or Civil War tactics to a modern military. It's the rise of international finance. It's many, many things that flow from WWI that we don't even realize to this day, and it's the reason why I wanted to chronicle their story in *The Unknowns*. Yes?

2: Patrick, did all of these men bring the bodies all the way back to the US?

O'Donnell: The men themselves--they start--they all form together. Many of the men actually cross paths in France, either in the Medal of Honor Ceremony or on the field of battle. And in the case of the final day of the war, the final two days of the war, November 10th and 11<sup>th</sup>, several of these men are all together in one place, in the Meuse--on the Meuse River trying to cross the river. They then come back together on November 9th at the Washington Navy Yard, where out of the mist the USS Olympia, this great battle cruiser, is carrying the Unknown. It's carrying the Unknown on the deck of the cruiser. It's lashed to the deck. And interestingly enough the casket was so large that they couldn't bring it into the hull of the ship. It almost washed overboard because the Olympia had a very rough voyage home. Makes it home, and on November 9th out of the mist the Olympia comes, and the body bearers and General Pershing and President Harding are all present at the Washington Navy Yard. It's actually the picture on this book. It's where all these men are together. I had the honor about a week ago of actually discussing the book at the very place that these guys came home and they were all together. They then physically remove the casket from the Olympia, and they bring it to the Capitol rotunda, where it lies in state, and tens of thousands of Americans as well as General Pershing and President Harding pay their respects. And then on Armistice Day on November 11th they gather again and they remove the casket, which had been lying on the very same reinforcing pillars that President Lincoln had laid after he was killed. And it was the same caisson that President Lincoln had used. And they

walked in procession to Arlington Cemetery. And this is an incredible ceremony that is meant to provide closure for the Great War for all that have died. And the Tomb of the Unknown is our most sacred war memorial. It represents all of those who had fallen in battle. In WWI it was meant to provide closure to some degree to those who had lost relatives. It was also a chance to heal the country. And all of the groups, and many stakeholders in the country were brought together. For instance the NAACP was there, the DAR--many, many groups from all walks of American society, including the eight body bearers, and then all of the Medal of Honor recipients from WWI were present along with many Medal of Honor recipients—those who survived the Civil War were even there, and they were all walking together with President Harding and General Pershing who was supposed to be mounted on a white horse, but he decided to walk as a regular mourner behind the casket. And they walked towards Arlington Cemetery. And there were many presentations and speeches that were made, but I think the most striking was the final individual that said some words, Chief Plenty Coups, who was a member, a war chief that had fought the United States was given the opportunity to say a few words. And he lays his war bonnet, which is still actually--if you go to the Tomb of the Unknown there's a museum there. That's there inside the museum as well as his war staff on top of the remains, and it's buried in the earth. It's buried in earth from France that they had brought back. But that's some of the stories there.

3: Were there any discussions within the military between the Civil War and WWI on an unknown, identifying an unknown or paying tribute?

O'Donnell: No. The Unknown's story is a very interesting one in the sense that it was not an American idea originally. This was an idea that was born in Europe. The French and the English were the first to honor unknowns. And there was--in 1920 there was a movement that was created by a very famous editor of a women's magazine, and she decided--she wrote a letter to the war department, and she was the one who actually created the movement for the Unknown. And the letter sparked interest--the New York Times went behind it, the AP, and many others. And another driving force was Congressman Hamilton Fish from New York. And Hamilton Fish was an officer in the Black and Puerto Rican American unit known as the Harlem Hell Fighters. And they fought very bravely in France. And Hamilton Fish saw this as an opportunity to honor his men and honor all the fallen. And he took up the cause for the tomb and was able to get it through Congress. And President Wilson signed the bill, and then eventually President Warren Harding presided over the ceremony along--President Wilson was also there. And they were able to get it through, but it's a remarkable story told for really the first time in *The Unknowns*, and it's from the perspective of many of these stakeholders, including the officer who was part of the graves registration service. I found his diary that tells about the four men that were taken from these different cemeteries, and the process that he went through to make sure that none of them had any kind of information that could identify them. They wanted to make sure that they were really unknowns. And they literally burned the graves registration cards that were associated with each one of those grave plots from each one of the cemeteries so that it would be impossible to figure out who each one of these individuals was. But that's the untold story, that's the backstory that's revealed in *The Unknowns*.

3: My question is, how many of the men from the United States and how many of the women passed away in there? And I also remember that the Germans had chemicals that they sent over there, so they would--the chemicals would kill them, but some of them still remained alive even though they had the chemicals. Do you know how many men and women passed away over there? Thank you.

O'Donnell: There were roughly 116,000-plus Americans that died in the Great War, but there were also many that died from influenza. The book really gets into the horrors of



trench warfare and gas attacks. I mean, this is a--think about that. This is a persistent thing; you have to actually fight in combat, with gas around you all the time. Many of these men literally had to sleep with their masks on. And there was not only this gas, but there was also--picture kind of the oily droplets, and this is mustard. And it would get on your skin and just irritate you. And the Germans had perfected techniques to hit positions with mustard and phosgene so that it would first irritate you and you'd have to rip off your mask, and then you'd get hit with the phosgene or hit with artillery. I mean, this is incredibly—what these men went through is a story of human endurance, and it's an exceptional generation that I think is forgotten. And many of these guys, they had no training at all, and the training and tactics they were given at the beginning of the war as obsolete. It was not in keeping with modern warfare. There was a call that, you know, for instance all rifle artillery, rifle fire would be able to suppress fixed positions like the Hindenburg Line, and these men were going into this situation with poor training, but what I think is extraordinary is that they innovated, and they did it in the field, and they did it in an amazing manner, and they were able to defeat the greatest army in the world at the time, the German army. So I think that that's an exceptional story and one that's unheralded and unknown in many cases. Yeah, sir.

4: What happened to the other three bodies of the soldiers?

O'Donnell: They've been--that's a good question. They've been reburied, and they're in France, and they're listed as unknowns. All of them are together as unknowns. But I mean, that's--I think the extraordinary story is, it's sort of highlighting an issue that--of these unknown soldiers--there's unknown soldiers in every war. Not in modern war so much, not anymore with DNA analysis, but we have unknown soldiers in the Civil War and the Revolutionary War, and I think the tomb represents all those generations and all the sacrifices from America.

5: Were locations other than Arlington considered for the tomb?

O'Donnell: Yeah, that was one of the great discussions: where to put these people. Where do we put the Unknown Soldier? There was talk of New York City. There was talk of different places in the United States. And eventually it was decided to do it in Arlington, and I think it was a perfect choice. And the tomb itself has gone through an evolution. The first tomb was very simple. It was very much a simple stone, and then more than a decade later it's what you see now. It's more--in the 1930s it was expanded to include the tomb. And it's worth noting that the tomb includes WWI's Unknown Soldier but also a soldier from WWII and the Korean War, and there was initially a soldier from the Vietnam War, but it's a very interesting story. The family eventually got the government to test the body with DNA, and that soldier was removed and subsequently been reburied with full military honors again.

6: Of course there are thousands of unknowns. Every country had unknowns. Did Germany ever honor their unknowns?

O'Donnell: That is a question I'm not aware of. I don't believe that they have, at least from WWI.

7: In your research, either in their time or later in life, did Younger or the other eight bearers reflect on the significance of what they took part in, and if they did what did they say?

O'Donnell: Yes, Younger's story--I was able to find his hand-typed and handwritten notes in his personal files, which I don't know if they've ever been really explored other than in *The Unknowns*, and he really provides some beautiful words on just the awesome responsibility that he had. And he provides a very, like--his description of what he remembers that day I think was very compelling. And the thing that just--I just was struck by his description of the flag over these caskets and how it was sublime. And I found that to be very--and his, the words that he used to describe how he made this selection, and

how he felt that the man in that casket was somebody that he knew personally that had fallen, that was really, it was powerful.

8: Did Mr. Younger end up staying in Chicago 'til the end of his days?

O'Donnell: He did. He actually was a postmaster with the US Post Office in Chicago. And it's an amazing story. Largely he's a forgotten hero. In many ways he wanted to be a forgotten hero. He wanted to not remember what he did or the Great War.

8: You mentioned some of his memoirs and notes, and I was just curious if he wrote anything down about the Battle of St. Mihiel.

O'Donnell: It's very brief. There's very, very little bit, very little on his actions in some of the actual combat itself.

8: So you didn't put the whole--all of his notes in your book, right?

O'Donnell: Most of them--many of them are. The Salient points are in the book, the quotes, and then there's also in the endnotes more detail and where they came from specifically. They're hard to get. I mean, it's not some--the personnel records from the National Archives is almost--it's a challenging environment to research in, but we were able to get a lot of material from there.

8: Thank you.

(Applause)

Williams: Thank you to Patrick O'Donnell for an outstanding discussion and to Grove Atlantic Press for sponsoring this program. The book is *The Unknowns: The Untold Story of America's Unknown Soldier and WWI's Most Decorated Heroes Who Brought Him Home*, and it is published by Grove Atlantic Press. To learn more about Grove Atlantic, visit [GroveAtlantic.com](http://GroveAtlantic.com). To learn more about the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, visit in person or online at [PritzkerMilitary.org](http://PritzkerMilitary.org). Thank you, and please join us next time on *Pritzker Military Presents*.

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(Theme music)

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