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24 April 2011

Editor's note: The article, shown below, which was published on page 15 of the April issue of Tiger Tales has caused some controversy. The article is shown on many Ex-Service Organization (ESO) web-sites, including the RSL's and has been published in the DVA Newsletter, VetAffairs.

I believe that I was lax in not endeavouring to substantiate the origin or the correctness of the article. Therefore I am printing the following submissions from various people as to their knowledge. This will allow each member to judge the submissions and the previous article on their merits and make their own decision.

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THE VETERANS' REMEMBRANCE SALUTE

It will be noticed at any Remembrance Service or when passing a Cenotaph Veterans will place their Right Hand over their 'Left Side' many believing that they are placing their 'Hand over their Heart' in Respect or Remembrance of their Fallen Comrades;- this is not so.

The Veterans Salute to their "Fallen Comrades" originated in London on Armistice Day in 1920, during the ceremony to unveil and dedicate the Cenotaph in Whitehall at the same time a funeral procession accompanying the remains of the "Unknown Soldier" halted at the Cenotaph during the ceremony before proceeding to Westminster Abbey for internment. Those present included the senior Soldier, sailor and many Victoria Cross winners. The ceremony concluded with a march past. The Regimental Sergeant Major of the Guard Regiment conducting the ceremony, faced with a gathering of highly decorated and high ranking military men (including many Victoria Cross winners), all wearing rows of medals, decreed that all would salute the Cenotaph as they marched past by placing their hand over their medals, signifying that "No matter what honours we may have been awarded they are nothing compared with the honour due to those who paid the supreme sacrifice".

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Submission by Warren (Jack) Bradd, OAM

CPL C Coy 5RAR 1969-70

In 2000-2001 a strange and unusual practice crept into use at ceremonies conducted by the RSL in Australia. This practice is called "The Veterans Remembrance Salute" or as the Australian Regular Army calls it "The RSL Salute", it involves the Veteran covering his medals with the right hand as a mark of respect. A myth has been written which dates the first time this practice occurred was at the British 1920 Armistice Day Parade and the Internment of the Unknown Soldier.

The book "The Soul of a Nation" by Sir Phillip Gibbs 1920 is written about the ceremonies conducted that day. It is detailed in the March Pass the Cenotaph and the VC winners around the coffin of the Unknown Soldier. **No where does it mention the hands covering the medals.** The book is in remarkable condition, nearly 100 years old but very readable. It is available to be read **by anyone** in e-reader format and only 12 pages long takes but a few minutes to read.

From 1920 until 2010 when the myth was first printed in the Veterans Affairs Newsletter there are no documents, films or photos recorded of the practice of covering the medals as a mark of respect. The British Legion (RSL) has no documents or knowledge of this strange and unusual practice.

In 1993 Australia interred her own Unknown Soldier but there are no photos or documents of this practice, as a mark of respect, having been used in any ceremony relating to the Internment.

Most believers of the myth point to the fact that WW1 men would hold their hat over their medals, this is wrong. On the March Pass the Cenotaph the men would remove their hats on the command "Eyes Right' (or Left) and either hold their hats centre chest or at the side, replace them on the command "Eyes Front". Any coverage of the medals was purely accidental. These men had just won the greatest war in history, why would they cover their medals?

I am firmly of the belief that this is simply the copying of the American gesture of placing the hand over the heart, called "The Memorial Day Salute", but corrupting it with the covering of medals and adding a myth to justify it. American serving men and ex-servicemen attending Memorial Day Services are required to hand salute, whether they are wearing cover (hats) or not. The "Memorial Day Salute" is strictly civilian and used at other ceremonies like flag raising, singing of their National Anthem, ETC. How this translates into use by Australian ex-servicemen has got me beat.

Most Americans would be flattered that we are copying their "Memorial Day Salute" but horrified that we are corrupting it to cover medals.

I would like to see some clown tell those magnificent diggers from SASR to cover their VC's, a few weeks in Intensive Care would make him think twice about giving the wrong drum to fighting men.

References;

Tiger Tales Issue 27 dated Apr 2011

The Soul of a Nation by Sir Phillip Gibbs. openlibrary.org

The British Legion

New Mexico Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW)

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Email reply from The Royal British Legion

19 April 2011 18:15

Dear Gary,

I asked our National Parade Marshal for advice on this query and he told me that when he was in the Guards they never got told to salute this way; if they were not in uniform they gave eyes left or right, but never brought their right arm across.

It is not customary to salute this way in the UK, but in the United States civilians salute its national flag by placing their right hands over their hearts when reciting the Pledge of Allegiance or hearing the national anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner". Civilians in some other countries, like Italy and Nigeria also render the hand-on-heart (heart-touching) salute when hearing their respective national anthems.

We do not have any information on the origin of this way of saluting and people who I spoke to in Head Office were surprised to hear that this was the way of saluting the Cenotaph.

The ceremony you describe in your email: maybe you could send some more details, i.e. date of the event, and I will try to find some more information.

Kind regards,

Karolina Brzeska

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Submission from Christopher Jobson

Author of "Looking Forward, Looking Back" Customs and Traditions of the Australian Army.

Saluting In Civilian Attire

The origin of the hand salute of today goes back to medieval times when the raising of the right hand, the fighting hand, was to show that it did not carry a weapon and that the person concerned was there in peace; however, the origin can actually be traced back further, to ancient Roman times. The salute in the Roman armies was one of raising the right arm, with the hand's fist closed, up-over the heart, showing that the person was not carrying a weapon; indicating that he was there in peace and could be trusted not to fight.

Many today think that the modern version of this salute, the open hand up-over the heart, is to cover one's medals; there is also a misconception that this method of saluting is an American custom. Another thought is that this form of saluting originated at a Remembrance Day ceremony in London in 1920; all of these beliefs are incorrect.

There are a number of ways of saluting when wearing a hat in civilian attire; all of which are acceptable. One is the doffing of one's headdress, when returning a salute from someone in uniform. Another is the complete removal of the hat and holding it, in the right hand, standing at attention; for example during the playing of the Last Post or the National Anthem. However, it is also acceptable, on such occasions, to place the hand, with the hat, over one's heart; again, it is not to cover the medals.

There are several photographs of persons in civilian dress at a memorial service in London, just after the South African War (1899 – 1902), standing at attention with their hats over the left side of their chests (covering their hearts), well before the 1920 Remembrance Day Service.

When parties of persons in civilian attire are marching-past a reviewing officer, on occasions such as ANZAC Day ceremonies, the correct protocol is for the leader of the party to (completely) remove his hat (in lieu of a uniformed officer giving a hand or sword salute); he may either hold the hat down alongside his right side or, up-over his heart. However, those within the party, with the exception of the right marker, simply carry-out an 'eyes right'; they do not remove their headdress (the same as troops in a formation do not salute).

Chris spent 30 years in the Australian Regular Army (including active service in South Vietnam) and his postings included:

RSM 4th Field Regiment

RSM 3^d Brigade

RSM Ceremonial & Protocol (Army Headquarters)

RSM Ceremonial (Australian Defence Headquarters)

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Since receiving Warren (Jack) Bradd's submission I have not been able to find any notation as to who or what organisation wrote the article, nor where it was first published.

In the text of "The Soul of a Nation" there is no reference to medals being covered in a salute to the "Unknown Warrior". It did describe the "highly decorated and high military men (including many Victoria Cross winners)", not as they marched past the Cenotaph, but as they were assembled in Westminster Abbey, "Waiting, too, near his grave, were men of the Warrior's own kind."

In the various British Pathe newsreel films of the 1920 Internment of the Unknown Warrior, that are available on the internet, the only salutes that are shown are of the traditional types. There is no evidence of any person giving a salute by covering their medals with their hand.

Gary Townsend. Editor