

# THE Empire



THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER FOR THE ALUMNI OF  
ROMAN CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL



## Did You Know - When Roman opened in 1890, it had an astronomical observatory and lighting was a combination of gas and electricity?

The Tower's Astronomical Observatory  
(From the Catholic Standard – September 13, 1890):

"The tower upon the corner of Broad and Vine Streets is 22 feet square at the base, the height to the square of the gablets 80 feet, the cupola dome 40 feet more, making 120 feet in all. The framing of the dome is of wrought iron covered with copper, and revolves on its base by means of a circular track of cogged teeth with pinion wheel and crank movement. This arrangement for the astronomical observations is complete. To prevent vibration the interior floor that receives the instruments is constructed upon heavy iron beams and post supports, framed independently of the external work. A section of the roof of the dome opens at the will of the party making the observations – giving the telescope a clear view, while the west gablet roof opens entirely north and south for the use of the transit. The corner turrets and gablets are of marble, as also the projecting bay window of the tower."

## The Building's Heating and Lighting:

"The heating is by the direct system of steam heating. The building will be lit by combination fixtures for gas and electric lights. There are three iron tanks set up in the lofts of 7,000 gallons' capacity, resting on iron beams and coupled with three-inch supply pipes and fire hose on each floor in case of fire."

## Did You Know - Philip J. Kieffer from the Class of 1903 appeared in over 29 films during Hollywood's "Golden Era"?

Following graduation from Roman, Kieffer attended the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, graduating in 1911. His father was a Captain in the Union army during the Civil War and his brothers, George and Pierre, also Roman grads, served overseas as senior officers in World War I. Philip served as a 2nd lieutenant with the 13th Cavalry in the Punitive Expedition into Mexico, from March 1916 to February 1917. Kieffer then served stateside with the 13th Cavalry during World War I rising to the rank of Major. After his retirement from the Army, he became an actor and technical advisor in Hollywood. Between 1928 and 1962 he appeared in over 29 movies. He was also the technical adviser and military consultant on at least five major movie productions, including *Fort Apache* (1948), and *Rio Grande* (1950). His son, William, was Commander of the 8th Air Force in Vietnam. Philip Kieffer died in 1962 and is buried at Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery in San Diego.



Philip J. Kieffer (pictured far left), RCHS Class of 1903, and West Point, Class of 1911, held the rank of Major of the 13th Cavalry in WWI. Kieffer went on to act in numerous films including *Fort Apache*, *Rio Grande*, and *Pillars of the Sky*.

# A Prayer for the Unknown Soldier

By Chris Gibbons '79

*November 11, 2021 marked the 100-year anniversary of the first interment ceremonies at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and for Roman Catholic High School this holds special significance. The following essay was published by Broad & Liberty and the U.S. World War I Centennial Commission.*

It was early November 1921, and the storm-tossed waves of the Atlantic Ocean wrought by the great Tampa Bay Hurricane continually pounded the deck of the USS *Olympia* as she valiantly fought to stay afloat. Waves approaching 15 feet repeatedly slammed into the ship causing it to roll a precarious 39 degrees. Crew members witnessed the deck plates shifting up and down and feared they might come apart. As chronicled in Marine Lieutenant Colonel Dennis Nicholson's *In Good Hands*, Private Frederick Landry said that "all hands and the ship's cook speculated on how close she would come to capsizing on the next roll."

Lashed down to the deck of the USS *Olympia* was a canvas-covered box containing the precious cargo. Its importance was so great that a Marine guard was ordered to be stationed by its side around-the-clock. Two additional sentries were also ordered to stand close by and assist should the storm loosen the cargo from its signal bridge mooring. Nicholson wrote that the seas were so heavy that these Marines were "lashed to a stanchion to prevent their being swept from their stations by waves swishing over the decks."

Tasked with forming and commanding the 40-man Marine Guard to accompany the cargo aboard USS *Olympia* was Captain Graves B. Erskine, a battle-scarred World War I veteran who fought at Belleau Wood, Soissons, and St. Mihiel. Erskine said that when he thought of the cargo washing overboard, "I might as well jump over with it." His sentiments were certainly understandable, for the box contained the casket that held the remains of America's Unknown Soldier of the Great War.

Several months prior, the United States Congress approved the burial of an unidentified American serviceman from World War I in the plaza of the new Memorial Amphitheater at Arlington National Cemetery. The bodies of four unknown American soldiers were then exhumed from their battlefield graves in France. U.S. Army Sgt. Edward F. Younger, a Great War veteran and recipient of the Distinguished Service Medal for bravery, randomly selected the Unknown Soldier from among these four unmarked caskets. Amidst great fanfare and newspaper coverage in America and Europe, the famed USS *Olympia*, flagship of Commodore George Dewey at the Battle of Manila Bay during the Spanish-American War in 1898, was selected to transport the body from the French Port of LeHavre. An entire nation anxiously awaited its arrival as a solemn ceremony with President Warren G. Harding officiating was planned for November 11th, the three-year anniversary of the end of the Great War. Numerous foreign dignitaries were to present their highest service awards during the ceremony.

Consequently, the crew of the *Olympia* was well aware of what was at stake, and as the storm continued to batter the beleaguered vessel on November 5th and 6th, Navy ship captain Henry L. Wyman feared that *Olympia* would sink. He knew that his courageous crew would do everything they could to keep the ship afloat, giving their lives if necessary, but the captain now believed that he needed divine intervention. He summoned for Lieutenant Edward A. Duff, a Navy chaplain who, by chance, joined the crew in Portsmouth, England to simply hitch a ride home. Duff, from Philadelphia's Fairmount section and Roman Catholic High School's Class of 1903, served in Europe aboard the USS *Nevada* during the war. He was among the over 1,500 Roman alumni who were World War I veterans. An astonishing 16 Roman alumni served as chaplains in World War I, including the highly decorated and revered 28th Division's Reverend Lieutenant Joseph L. N. Wolfe.

Per the captain's orders, all off-duty sailors and Marines gathered below deck in the mess area where Duff would lead them in prayer to save the ship. A silence fell over the crew as they tightly held

on to the stanchions and pipes of the wildly swaying, creaking ship. Nicholson described the scene:

"...while the ship quivered, they fixed their attention on Duff. He told them that God was with the ship and that He was watching over the crew. Duff stressed the importance of a safe passage because a grateful nation was awaiting the ship that carried the Unknown Soldier. Finally, he prayed aloud that the lone soldier lying unknown in a canvas-covered coffin on a deck far above them would reach the "land of the free and the home of the brave."

Miraculously, in the hours following Duff's prayer, the storm's intensity gradually subsided. For the brave crew, it did indeed seem that God was with them, and all breathed a sigh of relief when Virginia's Cape Henry Lighthouse was sighted in the mid-morning hours of November 7th. "Never has there been a happier bunch of Marines than when we sighted Cape Henry Light," Pvt. Landry recalled. The crew of the USS *Olympia* had fulfilled its duty. The Unknown Soldier was finally home.

In the years after *Olympia*'s heroic voyage, Captain Henry L. Wyman continued to serve in the U.S. Navy and was awarded the prestigious Navy Cross for distinguished service while captain of the USS *Denver* during the Nicaraguan Campaign of 1926-27. Marine Captain Graves B. Erskine eventually served in World War II as commander of the 3rd Marine Division at Iwo Jima. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal for his actions at Iwo Jima and in 1951 he was named commanding general, Fleet Marine Force, Atlantic.

Navy Chaplain Edward A. Duff, decorated in 1920 by the king of Italy with the Chevalier of the Crown of Italy for his service aboard the Italian battleship *Puglia* in the Adriatic, was promoted to captain in 1925. In 1937 he was named Chief of the Navy Chaplain Corps, the first Catholic to hold that position. His lectures on the Unknown Soldier were estimated to have been heard by over 300,000 people. Unfortunately, a heart ailment forced his early retirement and he died in Philadelphia at the age of 58 in 1943.

As for the venerable USS *Olympia*, she was decommissioned in 1922, designated a National Historic Landmark in 1966, and is now docked in Philadelphia as part of the Independence Seaport Museum. It is the oldest steel American warship still afloat.

On October 25, 2021 I attended a ceremony aboard *Olympia* commemorating the anniversary of the start of its epic voyage. Numerous military personnel and veterans were present, including an attaché from France. The most poignant moment occurred when attendees placed roses at the location on the deck of *Olympia* where the box containing the body of Unknown Soldier was lashed to the ship.

November 11, 2021 marked the 100-year anniversary of the first interment ceremonies at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and for Philadelphia's Roman Catholic High School this centennial commemoration holds special significance. Not only is a revered alumnus forever linked to the Tomb's founding, but Roman's Alumni Association also has its own "Unknowns" of the Great War. For the last several years we have been searching for the names of the 34 Roman alumni who gave their lives in World War I, and while 19 have been found thus far, 15 names still remain unknown. It seems fitting then that the words of Edward A. Duff from the Class of 1903 not only serve as inspiration for Roman to 'bring home' our unknown dead of the Great War, but are also a reminder to all Americans of the importance in honoring the Unknown Soldier:

*"You know him and I know him. He was one of the simple, unpretentious boys of the neighborhood. One of the fellows we played with and grew up beside. He is the boy who answered the call to help save his country. There is hardly a mother whose son did not come back alive, nor a veteran who left a buddy on the battlefield, who does not hope and think that man has finally returned home as the Unknown Soldier."* (Edward A. Duff)





# Pro Quorum Memoria



Pro Quorum Memoria is Latin for "In Their Honor." Each newsletter issue will feature those members of the Roman family – two living and two deceased – who have been selected by the Archives Research Committee for recognition as a result of distinguishing themselves in their career, or in certain endeavors of their life, or who have selflessly given their time, or volunteered their efforts to such an extent that their accomplishments and notoriety reflects positively upon Roman Catholic High School.

## Herb Jung 1948



Herb Jung was born and raised in Philadelphia's Chinatown section, hailing from Holy Redeemer parish. Following graduation from Roman in 1948, Herb attended La Salle University, earning a bachelor's degree in Education in 1955. He then served in the U.S. Army and was stationed in

Germany until 1957. In 1958 Herb started a long and distinguished career in the Philadelphia Public School system. He furthered his education at Temple University where he earned a master's degree in Education in 1965. Herb then taught and served as vice principal at Stetson Junior High School and Conwell Middle Magnet School – a school nationally known for its innovative approaches to education. He later became the principal at Stetson, making him the first Chinese-American ever to hold such a position in the Philadelphia School District. In 1988, Herb was appointed principal of South Philadelphia High School and finished his career in 1993 after 35 years of outstanding service. He and his wife Pauline raised a family of five children. Herb died in 2020, but his impact on education in Philadelphia, and his contributions to the city's Chinese-American community will reverberate for years to come.

## Charles Hammock 1959



Charles Hammock was born in South Philadelphia and grew up in the Tioga section of the city. While at Roman, Charles was the 1959 Catholic League champion of the 120-meter high hurdles, and he was later inducted into the RCHS Sports Hall of Fame. Following Roman, after

being offered 14 college scholarships, Charles attended Villanova University where he ran track under legendary coach Jumbo Elliott and also earned a bachelor of science degree in economics. Charles then earned a law degree from Howard University and vowed to become an advocate for racial equality and social change. He served as a Democratic member of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives from 1973 to 1976. Charles promoted a message of equality as a contributing writer and columnist for the weekly Public Record. He mentored many high school students and served as a judge in the John S. Bradway High School Mock Trial Competition at what is now Temple University's Beasley School of Law. Charles' last work as historian, creative consultant, and lead actor was his portrayal of Frederick Douglass for PhillyCAM's community access TV program Conversations Across Time. Charles died in 2014, but his legacy of opposing racial injustice lives on in those he mentored.

## Jim O'Brien 1970



Jim O'Brien was born and raised in Philadelphia, one of eight children to Bill, a Philadelphia police lieutenant, and Sis, his mother. While at Roman, Jim was a 1st Team All-Catholic guard that helped Roman win the Catholic League Championship in 1969.

He was named the outstanding

senior player in 1970 by the Markward Club. Following graduation from Roman, he then attended St. Joseph's University and continued his stellar basketball career with the Hawks and also earned a bachelor's degree in management and marketing. Jim would later earn an M.B.A. from the University of Maryland in 1981. He was named to the RCHS, St. Joseph's University, and Big 5 Sports Halls of Fame. Jim would then serve a long career as a basketball coach at both the college and NBA levels. He was head coach at Wheeling Jesuit from 1982 to 1987, and head coach at the University of Dayton from 1989 to 1994. Jim then served as a head coach in the NBA for the Boston Celtics, Philadelphia 76ers, and the Indiana Pacers. He is currently a senior advisor for the 76ers. Jim is the son-in-law of famed Hall of Fame coach, Jack Ramsey, and he and his wife, Sharon, raised three children.

## Tyree Blocker 1970



Tyree Blocker was born and raised in Philadelphia. While at Roman, Tyree was a 1st Team All-Catholic running back for the Cahillites. Following Roman, he then attended Holy Cross University on a football scholarship. Tyree was later named to the RCHS

Sports Hall of Fame. He began his

career with the state police as a trooper in 1973 serving in troops F, L, and J. In 1985 he received his first promotion to Trooper first class while at troop L. In 1987 Tyree was again promoted to corporal and three years later to sergeant. In 1990, he became the head of Troop J, the first African American to hold that position. Tyree was then promoted to lieutenant in 1992 and a year later to captain. In 1996 he was promoted to major overseeing Section III: Delaware Valley area of Pennsylvania. In 2005 Tyree left the state police and was a senior adviser to the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, and he was then later named adviser to the minister of national security for the Trinidad and Tobago government. In 2014 Tyree returned to the United States, and on August 3, 2015, he was appointed as the 21st state police commissioner of Pennsylvania by governor Tom Wolf. Tyree retired in 2018 and he lives in Chester County with his wife, Janice.

**If you know a member of the Roman family** that should be considered for Pro Quorum Memoria selection by the Archives Research Committee, please send an email to Chris Gibbons at [gibbonscg@aol.com](mailto:gibbonscg@aol.com), or send a letter to the Alumni Office – Attn: Renee Brayboy. Please include a short biography of the nominee with the reasons why you think that they meet the above criteria and should be considered for selection by the committee. Those selected will have their biographies and photos presented in a display case in the school cafeteria, as well as published in *The Empire* newsletter, the school's alumni website, and other RCHS social media platforms.



**Roman Catholic High School**  
**301 N. Broad Street**  
**Philadelphia, PA 19107**

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## News and Events from the Board of Trustees

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### Events

#### Day at the Bay

Saturday, August 13th. Anticipating another record-breaking turnout as we gather again at North Wildwood's Seaport Pier!

#### Day of Giving

It was another record-breaking year! We surpassed our goals of \$150,000 and 800 donors, by raising over \$158,000 from 850 donors! Many thanks to all who donated!

#### Roman Run

Join us on November 13th along Kelly Drive for our Annual Roman Run!

#### Alumni Memorial Mass & Homecoming

Sunday, November 6th. Mark your calendars now as we resume our greatest tradition by gathering at Catholic High!

#### Board of Trustees Nominations

If you would like to become an alumni trustee, or know of someone that would, please contact the Mission Advancement Office, 215-627-5487 ext. 204 or Mike Pelone '77, [mjpelone@yahoo.com](mailto:mjpelone@yahoo.com) and Joe Mangano '84, [JosephMangano@msn.com](mailto:JosephMangano@msn.com)

#### Archives Research Committee (ARC)

The ARC recently announced the winners of the 3rd Annual Bill Laux '43 Essay Contest:

1. Francis Scales '22,
2. Tristan Eyring '22,

3. William Gardiner '22,
  4. Joseph Holahan '22,
  5. Edward Kiely '22.
- Congrats to the winners and to all of the students who participated!

#### Veterans Affairs Committee

The Veterans Affairs Committee requests that you mark your calendars for this year's Veterans Day Assembly as we unveil the new RCHS Korean War Memorial Plaque with 10 additional recently discovered names of alumni who gave their lives in that war.

### News

#### Roman Business Initiative

Roman wants to continue to promote and grow the business listing. Visit [RomanCatholicHS.com/Biz](http://RomanCatholicHS.com/Biz) to view entire listing. Want to add your business? Visit [RomanCatholicHS.com/AddBiz](http://RomanCatholicHS.com/AddBiz) to join the listing.

#### EITC/OSTC

If you owe at least \$1,000 or more in Pennsylvania state taxes you are eligible for the EITC/OSTC tax credit program which allows participants to redirect their PA state taxes to Roman as financial aid for students. In doing so, the participant receives a 90% tax credit. It is a simple program and truly a win-win! For more information and to get started contact Nicholas Pytel '97, [NPytel@RomanCatholicHS.com](mailto:NPytel@RomanCatholicHS.com), 215-627-5487 ext. 204.

#### 1890 Society

The 1890 Society (formally known as the Fides et Scientia Society) was formed to encourage and acknowledge individuals who have designated Roman in their Will and estate planning. The fact is, that every individual, no matter their financial status, can allocate monies to Roman through participation in planned giving. Any alumni, family or friend of the school who has listed Roman Catholic HS in their wills through bequests, charitable gifts, gift annuities, or other planned gift opportunities, becomes a member of the 1890 Society. As Thomas Cahill showed, such a gift to Roman can make a lasting difference, not only for the next generation, but for many future generations. Consider taking steps now to be a good steward of the resources you intend to leave behind in your Will. Remember, Roman needs your help now and in the future. To discuss options and opportunities, please contact Nicholas Pytel '97, Executive Director of Mission Advancement at [NPytel@RomanCatholicHS.com](mailto:NPytel@RomanCatholicHS.com), 215-627-5487 ext. 204.

#### Congratulations to the Roman Catholic High School Class of 2022!

The Class of 2022 held their Baccalaureate Mass and Graduation Ceremonies at the Cathedral Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul on Friday, June 10, 2022. The Board of Trustees extends congratulations to the Class of 2022 and a hearty welcome to the greatest Alumni Association in the world!

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