

MAG – 053 - Crusader

Content Warnings:

- Warfare
- Mass murder
- Burned alive
- Human sacrifice

Discussions of: burns, fire, graphic injury, screaming, human remains, eye horror, paranormal encounter

Mentions of: hospitals, tunnels & underground, scopophobia, knives, self injury

SFX: low drone, high pitched tone

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode fifty-three. Crusader.

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro *Continues*]

[Tape clicks on.]

GERTRUDE

Are you quite recovered?

WALTER

Yes, I think so. Well, enough to tell my story, at least.

GERTRUDE

Ah, good. Sergeant Walter Heller recording, regarding a discovery made near Alexandria during Operation Crusader in November of 1941. Recording date: 5th September 1997. Any time you're ready.

WALTER

Right. W-w-where do you want me to start?

GERTRUDE

Well, you say you were serving in North Africa when it happened?

WALTER (STATEMENT)

Yes, I-I was with the 2nd Royal Gloucestershire Hussars. We weren't even meant to be down in Libya originally, but when the pushback against Rommel

started, the whole brigade was reassigned. We were going to help with Operation Crusader. Well, that was fine by me. My brother Francis had died at Arras when the Germans had pushed through the year before. Rommel had been in command then as well, and I hated him for it. I knew I'd never get to do anything about it, but I always used to carry an old picture of him I'd clipped from a newspaper, and I made sure to keep it in my pack, so I'd know him if I ever saw him again, or just in case.

Well, there were four of us on the tank crew. Frank Malloy was in command, Ralph McKeller did the driving and we had a loader by the name of Dickie. Well, I'm afraid I don't remember his second name. He wasn't with us very long. I was the gunner. I've always had good eyes, you see, and you really need that for the gun. It's all very well for Frank to point at a speck on the horizon and give us the order to fire, but I'm the one that needs to line up the shot close to a mile away and turn a Nazi tank into a smouldering wreck before they can do the same to us. I was good at it, though I managed to get three M13/40s when the fighting started. I would have liked to have had a crack at the Panzer, but it was the Italians who caught us up with at Bir el Gubi, so I never had a chance. Maybe it was just as well. By all accounts, the Germans had a lot more training, so maybe it would have gone even worse for us. But I

still hated having to waste time on the Italians when I knew Rommel and his Panzers were out there in the desert somewhere.

It was all a bit of a mess, to be honest, that battle. Our air support were meant to have bombed their airfields to rubble, but weather had kept them grounded, so we were being hounded by German planes the whole time. The Italians had unsurprisingly taken a page out of Rommel's handbook and they'd backed up their tanks with heavy infantry support, while we were left almost entirely on our own. Frank took to the machine gun when he could keep it pinned down, but it was hard enough to keep our eyes on the enemy tanks, without constantly having to worry about a Panzerfaust coming out of you from nowhere. We were still in the Crusader Mark 1s back then, so we had the speed to keep ahead of them, but I was basically useless when we were driving, and any time we stopped long enough for me to get an eye on the Italian tank, we ended up a sitting duck for their infantry. All told, I think taking down three of them was a pretty good effort.

It was hot that day. I hadn't been in the desert more than a couple of weeks by then and the sheer heat of the place was still something of a shock. I'm from Cheltenham, you see, so not exactly used to the blazing sun of a Libyan desert. And the Crusader, well, for all its advantages, didn't have very much in the way of ventilation, so we were spending a lot of time trapped in what was more or

less a mobile oven. Even then, I could just about stand it, but once the fighting got going and the gun started firing... well, it was only a two pounder, but still... the heat was almost unbearable.

It was about two hours into the battle that it happened. The gun was now so hot I couldn't touch it and I was having to wipe a steady stream of my sweat from my eyes every few seconds. The whole desert seemed to swell and sway in the heat haze, but I dimly heard Frank call an order to fire on a tank from the east. Ralph brought the Crusader to a stop and I heard poor Dickie call from inside that we were clear to fire, swearing all the time over his burnt fingers. I could see the dark shape of an Italian gun in the distance and was trying to get the angle right, but my vision was so hazy from the intense heat that it was hard to focus my binoculars properly.

Then I saw it: a flash of light. A twinkling glint of sun from the enemy tank. In the back of my mind, I knew what it meant: the sun reflecting off their own binoculars, which were trained on us. But my head was so foggy that for all the world it seemed as though they were winking at me. I tried to say something to the rest of the crew, but my mouth was too dry and all that came out was a dull croak.

It was strange, but even with the intense sunlight reflecting off that endless expanse of bright desert, I still remember seeing the flash of their gun. I didn't hear it though. They always say that, don't they? That you never hear the shot that gets you? Well, I certainly didn't.

Then I was on the ground with Frank and Ralph standing over me. Ralph was trying to say something, but I couldn't hear it over the intense ringing in my ears. There was the smell of burning metal and below it another scent I couldn't quite place. I tried to sit up, but there was such an intense shooting pain in my left leg as I did so that I collapsed again. A few yards away I could hear our Crusader, smoke pouring from her cracked armour. It surprised me how intact she seemed, until I saw the flames creeping up from the hatch.

It was then that the ringing in my ears faded enough for me to hear it: the screaming from inside the tank. Dickie was still in there. I looked at my companions and saw in their faces that they heard it too. There was nothing they could have done to save the poor fool, of course. If they had trapped him in there, then getting to him would have been impossible and trying would only have got them killed. So I had to lie there and listen to Dickie roast to death. I don't know how long it took, but it felt like hours.

At some point there must have been a retreat ordered, as I saw the rest of the Crusaders pulling back. Frank managed to catch the attention of one of them and the commander agreed to take me back somewhere the medics could get a look at my leg, although there wasn't room for us all. So they literally strapped me to the top of the tank and we drove off, leaving Ralph and Frank to make their own way back. It wasn't until I tracked Ralph down almost ten years later that I found they had been captured soon afterwards and had spent the rest of the war in an Italian POW camp. Oh, the way they described it, they had been quite comfortable, but as far as I knew at the time, we were leaving them to their death. If I hadn't been so delirious with heat and pain, I might have cried.

My memory of the trip back is fragmented and I have only faint impressions of the pain which every vibration of the tank's engines sent through my injured leg, as I passed in and out of consciousness. Then there was stillness, shouting... I remember a faint prick in my arm and, and, and then a different sort of haze settled over my mind as numbness and sleep spread through my veins.

The next thing I recall with any clarity is my hospital bed. I'd been taken over the border back to Egypt and had ended up in the British military hospital in Alexandria. When I awoke it, it was so quiet that, for a minute, I had the

sudden panicked thought that I might be deaf. But it was just that after so many days hearing the roar of one engine or another, th-the peace of an almost empty hospital was so deep and serene that I couldn't understand it. When she came round, the nurse was kind enough to inform me that I was one of the first wounded to have returned from Bir el Gubi, but they were expecting more.

Sure enough, over the next few days, the ward filled up and my peace slipped away beneath the steady stream of injured soldiers. I didn't mind too much, as it was still a damn sight better than rolling over the boiling desert in an iron coffin, not to mention the fact that it turned out I wasn't going to lose the leg, which is the sort of news to put you in a very good mood. The doctors told me I'd probably always have a limp, as I'm sure you've noticed, but it wasn't infected and there wasn't the nerve damage they'd been afraid of. So, all told, it was a pretty good wound to get.

After a few weeks, I was walking on without too much pain and the nurses advised me to start taking the occasional walk around Alexandria. I did so, but between the locals and the army, it was a crowded, noisy place, even at night. I took to taking my walks further and further from the hospital and the city centre, and occasionally I'd find myself wandering some way beyond the city limits, at least as far as my leg would allow. It was still hot, even in late

December, but beyond the edge of the city, there was a peaceful quiet that I just couldn't find anywhere else.

It was two days before I was due to return to active duty that it happened. I'd been restless all week and I couldn't seem to settle down or focus on anything. Once I got out near Pompey's Pillar, the crowds seemed to disperse and my mind finally cleared a bit. I kept walking, though not paying any real attention to my surroundings, until I found myself rather lost. After several hours, my leg was starting to ache badly and I took a moment or two to rest against a nearby door. The wood of the door was old and dry and creaked as I put my weight against it. I didn't even notice it buckling until it was too late. The next thing I knew, I was lying face down in a dingy basement, my leg screaming in fresh pain. It wasn't broken again, which was a relief, but I still had to sit there for a while, recovering from my fall. N-nobody seemed to have noticed what had happened, or at least they didn't care, and I took a few moments to look at exactly where I was.

The basement looked old, really old. I'm not an expert on Egyptian architecture, but it didn't look much like the rest of Alexandria. More than that, aside from the now broken door, there didn't seem to be any entrance to the place, or anything connecting it to the building above. It was dry and cool

and there didn't seem to be anything else of note, except for an old grate made of brass, or maybe bronze, that I assumed led to the city's sewer system.

It was, as I finally, painfully was dragging myself to my feet, that I saw it. From somewhere far beyond the grate, as the setting sun fell on it, came the glint of something round and white. It was only for a second and if I hadn't spent so long training to spot objects at a distance, I probably wouldn't have noticed it, but there was definitely something there. I approached the metal grate, expecting to smell the sewer beyond, but instead there came the scent of something else. At that point, I had no idea what it was, but I would have described it as not unlike wood. I tested the grate and found it came away easily from the floor, leaving a hole large enough to climb through without any problems.

I had taken to keeping a torch with me on my walks, as I sometimes had a tendency to wander too far and so I'd be walking back in the dark. Shining it into the now open hole revealed what looked to be an old tunnel. Whether it was manmade, a naturally occurring cave, or somewhere in between, I couldn't say, but it was easily big enough for me to walk down and, once again, I saw that glint of pale white a long way down. So I went in.

It was slow going as my leg was still weak and the floor of the tunnel was not level. I had to crouch at points and place my hands upon the dusty walls for support. After a few minutes, I was deep enough that my torch was the only source of light and the passage began to open up into what seemed to be a large room.

It was there, in a small alcove carved into the wall, that I saw what had caught the light. It was an old papyrus scroll, lying amongst the shattered remnants of its case. I cast my torch around and saw more shelves carved into the walls of the chamber, each of which housed a scroll of its own. They were written in a language I didn't recognise, but they were old and they smelt of age and dry decay.

It wasn't the only room like that. There were dozens of chambers like it, all of different shapes and sizes, connected like a warren. Some were empty; others still had a handful of old scrolls left in alcoves or fallen to the floor. It looked like the place had been looted a long, long time ago. After checking through a few rooms, I was sure that whatever this was, it must have been a huge archaeological find. I really didn't know who to tell about it, but I knew I needed to tell somebody. As I turned to head back towards the entrance, my torch beam fell upon something dark in an adjoining room. It was a body.

From the looks of it, the corpse had been dead a long, long time and the dry air had almost mummified it, leaving a desiccated skin stretched tight over the bony frame. It wore what looked to be the remains of chainmail and a black cloth tabard with a pointed white cross emblazoned on the chest. A broken sword lay nearby, now rusted almost into nothing, and as I gazed at the dead man's face, I couldn't stop a chill running down my spine. I tried to tell myself that it was just the way the skull had warped over the years that made him look like he was screaming. His eyes were gone, but rather than simply decaying into nothingness, there were ragged scratches around the edges of the sockets, leaving messy hollow pits. I was feeling very afraid now and had just turned around to leave when my torch abruptly turned off.

It was the strangest thing. It should have been pitch dark. There was no light at all filtering through into those underground caverns. But instead, I, I could see everything. Every detail of the shrivelled corpse before me was as clear as day, though there was no light to see it. I, I can't explain it, even really describe how it felt, but it was absolute darkness and I could still see. At the same time, I suddenly got the most intense feeling of being watched, like a thousand eyes turned to me at once.

I froze. From somewhere, deeper within that strange, ancient library, there was the sound of movement – the rustling of cloth and a slow, rhythmic step

coming towards me. I started to back away, towards the tunnel that had brought me there, but it was hard. The sense of being watched was getting stronger, an almost physical weight that seemed to drag me down.

I reached the mouth of the tunnel just as a figure came into view. It wore what looked like the remains of an ancient robe and, in the darkness, I could see long, spindly fingers stretching, probing towards me. From within its huge, flowing hood, I could see nothing except a single, lidless eye.

I, I, I don't know at what point I started screaming, but I know I didn't stop until I was restrained by military police, fleeing through the streets of Alexandria in the early hours of the morning. I spent another month there undergoing psychiatric evaluation, before being discharged.

GERTRUDE

I see. Did you locate that basement again?

WALTER

Well, well, well I wanted to, but I was supervised the rest of my time in Alexandria.

GERTRUDE

Did you tell any of your superiors about it?

WALTER

No, I, I, I was half convinced I'd dreamt the whole thing up.

GERTRUDE

And did you replace the grate?

WALTER

The, the, the what?

GERTRUDE

The bronze grate over the entrance to the archive. Did you replace it when you fled?

WALTER

I... yes, yes, yes, I think I did.

GERTRUDE

One other thing. That feeling of being watched, have you ever had it since?

WALTER

Well, I wasn't sure whether to say anything, but yes, I have. Just now. That funny turn I took on the way down the stairs. I felt it again. All those eyes watching me.

GERTRUDE

Thank you, Walter. Now, I need to check some maps with you, but I don't think we need that on tape. Are you alright here for now?

WALTER

Oh, well, I should be.

GERTRUDE

It's unlikely to happen, but if anyone else comes down here...

WALTER

I'll tell them I'm an old friend of yours, paying you a visit.

GERTRUDE

Thank you. This statement is off the record and I don't want anyone to bother you about it further. Let's keep it between us.

[Tape clicks off.]

GERTRUDE

Well, that was certainly useful. It's taken a long time to track down someone still living who found the Serapeum of Alexandria. It's not a full confirmation of my theory about ancient iterations of the Archive, but I'm certainly feeling validated for pursuing it. I'd been working on the assumption that the great library itself would have fulfilled the function, but it makes a lot more sense that it would have been the Serapeum offshoot. The ruins of the main Serapeum itself near Pompey's Pillar are quite well researched, so this could be the secret caves mentioned in certain accounts of its destruction.

According to Eunapius, the destruction of the Serapeum in 391 AD was conducted by a Christian mob, emboldened by the reforms of Pope Theodosius I, attempting to drive the worship of all other gods from Alexandria. There are other accounts, however, that claim the scholars barricaded themselves inside with prisoners and retreated to hidden caverns deep below. Some even go so far as to claim the captives were tortured into the worship of pagan deities or offered as blood sacrifices. There's even one unnamed contemporary historian that describes the mob attacking the Serapeum not as Christians, but using a phrase which roughly translates as 'those who sing the night'.

The corpse found by Mr Heller would seem to be the remains of a Hospitaller Knight of the Order of St John, at least based on his description of the tabard, most likely from the sack of Alexandria in 1365 by Peter I of Cyprus. While generally grouped in with the rest of the Crusades, it's generally considered to be one of the few such attacks with no religious motivation. Given this discovery, however, I do wonder if there might have been... other reasons.

Regardless, I have further follow-up of my own to do. My biggest concern right now is whatever creature Mr Heller encountered down there. It was 56 years ago, but if it's still alive, I should be careful. What was it? A guardian of some sort? Or perhaps... perhaps it too was once an archivist.

[Tape clicks off. Tape clicks on.]

ARCHIVIST

Well... only two tapes so far and already... I don't know what to think. Another Archive? An earlier version? Am I just part of a chain? A long, unending string of people who call themselves the Archivist, stretching back to... Are we all destined to end up like Gertrude? Just following the path? I need to find out more about her. One thing's becoming clear though, she did not trust the Magnus Institute, something that I can certainly–

[The office door opens.]

MARTIN

I was just going down to the cafe. Did you want a sandwich?

ARCHIVIST

That, that depends, are you... are you going to keep hovering around me if I go to the canteen?

MARTIN

I just worry. You needed five stitches after you ‘accidentally stabbed yourself’ with the bread knife. If you’re still claiming that’s what happened.

ARCHIVIST

I am.

MARTIN

Then you’ll forgive me for worrying when you use sharp knives.

ARCHIVIST

(Sigh) Fine. I’ll come with. Just give me a second to grab my coat.

MARTIN

Sure.

[The office door closes.]

ARCHIVIST

Mr Heller died from a stroke in 2004, making follow-up on this tape difficult, but I've found a news article from March 1998, six months after this statement was taken. It reports an explosion in Alexandria which destroyed several buildings in the vicinity of Pompey's Pillar and killed 17 people. Official investigation determined it to be a gas mains explosion, but... I wonder. Gertrude Robinson is not who I thought she was.

End supplement.

[Tape clicks off.]

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Today's episode was written by Jonathan Sims and directed by Alexander J Newall.

The Magnus Archives – Episode 053 - Crusader

It featured: Sue Sims as Gertrude Robinson, Harvey Kesselman as Walter Heller, Jonathan Sims as The Archivist and Alexander J Newall as Martin Blackwood.