

MAG – 033 – Boatswain's Call

Content Warnings

- Isolation
- Thalassophobia
- **Discussions of:** Anxiety, altered reality
- **Mentions of:** Mass murder, death, alcohol

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill Presents The Magnus Archives Episode Thirty Three Boatswain's Call

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro - Continues]

[CLICK]

ARCHIVIST

Look, Tim, I'd love to discuss this further, but as you can see, I have a recording to do.

TIM

Oh, come on. Look, it's not a big deal. We just need to do a few of them again.

ARCHIVIST

Out of the question.

TIM

It's just confusing if not. Er, like the garbageman's statement.

ARCHIVIST

Mr. Woodward.

TIM

Yeah, so, you said that Alan Parfitt was reported missing... ah, in August 2009, which would actually be six months after the statement had been given.

ARCHIVIST

Obviously it should have been 2008. I misspoke an '8' as a '9'. What does it matter?

TIM

Well, someone noticed.

ARCHIVIST

Who?

TIM

Er, Josh Cole – great guy – he's one of the students using our resources for a dissertation. Um... oh, and here, in Miss Montauk's statement about her father's killings. You refer to case, um, 9220611 as case, um, 1106922. Oh, and don't get me started on the other case numbers around the Hill Top hauntings, they're a mess!

ARCHIVIST

Alleged hauntings. And who honestly cares if I misspoke case 9220611 as 1106922? Another student?

TIM

Well, actually, yes. Um, Samantha Emery – she's lovely – she's actually doing a PhD in manifestations...

ARCHIVIST

I don't care. It's not enough that Gertrude left us with such a pointlessly awkward filing system. Half the time she doesn't even stay consistent in her own records.

TIM

To be honest with you, er, I don't really understand the system.

ARCHIVIST

Last three digits of the year, then the day, then the month. I don't know why she did it like that, but I can't change it now.

TIM

Oh... okay... Alright, so what happens if more than one statement is given on the same day?

ARCHIVIST

I... don't know. It never came up. Was there anything else? **TIM** Oh yeah, just one.

ARCHIVIST

Good lord.

TIM

So, in case 8163103 it isn't clear if Albrecht's wife is called 'Clara' or 'Carla' 'cause you keep switching back and forth...

ARCHIVIST

Well, I'm sorry if I found it hard to read a 200-year old letter, written in cursive by a native German speaker. Who complained about that one?

TIM

Oh, it's, it's not a complaint. I just noticed actually. Um, look I know you've been under a lot of pressure... it's not a big deal, I just think it might be worth re-recording these statements.

ARCHIVIST

No. I don't have time. I still have a mountain of haphazard statements to get through, not to mention that I need to keep this wretched tape recorder on hand just in case I encounter one of the files too stubborn to work on anything else. And when I do, I have to actually read the damn thing, which is...

TIM

Oh, woah, woah... woah!

ARCHIVIST

Fine. It's fine. I just haven't been sleeping much these last few months, what with all this... worm business. Which reminds me, if you do see Elias, tell him thanks for the extra extinguishers.

TIM

Oh, yeah. Yeah, sure. It's getting bad. I mean, Martin keeps showing me his tongue and asking if it "looks infested". Um. So what do you want me to do about these errors?

ARCHIVIST

I really don't care. Put a Post-It on the tapes or something. I'm not re-recording them. Now if you'll excuse me...

TIM

Oh, yeah, sure, yep, I'll let you get back to it.

{DOOR CLOSSES}

ARCHIVIST

Right. Oh, still running? Okay. Statement of Carlita Sloane, regarding her work on a container ship travelling to Southampton from Porto do Itaqui. Original statement given January the 2nd 2011. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London. Statement begins.

JONATHAN SIMS

I've been working the shipping routes for years now, so I know there's plenty of messed up things can happen out there. You remember the old saying 'worse things happen at sea'? Well, let me tell you it's just as true now as it ever was. But I've never seen weird like I saw when serving on the Tundra. I didn't even want the job, really, but I didn't have a lot of choice. We'd just hit Porto do Itaqui in Brazil in late November of last year when the ship I was on

got stopped because of 'cargo irregularities'. I don't know what it was. Might have been drugs, human trafficking, might have just been a crooked harbour master looking for a kickback, but it didn't really matter. Point was I had to jump ship.

This wasn't an easy thing, though. A sailor's union should be recognised anywhere in the world, but when it came down to it, my membership of Nautilus, a UK union, meant nothing when I was trying to get a place on a cargo run coming out of Brazil. Didn't help that I'm a woman. A lot of people don't think shipping is a job for women. Hell, a lot of people who work on ships don't think it is. You don't see a lot of us in the trade, and every ounce of respect I got, some dick-waving asshole probably bled for. But that's fine, I can hold my own, and it hasn't been such a problem since I shaved my head. It was enough to keep me on land for a good few days, though, as I tried to find another ship to take me on. Well, that and my bad Spanish.

I'm sure I don't need to tell you how relieved I was when I heard that a British ship had made port. The Tundra. Now at that point I was starting to get a bit desperate, so I was keen to go to the captain and just about beg passage. Screw my qualifications, if needed I'd sign on as a workaway. I could find a better position once I was somewhere I spoke the language properly.

I eventually found the captain in a small bar in one of the seedier areas of the dockside. I'd been told his name was Peter Lukas, but to be honest I wouldn't have needed his name – he was the only white guy in the place. Even by those standards he was very pale, weirdly so for someone who apparently lived their life on the sea. He sat there at a small table, completely alone, drinking a cup of black coffee. He was staring into the distance, and didn't seem to notice anything going on around him. I sat down opposite and coughed.

His eyes only moved a fraction of an inch to focus on me, but it felt as though the movement had the weight of a heavy stone door. Like a tomb. Don't know why that's what popped into my head, but there you go. I asked if he was Peter Lukas, and he said, "Yes". I'd gone blank on what to say next, and it was then that I noticed the silence. I looked around to see that the place was now completely empty. Even the bartender was nowhere to be seen, and the only sound was the whir of the ceiling fans above us. The captain was still staring at me, so I swallowed my unease and began to explain my situation to him. I left out the part about the criminal possibilities of my last ship, but was clear that I was in desperate need of a new post. When I had finished, he was quiet for a few minutes. Then he nodded.

"We have one space. Report tomorrow. At dawn." That was all he said. And it was all I needed. The Tundra wasn't difficult to find when I headed to the docks the next day. It was big, already stacked high with an array of colourful shipping containers. I wondered if they'd loaded it up overnight, as there didn't seem to be much activity from the crane. It was early, and I was glad I was leaving Brazil before the wet season really got going, as the sky was threatening to break. Making my way through the dock I asked around until I was finally pointed to the mate. He was a short man, heavy set with a thick, black beard. His warm, brown skin was stained darker by a life working in the sun, and he didn't smile when he looked at me. Around his neck, I saw a chain ending in a small brass ball and stem. It looked like an old boatswain's call, an antique sailor's whistle.

I introduced myself, told him what I'd told the captain and gave my qualifications and experience. The bearded mate listened quietly until I finished. Then he shrugged, and said they were in need of an Ordinary Seaman,

and I was welcome to the position if I wanted it. OS was a bit of a step down for me, as I've been pulling Able Seaman pay for these last few years, but it was a ticket out of Porto do Itaqui, so I jumped at the chance. The mate still didn't smile, but he did offer his hand and introduced himself in a gentle Dutch accent as Tadeas Dahl, First Mate of the Tundra. I was surprised, as it seemed a bit abrupt to be leaving, and I hadn't even had time to stow away the duffel bag that was my only luggage. Still, I wasn't about to disobey the first order I'd been given on a new ship.

The Tundra was pretty normal. I've served on a half dozen ships almost identical to it, and I fell into my duties quickly. We set off almost as soon as I was on board, and it was only later I discovered we were heading across the Atlantic towards Southampton. I was very happy to find that out, as I had assumed we'd be making plenty more stops before crossing back to England. With any luck it wouldn't be more than a couple of weeks before I was home, and those would be spent in maintenance, repainting and taking watches with 'Iron Mike', the autopilot.

So that was fine, but I did start to notice a few things on board which didn't really seem to add up. The first was the crew. They were quiet. Very quiet. I mean, I've been on ships where I was pretty much the only native English speaker, and plenty of people prefer to keep to themselves. Hell, not being too comfortable around people is a damn fine reason to go to sea. This was different, though.

It wasn't just that they didn't talk much, they seemed uncomfortable with me. They'd avoid eye contact, and only barely acknowledge me if we were on a shift together. At first I thought it was because I was a woman, but then I saw that it wasn't just me. They avoided each other just as much as they did me.

Meals were always quiet, no matter how many people were eating, and there was no friendly games of cards or chat in living quarters. There was no real conversation in any language. It was like they were doing everything in their power not to think about each other. It took me less than a day of ignored hellos and grunted answers before I fell into line, becoming just as quiet as my crewmates.

The only person who spoke was Tadeas Dahl. The mate would walk among the crew, giving instructions and orders in a dozen different languages, as the crew scrambled to carry out his commands. He was just as composed as he had been when I met him, and it soon became clear that, if he had emotions, he kept a tight wrap on them. He would stride along the ship, his antique whistle swinging from his neck. He never actually blew the boatswain's call, apparently preferring to summon the crew via the intercom or horn. It just hung there, its polished brass heavy around his neck. I didn't see Captain Lukas at all that first week. I only knew he was onboard because every meal time the cooks would hand a tray of food to the mate, who'd take it up to the captain's cabin. We never saw the man himself, though.

There was one crewmember who did catch my eye. He was a young guy, white and, from what I could tell, Scottish. I never really got more than his name out of him: Sean Kelly. He had the bunk opposite me, and we were on different shifts, so I would often see him lying there when I returned from my night watch. He didn't talk any more than the others, but he also didn't go around with that blank look on his face. He looked scared.

There were other odd things about the ship, but hands down the weirdest thing, I didn't notice until a few days out into the Atlantic. Now one of my duties was to check the deck containers were securely in place, none of the

twistlocks or lashing rods had broken or come loose. It was usually just busywork – I'd never been on a ship that lost a container, though it does happen. This shift, though, I noticed something wrong. I saw that one of the lashing rods, towards the stern, had broken. And not at one of the ends, or the twistlock itself, but right in the middle of what should have been solid metal. From a distance it looked fine, new paint shining in the sun, but looking closer I saw that it had rusted all the way through. Not just that, but checking out where the rod connected to the container, it became clear that they had rusted together. Fresh paint covered up most of it, but once I knew what I was looking for I saw it everywhere. The shipping containers, all of them, were rusted in place. How could this have happened, though, if they were being changed over at port? How long had the Tundra been sailing with the same cargo?

I decided I had to look inside. Stupid, maybe. If it was something illegal, they might toss me overboard first and ask questions never, but only if I got caught. And I was just about sick of nasty surprises.

I did it on my next late shift. I kept an eye on the rest of the crew and waited for my moment. I'd already marked out a ground level container where the padlock had practically rusted off. It wouldn't be difficult to get it open. It was about 3am when I had my chance. I was alone on deck and the wind was howling loud enough to muffle the groan of the container's rusted hinges. It took three kicks from my steel toecaps to get it open, but finally I was able to get the door ajar. It was so stiff it took almost all my strength to get enough of a gap to walk through, but finally I could see inside.

It was completely empty. There was no sign of cargo, or any markings or debris on the floor that might have shown there had ever been anything inside. I

couldn't believe it, a transport ship with nothing to transport? It didn't make any sense. I managed to bust two other containers open, but they were the same. As far as I could tell, every container on the ship was empty.

I was still trying to figure out what this could mean when I saw a couple of torches approaching. I almost panicked and ran, but where exactly was I going to escape to? The empty, uncaring ocean stretched out for hundreds of miles in every direction. So instead I swallowed my fear, and pushed the door careful closed, trying my best to hide the broken lock before making my way onto the deck.

I was met by the mate and a half dozen other crewmen behind him. He looked at me for a second, then nodded and told me to follow, then he continued walking. Confused, I headed after them as they made their way around the ship, silently collecting up or waking all the rest of the crew. I started to ask what was going on, but the glares I got shut me right up. Finally, when we had what looked like the whole crew together, we walked over to the lifeboat.

Now we definitely weren't sinking, so I hadn't really paid much attention to the lifeboat before, but now I looked at it, I realised it wasn't what I'd have expected. Most modern container ships have a lifeboat that looks more like a lumpy orange blob than a boat. They're designed to be quickly and safely dropped into the water and tough out whatever conditions the sea might throw at them. But this was an old fashioned boat, with oars and a winch mechanism for lowering it into the water. It didn't even look like it had any supplies in it. Standing there in front of it was Captain Lukas, as silent as the rest of his crew.

The Captain nodded, and one by one the crew of the Tundra got on board the lifeboat. I got on too. I mean, what else was I supposed to do? I didn't know

what was going on and no-one seemed to want to tell me, but I sure as hell wasn't getting left alone on that big empty ship. So I got in and sat down, as a couple of the crew began to lower the lifeboat into the sea. A few others took up the oars, and as soon as we hit the water, they began to row quietly away from the Tundra, which floated, motionless.

The sky was clear and the wind had died down, so the stars reflected perfectly on the still ocean surface. All the lights on the ship had been turned off, so the world and all the empty horizon was only lit by the moon. As we rowed, I looked around my companions on the lifeboat. Everyone I recognised was there, except for one. I checked each face in turn, but I could see no sign of Sean Kelly, my scared bunkmate. Had we left him behind? Was he still back on the ship, sleeping away ignorant of the fact that he was now utterly and completely alone?

Almost as though he knew I was about to speak, Tadeas gave me a warning glare. The mate reached down and took the old brass whistle from his neck. He pressed it to his lips, and blew. I have never heard a whistle sound like that. It was shrill, so high and piercing that I felt my hair stand on end, but it also seemed distant. Like I was hearing it from far, far away. I don't know how long he blew that boatswain's call for, but by the end, I realised we were surrounded by thick sea smoke. We should have been far too far south for it, but it rolled and billowed around the lifeboat, obscuring the Tundra. No-one said a word, but I could have sworn a few of my shipmates were crying.

I don't know how long we floated there, sat in the dark water, but eventually the fog cleared and the mate sounded the boatswain's call again, this time a short, sharp whistle. We saw the Tundra, dark and still upon the water, and began to row back towards it. The lifeboat was painstakingly raised and the

rest of the crew returned to their positions. Sean Kelly was nowhere to be seen. And I never saw him again.

After that night, the atmosphere on board changed. People talked, and you'd occasionally hear actual laughter on board. Games were played, people drank, and there was this sense of relief to it all. I tried to join in, but got dark looks any time I asked about Sean. At one point the third mate, a man named Kim Duong, told me that I should shut up and be grateful, as it hadn't been "an easy choice".

I kept to myself the rest of the way, and left the ship as soon as we landed in Southampton. I didn't even think about my pay until it came through a couple of days later: twenty-five thousand pounds. For barely two weeks work. I don't mind telling you, it was almost enough to tempt me back. Almost.

JONATHAN SIMS

Statement ends.

An interesting statement, though difficult to investigate any potentially paranormal activity, as there does not appear to have been anything explicitly supernatural occurring in this statement. A lot of strange happenings and implicit weirdness, but nothing that can be isolated as a 'supernatural event'. There's also the fact that even a casual search of port authority records shows the Tundra is a currently active cargo ship operating for Solus Shipping PLC, a company founded and majority owned by Nathaniel Lukas. In addition to such business ventures, the Lukas family also provides funding to several academic and research organisations, including the Magnus Institute. Much as I want to dig further into this, especially given certain parallels with case 0161301, Elias

gets very twitchy when we look into anything that might conceivably have funding repercussions.

It doesn't look like I'm going to be able to do any further investigations into this. Even though the official crew manifest for the Tundra has remained the same for the last ten years. Even though I can't find any record of actual cargo being loaded or unloaded into it from any UK port. Even though Sean Kelly disappeared from the port of Felixstowe in October 2010, and his body washed up on the coast of Morocco in April 2011, six months later. According to the coroner, it had only been in the water for five days. Maybe I'll mention it to Elias. Just in case.

Recording Ends.

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Outro]

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