

MAG – 137 – Nemesis

Content Warnings:

- Wartime trauma
- Prisoner of War experiences
- Torture
- Extreme violence

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode one hundred and thirty-seven. Nemesis.

[Tape clicks on.]

GERTRUDE

Case 9550307 – Wallis Turner. Incident occurred at the North Point prisoner-of-war camp, then later the sunken ship *Nemesis* in late 1942. Statement taken 3rd July 1955 at the Pu Songling Research Centre, Beijing. Committed to tape 9th October 2014. Gertrude Robinson recording.

GERTRUDE (STATEMENT)

I always knew what sort of a thing war was. Even when everything was going to hell, even when it just plain stopped making sense, and what I was seeing and hearing was obviously ghosts and monsters, even then it still didn't surprise me. Not really.

I never wanted to join up, never cared about fighting for my country. I mean, what, like my country ever fought for me? No. No government ever gave a damn about me, and I didn't feel like I had anything needed paying back on that front. Add to that I was terrified. I'll admit it, the thought of marching off to war set my whole body shaking, and I can still remember the nightmares I had when I got the notice. I was half an inch from going conchie, going to prison and taking my lumps, but in the end it was my dad that pushed me into the uniform. And it wasn't an argument, or a telling off that did it either. He just looked so damn proud when I told him: his son, the soldier. Don't know if I'd ever seen him look at me like that before, and I just didn't have the heart to break it. Me going conchie would kill him, so I had to learn to kill others.

And that's the thing that really scared me, you know? I wasn't scared of dying, not really. Everything dies in the end, and the chaplain says you end up with God. Who am I to say different? Even if it's just sleep, just a quiet nothing forever, it's not like you know enough to be bored, is it?

No, death ain't scary. But killing? That's scary. To look another living thing in the eyes and end it forever, strip away everything they could have been, could have done or felt. Nobody should ever have to do that. Sergeant once told me it's no different from killing a chicken back home, but people aren't chickens, and the idea that war strips us all down to just a body that moves and kills, or falls and dies, makes me feel sick to my stomach. And I don't like killing chickens either.

But none of my feelings mattered in the end. I got the uniform, the training and the gun, then ended up shipped off to the Pacific to fight the Japanese. I've got no desire to share the details of my service. They're not memories I care to dwell on, and they're certainly not why I'm here. Let's just say that

neither my noble comrades-in-arms nor the soldiers fighting for His Majesty the Emperor seemed to share my lofty ideals about the sanctity of life. Still, I got through a while without dying and even without killing anybody. That I know of, at least. I fired my gun plenty, I guess. And you don't usually see where the bullet lands, do you?

I was captured after about six months, and sent to the North Point prison camp in occupied Hong Kong. At the time it seemed like a relief, but then I hadn't heard the stories about how the Japanese treated their POWs. I mean, these days, after the Tokyo trial and everything, I guess everyone knows how bad it was, but I didn't have a clue when we first surrendered. The things people will do to their fellow man just because someone with a shinier badge tells them to. And even then, our treatment was a picnic compared to the Chinese prisoners who came through North Point. But again, that's not the point and I have no interest in dwelling on the suffering. Plenty of others to tell those stories if you want them.

I was in that place for four months. Four months of hell. And I know others who were in there a lot longer, and I sure don't envy them, though the way I got out wasn't exactly ideal. Leonard was the one who heard it first, and he was the closest thing I had to a friend in that place. Leonard Holden, built like a barn and about as complicated. He'd worked on a farm before signing up, and sometimes it seemed like that was about the limit of what he thought the world was. At least until the rest of the world caught up with him. Poor bastard. We'd been captured at the same time, and the fact his head stuck out above the others meant it was easier for me to stick by him when we were all getting sorted. We pushed through those four months together, me watching

him go from a hulking farm boy into a scrawny beanpole of a man. He never lost his smile, though. Not until he heard that music.

It was a cool winter night when it happened. It never got properly cold in North Point, not like back home. But you still ended shivering most of your nights away. There was the lightest of rains that night, when the *Nemesis* arrived. We were trying to sleep, pushed into our cramped wooden huts, thin blankets pulled tight. At first it was a drum beat. Distant, regular, sometimes broken by the rattling roll of a snare drum. I could feel my pulse quicken, like it wanted to match the tempo, though I've no idea why.

I should have been confused, scared maybe, and I guess I was, but I could also feel my fingers tap-tap-tapping away to the beat. Beside me, Leonard started to hum to himself, a tune I could almost half-remember hearing, just before the trumpet began to drift over the waters just a few yards beyond the walls. I call it a 'trumpet' because that's the closest thing I can think to liken to that sound, but it sure wasn't any trumpet they played on the parade ground.

By this point we were all out of our beds and clustering around the dirt-caked windows, looking out towards the water. I don't know if any of us had any expectations of what was going to happen, but unless it was some Japanese military thing, I think we were all expecting to watch some people die. And we did, I guess, just the way we thought.

There was a boat floating out there, not twenty yards from the shoreline. It wasn't like any Imperial ship I'd ever seen, but I didn't think it belonged to our side either. It was metal, but not like the warships I was used to. It was like an old tall ship, with tattered masts and rigging, but made entirely out of cold, black iron. I knew it was cold. It made me cold just to look at it. The whole

thing shone in the moonlight, slick with water as though it had been caught in a rainstorm, and I could see the name written in English on the prow, clear as anything: *Nemesis*.

It had been almost a full minute by now, and we'd still heard no response from the guards. No search lights, no alarms, no angry shouting, none of the things that usually accompanied any sort of commotion. That should have been a good thing, right? But instead I just felt this pit in my stomach, like I knew whatever was coming had to be really, really bad. Just then I saw figures moving towards the shore. Even in the dark I could make out the uniforms of our captors, but they weren't moving right. They were stepping slowly, walking to the rhythm of the drum, the swelling of the trumpet. In another life, in another reality, I'd almost have said they were dancing.

They kept going until they stood at the water's edge. I counted dozens of them. It must have been every guard in the camp, or damn near it. They were still moving around each other, still shifting and stepping to the rhythm of that music, but now something was in their hands, glinting in the moonlight. Our captors held their blades tight, keeping them utterly still while their bodies moved and swayed. Then in a moment the control broke, and they fell on each other suddenly, each crying out with unleashed ferocity. One man severed his commander's arm in a single swipe, before being run through the stomach by his former comrade. Two more plunged the points into each others' eyes, pushing forward, driving them in until they both collapsed, propped up, intertwined.

It only took a few seconds, and then they were all dead, and the dirt was slick with their blood, flowing down and into the water where the *Nemesis* floated. And when they were lying still and the music stopped and night was quiet

again, that's when I heard the sound that really chilled my blood. All my comrades, my fellow prisoners, cheered. And it wasn't the cheer of those glad for freedom, it was the sound of bloodlust and cruelty.

Without any fear of the guards, we left our cramped dormitories and filed down towards the ship that all the others seemed to think was our salvation. We walked slowly, almost reverently, stepping over the bodies of our slain jailors. A few bent down, pulling long knives and bayonets from the corpses, not even bothering to wipe the trailing gore from them. Small boats paddled over from the ship and started to ferry us over. The sailors wore old uniforms, a mess of different navies, different eras. Some I recognised from history books, others were a complete mystery to me. All of them had some tell-tale stain or burn or patch of missing cloth. Something that made it clear that whoever was wearing the uniform was not the original owner. It took several trips to transfer everybody to *Nemesis*, but in all that time, nobody spoke. It was surreal. My whole time as a prisoner had felt like a nightmare, but this... this felt like something else entirely.

They lined us all up on the deck, as if we were mustering for something. None of us dressed or uniformed, a few holding salvaged weapons, waiting to know what was expected of us. The ship began to sail out, down towards the open ocean, wind and salt cutting through us as we went. My feet felt stuck to the deck, shivering as we watched this weird mismatch of bloody sailors manoeuvre this thing that seemed like it belonged to the bottom the sea. Looking around I could see the metal was twisted and bent in places, and the staring closer at the deck below I began to notice rust and holes laced through it. There was absolutely no way that this vessel should have been floating.

After an hour we completely lost sight of the land, and the only things beyond our ship were the rolling black waters and the hollow glow of a full moon. That was when the music started up again. We were so close now, every pulse of the drum shuddered through us, and the trumpet notes cut through us. I could see now it was made of the same black iron as the ship, and embedded like shrapnel in the hand that held it, the lips that blew into it. Whatever spell had come over the others was gone in an instant, and I could feel the sudden terror flow out of them in a flood of unleashed fear. Some of them started to whimper, others tried to ask questions of anyone they thought might be officers, but they were ignored, and the music just got louder.

Leonard was the first to dance. Well, I think of it as a dance, though I don't know why. He reached over and grabbed another one of the former prisoners, a scrawny guy, I think his name was Milton. He gave a cry of anger that I could never have imagined coming from his gentle, smiling lips even in the head of battle. There was nothing Milton could do. Even malnourished as he was, it was easy for Leonard to snap his arm like a twig, twist his neck until his leg spasmed and his skull started to crack. Even when his victim was clearly dead, he kept beating it, tossing the corpse across the deck with as much ferocity as if it were the most hated man alive. The bloody crew of the *Nemesis* watched, their eyes riveted and their feet tapping to the music. Leonard's rampage against the now unrecognisable corpse of Milton only ended when another soldier, whose name I never knew, leapt forward with that same cry of violence, and began to stab him wildly with a stolen bayonet.

As so it continued. Hour upon hour of that night, as one by one the stolen prisoners succumbed to that music, their silent, frozen terror giving way in a moment to the eager desire to kill. The crew, hungry for death in their stolen

uniforms, at first cried out in joy with each new murder. Then they cried out with expectation, and at last with what sounded like concern, casting their eyes up into the empty sky as though waiting for something. As fewer and fewer of us remained, I could feel something like panic begin to spread through them, and I began to see the waterline creeping higher and higher up the side of the ship, reaching eagerly to pull the *Nemesis* back down into its grave.

The whole time, I expected the music to reach me, to take me, to seize my heart with murderous purpose, but it never did. Even as the last of the other prisoners began to hack wildly at each other, and the waters started to flow over the sides and around my ankles, I never felt it. Instead I broke and ran, fleeing for one of the smaller boats that had ferried us from the shore. The crew did not stop me. They simply watched me with expressions of despair, of the deepest disappointment I've ever seen. The small craft was iron, like the larger vessel, and as it sunk finally beneath the waves again, I cut the remaining ropes and simply floated away.

I was terrified I'd be picked up by the Japanese, or die out there in the ocean, but as it was I got lucky, and then a few days later was picked up by an Allied ship. I told them my story, just like I'm telling you know, and what do you know? I got to sit out the rest of the war.

I often think about that night. And it's not the blood I remember, not the black iron ship or the look on Leonard Holden's face as he pulled poor Milton apart. It's the sadness on the faces of those who kidnapped us, those who made us dance to their violence. I don't think I'll ever know what they expected to happen, but I think I'm very glad it didn't.

GERTRUDE

Final comments: Well, that's quite a relief. Nearly forty years I've been wondering about The Slaughter's ritual, keeping an eye out for anything that might be stirring, and it turns out I needn't have been worried at all. The Risen War failed a few years before I was even born. I should have known, I suppose. Few wars in my lifetime have reached anywhere near the heights of fear I suspect this ritual would need, though I did spend some time a while back looking over some details from the Cuban Missile Crisis to no avail. And all this time the answer was just sitting in the archives at the Songling Centre. Funny how that works, sometimes.

An interesting set of trappings for this one, the Opium War history of the *Nemesis*, uniforms linking no doubt to horrific crimes from every imperial nation, all placed in the bloody heart of the Pacific theatre. And Japanese POWs...

Something to do with attitude towards surrender and atrocity in Japan at the time? The Senjinkun military code? Not my place to speculate, I suppose. Still, the anti-climax is fascinating. I can only assume they were supposed to be bombed at the height of the ritual. Maybe by Japanese aircraft, maybe Allied, maybe both. I wonder what stopped it? A Japanese radar filled with spiderwebs? A US destroyer finding itself suddenly alone in the open ocean? Heh. We'll probably never know.

Heh! I suppose... Ahh, if any of them survived the re-sinking of the *Nemesis*... God, they must have been kicking themselves in 1945. If they'd just had a bit more patience, waited a few years, sailed her into Nagasaki harbour instead... Still, none of us can tell the future, can we?

So that's nice. Another one to cross off the list. Doesn't help with the Unknowing, though.

(Sigh) We still have Dekker's back up plan, of course, but it's very risky. To be sure, I think the detonation would need to happen from within the Unknowing, while it was going on. Gerard may have a connection to The Eye, but I'm not convinced it'll be enough. And I will admit I've grown... fond of the boy.

I wonder, if I told him about Eric, whether he'd follow in his father's footsteps. Still, it's not like it kept Eric safe in the end. Anyway, point is, you can probably discount The Slaughter. It had its chance.

[Tape clicks off. Tape clicks on.]

(The Archivist sighs heavily.)

ARCHIVIST

So. Funny story. Turns out when Daisy broke the lock to get into Elias' old office... Well, she did a good enough job that it's not obviously broken. So it hasn't been replaced yet.

So I had a look around. Mostly as I remember, but... There's a box of tapes and statements in the corner, obviously those Elias didn't feel he could trust me with yet. Or maybe just the ones he was checking himself. Ideally I'd like to avoid tipping Peter off for as long as possible that I have access, and it turns out I don't know Elias' safe combination, not yet anyway. So I just took the first one that called to me. And it's... it's good, I suppose. Glad to know I don't need to worry about a Slaughter ritual, nice to get confirmation that whoever 'Eric' was he was Gerry's father and, well, one assumes, Mary Keay's partner. But nothing with any direction to it.

Ever since I crawled out of that damn coffin I feel like I've been... adrift, filling in blanks and diving into history, but the only... the breadcrumbs I'm finding are stale. Old. What the hell **is** the Watcher's Crown? So far the only mention of it I've even heard is from Gerry, and he didn't seem to know much about what it actually meant. And he's gone now.

But if it is the grand ritual of Beholding then— I mean, I need to know about it. Right? I feel like I'm on a deadline, like I'm running out time, somehow. And I don't even know where to go, what to look for, or— Just casting around blindly for more clues to just drop into my lap. Everyone else is running towards something, or running away and I...

(Heavy sigh.)

I don't know what I'm doing. I'm just tired. Think I might go lie down a while. Get a cup of tea. Heh. Daisy's got me listening to *The Archers*. I hate it. But it feels nice to hate something that can't hurt me. I don't know. That's it, I, I guess.

End recording.

[Tape clicks off.]

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Outro]

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

It featured: Jonathan Sims as the Archivist and Sue Sims as Gertrude Robinson.