

MAG – 125 – Civilian Casualties

Content Warnings

- Graphic violence
- Trauma
- Suicide
- Mass hysteria
- Self-harm
- Dismemberment
- Direct violence
- Amateur surgery
- Non-consensual medicine

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode one hundred and twenty-five. Civilian Casualties.

[Tape clicks on]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Sergeant Terrance Simpson, regarding an outbreak of violence in the crofting community of Lannraig, Ross-shire. Original statement given 19th July 1993. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, the Archivist.

Statement begins

ARCHVIST (STATEMENT)

The thing is, I wasn't even responding to a call-out. Well, well, I was, but it was a break-in about ten miles further on, and I just wasn't in a hurry. I mean, Lannraig is the sort of place you don't even notice you've been through if you're not looking – a half mile of road with a handful of white or stone cottages dotting the fields, nothing you'd recognise as a shop, and it's two miles the other way to the post office. Lannraig is what they write on the map, but to most people it's just more empty Highland. It's like that with a lot of old crofting communities. They've all got their little parcel of land for farming, and a big old stretch to keep the sheep all together, but it's a poor life, really, and hard work. Lends itself to isolation well. Too well, sometimes.

I knew Callum McKenzie, or at the very least he knew me. Again, not well, but North Highlands Police tend to serve a lot of very small communities, and I stood out like a sore thumb. He called me “the bastard English”, but he always did it with a smile on his face. His little house served as pub for those minded to use it. He didn't have a licence, but if the landlord didn't mind, who was going to raise a stink about it? I could have, I guess, but it would've been a damn stupid thing to do, turning them all against me. He even showed me the still he kept out back once, and I'm very thankful I was on duty at the time, or I might have had to drink some out of politeness.

So, I'm driving, heading towards this break-in over in Dalnessie, when Constable Carla Ross, my partner, starts telling me to slow down. Now, Ross had known Callum a lot longer than I had, being about ten years my senior on the force, and had a good twenty years' experience policing these communities. I dropped speed, and she stared out at one of the crofts next to us, making this little noise of uncertainty. I was just about to speed up again when she gasped and yelled to stop the car.

There wasn't really anywhere to park, but the road was wide enough to pass on, and barely saw two cars in an hour, so I just stopped where we were and got out. Staring out over the low stone wall, I could see a figure stood in the middle of the field. It took me a moment to recognise Callum McKenzie, holding out his pitchfork as he looked over his croft. But no, the angle was wrong. He wasn't holding his pitchfork, he was just gripping the handle, and I realised with a jolt that the sharp tines were buried in his stomach. From this angle, I could just about make out the ends of them protruding from his back, and suddenly everything seemed very still.

Ross acted before I did. She vaulted over the wall and started running towards Callum, calling his name, and I followed a second after her. But then he turned, and we both stopped short. I can't exactly say what it was in his turn that so unsettled me. Maybe it was too violent, too smooth; it seemed like the pitchfork should have flown out of him, but it stayed wedged in place. Maybe it was something in his eyes, or that smile of his. Or maybe just the sheer amount of blood on him that didn't seem right for the neat punctures that we'd seen.

Then he turned and began to run towards us at a dead sprint, pushing the handle that protruded from his torso towards us like a battering ram. I called at him to stay still, to wait there while we got help, but he just kept coming. Then Ross told him to stop, and I could hear in her voice that she was afraid of him. I was too. As he got closer, I saw him let go of the bloody pitchfork and drop his hands to his sides like claws. Broken glass was pressed into his fingers, glinting red in the morning sun, and I knew with absolute certainty that he intended to kill us.

The moment before he reached us, I grabbed the handle that still stuck from his belly. It was pure instinct, and my hands exploded in sharp pains as splinters from the rough wooden handle dug into my fingers and palm, but Callum McKenzie stopped dead with a horrible lurch, as the metal prongs buried themselves still deeper. Ross stood there, baton in hand, clearly desperate not to use it, as Callum swung his glass-covered arms at me, trying to slash at my face, and coming within an inch or two of doing so, only kept at bay by the distance of the pitchfork's handle. I finally got a look at his eyes, expecting to see mania or a glassy stare, but when they met mine, they were clear and focused. His smile got wider.

"Bastard English," he snarled and paused a moment, assessing the situation. With a grunt of effort, he pushed himself further onto the tines of the fork, moving slowly, agonisingly up them, desperately trying to make it those last few inches to reach my throat.

Then there was the sound of something... tearing, and I think he must have ruptured something, because his legs went out from under him, and where blood had been oozing before, it now began to gush. He choked as it started to fill his throat, and I tried, I really tried, to reach out and help him, but he still slashed at me with those mutilated hands, and I couldn't get close enough.

Then it was quiet. Ross still stood there, baton raised in exactly same position, seemingly frozen in confusion and disgust. She looked at me, as if I might have any explanation, but what the hell was I supposed to say? We just kept looking at this broken man, her friend, who had literally killed himself attacking us. I went back to the car to radio for help, but it didn't seem to be working right. All I could hear from it was the faint noise of static and what sounded like bagpipes.

I walked back over to Ross, who was now crouched over the body of Callum McKenzie. She looked up at me and shook her head slowly. Standing back up, I could see her hand was slick and red. Then she pointed silently over my shoulder. My breathing was erratic, and I could feel the tell-tale signs of shock starting to creep into my body, but I forced myself to turn around. All I could see was the white one-storey cottage behind me, but then my eyes fixed on the broken window and the streaks of blood around the door. I knew what she was thinking, and I just nodded, took out my own baton, and quietly approached the small house.

It was silent – no sound at all, save for the bleating of a sheep in a nearby field. I've never quite got the hang of sheep. I know that sounds daft, but it's their throats, you see. They're so like humans that when they, 'baaa', it doesn't, it doesn't sound like sheep. Does that make sense? It sounds like a person pretending to be a sheep. Sheep don't kill each other, though. Not like this. Anyway, the sound didn't exactly do anything to put me at my ease.

When we entered the house, I instinctively reached out for a light switch, but couldn't find one. A lot of these old crofter places don't have any electricity, or at least not mains power. It didn't matter, though, there were plenty of windows to light up the scene in front of us.

The fireplace had long since burned out, but the rocking chair next to it was still occupied. An elderly woman sat there, a blanket over her legs and a cross-stitch frame in her lap. If it wasn't for the cook's knife that pinned her to the chair through her throat, I'd have almost called her serene. Her feet didn't quite touch the floor, so the draft from the open door rocked her back and forth, back and forth.

On the floor in front of her, two corpses, middle-aged with rough, weathered faces, were entwined together, in an embrace that almost looked affectionate, until you saw the blood staining their teeth and hands, or the ear still clenched in the younger man's smile, freshly torn from the other's head. They had each had their own throats cut crudely, and plastered across their faces was a smile that seemed to occupy a frozen space halfway between ecstasy and an all-consuming anger. Neither of them had any fingers left at all.

Their murderer was in the kitchen, head forced into an oven, now cold, and burned beyond recognition. The bloody vegetable knife was limp in her hand, and the glass embedded in the back of her neck placed her death firmly at the feet of Callum McKenzie. At this, Ross let out a small cry and left the room to be sick. I was feeling completely numb by now, and felt nothing but a dull fascination when I saw the circle pattern of cuts on the dead woman's right arm. The angles made it almost certainly self-inflicted, and it gave the impression the skin was a simple tug from coming away like a peeled potato.

The back door was kicked in, and I could see a small lump of pink flesh just beyond it, and then another. The ground was disturbed as though by a struggle, and I suddenly realised what had happened. Ross had returned by now, shaking and pale but just as quiet as I was, and together we followed a trail of bitten-off fingers like breadcrumbs taking us home.

'Home' in this case was the lawn just outside the cottage of Angus Stewart, an acre or so of land he kept clear for meetings, parties or whatever other events the tiny community might find they needed space for. Yesterday it had been the parking of a small, sky blue transit van. I recognised it, of course: it belonged to a young lady from Inverness, I never got her name, who ran a

small, mobile lending library that travelled around the villages and crofts of the Highlands.

Now she lay at the centre of absolute carnage. Eventually, it would be conclusively established that all sixteen other residents of Lannraig were there, though to simply look at the scene it was impossible to tell mud from blood from flesh from bone, and I thank God every day that not one resident of that poor doomed place had children. The head of Angus Stewart leered up at me from the ground, lips parted in that same expression of fury and joy, cheeks latticed with steel sheep wire.

A sudden thought struck me, that since our struggle on arriving with Callum McKenzie, neither myself nor Constable Ross had made any noise at all. If there were survivors, they had no way to know it was safe. Abruptly, I shouted, calling for anyone who might still be alive, telling them they could come out. I tried to ignore the edge of panic in my voice, but my only answer was the mocking bleating of sheep and those impossibly distant pipes.

Ross glared at me, clearly startled by my shouting, and stepped gingerly through the dirt and viscera towards the centre. Neither of us could pretend we cared about preserving evidence at this point. These people, good people, had slaughtered each other for no reason at all, and there was nothing we could do to change that fact.

I don't know exactly how the woman who ran the library van died. At a certain point, the injuries all seemed to bleed together, if you'll excuse the expression. All I could see for certain was that she held a book in her hands. It was a paperback, old and unloved, with obvious signs of wear long before it found itself in this chaos. The cover and title were unrecognisable, now far too

soaked in blood, but it was clear that at some point the woman holding it had torn it clean in two down the spine, and now held half in each of what was left of her hands. Ross told me later that she'd gotten a good look at the pages, and that every single one of them was blank.

That was when our back-up arrived. It looked like whatever strangeness had affected the radio had been only on our side, and my frantic messages had reached the station loud and clear. It was a whole mess for a long time. You might have read about it in a few of the papers; I think the official report covered it as a drunken brawl that got out of hand. It wasn't, obviously, and no-one who was actually there signed the report, but almost everyone who actually dealt with the scene got signed off for several weeks with stress, so didn't get to have much say in the matter. There didn't really need to be any proper cover-up. It was an isolated place and the folk who had still been living there were on the older side, with little real connection to the outside world. I guess the media doesn't really care about crofters, especially once the police had swept up the more gory details.

I moved back to Macclesfield shortly afterwards. It pretty much ended my marriage, since my wife is why I moved up to Inverness in the first place, but I just couldn't go on up there. I can't stand the sound of bagpipes. And sometimes, at night, I still hear sheep in the distance.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Hm, an Englishman returning from Scotland with a fear of bagpipes and sheep. I'm sure we can all relate.

In many ways, The Slaughter fascinates me. There seems to be in all cases a question at its heart about control. Is it a mindless dance, dragging participants along by the beat of a drum? Or is there a kernel of will in there, a lucidity and deliberateness to the random fury and violence? I suppose that's the question with so much of violence, war. How much are you really in command of yourself, or of others? I'm not sure what scares me more, the idea that deep down everyone is in complete control of their actions, that everything is on some level intentional, or that ultimately, we don't have any control over ourselves at all, and the rest is just rationalisation.

Another Leitner, obviously. Not one I can readily identify, though it sounds like it would now be inert anyway. Given the blank pages, I do wonder whether its destruction was a last-ditch effort to stop its effects, or the exact thing that released its power in such an extreme way.

Regardless, I've hit another research dead end with this. It's frustrating, to be honest. I finally feel myself – I feel focused and ready – and I find myself basically alone.

I'm now sure Martin is actually avoiding me. Basira was right about the Institute being watched, though. In the last week, I've seen two different people wearing symbols for the People's Church of the Divine Host, and it's rare I go anywhere without cobwebs anymore. I, uh, find myself keeping my guard up around mannequins as well, though I'll admit that one is more likely to be my own projection.

But honestly, it's the internal threats I'm worried about. Peter Lukas is just sitting up there, doing whatever the hell it is he and Elias have planned, and

Melanie still has that bullet pumping violence into her, waiting to turn this place into another Lannraig. I just wish there wa—

...

Wait. I, I didn't—

Did I read that somewhere, or...?

...

R-right. Yes. The bullet... didn't show up on electronic or mechanical scans, but it's still lodged in her leg, just above the tibia. And it's been getting slowly infected ever sin— I have to find Basira.

[Tape clicks off. Tape clicks on. Sounds of breathing in sleep.]

ARCHIVIST

(Hushed throughout this exchange) You're sure about this?

BASIRA

(Hushed throughout this exchange) No, but if you're right, I don't see what choice we've got.

ARCHIVIST

No, I mean...

BASIRA

Oh, yeah, the stuff she takes is pretty strong these days. She should be out for a while.

Well, sleep is hard.

ARCHIVIST

You've been staying here too?

BASIRA

Got a camp bed at the other end, near the tunnels. I like to keep an eye on them. Besides, wanted to give her some space, you know? But yeah, living outside the Institute, it's just not safe anymore.

ARCHIVIST

What about Martin?

BASIRA

I think he's still got a place? He's not down here, anyway.

ARCHIVIST

Right. So, how, how does thi—

BASIRA

Do you want to get on with this or what?

ARCHIVIST

Yes, right, sorry. You, uh, you managed to get some anaesthetic?

BASIRA

Here. The guy said it was a nerve block, should numb pretty much the whole leg.

ARCHIVIST

Right. Right. Was it hard to come by?

BASIRA

(**Sarcastic**) No, I just popped down Superdrug. Yes, it was hard to come by.

ARCHIVIST

And you couldn't get any general anaesthetic to knock her out fully?

BASIRA

(**Sarcastic**) Oh, sure. Did your spooky brain tell you the right dosage to not kill her?

ARCHIVIST

N-no. No, it didn't.

BASIRA

Then it's got to be the local. Here, get on with it.

ARCHIVIST

What, me?

BASIRA

Yeah. If she comes round she's going to kill someone and, you know, not it.

ARCHIVIST

Fine, give it here.

BASIRA

The guy said you'd need to hit the right nerve for it to work. Do you know much about—

ARCHIVIST

(Confidently) Here.

BASIRA

You sure?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

BASIRA

Okay. Go for it.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

BASIRA

And pray the injection doesn't wake her.

ARCHIVIST

Yes, thank you, Basira. You're sure we shouldn't just... tell her?

BASIRA

I really don't know how she'd take it. Not well. If we want to get it out of her, this is it.

ARCHIVIST

Okay.

[Melanie stirs at the injection but does not wake]

Right. How long does it take?

BASIRA

About half an hour, he said.

ARCHIVIST

Right.

BASIRA

You'd better be right about this.

ARCHIVIST

I am.

[Tape clicks off. Tape clicks on]

ARCHIVIST

Right, pass me the scissors.

BASIRA

What? I thought you had a scalpel?

ARCHIVIST

For the trouser leg.

BASIRA

Oh, right.

[Sound of fabric cutting]

ARCHIVIST

God. Look at that.

BASIRA

I don't... It's a leg.

[Static rises]

ARCHIVIST

No. Inside.

BASIRA

I don't know what you're seeing, John.

ARCHIVIST

It's... Christ, it's all rotten.

BASIRA

Can you see the bullet?

ARCHIVIST

Yes.

BASIRA

You ready?

ARCHIVIST

(Bitter chuckle) No.

You're sure you don't have restraints, or...?

BASIRA

You think she's gonna sleep through being tied down? I'll try and grab her if she wakes, but...

ARCHIVIST

(Sighs) Okay. Here we go.

[Sounds of impromptu surgery and nervous breathing. Clang of metal on metal, followed by relieved sigh from the Archivist.]

MELANIE

(Screaming) Get off me!

[Extremely loud commotion as Melanie springs up and attacks the archivist]

(Everyone starts speaking/shouting/screaming simultaneously)

MELANIE

Get off me!

ARCHIVIST

Woah, Jesus! Basira, she's awake!

BASIRA

Melanie! It's okay. It's okay. I've got you.

MELANIE

Don't touch me!

[Melanie's anger is being physically expressed]

ARCHIVIST

Basira, watch her hands, watch—

[Wet, fleshy sound of stabbing]

Argh! Argh!

MELANIE

I'll kill you. I will kill you!

BASIRA

Melanie!

ARCHIVIST

It's alright! It's just—

BASIRA

Just go!

MELANIE

I can't feel my leg. I can't feel my leg!

ARCHIVIST

It's just an anaesthetic, it's just—

BASIRA

Come on, John, we have to get out of here now. Come on!

MELANIE

Get away from me!

[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, Frank Voss as Basira Hussain, and Lydia Nicholas as Melanie King.