

MAG – 095 – Absent Without Leave

Content Warnings:

- Gun violence
- Warfare
- Undead
- Cannibalism
- Suicide
- Fascism

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode ninety-five. Absent Without Leave.

[Tape clicks on.]

MARTIN

Right. Statement. Another statement. (**Sigh**) Fine.

Martin Blackwood, Archival Assistant at the Magnus Institute, recording statement number 9770211, statement of Luca Moretti, given November 2nd 1977.

MARTIN (STATEMENT)

There is no glory in war. I learned that early. Maybe there was once, riding out onto the

battlefield with your banner held high, a warhorse below you, and a lance in your hand. But no, probably not even then. It's just fear. Fear that some unseen enemy might end your life from a mile away with a tank round or an artillery shell. Fear that you might look another man in the eyes the moment before he pulls a trigger and takes your life. Fear that you might have to look in his eyes before you do the same. I joined up because I wanted to serve my king, because I thought that out there, on the field of battle, I could be the hero my country needed. But it turned out I was only ready to kill for my country right up until the moment I had the chance.

They never tell you how difficult it is to take a human life. They tell you the enemy are monsters, an evil force sweeping across our fair land, burning and murdering because that's all the enemy knows. They try to keep you far away, firing round after round from whatever hidden spot you've found. All so you don't look your enemy in the eyes. Because they're just people.

That's not to say I never killed anyone. I honestly don't know. A battle is a terrible, confusing place. I fired my gun plenty, and many Allied soldiers ended up dead. I can't be sure none were because of me. But, I never took a life with full knowledge and intention. Not during the war, at least.

I wasn't a fascist. I know that's always the claim people try to make, but I honestly had no time for Mussolini. I'll admit there was a certain poetry to D'Annunzio's words, which brought me close to believing in him on occasion, but when he made way for "Il Duce", I rapidly lost interest. I had no time for that bald, pouting fool, strutting about and preening. I, like my father, served for the King. I wasn't happy he had thrown his lot in with the Fascists, but loyalty was always a failing of mine. That said, I despised Communism, and under Mussolini's rule the military enjoyed freedom and prominence as never

before. I ignored, though, the rumours of what my brothers-in-arms were doing in Libya.

By the time the war broke out, I had been a soldier for most of my adult life, but I had never seen full combat, despite having made the rank of Maresciallo capo in the 4th Alpini. We were trained in mountain warfare, some of the toughest men I ever knew, and eager to see combat, even if to do so, we would stand side by side with Nazis. True battle was worse than I could have imagined. We were trained and equipped to fight in the Alps, in mountain terrain, but our commanders would send us against tanks and motorised infantry in wide open plains, with no proper cover or elevation. For all our leadership hungered for war, they had little idea, it seemed, how to wage it. For my part, I discovered that all my dreams of honour were only that. The war tested my mettle, and it broke.

When the King broke with the Fascists and signed the Armistice with the Allies, our erstwhile German companions wasted no time turning on us. I spent the last two years of the war in a Nazi prison camp, but strange as it feels to say, it wasn't actually that bad. They treated us well enough, and having fought together, the abuse was minimal. It was only in the last few months, when our hosts were being pressed by the Russians, and resources became scarce, then we suffered. But this is not what I care to dwell on. It was what happened after we were released that brings me to tell you my story.

You cannot imagine the chaos immediately after the war was lost. Unlike Germany, carved up between East and West, Italy's division was... messier. There was the South, that had surrendered with the King in 1943, and the North, occupied by the Germans for the most part, but some of our forces had still fought alongside them in Mussolini's puppet state. To give you some idea

of what I was returning home to after the war: Il Duce died in April of '45 and the Germans surrendered in May, but the official peace treaty between Italy and the Allies was not be signed until 1947. The country was split, divided and bleeding. There was 'interim government' and 'moves to restore order', but nobody really knew what was going on. There was no debriefing, no official response to our release; I didn't even know I was part of a military that still existed. I had to make my own way back to my home near Teramo, walking, hiding and riding in whatever vehicle had a driver who took pity on me.

I don't know what I expected to find when I finally arrived home. Whatever it was, it wasn't my old Alpini comrades, uniforms torn and fading, preparing what weapons and equipment they could find for an expedition into the mountains. My home was in the foothills of the Appennino Centrale, and many of the men I served with I had known since childhood. I was glad to see them alive, and they greeted me with smiles and open arms, but there was something tight about their faces that filled me with a faint dread.

I asked what they were doing, and their eyes fell to their guns. Deserters, I was told, in the mountains. Attacking people, and stealing from nearby villages. We were going to find them, and take care of them. I started to protest, sure there must be others better suited to the task, but even before I spoke I knew this wasn't true. Instead I asked if the deserters knew the war was over; it was likely they no longer needed to hide. Again, a shake of the head, and there was quiet for a few seconds. It was Antonio Cannavaro, one of my oldest friends, who finally spoke up.

The deserters, he said, had gone rotten. Not mad, or desperate. Rotten. Sono andanti marcio.

I suppose I could have left them to it. Turned my back on them, and tried to leave my war far behind me. But I don't think that was ever really an option. I told them I was coming, and Antonio nodded his head. There was no joy in the movement. He was a huge bear of a man, was Antonio, but I saw his hands shaking as he checked his weapon yet again.

My father served his King in the Great War. He told me tales afterwards, stories of courage and heroism, of men fighting for the glory of their country. I now know these stories were lies. But when he was drunk, as he was more and more towards the end, he told other stories. Stories that didn't always make sense. Once or twice he had talked to me about the 'wild deserters'. These men, he had said, had fled from their units, but rather than trying to escape behind the lines, where they might be caught and shot, they would run into the battlefields, into no man's land, and tunnel under the mud and carnage. They lived down there, so he said, desperate, ragged and barely human. At night you could hear them creeping around the battlefields, stealing what they could, and dragging the bodies of the dead down into their dens. If you were quiet, my father would say with a shudder, you could hear them eating.

I didn't mention these stories to my companions as we started to trek up the slopes of Monte Vettore. They clearly had enough on their minds, eyes narrowed against the glare and mouths pressed tight. We didn't talk about the war. There was no question I could have asked that did not risk breaking the fragile solidarity of our small band, but as I walked alongside them, I knew that each of them was dwelling on ghosts and stories of their own.

The first sign we saw of our quarry was a thin column of smoke ahead of us, clear against the deep blue sky. It was a mountain cabin, not uncommon in these parts, with a well-built chimney stack gently announcing its warmth. In

front of the door sat a woman with coarse, dark hair, built almost as solidly as the chimney, and quietly mending a thick, woollen shirt. As we approached she looked up and we saw, in the middle of her throat, a ragged bullet hole. Her eyes were cloudy and unfocused as she got to her feet and began to walk towards us, blood still trickling from her throat.

I heard a scream, and it was so hoarse and inhuman I assumed for a moment it must have come from this half-dead thing with its ruined throat. But it was Antonio. His face was ashen, and for a second it seemed he was about to drop his weapon and run, but instead he barrelled past me, tackling the woman to ground. There was an awful snapping sound, but her limbs still moved and flailed weakly as Antonio stood, and began to stomp down with all his weight. The others joined in, shouting or screaming, kicking and beating until the corpse was still. I was the only one left standing at the side, staring down at the beaten and bloody mess of... something. None of us said a word.

The silence lasted for about four seconds. Then there was the gunshot. It echoed around the mountain for far longer than it had any right to. We scattered immediately, instincts triggering to find cover. Too late for poor Alfredo, a small man whose sister I had once courted long ago. He remained stood exactly where he'd been when the bullet went clean through his skull. It was almost five minutes before he finally collapsed, but we watched for far longer to see if he got up again. He didn't.

That was the turning point. Not the dark-haired spectre of death, but that sudden, unseen death.

Uncaring savagery that could be neither foreseen nor avoided, only awaited. From that moment the mountain was no longer the place where we hunted.

But neither was it somewhere we were prey. It was simply the place we were going to die.

We continued like this for several days. We saw no other signs of life, or whatever passed for it up there on the mountain. The only indication we saw that we weren't utterly alone would be the periodic sound of a gunshot, as another of our number fell. The stark terror was evident on every face, but none of us even considered turning back. Something in us just knew that we were far beyond anything we could control, and if we were leaving this mountain alive, it would not be through our own decision.

By the time we found the cave, it was only myself, Antonio, and a young lad from the village, who should not have joined us in the first place. I never learned his name, but he'd been a drummer in the fanfara, or so he said. Judging by how he held his rifle, I believed him. I would have laughed, told him he would have fared better with his drumsticks, but the joke died on my lips.

The smell that came from that cave was far beyond anything I had experienced in the war. The jagged hole into the cliff face oozed bitter, icy cold, and to call it the smell of death would miss the point of it entirely. It was the smell of our death. Antonio turned to me without a word, gripped my hand in his, and kissed me once on the forehead. Then he walked to edge of the cliff and hurled himself over the edge. I didn't look down after him. Truth be told, I envied him his resolve.

I walked into the cave. The drummer boy might have followed after me, or he might have joined Antonio. I never turned around; he was the last thing on my mind. The cave was a long way from natural, forming a smooth but uneven tunnel heading deep into the mountain. It narrowed slightly as I descended,

until I was stooped, half-walking, half-crawling along the floor. The smell seemed milder inside, but I don't know if it was truly less, or I had already grown accustomed to it.

The texture of the earth beneath my hands changed so gradually I barely noticed, and the torch I had brought was too weak to show anything more than a few inches in front of me. The first moment I realised what the tunnel had become was when I placed my hand fully over the cold and clammy skin of someone's face.

I pulled my hand back with a cry, and pushed my torch down to focus on what was below me. It was a corpse, as I had thought. Its eyes were closed and its face was serene, but it was dressed in uniform, cut through and black with blood. It was Italian, I thought, but an old design, and not one I really recognised. Shining my torch around, I saw more of them, half-buried in the walls and ceiling. More dead faces, more uniforms, and not just Italian, either.

I pressed on, trying to find gaps between the bodies where it was still dirt, trying to avoid touching them. But those spaces became smaller and smaller, and the corpses were now piled two or three deep. It wasn't long before the one way forward was clambering over them, climbing along their stiff, unfeeling limbs.

When they all opened their eyes, it was unhurried and deliberate. They were already focused on me, as though they'd been following my progress from behind closed eyelids. They were not cloudy like the woman at the cabin, but sharp and clear, slowly swivelling in their sockets to watch me climb over them. They did not move. I believe, though, at one point they started to sing, but that might just be in the nightmares I have since endured.

When I reached the end of the tunnel, the deserter was waiting. He had his rifle pointed at me, and sat in a tiny hollow with nothing but a small pile of soiled bandages and two dead rats. He was young, and so thin that for the briefest of seconds I felt a deep pity for him. The mud caked on his face had lines carved through it where tears had fallen, but they hadn't been shed for me.

He lifted his rifle, and prepared to kill me. I tried to raise my own, knowing with a perverse sense of relief that I was too slow. He would pull his trigger before I would pull mine. It was over.

But as I lifted the barrel to fire, I heard shots, five or six of them, ringing out in rapid succession.

In the closeness of the tunnel, they were deafening. The deserter slumped. He was dead the moment the first shot sounded. Maybe even before that. For all his gaunt frame and emaciated body, he hit the ground with a weight that seemed to shake the mountain. I'd never before witnessed a firing squad, and I never care to again, although of course, I was alone in the tunnel.

I left the deserter's corpse there. Left the cave and the mountain. Left my home and my country.

Eventually I came here, and I never want to return. That is my story.

MARTIN

S-S-Statement... done.

(Martin takes deep, shaky breaths)

I don't like recording these. There. I-I said it. I'm sorry whoever's listening to this, I know it's unprofessional, but they f... I don't like it. I guess we're past professionalism now. Probably. I don't even know why I'm still doing them, since John's back now. Well, 'back' is a strong term.

(Sigh) I guess just nobody told me to stop? Melanie's been asking about cases related to wars, so I thought... I mean, it's not even like there's any follow-up I can do on an unofficial Italian military operation from a period in Italian history where there's basically no records.

(Sigh) John came by. He asked Melanie to see what she could hunt down about the owners of an old depot up in Newcastle, and asked me to get him a couple of books on taxidermy from the library. Then he left. Again. I mean, I'm glad he's back, and I guess he seems to trust us a bit more, now, but... And-And I'm glad we can help, of course I am. It's just what he's doing seems really dangerous. And I get that he's worried about us. I mean, we worry about him as well.

I worry.

And we should just—

BASIRA

Could you pass me that pen?

MARTIN

(Surprised) Oh, er... Hi Basira... Um, how long have you been there?

BASIRA

Erm, I don't know. Couple of hours? Why?

MARTIN

Y-You didn't say anything.

BASIRA

Yeah, I was reading.

(Martin clears his throat)

BASIRA

Did you need me?

MARTIN

No... erm, I just... er, feel a bit... self-conscious?

BASIRA

About what?

MARTIN

Well, I was just, doing a statement and notes and...

BASIRA

Ah. Was it... good?

MARTIN

You weren't listening?

BASIRA

No, I was reading.

MARTIN

I just...

BASIRA

Erm, do you want me to find somewhere else to read? Somewhere more... I dunno, obvious?

MARTIN

No, sorry, you just surprised me, is all.

BASIRA

Sorry.

MARTIN

It's okay. What are you reading?

BASIRA

Introduction to Alchemy. It's, um, really interesting, actually – you know a lot of the symbols people use come from astrology and alchemy. Like the symbol everyone thinks is the female symbol is actually the old astrological sign for Venus, which means it also means copper in alchemy. Which is kind of... What?

MARTIN

Nothing... (**nervous laugh**) you just... You've been reading a different book every time I've seen you for the last week.

BASIRA

Well, it's my job now.

MARTIN

Kinda thought your job was to be a hostage.

BASIRA

I mean, I guess, but... what? You want me to just sit, and mope around?

There's a huge library up there.... and this stuff is kind of fascinating.

MARTIN

Shouldn't you be, I don't know, trying to escape?

BASIRA

Sure. How's that gone for you?

MARTIN

What?

BASIRA

The way Tim tells it, we're all in the same boat here. So, how's your escape plan coming?

MARTIN

(Confused) How... Doesn't it bother you?

BASIRA

Of course it bothers me, but so do a lot of things I can't change. So you make the best of things. And, hey, you never know, maybe there's something in these books that can help us.

MARTIN

That's... huh, that's not a bad point, actually.

BASIRA

So, er... Do you want me to move?

MARTIN

No, no, I'm just about done. You keep reading.

[Paper shuffling]

MARTIN

Not much else for us to do.

[Tape clicks off]

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Outro]

JONATHAN SIMS

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