

MAG – 045 – Blood Bag

Content warnings:

- Blood
- Insects & Infestation
- Infection & Disease

Discussions of: graphic injury, death, body horror

Mentions of: none

SFX: low drone

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro]

JONATHAN SIMS

Rusty Quill presents: The Magnus Archives. Episode forty-five. Blood Bag.

[The Magnus Archives Theme – Intro – Continues]

[Tape clicks on.]

ARCHIVIST

Statement of Thomas Neill regarding his experiences working in malarial research during the spring of 2010. Original statement given February the 9th, 2011. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London.

Statement begins.

ARCHIVIST (STATEMENT)

I hope you'll forgive the handwriting. The shaking has gotten better over the last few months, but it's... still quite hard to read. Also my therapist has recently changed up my medication, so if I get a bit muddled, that's why. Just to be clear, my medication and treatment have been in response to the events I'm describing here. I was not taking any drugs before or during the event I'm setting down. I only started my treatment course after Neil's death.

I've been working as a research assistant for about six years now. Anyone who tries to sell you the career with promises of money, fulfilment or grand discoveries is a liar. The work is long and repetitive, the discoveries will be credited to the fellows, at least until they're disproved or irrelevant five years down the line, and the money is... uh, well... the money is actually not too bad, at least not until the grant dries up halfway through the project.

I guess what I mean to say is that, when I finally managed to get on a project doing something I really believed in, I was prepared to overlook a lot. It was malaria research at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. I was working under Dr. Neil Thompson. I'm pretty sure he hired me just because of how similar our names are: Thomas Neill and Neil Thompson. There was always a little moment of confusion whenever anyone asked for 'Neil'. I think he got a kick out of it. That's the sort of person he was, not mean-spirited or nasty, he just liked a bit of harmless chaos now and again. Balanced out his precision in the lab, I suppose, because in there he was the sort of rigorous, meticulous scientist I didn't think existed outside of fictional medical dramas. Put it like this, he wore a white lab coat, and it was always immaculate. I don't know if you realise how genuinely impressive that is working in a lab, especially given as our work was messy. Very messy.

We weren't working on malaria directly, you understand. Our work was on the anopheline mosquitoes themselves, transmission capable but... not infected, though you'd hardly know by the reaction if one got loose. We're talking panicked fleeing, lockdown, and trained staff coming in to kill the thing. I always used to think that level of caution was ridiculous, given our mozzies didn't actually have malaria. Not so much anymore.

We were trying to synthesise a sort of 'blood substitute', a combination of the sugars and proteins that the mozzies need to survive, but one that was more enticing than a human full of blood. The idea was to create a, a lure of sorts, which would keep the mosquitoes concentrated away from people, and could potentially be used to poison them, though that bit was some ways in the future. At this point most of the research was spent trying to perfect the 'taste' of the thing, for lack of a better term.

The smell was also a big factor, as we needed the mozzies to choose it as a source of protein over a human, and as it progressed, it turned out that the texture and composition of the feeding bag itself helped attract them, so it ended up getting more and more like, er... human skin. The later bags even had little bits of human hair embedded into them, which made the whole thing several shades too grotesque for me, but the mozzies went mad for it, and as far as Neil was concerned, that's all that mattered.

After about six months we had pretty much perfected it, to be honest. We had a lure bag that the mozzies preferred over a human sample in 98 per cent of cases, in which they consistently demonstrated a willingness to return to other alternatives. The issue was the cost. Our synthesised blood substitute, which we liked to call 'haemoglobish', was simply not cheap enough for mass production, especially considering the bag requirements, and as we were dealing in prevention rather than cure, we were always going to be compared to the cost effectiveness of just buying a boatload of mosquito nets. And that wasn't going to be a comparison where we came out on top. We kept going though, trying to recreate the effect with cheaper, more easily available materials, but that was when Neil first started muttering darkly about funding.

Here's where I should probably say a bit about Neil's syringe. Now, our Dr. Thompson claimed to be descended from the 19th-century physician, John Snow, a great-great-nephew or a great-great-great-grandson, or something like that. I'm not sure how much you know about epidemiology in the 1850s, and it's certainly a common enough name, but Snow was pivotal in laying the groundwork for the germ theory of disease transmission, and is widely credited with helping end the cholera outbreak of 1854. I only bring this up because Neil had... well, I suppose you could call it something of a totem. It was an old Victorian syringe, which he claimed had belonged to this illustrious ancestor of his.

I don't know if it was true or not, but Neil certainly treated the thing like a relic. He kept it in excellent condition, with glass shining and brass polished, and would carry it around in a small case tucked into his lab coat pocket. Whenever he was called upon to do any calculations or look over results, his hand would slip into that pocket, and he'd gently clutch that case. So, you can imagine that

it came as something of a surprise when he came to me, and asked for my help in selling it.

Now, according to Neil, our project's grant money had run out, and without alternative sources of funding, we weren't going to be able to continue the work. I'm not sure how much I believed him, as the word around the lab was Neil had something of a gambling habit. In fairness to him, I'd heard all sorts of baseless gossip flying around about everybody, and honestly don't know how the money worked for our project. I'd just signed the contract and took the pay cheques, it never occurred to me to investigate our funding myself, so he might have been telling the truth. He might have been trying to save the project. It didn't really matter, as by this point Neil and I were quite close, so... if he asked me to do him a favour, I wasn't exactly going to refuse.

When I say he asked for my help selling it, that's not *exactly* accurate. He'd already found a buyer, some antiques dealer who Neil said had offered him six figures for it. That sounded mad to me. I mean, it was a valuable trinket, sure, but... that's all that it was. Neil didn't seem entirely convinced the guy was on the level either, which was why he asked me to come along.

I'm a big guy, six foot seven, fourteen-and-a-half stone, so I can cut a pretty intimidating figure if I need to, especially if you don't know that I've never thrown a punch in my life. That's what Neil wanted me to do, just be there, have his back while he went to meet this guy, so he'd know not to try anything. I don't remember the name, I'm afraid, but he was foreign; Indonesian, I think, or Samoan.

I expected the meeting to be after dark in some dingy dockyard, but as it turned out they'd arranged to meet at The Three Greyhounds pub in Soho the following afternoon. I wanted to dress to intimidate, but I didn't really have any appropriate clothes, so I just wore a suit. As it turned out, I needn't have bothered – this overly generous antiques dealer was almost as big as I was, and unlike me, he looked like he could handle himself.

He didn't even look at me when he entered the pub, almost deserted at that time on a Tuesday afternoon. He sat opposite Neil, while I stood awkwardly just outside their booth. They talked hurriedly and quietly to each other, and I couldn't make out many of the words, though it seemed like they were just

discussing the price for the syringe. Eventually I saw a couple of briefcases exchange hands, and that was it. The dealer got up and walked out, holding a suitcase that seemed much lighter than the one he'd come in with. Neil gave me a relieved nod, and headed back to the laboratory with his own suitcase, that I can only assume was full of cash.

This is when things... started to go wrong. When things started to get weird. I don't know if it had anything to do with Neil selling that syringe. I mean, I don't know how it... could have, but that's when the trouble started.

The first thing I noticed was the heat. Now mozzies need to be kept at a temperature of around 23 to 24 degrees Celsius, which might not sound too hot, but at this point it was late May and we were started to head towards summer, so on a sunny day the room where we kept the cages felt... stifling. But as the days wore on, the heat started to seep out into the rest of the lab, until we were all coated with sweat for most of the day.

We called the building manager to get the heating checked, and he told us everything was working fine. He even agreed to turn on the air conditioning for us, but it made no difference. The lab was warm and humid, everything felt *sticky*, and I took to bringing in a change of shirt for when I left at the end of the day. Luckily none of the chemicals we were mixing into the faux blood bags were particularly temperature sensitive, or God knows how much work we might have lost.

That was unpleasant, of course, but there was no real evidence of it being paranormal. No, that didn't come until a couple of weeks later. The mozzies started acting unusually. We kept them in metal mesh cages so they're viewable at all times. There's a hole in the front which is lined with gauze that can be gathered up to make a seal or allow you access to the cage. Normally they're happy enough to flit about their cages. But then, without warning, they stopped. They landed on the cage and just stayed there. They were distributed almost completely evenly over the inside, to the point where it almost looked regimented, and then they would stay like that for hours. It was unsettling, and more than once the researchers retrieved some for testing, looking for any change that might have resulted in this altered behaviour, but everything came back normal.

Sometimes though, when I was working late, I'd look into that room, and I swear I would see a mass of mosquitoes in each cage, crowded in a thick clump around the gauze covering the entrance. I should have told somebody, but at the time I didn't know what I was seeing.

The mosquitoes' attitudes towards the fake blood bags changed as well. Instead of meandering round, landing, feeding, flying off, feeding again, a few times, now as soon as the bag was placed inside, every mozzie in there would descend on it immediately, all at once, until the bag was completely covered in needle mouths and flitting wings. It genuinely started to scare me.

What really scared me, though, and everyone else on the team, was what came out of the blood bag afterwards. Shortly after they began exhibiting this behaviour, one of the other research assistants, George Larson, was retrieving one of the empty bags and returning it for disposal in the lab, when he stumbled, and it fell to the floor. When it hit the ground with a moist thud, it became immediately clear that the bag was not as empty as it had first appeared.

The blood substitute, the 'haemoglobish', was a clear, syrupy orange, almost like dark honey, but slightly thinner. What oozed out of the bag now was a deep, cloudy red. At this point nobody objected to calling in a biohazard. They took samples of the substance, and put us through a basic decontamination, and then I went home. Odd to think now that my thoughts back then were full more of curiosity than of fear.

The tests came back, and were as alarming as they were impossible. It was blood. Real blood. O Negative and infected with malaria. Not just malaria though, but yellow fever, hepatitis B and signs of cholera. There were other substances in the sample as well, that they were unable to identify. We were all told that we were to be quarantined immediately, and that our project was shut down until further notice. I remember standing there in the lab as they said this. I heard a strangled cry from behind me, and turned around to see Neil, shaking his head over and over, his face a mask of rage and hatred. He wasn't looking at the people who had come to quarantine us though. No, he was looking at the room full of mosquitoes, as though they had planned this,

as though it was purely through their malicious intent that he was watching his career burn to nothing.

Before anyone could stop him, he grabbed a fire extinguisher and ran into the mosquito room. God knows what he was hoping to achieve. Spray a few cages to death in some petty act of revenge, maybe? He never got the chance.

As he fumbled with the release mechanism, a tremendous buzzing filled the air, and suddenly I realised what they had been doing clustered around the gauze those nights. There was no time to pull Neil out, so I did the only thing I could. I shut the door.

Thousands of mosquitoes erupted from those cages, far more, I thought, than we could possibly have had on site. There was no way to count them though as they swarmed onto poor Neil; first his hands and his face, then beneath his clothes, until there was no part of him not covered with the things. He swatted at them, killing some, but there were just too many, and after a few seconds it was clear he was going into shock. He tried to scream, but that just gave them more places to drink from.

That was when I turned away. There hadn't been a single drop of blood spilled, but we all knew that Dr. Neil Thompson was dead. I don't remember much after that. There was a lot of shouting and a lot of noise, then tests. Confused and worried academics asking me questions that, of course, I couldn't answer. It was almost a month before the world was in focus again.

The faculty have been all right to me actually, so I should probably be thankful. They were so keen to get this swept neatly under the rug that they just let me go, with such a glowing reference I just walked into a lab tech position at King's College. It's mostly helping students, but that's all right. I think I'm done with research.

ARCHIVIST

Statement ends.

Can't stand mosquitoes. Horrible things. Any solution to the issue of malaria that doesn't concentrate on wiping them out is not one that I have much time for. Still, this grotesque account doesn't give us many leads to follow.

Obviously, there's the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine itself, but Tim's investigation yielded little significant information. Apparently, those staff who've been around long enough to remember the event, either didn't know the details or have been well briefed to keep their mouths shut.

Aside from the fact that Dr. Neil Thompson died in a lab accident on the 30th May 2010, there's little more to be found. Sasha managed to get a copy of the inquest report, which is... infuriatingly vague, but does list the cause of death as blood loss, and the official verdict as 'death by misadventure'.

I don't think there can be much doubt that the antiques dealer is the curious Mr. Salesa. He's now turned up enough that I can no longer write it off as a coincidence, and have been having a word with Rosie about whether we can make contact with him. Apparently, he hasn't been seen for almost two years now, with rumours in the trade running to everything from 'he had a quiet retirement' to 'he's trying to dodge a jail sentence', or even 'he was shot dead in Colombia for stealing a priceless artefact from a drug lord'. Whatever the reason, it doesn't look like he'll be answering questions any time soon, though I have urged Rosie to keep trying.

Aside from that, there's little more we can do with this statement. Mr. Neill himself passed away last year. Martin hasn't been able to get a hold of the official cause of death, but judging by the number of antibiotics the police report list as being at his home at the time, it must have been something very nasty indeed.

End recording.

[Tape clicks off. Tape clicks on.]

ARCHIVIST

Supplemental.

I've been doing some digging into Tim, watching him. He's certainly doing his job, far better than I'd have expected, given his recent experiences. There's just one thing I don't understand: why is he working for the Institute? A First in Anthropology from Trinity College, five successful years spent climbing the

ladder at a major publishing house, and then, out of the blue, he decides to come work for us.

Why? I can't find any other indication of an interest in the paranormal, nothing to indicate this area of study appealed to him. And why stay after everything that happened with Prentiss? Is it just loyalty or could it be something –

[The office door opens.]

MARTIN

Hey, I just wanted to check if you wanted a cup of tea?

ARCHIVIST

Uh...

MARTIN

Oh, oh, sorry, are you recording? I, I thought you were done for the day?

ARCHIVIST

I-I was. I am. It's...

MARTIN

Why do you have pictures of Tim?

ARCHIVIST

It... it's a performance review thing, going over some files for it.

MARTIN

But that looks like a picture of his house?

[Something rustles]

ARCHIVIST

Confidential files that you... legally you shouldn't really be looking at them. Please, er, please leave, Martin.

MARTIN

Right, right. Right, right... Did you want that tea?

ARCHIVIST

No. Thank you, Martin.

[Matin leaves. The office door closes.]

I need to find a better place to do these recordings.

End supplemental.

[Tape clicks off.]

[The Magnus Archives Theme - Outro]

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