



Episode 709, Story 1: Mussolini's Dagger

Wes: Our first story cuts through family lore for the truth behind a wartime souvenir. In the late spring of 1945 in some of the bloodiest fighting of World War Two, Allied forces move north through Italy, liberating towns from Fascist control. Italy's leader, Benito Mussolini, is in hiding. A deadly cat and mouse game unfolds as members of the American spy service, the OSS, hunt for Mussolini, to try him as a war criminal. But Il Duce has terrorized Italians for twenty one years – and the US military are in a race with Italian Partisans who want vengeance. Jerry Steichen, of Reno, Nevada, has a weapon which he believes may be connected to the last days of the world's first fascist state.

Jerry: My, uncle got this in World War Two. We were always told that this was Mussolini's dagger.

Wes: I've come to Reno to examine this family legend.

Jerry: I remember seeing that when I was a little kid.

Wes: Well, you obviously weren't allowed to play with it, because it's still in beautiful shape.

Jerry: Oh, no, no.

Wes: And what's the story behind this dagger?

Jerry: My uncle, Clarence Farber, he was a major in World War Two. He always told me it was presented to him by the Italian people when he was liberating, uh, cities in Italy. It's supposed to be Mussolini's dagger.



Wes: His uncle repeated the same story to other family members. And although he's lost touch with her, Jerry says his uncle's elderly sister is still living in Illinois. I don't have to tell you that if this is really Mussolini's dagger, it's a quite valuable World War Two souvenir.

Jerry: I just would really like to find out if the story is true.

Wes: I'm gonna have to take this with me, if it's okay? But I think I can help you with this story.

Jerry: Oh, I appreciate that.

Wes: Look at this blade. It has never been touched. This strikes me as a dress dagger. Not anything that would have ever been used. I'm not familiar with all these symbols. But the eagle was a popular fascist icon. Does "m" stand for Mussolini? Even if the dagger is period, I'm fairly skeptical it ever belonged to the Italian leader. I've done a couple of stories similar to this on Napoleon's sword, Herman Goering's shotgun. In both of those investigations, memory and time had turned the object into something it was not. Over the years the story gets embellished and before long, the story becomes fact. Here's a couple pictures... the dagger he's wearing here has a white handle. This one has a black handle. But, you know, who knows maybe Mussolini owned several daggers. Did Jerry's uncle receive this as reward for liberating Italian cities? The American invasion of Italy in 1943 was designed to strike a blow against Hitler's underbelly and destroy the remnants of Mussolini's army. After landing at Salerno in September 1943 the Allies met with initial success. But German counterattacks almost doomed the invasion and caused many casualties. Farber may have witnessed that carnage and the suffering of the citizens of Salerno. So let's see here. It looks like in late April, 1945; Mussolini is trying to escape from the



approaching allied forces. And he's captured by Italian Partisans. Looks like near Lake Como. On April 28th, 1945 the man known as Il Duce – or “leader” was executed along with his mistress. He had ruled Italy with an iron fist for 21 years. The next day, his body is brought to Milan and put on public display in the plaza there, where the enraged citizens of Milan spit on him, kick him and then his body is hung up. If Jerry's story is true, his uncle would have had to have gotten this dagger sometime after late April, 1945. But I can't find anything about Mussolini's possessions being given to Allied soldiers. If I'm gonna prove that this was Mussolini's dagger, I need to search military records and find out if Jerry's uncle was even in Italy. I've ordered copies of Farber's service history. In the meantime, an expert in World War II weapons ... Gary Piattoni confirms it is a period Italian made weapon.

Gary: There's a lot of clues as to the type of dagger it is. Here we have on the inset into the grip -

The fasces is an ancient roman symbol of power featuring a bundle of sticks and an axe. It became the symbol of Mussolini's Fascist party. The eagle was also a fascist symbol and the m does signify loyalty to Mussolini.

Wes: I'm sure that there are elements of this, symbols of rank, that will tell you who was allowed to wear this dagger.

Gary: Let's take a look. It's a model 1939 ...this dagger would have been worn by members of the PNF, or the Fascist party. Or the MVSN, or the Fascist militia, often called the Black Shirts.

Wes: Gary explains how Mussolini's seizure of power was aided by the Black Shirts, a paramilitary group known for their brutality and characteristic uniform. They also favored



ceremonial daggers. Gary says the best clue to who might have worn our dagger is the color of the handle.

Gary: For rank of below colonel, you would have the black inset. For colonel through general officers, you would have a white plastic, or an ivory material. And then true ivory, or even sometimes fossilized ivory, would have been for senior leaders or generals.

Wes: Because the grip of this dagger is black, that means that this could have only been carried by someone below the rank of colonel?

Gary: Correct. It's certainly unlikely that Mussolini would have worn this dagger in public, based on his rank. For such a relatively ordinary dagger, you would need extraordinary proof to tie it to Mussolini.

Wes: The History Detectives office has located Farber's records. In his application to join the Army there are some potentially interesting items. Farber had worked in both law enforcement and prison security. He had also been trained by the FBI in counter espionage. Farber was no ordinary soldier. But the only mention of his war service is that he entered the Army as an officer in 1942. Unfortunately, his wartime records have been destroyed in a fire. Jerry mentioned that his uncle has a sister living in the Midwest. Her name is Ruby Vant and I've tracked her down. I'm here in a little old town about a hundred miles south of Chicago, out in the middle of Illinois Farm country. And I'm here to see Clarence Farber's 101 year-old sister, hoping maybe she can tell me something about Clarence's military career. Ruby, did Clarence ever show you this dagger?

Ruby: Well, I knew he had it, but I can't remember it.



Wes: So, Ruby, did Clarence ever talk about what he did during World War Two?

Ruby: No, he wouldn't talk about the war.

Wes: Many returning GI's were quiet about their service years – eager to put the horrors of war behind them. But Ruby says she may be able to help me. A box of her brother's documents have sat in her attic, where she stored them 30 years ago. From the old box come fragments of information. Farber did see service in Italy during the war. In September, '43, he joined the invasion forces and landed at Salerno. It looks like Farber was in the 2675th regiment Allied Commission. His military occupation is listed as Public Safety Officer. After the war he stayed on in Italy. It seems as if his law enforcement training was put to good use by the US occupation forces. He was assigned to Salerno as the Superintendent of Prisons and Chief of the Italian Police Agencies. Here is something that, uh, Jerry was talking about. It's a copy of a proclamation from the City Council of Salerno to Farber. "He was always full of compassion towards those who suffered and revealed himself as possessing qualities of great generosity and kindness to those in pain." But there's nothing about a grateful citizenry giving him Mussolini's dagger. The old box contains a surprise, though – a letter with a very different account of how Jerry's uncle got the dagger. Listen to this. "Captain Clarence I. Farber and another officer were sent to pick up Mussolini. When they arrived at their destination, Mussolini and his mistress were hanging in the town square. He and the other officer went to Mussolini's apartment. Captain Farber picked up the dagger Mussolini wore on his dress uniform. The other officer took Mussolini's uniform." Although it's an incredible story, it's still only Farber's account, as told to his second wife. And the dates in this version don't quite match his official service record. He was at 5th Army Headquarters, in September, 1944, in Pisa. And he remained in Pisa, until July 1st, 1945. Now



why is that interesting? Well, Mussolini was ultimately captured and killed in the Lake Como district, a long way from Pisa. But Farber had FBI espionage training. Was he secretly involved in the hunt for Mussolini? I'm at the Special Forces museum in Fort Bragg North Carolina. Lt. Col. Robert W. Jones, Jr. Of the US Army Special Operations Command says Farber's military unit had an essential role keeping the peace in post war Italy. So exactly what did the Allied Control Commission do?

Colonel Jones: Well, the 2675th regiment, Allied Control Commission is a military government unit, today what we call Civil Affairs.

Wes: He says the Civil Affairs Division was established by Presidential order in 1942. Its mission was to plan for running the governments of countries that Hitler and Mussolini had tyrannized.

Colonel Jones: They are gonna go in after a battle, right on the heels of the combat troops to establish civil infrastructure within those areas, public safety, water, roads.

Wes: In town after town, Farber's unit provided immediate relief. But were they also involved in the manhunt for Benito Mussolini? Lt. Colonel Jones doubts it.

Colonel Jones: That would probably fall under the OSS.

Wes: He suggests I speak to Troy Sacquety, an OSS historian. Troy explains how the Office of Strategic Services was an intelligence organization created during World War Two. It was the precursor of today's CIA. Okay. Okay. So we've got these OSS guys behind the lines, right?



Troy: Right.

Wes: What are they doing? What's their mission?

Troy: You have Special Operations, or SO. These are the guys that are demolitions, sabotage. And then you have the operational groups, or OG's. And these guys are training the Partisans and, uh, leading them in harassing operations against the retreating enemy.

Wes: Sacquety explains how in late April 1945 the Italian leader was on the run from his many enemies, and trying desperately to flee Italy.

Troy: Mussolini was trying to escape to Switzerland and, he was with a German column.

Wes: If an OSS group had captured Mussolini, this would have been a big intelligence coup, right?

Troy: Oh, it would have been a huge propaganda coup. In modern terms he would be considered a high value target.

Wes: But the US military was not the first to reach Mussolini.

Troy: It was stopped by Partisans. He put on a German greatcoat and helmet, and tried to pass off as a drunk German soldier. The ruse was discovered and they captured Mussolini.

Wes: The OSS had missed their target by a few days.



Troy: This is from operational group Suwanee. And what it says here is, "Mussolini reported captured by patriots. If in hands of Partisans under your control, 15 Army group requests they turn him over to you to be held for Allied Command." Unfortunately, this order is dated April 29th, by which time Mussolini is already dead.

Wes: Troy, part of my story involves a GI captain named Clarence Farber. Is it possible that the 5th Army would have sent Farber to Milan to pick up Mussolini to take him to prison and go through his apartment?

Troy: It's possible. Uh, as early as the 28th, the advance elements of the American Army were in Milan.

Wes: What Troy shows me next gives me some interesting information for Jerry. Every investigation that I do for History Detectives I learn something new. What I found out was that this is not the kind of dagger that would have been worn by Mussolini himself. It's a dagger that would have been worn by someone below the rank of colonel.

Jerry: Below colonel.

Wes: The fact is, you would need extraordinary evidence to show that it was owned by Mussolini. I show Jerry the letter that claimed his uncle got the dagger when he was sent to pick up Mussolini.

Jerry: I've never seen any of this before.



Wes: It wasn't until I'd spoken with OSS historian Troy Sacquety that I understood the likely story behind the dagger.

Troy: I'll show you some things here. Photographs of Mussolini hung up in the square.

Wes: Oh, yeah. I've seen those before.

Troy: And, these were printed by the thousands as souvenirs. But, when they come back, it... the story comes in that granddad took these photographs himself and that he was there.

Wes: So I guess what you're saying is that this whole story could be... just a GI's memory?

Troy: Absolutely. Uh, the defining moment in the war in north Italy is held in your hands right there and everyone wanted to be there.

Wes: I tell Jerry he has an authentic Italian Fascist dagger from World War Two, but there was no evidence it had once belonged to Mussolini.

Jerry: Okay. Yeah. Well, it's good to know what I've got.

Wes: This shouldn't really diminish the story about Clarence here. He was given the job, among others, to bring order to a shattered, war torn country. And by establishing the police system and the prison system in Italy, as the allies took it over...he alleviated the suffering of thousands of



Italians. And, in that sense, he's a true war hero. But like a lot of GI's brought back something from his service, and maybe embellished it just a little bit.

Jerry: Yep. I see where that could happen, you know.