



EPISODE 11, 2004: PRISON PLAQUE, PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

Tukufu : Our next investigation reveals a remarkable scheme to recruit forces to fight in World War I. The year is 1917. The United States has just entered the First World War and is sending forces to fight on the western front. Most of the two million young men traveling to Europe believe in the justice of their cause, a war that could end all wars.

Wes: Some 80 years later, we've learned about an old prison plaque suggesting some soldiers had very different motives. The plaque is located at the center of Philadelphia's Eastern State Penitentiary, a former prison that once held some of America's most violent criminals. The plaque was brought to our attention by Elizabeth McKenty, a descendant of Bill McKenty, who ran the prison during World War I.

Elizabeth McKenty: I first heard about the prison because my great-grandfather was the warden here, which the family made clear was a really big deal, but it was only when I moved to Philadelphia as an adult and I saw the prison for the first time that I went, whoa. It's just an amazing facade to see. It's not something you expect in the urban landscape at all. But the thing that I found truly unusual was the plaque.

Wes: That plaque is dedicated "to the everlasting honor of those inmates of the Eastern State Penitentiary of Pennsylvania who served in the army and navy during the World War." Underneath, it lists 121 prisoners' numbers, suggesting that the challenge of defeating Germany and bringing peace to Europe was placed in the hands of criminals.

Wes: I'm Wes Cowan. Tukufu Zuberi and I have traveled to Philadelphia to decipher the mystery within these prison walls.

Wes: Elizabeth, this is really a unique plaque. What do you know about it?

Elizabeth: I heard about it from my father's cousin. She told me that she'd come to the unveiling when she was a child. Her grandfather, my great-grandfather, was the warden at the time. I wasn't aware that it was going to be a memorial to the inmates who had served during the World War.

Tukufu : So what do you want to know?

Elizabeth: I would like to know how this came about, that these inmates served during the World War, and also I'd like to know what my great-grandfather's role was.

Wes: It's kind of unusual, because by the time the United States entered the war in 1917, Wilson was touting this as the War to make the world safe for democracy. Are these the kinda guys that he would want to have serving in our armed forces? I mean, these guys are convicts. I think that -- I think that there's a lot to learn about this plaque.

Tukufu: While Wes heads off to New York to see if prisoners were allowed to fight in World War I, I'm going to see what I can find out here. Since it was shut down in 1971, the prison has been turned into a museum. I've heard there was a film that was shot in the prison in 1929. Was the plaque here then? I'm meeting with Sean Kelly, the program director, to take a look.

Sean Kelly: So we have basic shots here, inmates coming out of the van.

Tukufu: These are some great images.

Sean: Aren't they fantastic? And then this is the -- this is the shot here we're looking for. And so they have this great, nice, slow, pan shot and then if you look, right there next to the doorway, there it is. That's -- that's it!

Tukufu: Wow!

Sean: Right there on the wall.

Tukufu: Now why would the plaque be in the center of the prison?

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Sean: Well, you know, it's anybody's guess, but in the '20s, the inmates would be walking through that room all the time, and so it was a nice, visible spot. It was the most trafficked spot in the whole prison, a good place to make a statement about something you thought was important for the institution.

Tukufu: Whatever point was being made by displaying the plaque in such a prominent place, I still don't understand how a group of prisoners were being sent to war. By the spring of 1917, the First World War had been raging in Europe for almost three years. The United States was finally drawn into the conflict on April 6, 1917, when President Wilson declared war on Germany.

Wes: To find out more about how the military recruited soldiers during World War I, I've come to New York to meet with historian and author Thomas Fleming.

Thomas Fleming: We started from zero when we declared War. We had been talking about being neutral for 32 months before this and we weren't ready for war. So we had to find men to man a huge industrial war machine, and we also had to find men to put in the army to fight.

Wes: So how did Wilson ultimately solve this dilemma?

Thomas: He decided to go for a draft, for conscription and they -- Congress passed the Selective Service Act.

Wes: The Selective Service Act required every man between the age of 21 and 30 to register for the draft. These men were then placed into five classes according to who was most needed for the war effort at home and who was needed on the battlefield. Single men and unskilled laborers were placed in Class One and were the first to be drafted. Prisoners and ex-convicts were deemed morally unfit for duty and placed in the fifth and last class.

Thomas: As the war progressed, the pressure to get men into the army built and built and built because the Germans, it now became apparent, had a superiority, a numerical superiority on the Western front and were in a position to win the war. So Wilson's first statement that he needed a million men was now changed to two million and then three million, and before the war was over, they were planning for an army of five million men.

Wes: So there's tremendous pressure at the Class One level. What happens when you run out of those Class One people?

Thomas: They started taking people from the other classes and moving them into Class One.

Wes: So as the war ground on, there must have been a temptation to bring people up from Class Five that could include convicts.

Thomas: That's quite possible. No question about it.

Wes: So the demand for able-bodied men was so great that prisoners might have been sent to war. But did any of the guys on our plaque fight?

Tukufu: I'm headed to the Pennsylvania State Archives where the penitentiary records are stored. I'm meeting with historian Bob Wintermue. He's spent years researching U.S. Military History during World War I, including the story behind the plaque. He should have some information on our prisoners.

Bob Wintermue: These are the ledger books that should contain all the information that we're looking for. Who do you want to start with?

Tukufu: Let's start with B1739.

Bob: "B1739."



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Tukufu: Yes.

Bob: "William, alias Tom Guterman, murder in the second degree."

Tukufu: Whoa. Okay. Maximum sentence was 19 years and 7 months.

Bob: "B6158, Walter Rudisill, 18, pandering." He was a pimp.

Tukufu: He was a pimp.

Bob: Let's see what they say about it. "He enticed Hazel M. Stewart and Annie Rudisill, a minor female -- probably his sister -- to become inmates of a house of prostitution."

Tukufu: These were some pretty hard-core criminals.

Bob: Yeah, if they were in Eastern State Penitentiary, they were felons.

Tukufu: Do we know how they looked?

Bob: Here's some of our mug shots. Found one of our guys, Walter Rudisill.

Tukufu: Mr. Pimp. So we got a face with our name.

Tukufu: Now I've got a good sense of who these men were, but finding out if they actually served may not be so simple. According to Bob, in 1973, most of the World War I military records that I hoped to find were destroyed in a fire. But there might be another way. During the Depression, many veterans rushed to apply for bonus money that was due to them. The Pennsylvania applications are housed here at the Archives. Maybe our prisoners are among the applicants.

Bob: Guterman, right?

Tukufu: Yeah.

Bob: Yeah, he was a murderer. This is a list of his decorations and citations.

Tukufu: He got the Silver Star.

Bob: He got the Silver Star. In -- October 20, 1918, he was severely wounded.

Tukufu: So this tells us that some of these guys, at least, served in combat --

Bob: Mm-hmm.

Tukufu: -- And were distinguished by their military performance. Is there any way that we can show whether they were imprisoned or prisoners at this time?

Bob: You know, a good place to take a look would be the Warden's Letter press books. Okay, here we go. This is from the Deputy Warden to an attorney representing somebody who is inquiring about whether he could be sent into the military or not, a former inmate. "We notified them if they could get into the service, we have no objection whatever. We have at the present time close to 100 men in domestic or foreign service." So we've got 121 on the plaque. "We do not require them to fill out any reports, but we would like to hear from them by letter at least once a month if they have an opportunity to do so." This tells us that these guys are all parolees.

Tukufu: So the guys listed on the plaque did fight for their country in World War I, but they weren't prisoners. They were all ex-cons on parole. But even ex-cons were still included in Class Five and considered morally unfit for duty. Then Bob

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finds another letter in Warden McKenty's press book.

Bob: yeah, this is it right now. Dated November 8, 1918. It's to a former inmate who is apparently in training or shortly to go to Europe. "We fully believe that we will be able to secure pardons for all the men that served their country in this time of war."

Tukufu: Whoa!

Bob: "That is my reason for requesting you to get in communication with me as soon as you return."

Tukufu: So Warden McKenty, Elizabeth's great-grandfather, knew what was going on. Not only that, but he's also saying that the ex-cons that complete their service should be pardoned. Was he behind the whole thing all along?

Wes: I've come to Temple University's Urban Archives to look through back copies of the "Philadelphia Bulletin." I want to find out if there's any mention of the prison or the warden himself during this period. Oh, here's a great headline. Listen to this. "Three hundred Eastern Pen Honor prisoners are war heroes." This article quotes Warden Bob directly. "When a man asked to be given an opportunity to enlist, we took his word for it. Every man we paroled, every man we paroled in this manner gave a good account of himself. One of my burglars came back some time ago all shot up. He had 15 wounds and his right kidney was shot away and he walked on crutches. He also wore a bunch of medals. He said to me, 'life's a funny thing after all, ain't it, Warden. Here I go and get 15 years in jail for accidentally shoving a man up a railroad track, and then I get all these medals and decorations for killing two dozen men.' I agreed with him that we were living in a make-believe world." Boy, that's the irony of this whole story, isn't it?

Wes: So McKenty made it possible for some of his boys to serve their parole in the armed forces. But why did he risk his reputation for a bunch of ex-cons? I think I need to find out more about the kind of man Bob McKenty was. This is Elizabeth's Uncle Ruben McKenty and his son Bill.

Ruben McKenty: And here's a family photo of the whole family together. This is my grandfather, Robert J. McKenty. This is my dad. This is my mother. She's holding my brother Bill, who is the father of Elizabeth.

Wes: And they're posed before the prison wall.

Ruben: The whole family, my father and his four brothers and sister, grew up in the prison. And it was -- it was their home. When my dad and mother got married, they each chipped in, each prisoner -- I don't know the exact amount -- but they bought them a full set of china.

Wes: The prisoners bought the wedding china?

Ruben: And we still have it.

Wes: Oh, you're kidding me. That's great.

Wes: It's clear that the family had a unique relationship with the prisoners. But I'd like to understand more about what McKenty was like as warden. Bill showed me an article describing his philosophy.

Wes: "He persuaded himself that if the convicts were treated with consideration and fully trusted, they would respond with loyalty, that by these methods they would be reclaimed from their evil ways and return to society as honest, useful citizens." Huh, interesting. I mean, we would say today, in modern jargon, that they were rehabilitated. That's great. You know, I just -- I keep looking at these pictures down here and they look to me like World War I -era soldiers. What do you guys know about these?

Bill McKenty: These pictures were always referred to as the warden's boys that were inmates, or sent off to World War I.

Wes: Wow. You know, I look at these faces and I can't help but wonder if they somehow connect with the numbers

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that are on the plaque. Bob McKenty had an unusual relationship with his prisoners. His devotion resonated through the long hallways of the prison cellblocks. He truly believed that if given the opportunity, they could return to society as decent citizens. This plaque leaves us with evidence of his commitment to these men. I think it's time to tell Elizabeth everything about it and her great-grandfather's remarkable attempt to rehabilitate his former inmates.

Elizabeth: Wow.

Tukufu: And we believe that he placed this plaque here not only to honor the men who served in the military, but also as an inspiration for those who were still imprisoned.

Wes: You know, we also wanted to leave you with a little reward for letting us work on the project.

Tukufu: So we have a plaque for you.

Elizabeth: Oh, wow. How about that. "In the everlasting memory of Robert J. McKenty, warden of Eastern State Penitentiary, 1909 to 1923." I think that would please him and my cousin and the rest of the family very, very much. Thank you.

Tukufu: While only one of these men died, each one of them risked his life on behalf of his country. Once murderers and thieves, one man's determination gave them a second chance. Through Bob McKenty's dedication, the memory of their efforts lingers on.

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