



Episode 902, Story 2 – Spanish Civil War Eulogy

Tukufu Zuberi: What does this faded document reveal about a band of brothers who risked their lives for another people's political freedom? July, 1936. The nation groans under the Great Depression while President Franklin Roosevelt struggles to help the country recover. Across the ocean, Europe is also in turmoil: all eyes are on Spain where conservative military forces attempt a coup against the newly elected republican government. Hitler and Mussolini back the conservatives and their new leader, General Francisco Franco, but none of the major Western democracies step in to help the socialist and liberal republicans. So why did thousands of Americans risk their citizenship and their lives to fight for Spain? David Fellman from Minneapolis, Minnesota has a scrap of paper that may shed light on why one man volunteered, and reveal his family's connection to a lost American hero.

I'm Tukufu Zuberi and I'm here to meet David and investigate a story his father kept buried for over half a century.

Tukufu: Hi.

David Fellman: How do you do? Come in!

Tukufu: Thanks. So, what do we have here?

David: Well, my father, his name was Sol Fellman; he gave me these documents from the Spanish Civil War.



Tukufu: David explains his father went to Spain with his brother, Harry. But Harry Fellman disappeared in battle in 1938. Sol named his son, David Harry Fellman, in his brother's memory.

David: That's all I have of my uncle Harry.

Tukufu: Wow...that's powerful.

David has long been curious about an impassioned eulogy his father wrote for another veteran, an African American named Douglas Roach. "Douglas Roach, one of the finest sons of the Negro race, died July 1938. Murdered by the fascist in the flower of his youth. One of the first of his people to volunteer to fight for democracy in Spain who sought to stem the mad dogs of war."

David: It ends in a really interesting way. he says, "Remember Doug, the night we stood in the cold drizzle soaked to the skin surrounded by our dead and dying comrades, our rifles clinched in our numb hands waiting for the counter attack and said over, and over again, 'we'll pay them back, Doug, I promise you, we will pay them back.'"

Tukufu: There is a lot of emotion in here. David never knew his father to be a writer, but this poignant eulogy reveals the impact of his war-time experiences.

David: I tried to ask him about it, but it was so emotional for him that he just couldn't discuss it.

Tukufu: Now, why are you bringing this up now?



David: Well, my son was deployed to Iraq, his military experiences and my father's military experiences created quite a strong interest for me.

Tukufu: So this is coming full circle for you.

David: Yeah, it is.

Tukufu: So, what did you want to know about this?

David: I'd like to know about Douglas Roach.

Tukufu: Who was this fighter his father cared so deeply for, and where was the eulogy delivered?

Well let me go find out something for you.

David: Oh, thank you so much!

Tukufu: In some ways, this antiquated term, Negro, may seem insulting, yet Sol Fellman, you see him capitalizing the word Negro here. Writers like W.E.B. Dubois and others instituted this practice of capitalizing Negro, as a way of reclaiming the humanity of African Americans. It's clear Sol thought highly of Douglas Roach. Listen to this. "He carried out every command to the letter. He sought no glory." Sol and Doug met and fought at a battle called Jarama. Roach was wounded during another battle at a place called Brunete.



Let's see what I can find on Douglas Roach. A name search isn't helpful. It's too common, but adding the war gives me some interesting results. Whoa, now this is a pretty cool picture. Seems Douglas Roach was a member of a unit called the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. It was made up of 2800 Americans who went to fight in Spain. They joined after conservative and fascist forces, including those under General Francisco Franco, attempted to overthrow the liberal republican government in July of 1936. The U.S. and other major democratic governments refused to intervene, but that didn't prevent individuals from volunteering. In total, over 40,000 folks come from around the world to fight on the side of the republican army. Let's see if we can find this battle that's mentioned here. Jarama. So this was a battle that happened in 1937. The battle looks as if it was significant. I want to find out exactly what happened and why Sol Fellman thought so highly of his fellow soldier.

Spanish Civil War expert, and Oberlin Professor, Sebastiaan Faber, meets me at the International Center of Photography, where there's an exhibit of recently recovered images from the war.

Tukufu: So this is a eulogy that a guy named David Fellman, he received it from his father, Sol Fellman. That name sound familiar to you?

Sebastiaan Faber: No, doesn't ring a bell. No.

Tukufu: Look at this. "A Negro Hero Dies." But Professor Faber has heard of Douglas Roach.



Sebastiaan: Yeah, he was one of the 90 African Americans that went over to Spain in the Lincoln Brigade.

Tukufu: Sebastiaan says he's familiar with Douglas Roach because of the unique place of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in military history.

Sebastiaan: The army units of the Lincoln Brigade were the first non-segregated unit in American military history, and the first time that an African American man is commanding white soldiers.

Tukufu: So why didn't the United States support this effort?

Sebastiaan: There are many reasons, but there are two main reasons. One of them was simply isolationism. It's been only, less than two decades since the end of World War I. So people remember how horrific war is. The second reason was more political.

Tukufu: Sebastiaan explains how Franklin Roosevelt was pushing through New Deal programs to cope with the Great Depression and joblessness. A big piece of his new deal support came from US Catholics, many of whom who opposed the anti-clerical views of some Spanish republicans.

Sebastiaan: What this meant for Roosevelt was that he couldn't take sides. He sympathized with the Republic on a political and on a human level, but he felt he could not afford to alienate the Catholic vote. There was a law that said no US citizen could enlist in a foreign army.



Tukufu: Okay, how do we get from a Jew, Sol Fellman, and a Negro, Douglas Roach, end up coming from the United States to fight in a war in Spain?

Sebastiaan: The Spanish Civil War was the first media war. It was covered by journalists including Hemmingway, Langston Hughes, people like George Orwell went actually to fight.

Tukufu: Sebastiaan says Americans discovered the reality of the war through innovative writers, photographers, and filmmakers.

Sebastiaan: It was a moral cause, it was seen as a moral cause, and it had the support of prominent cultural icons.

Tukufu: Sebastiaan explains how volunteers like Sol and Doug saw Spain as the stage in a global conflict.

Sebastiaan: For them, if fascism wasn't stopped in Spain it would easily conquer the rest of the world. It could go to France and go to England, get to the United States. World War II shows that that was indeed its ambition, its aspiration, to conquer the world.

Tukufu: Sebastiaan believes that Douglas Roach's African ancestry also helped motivate his fight.

Sebastiaan: In October, 1935 Mussolini's fascist Italy brutally invades Ethiopia, and this is where there were bombings, there was poison gas...it was horrific.



Tukufu: To many African Americans, Ethiopia was a symbol of their homeland, so Mussolini's brutal invasion was a personal attack.

Sebastiaan: For Americans like Doug Roach, the fight in Spain was a continuation of the fight that he would have wanted to fight in Ethiopia.

Tukufu: What was the Battle of Jarama?

Sebastiaan: This was the first battle action that the Lincoln Brigadiers saw.

Tukufu: Sebastiaan says the Battles of Brunette and Jarama, where Sol Fellman met Doug Roach, were two of the most important conflicts in the war. He suggests speaking to someone who saw the Spanish combat up close. Ninety-four-year-old American veteran Matti Mattson now lives in the coastal town of Lake Worth, Florida. How you doing?

Matti Mattson: Alright.

Tukufu: Just 19-years-old and living in Fitchburg, Massachusetts when the war started, Matti grew up influenced by the politics of his Finnish immigrant mother, an active Communist Party member. He says she taught him to fight for what he believed was right. For Matti, this meant joining the Abraham Lincoln Brigade and the fight against fascism.

Matti: The United States didn't do anything, so some of us decided well, somebody has to do something.



Tukufu: Arriving in Spain in March 1937, Matti was a frontline ambulance driver.

Matti: I was in every major battle from Brunete, all the way through the end of the war.

Tukufu: He explains that Brunete was a republican offensive meant to hold off the advancing nationalists from Madrid. Matti was an eyewitness to the carnage.

Matti: A couple of times, I drove that close to the front that I was, I could actually see the there were the trenches. They were firing at one side to the other.

Tukufu: Grossly outmatched by Franco and his forces, Brunete would be known as the bloodiest conflicts of the entire war.

Matti: They had bombers and they had no end of material that they were getting from Hitler and Mussolini.

Tukufu: Matti never met the Fellman brothers but he did encounter Douglas Toach during a break in the fighting at Brunete. He says Roach was known for his bravery, and kindness, despite the grim surroundings.

Matti: Sometimes when we advanced we'd run into a whole bunch of corpses along the roadside that were just simply slaughtered.

Tukufu: Do you regret participating in that war?



Matti: No, no. It was— we were fighting a “just” war. They were fighting an unjust war. I did it for the welfare of all.

Tukufu: Matti doesn’t know the circumstances surrounding the eulogy, nor where it was read. New York University’s Tamiment Library holds the most comprehensive set of archives on the Abraham Lincoln Brigade veterans. Jim Fernandez teaches at NYU and is Vice Chair of the Archives. Let me show you, this is the eulogy. It was written by a guy named Sol Fellman to honor Douglas Roach.

Jim Fernandez: Okay. Well you’ve come to the right place. What we have here are the personal papers of 300 of the almost 3000 volunteers that went to Spain.

Tukufu: The eulogy says Sol never saw Doug again after he was wounded at Brunete and hospitalized in Spain. Alright, let’s get busy.

Jim: Okay, let’s do it.

Tukufu: So what happened to Doug Roach after he was hospitalized? Unfortunately, Jim doesn’t have Doug’s own personal papers, but he does find something else.

Jim: Here it is, Douglas Roach.

Tukufu: Let’s see what we got here.

Jim: That’s Doug Roach. Look at the muscles on him.



Tukufu: I know, he's in pretty good shape.

Jim: There's a lot of clippings here.

Tukufu: Born in Provincetown, Doug graduated from Massachusetts Agricultural College in 1933. An active member of the Communist Party, and an amateur wrestler, Roach was only 5 feet tall but made a big impression on his comrades when he joined the fight in Spain. Roach was one of the best machine gunners in the entire Spanish war. Franco had nobody like him and he was an army by himself. Roach was badly wounded at Brunete by shoulder and chest injuries from mortar fire. In the fall of 1937, he returned home frail but remained politically active. At the First Convention of the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, Roach was elected as National Adjunct Commander. In July of 1938, however, with injuries never quite healed, he died in New York.

It's an account of his funeral. Thousands lined the streets for his impressive Harlem service. Well look at this, Mother AME Zion Church. Now do you know if this eulogy was actually read at the funeral?

Jim: We don't know that, we're not sure. We do know that two veterans accompanied his body back to Provincetown where there was another set of services.

Tukufu: And Jim has found some other records. Deep in the stacks are papers about Sol and his brother Harry and their long ago journey from New York Harbor to the battlefields of Spain.



Jim: So if we go to "F," there they are.

Tukufu: Cool.

Jim: Harry Fellman and Sol Fellman left on the 16th of January aboard the S.S. Paris.

Tukufu: The brothers entered the war together, but where did Harry go after he and Sol were separated?

Jim: There should be a file in there. Check this out.

Tukufu: Jim's found details on Harry Fellman's final hours. Its information I want to share with David, his nephew and namesake. At the tip of Cape Cod is Douglas Roach's childhood home. We ask David to meet us there.

Let's talk about this place a little bit.

David: Okay!

Tukufu: Just behind the house is the Roach family burial plot. So David, you asked me to find out about Douglas Roach. Here is his grave site, "Douglas Bryan Roach, who died that democracy may live. New York, New York. July 13th, 1938."



I share how Douglas Roach may have been small in stature, but had fought in two important battles, facing overwhelming odds.

David: Wow, what an amazing guy.

Tukufu: We'd also run down information about his namesake.

Jim: Check this out. Here he is. Harry Fellman, March 1938, Hajar.

Tukufu: Jim had found the list of missing soldiers for the Brigade.

Jim: If he's missing in Hajar, it means he's on the run, and chances are next to nothing that he would have survived.

Tukufu: Do you have death records?

Jim: Yeah, Harry Fellman.

Tukufu: It's what he had long known, but the document gives David closure his father never had.

David: Well, at least Doug came home.

Tukufu: There's one final thing I want to share. So David, I want you to meet Douglas Watkins. Douglas is named for Douglas Roach, his uncle, as you were named for your Uncle Harry.



Doug Watkins: It's very nice, it's good to meet you. I've heard a lot about you.

David: I know that Douglas Roach was one of the most influential people in my father's life. That he never forgot his friendship with Doug Roach.

Doug: I heard he was a very likable person, very charismatic person.

Tukufu: I explain how Sol's eulogy may have been read at this same gravesite back in 1938.

David: Maybe I can read a little bit of it now?

Doug: That would be super. I'd really appreciate it.

David: "I remember well the last request he made of me. He had been promoted to corporal and asked me to get his chevron. You should have seen the pride in his eyes when he took it in his hand for the first time. Then we put him on a bus and watched him go away. For a long time, life was empty without him."

Doug: It's beautiful. It's beautiful. Thank you very much for that.

David: Oh, my pleasure.

Tukufu: Over time, the efforts and sacrifices of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade have been widely recognized. In 2009, Matti Mattson was awarded Spanish citizenship. He accepted the honor, he said, for not only the guys who are buried



in Spain, but also the guys that are buried in the United States. As we were finishing this story, Mr. Mattson passed away in January, 2011, at the age of 94.