Episode 903, Story 2 – Siberian Bullet

Eduardo Pagan: This case asks what a doughboy’s keepsake reveals about the earliest days of the struggle against communist Russia. November 1917: the Bolshevik Revolution has sparked upheaval in Russia, and brought a radically new system of government onto the world stage. The United States, along with the United Kingdom and France, are shell-shocked. Already embroiled in a bloody war with Germany, they now face a potential new foe, an anti-capitalist worker-state which they fear may one day spread communism to their own shores. Behind closed doors these allies turn their attention to this new threat, keeping their real agenda hidden from their own public. Now, a collector from Lakewood, California has a piece of lead and brass that may open a window on a critical moment in Soviet-American relations.

Dave Damp: This bullet has never been fired but I’m sure there is a story behind it.

Eduardo: I’m Eduardo Pagan, and I’m meeting Dave Damp to investigate the ammunition he found decades ago.

Dave: I was 16 years old at a gun show in Colorado and I had a dollar, was walking around and I found this in a box of loose shells. The thing that caught my eye was the inscription. It says, Leo V. Thompson, Company E, 31st infantry, A.E.F. Siberia.

Eduardo: Were you able to find any information about this?
Dave: I did a little search here recently and I found out that A. E. F. stands for American Expeditionary Force. And we actually sent some troops to Siberia back in 1918. But beyond that, I don’t know anything. If you take the bullet off it’s got an interesting feature.

Eduardo: Look at that.

Dave: I figure it was made into a letter opener as a souvenir either for Mr. Thompson or by Mr. Thompson.

Eduardo: Well what can I find out for you?

Dave: Well I’d like to know about Leo V. Thompson and the unit he served in. And I’d also like to know why we had American troops in Siberia.

Eduardo: I’ll see what I can find out for you. Thank you, it was very nice meeting you.

Dave: Thank you very much.

Eduardo: The bullet definitely appears to be lead and the casing appears to be brass. That looks like a little pen knife or maybe a letter opener. The inscription on this looks very nicely done. “Leo V. Thompson, Company E, 31st infantry, A.E.F. Siberia.” There’s something interesting about the word “Leo”. There’s what appears to be a period after the “O”. I’m guessing that’s maybe short for Leonard. I do remember something about a detachment to Siberia but I don’t know a lot
about that. And A.E.F, immediately I think of the American Expeditionary Force during World War I.

If he served in the A.E.F, finding Leonard V. Thompson shouldn’t be that difficult. There are a number of World War I veterans’ databases. This is interesting, the 31st Infantry was sent to Siberia from 1918 to 1920. But I can’t find a Leonard or a Leo V. Thompson in the 31st Infantry. Rutgers University Professor David Foglesong has written extensively about the United States’ involvement with Russia at this time. David, thanks so much for meeting with me. I’m dying to know whether you’ve seen anything like that?

David Foglesong: No, I never have seen anything exactly like this.

Eduardo: What caught my attention were the initials A.E.F. David explains how the term A.E.F had first been used to describe the American Expeditionary Force of some two million doughboys. These troops left the United States in 1917 and 1918 to fight Germany during World War I. But he says the “infantry” on our bullet must refer to the U.S. force stationed in Siberia after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.

David: There were two American Expeditionary Forces that were sent to the former Russian empire in the summer of 1918. The expedition to Siberia involved between 8 and 10 thousand American troops. One went into northern Russia at Archangelsk or Archangel and one went into eastern Siberia at the port of Vladivostok in the summer of 1918.
Eduardo: This is the period of the Bolshevik Revolution. And this is the reason, as I understand it, why Russia pulled out of the First World War.

David: Yes.

Eduardo: David explains how the communist revolution had lit a civil war inside Russia, with Lenin’s Bolshevik Red Army doing battle with the monarchist White Army. David relates how Czarist Russia had, at first, been on the side of the Allies in the fight against Germany. They had also been sent a great deal of war materiel and ammunition. Now, Great Britain, France and the United States viewed the Bolshevik revolution and that stockpiled ammunition with growing concern.

David: The British and the French and the Americans did not want the Bolsheviks to be able to seize the stockpiles at Archangelsk and at Vladivostok.

Eduardo: David says the U.S. government made the decision to keep troops in Soviet Russia, even though Germany’s surrender in the fall of 1918, marking the end of the war. How did Wilson sell this to the public?

David: The short answer is he did not sell the expedition to the American people. And that’s one of the reasons then that we see so many people scratching their heads and wondering what are our forces doing in northern Russian and eastern Siberia after the ending of the First World War. The Wilson administration did release to the American public a brief press release in early August of 1918. “The Government of the United States wishes to announce to the people of Russia in
the most public and solemn manner,” Wilson wrote, “that it contemplates no interference with the political sovereignty of Russia.”

Eduardo: But behind closed doors, a very different strategy was being plotted.

David: He didn’t want to spell it out that the ultimate purpose of this was to try to assist the removal of the Bolshevik regime. Bolshevism really meant a challenge to the existing order throughout the world, including in the United States. We will incite the working class of the world to rebel against the capitalists, and we will try to turn World War I into a civil war within each of those societies.

Eduardo: Wilson was secretly providing assistance to the anti-communist White Army.

David: Implicitly the United States is assisting the White forces in the Russian civil war by patrolling the railway line. By keeping that supply line open.

Eduardo: So we didn’t intervene directly, but it sounds like we did everything we could indirectly to influence what was happening there?

David: Right.

Eduardo: What did the American troops understand of their mission in Russia?

David: Some of them didn’t understand at all. Both in terms of local skirmishes against Red partisans and in terms of securing the supply line for the Whites,
some of the American troops understood that their purpose was at least implicitly anti-Bolshevik.

Eduardo: David suggests to learn more about the 31st and Leo Thompson, I head to the National World War II museum in Kansas City. Doran Cart is curator.

Doran Cart: And this is our Siberian expedition exhibit.

Eduardo: He says the artifacts are a reminder of a war, and soldiers, whose exploits America knows little about. Have you ever seen anything like this?

Doran: Yes absolutely. We have a number of other objects that are very similar to this. I think this is the same cartridge that you have. And this is an unfired cartridge and this was for the Berdan 2 rifle.

Eduardo: The gun itself was invented in 1870 by an American Civil War veteran sharpshooter, Hiram Berdan. An incredibly reliable weapon, some three million of them were eventually made.

Doran: And these were used quite extensively in Siberia.

Eduardo: The cartridges were also invented by Berdan, and known for their power and accuracy. If you pull the bullet from the cartridge, out comes a little knife.

Doran: They made a lot of those. That’s shell art. Shell art was an art form that really reached its height during World War I. They could keep them as a
remembrance of where they served and what they did during the war. Or they would send them home. These were made really in a cottage industry.

Eduardo: So local artisan did this?

Doran: Local artisans. Right there. They had market all set up. Soldiers would come in, they would give their name, their unit number and then they would engrave it and sell it to the soldier.

Eduardo: Well is there anything you can tell me about the 31st Infantry and specifically Company E?

Doran: Well, the 31st Infantry really had an interesting history. Their first duty really was to guard the military stores in Vladivostok itself. And in the summer time of 1919 they were sent out to guard the Trans-Siberian Railway.

Eduardo: Well, what was life like for these guys in this unit?

Doran: Mostly, it was miserable. They were cold and hungry and had people shooting at them. They had many skirmishes with what they called the “Bolsheviky bandits.” During the summer of 1919, thirty members of the 31st Infantry were killed and then 60 of them were wounded.

Eduardo: Was Leo V. Thompson one of the casualties? Why can't I find a trace of his service? What kind of records exist for this unit?
Doran: Well there’s not a lot. It was a kind of a forgotten war. But we actually have a copy here of the roster of the 31st Infantry of Company E.

Eduardo: I’d love to see if we can find Leo V. Thompson in this roster.

Doran: Well let’s see if we can find him. So, we don’t see any Thompsons under the officers or non-commissioned officers. Now we’re into the privates.

Eduardo: Now there’s a Thompson. But that’s George V. Thompson.

Doran: Well, there’s not a Leo.

Eduardo: You know one of the things that struck me as a little bit curious is that there appears to be a period right after Leo. Maybe this Leo is not Leo, but Geo, short for George.

Doran: And of course that was a common abbreviation at that time for George.

Eduardo: Could this be the same man on our bullet? Doran directs me to the museum’s online records. Well, there’s one George V. Thompson, 1881. I’m not sure if that birth date would be quite right for the time that I’m looking at. Here’s another one that was born in 1895. Now that seems like a real possibility. They’ve got a draft card online! Here it is. George V. Thompson, aged 22 from Milan, Missouri. Born in 1895. He was a farmer. And look at this! He signs his name Geo V. Thompson. I think this could be our guy!
What happened to George Thompson? The bullet made it out of Russia, but did its owner? I was able to track George’s grandson, Steve Thompson, to Springfield Illinois.

Steve Thompson: Come on in.

Eduardo: Thank you. I am conducting some research on a World War I soldier by the name of George V. Thompson. I presume that is your grandfather?

Steve: That is correct.

Eduardo: I want you to take a look at this.

Steve: That is just incredible.

Eduardo: Steve tells me that George survived the war, and that the family has memorabilia from his time in Russia.

Steve: Let me start with that. This photo of George is in what I believe is his issued jacket.

Eduardo: You know, I see a resemblance.

Steve: These are his insignia pins.

Eduardo: Yes. 31st Infantry. MG, for machine gun I take it?
Steve: He was on a machine gun crew. Eduardo, the last thing that we have here are all of his letters to and from home.

Eduardo: This is really cool that you’ve got these. These letters from Siberia are remarkable. “I don’t really want out until peace, and then I can walk out feeling that I have done my bit.” To what degree do you think he understood the purpose of their being stationed in Siberia?

Steve: He understood what was going on in Siberia and in Russia as a whole. And that when they pulled out they were abandoning the country and essentially they were abandoning it to communism.

Eduardo: “We are up against one of the greatest questions to my notion that the world has ever known.” Looking over George’s letters, the details of his experience finally become clearer… then Steve helps me complete the picture of George’s service in Siberia.

Well Dave, I want to thank you for contacting me and allowing me to delve into a piece of American history that I didn’t know a lot about. I can tell you, after a fair amount of research, that there was no Leo B. Thompson who served in this unit.

Dave: There was no Leo V. Thompson? Well that’s interesting.

Eduardo: Now if you look at the first letter in that first name, it looks like an “L” but notice that there’s a line that’s scratched behind it which then transforms the “L” into a “G.” And I can tell you in fact there was a George V. Thompson who served in Company E in the 31st Infantry in Siberia from 1918 to 1920.
Dave: You know, now that you take a look at it, you can see it but it is so faint.

Eduardo: And I've got something I want you to see. I was able to find a picture of George Thompson himself dressed in his winter uniform for his Siberian service.

Dave: It’s kind of neat to see the man behind the shell, so to speak, after 40 years of wondering. This is very interesting.

Eduardo: And there’s something else. I was able to meet with his family and they were able to fill in some of the background about his life. But I found something very interesting in George’s diary.

Steve: “On June 26th they have a call to arms. They’re out for action. My squad out on hospital train for reinforcement of a company in engagement with Reds. Under fire. A real battle in engagement with, 3 automatic rifle squads. Drove the enemy off into the hills. There were 19 Americans killed. 32 were wounded. A dreadful sight.” That was the largest engagement that the 31st Infantry experienced.

Eduardo: You’ve got quite an historical record here. Because of the camouflaged nature of the A.E.F.’s operations, Steve’s grandfather’s diary gives a rare look into the brutality of that fighting, and the bravery of the soldiers.

Dave: That's incredible. Knowing the story behind it really kind of brings home just what that represents.
Eduardo: I’ve got one more thing that I want to show you. Dave, I would like for you to meet Steve V. Thompson, the grandson of George V. Thompson.

Dave: Wow, it’s really a pleasure to meet you.

Steve: It’s great to meet you!

Dave: Well I’ve had this for 40 years and it has always been in a place of honor in my home and I’ve never considered it mine so I am glad I am able to return it to your family.

Steve: Wow. I can’t tell you how much we appreciate you going out of your way, cherishing this and bringing it back to the family. I want to thank you.

Dave: Thank you.

Eduardo: In early 1920, after public outcry and plummeting soldier morale, Wilson finally pulled American troops from Siberia. George Thompson returned to the United States, and settled in Kansas where he started a farm. Three generations later, some of his descendents still live there today.