



Episode 1, 2006: McKinley Casket Flag, Battleground, Washington

Wes: In this next story, an American tragedy: the point-blank assassination of our 25th President, William McKinley. Kennedy's final march down the Mall. Reagan's sunset farewell in California. Whether our nation's leaders are struck down by tragedy or whether their lives come to a natural end, the last image we have to remember them by is a casket draped in an American flag. The same was true for President William McKinley, who met his death at the end of an assassin's gun in September 1901. One hundred years later in Cincinnati, Ohio, Sean Kennedy believes he may have the flag that draped McKinley's coffin.

Sean Kennedy: There wasn't too many Presidents assassinated, and that we actually have one of the flags from one of those caskets is pretty significant.

Wes: I'm Wes Cowan. I'm from Cincinnati, and I'm heading to meet Sean to see if I can get to the bottom of this mystery. Sean told me that according to family legend, his great-grandfather was President McKinley's personal bodyguard. And is there any proof to this story?

Sean: No, I have nothing. All I have is a family story that's been handed down through the generations.

Wes: Okay, so, what do you want me to find out?

Sean: One, I'd like to know who my great-grandfather was. I'd like to know if he was in fact McKinley's bodyguard. The other thing: I'd like to know if this flag was actually on McKinley's coffin.

Wes: So what do you know about your great-grandfather?

Sean: All we know is his name, and it's Charles H. Kennedy.

Wes: Charles H. Kennedy.

Sean: I don't even know the middle name.

Wes: You don't know where he died or when he died. Anything else that I should know?

Sean: I'd like you to look at the medals that we got from him.

Wes: Okay, mind if I spend a couple minutes here taking a look at it? I'm going to have to take this stuff with me.

Sean: Yeah.

Wes: I've appraised hundreds of flags in my career, and if this is the flag that draped McKinley's casket, it could be a valuable piece. It has 45 stars on it, which is the right number of stars for the year McKinley was killed. But did it drape his casket? I'm not sure. See that? That's a grommet. Grommets are put on flags for only one reason. That's to fly them. So why would a coffin flag have a grommet? These medals are interesting. That's a hat pin for a military cap. This pin was an infantry pin. That's what the crossed rifles signify. And the "14 C" means that this guy was in company "C" of the 14th infantry. And this sharpshooter's medal, it's a really pretty rare thing. And, you know, you might expect that someone who was a bodyguard ought to be a good shot. So maybe we can find out something about this guy from the sharpshooter medal. I want to brush up on my McKinley history a little. A conservative Republican from Ohio, William McKinley was our 25th President. He was twice elected to the White House, each time with large majorities. Although the nation emerged as a world power during his administration, McKinley's often represented by his critics as an arch-conservative puppet of industrial leaders and corporations. The nation grew prosperous during his presidency, but much of that wealth went to the great barons of the steel and textile industries, who were transforming the economy. Working conditions for the tens of thousands of immigrant laborers inside those factories and mills was often abominable. With child labor and 60-hour work weeks commonplace. McKinley's angriest critics included socialists and anarchists. Their hatred reached a boiling point in September 1901. At a public reception in Buffalo, New York, a young anarchist named Leon Czolgosz lined up to shake McKinley's hand. As the organ played Bach, Czolgosz shot the President twice with a pistol concealed in a handkerchief. After eight agonizing days, McKinley died. Leon Czolgosz

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was executed for his crime, an event that was actually filmed by Thomas Edison. If Charles Kennedy was McKinley's bodyguard, perhaps he was present the day McKinley was shot. It says here there were four guys that were chiefly responsible for McKinley's protection. One was his secretary, George B. Cortelyou. There were two Secret Service agents, a guy named Ireland and another guy named Foster. And there was Webb Hayes, the son of the 19th President of the United States, Rutherford B. Hayes. Nowhere -- Nowhere in these books I s there any mention of a guy named Charles H. Kennedy. I'm headed a few hours east to Canton, Ohio, where McKinley lived during his presidency. I'm going to speak with McKinley historian Richard McElroy at the McKinley monument. Rich suggested we meet at West Lawn Cemetery in front of the Werts receiving vault. That's the place where McKinley's body arrived in the winter of 1901 after funeral services held in Buffalo and Washington.

Richard McElroy: 100 years ago, this vault housed bodies in wintertime because the ground was too frozen to dig graves. There's nothing in it now, but when McKinley arrived, it was the focus of a nation in mourning. And at the exact moment McKinley's casket was placed inside here, all telephone service and electricity ceased for about a minute in the United States as a tribute to McKinley's memory.

Wes: Wow. America's grief was powerful.

Richard: In ceremonies in Buffalo and then Washington, throngs of citizens stood in the rain to view the fallen President's casket. 100,000 flocked to pay their final respects when the body finally arrived in Canton. Afterwards, the President lay in state inside the Werts vault for six years until he was moved to a permanent resting place nearby in the McKinley monument.

Wes: So that's the monument, huh?

Richard: President McKinley, his wife, Ida, and his two daughters are entombed inside.

Wes: You know, the case that I'm working on involves McKinley's bodyguards. Now, I've heard of four bodyguards. Another name has come up, though, and it's Charles H. Kennedy. Does that name mean anything to you at all?

Richard: I've never heard of Charles H. Kennedy.

Wes: That name doesn't ring a bell? So what about those military pins? Have you ever heard of the company "C" of the 14th infantry ever being part of his bodyguard detail?

Richard: Not while President McKinley was alive, Wes. However, that company was here in Canton to serve as an honor guard at that temporary vault.

Wes: You're kidding me. So that means that our guy, Charles H. Kennedy, could have been here in Canton at the time of the funeral.

Richard: If he was a member of that company -- not the entire company was here. So if he was in that company, very possibly, he guarded the temporary tomb.

Wes: But what about the flag?

Wes: Good to see you! I called my friend Ken Kahn, a flag expert, and asked him to meet me in Canton at the church where McKinley's funeral was held.

Ken Kahn: It's an interesting flag. It certainly is a 45-star American national flag. It is of the period. The stars are appliquéd on both sides, and they're appliquéd with an unusual kind of machine stitching which is called zigzag stitching which was pretty exclusive to that period in the 1890s. It does have a nice brass grommet.

Wes: Now, why would a coffin flag have a grommet? I mean, a grommet's for only one thing. That's to fly this flag, right?

Ken: They used whatever flag was available.

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Wes: Okay, now, the other thing I noticed was that this flag seems awfully large to put on a coffin.

Ken: Well, they used flags of all different sizes, and it's certainly of the right period and well could have been on McKinley's coffin.

Wes: But there's a complication. McKinley's remains were on display at multiple sites in three different cities where numerous American flags had draped and surrounded the casket.

Ken: Our flag is from the right period, but at this point, that's about all we can say.

Wes: I've thought of one more thing to try. I've located the McKinley museum Library and asked librarian Janet Metzger if she has anything in the archive about a flag given to a Charles H. Kennedy.

Janet Metzger: No, we don't, Wes, I'm sorry to say, but I do have some photographs you might be interested in looking at. Let me show them to you.

Wes: The pictures are nice, but I don't even know what I'm looking for. I'm hoping something jumps out at me.

Janet: This is a photograph in front of the Werts receiving vault.

Wes: Oh, yeah, look at the flag there in front of the vault. And here's another one with a flag in front of the vault. This one's hanging, and look at the elaborate floral arrangement. Oh, this is great. Here's a picture of the vault open, and there are three military guys standing in front of it. The doors are open, and you can see the coffin. This is a great photograph. Yeah, this is company "C" of the 14th regiment, isn't it?

Janet: Yes. Lined up in front in front of the receiving vault at dress parade.

Wes: Wow. What a great picture.

Janet: Here's another from a different angle.

Wes: Boy, the detail is fabulous.

Janet: You can see "14" on one of the hat pins, actually.

Wes: You can actually see that on there? Yeah -- wait a minute. What's this? This guy has a sharpshooter's medal on his chest. Charles Kennedy was a sharpshooter. Suddenly, I get a strong feeling that I might be staring right in the face of Sean's long-lost relative. Boy, I wonder if that could be him. Wouldn't that be something if it was. He's got sergeant's stripes on his sleeves. You know, I don't know if our guy Kennedy was a sergeant or not, but that's something I can check out. Do you mind if I get an enlargement of this?

Janet: Not at all. We can do that.

Wes: I know that Some of company 14-C came to Canton with the President's body, but I still don't know if Charles Kennedy came here. If I'm going to find out if this image is Sean's great-grandfather, I need to figure out if Kennedy ever got to Canton. I'm going to start looking at Canton City Directories beginning in 1902. Let's see...Kennedy, Kennedy...Oh, here's a Charles H. Kennedy. And he's listed as a soldier. So it looks as if Charles Kennedy did make it to Canton. I wonder what else there is. I'll take a look at 1903. And here he is: Charles H. Kennedy. This time, he's listed as a laborer. That's kind of weird. Huh. I'm going to keep checking. Let's see. I'm looking in the 1904 City directory this time. And here he is: Charles H. Kennedy. This time, he's listed as a sexton, though. I'm not sure what to make of all this. Charles Kennedy is briefly listed as a soldier. So it could be him, but there's no indication this Charles H. Kennedy ever guarded McKinley's gravesite. There's one more place to check. Aha, here it is. What I found next would give Sean a

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very personal glimpse of American history.

Wes: I asked Sean to come to Canton so I could tell him what I discovered. I couldn't find any evidence his flag ever draped William McKinley's casket or that his great-grandfather was McKinley's personal bodyguard.

Sean: Okay.

Wes: Sorry about that, but there's good news. Are you ready?

Sean: Yeah.

Wes: This is Charles H. Kennedy's obituary.

Wes: Oh, this is great. "Having first come here as a member of the Regular Army detachment which was sent here for the funeral of William McKinley." And it says he was a sergeant, and he was in charge of a corps which remained on guard at the West Lawn Receiving Vault for a year and a half following the former President's burial. So Kennedy was there at the gravesite after all. He was guarding McKinley, just not in the way that we thought. And if you look at this guy down right here, I want you to look at this guy and see what he's got on his chest.

Sean: Oh, wow.

Wes: You know who that is? The rare sharpshooter medal and the sergeant's stripes means that the man on the right in the photograph is almost certainly Sean's long-lost great-grandfather.

Sean: That's pretty awesome. That made the trip worth it, right there. It feels great to actually see what he looked like. I mean, that's what I really wanted out of this. The flag was nice, but I wanted a picture of the guy and I got it. So thank you, guys.

Wes: There's something else I want to show you, though, too. Follow me.

Sean: All right. Where we going? Oh, wow.

Wes: All right, so what do you see?

Sean: Looks like my great-grandfather's gravesite.

Wes: You know, after he got out of the military, he was the sexton in this cemetery. The sexton is the guy who takes care of the cemetery. He lived the rest of his life here in Canton, led a simple life, honorable life, but I want you to just step up here and look right over there, and what do you see?

Sean: The McKinley monument.

Wes: Yeah, the McKinley monument. So, you know, in a sense, he never left guarding McKinley. I tell Sean that in his grandfather's story, we can look at history in a new light. McKinley was murdered by an anarchist who believed the President was an enemy of the people. Even today, McKinley's sometimes overlooked by historians, but in the example of service and devotion that Charles H. Kennedy showed to the President, loyal in life and in death, we see evidence of the deep appeal McKinley had for millions of average Americans, who twice voted him into the White House.

Sean: I didn't know where he was buried, nothing. Didn't know when he died. I found a part of my life.

Wes: That you didn't know existed. I'm going to leave you here for a couple minutes, and when you're ready, just come on down and meet me at the car.

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