

SCARAB

A COLT WILDER ADVENTURE

Nathan Karstulovich

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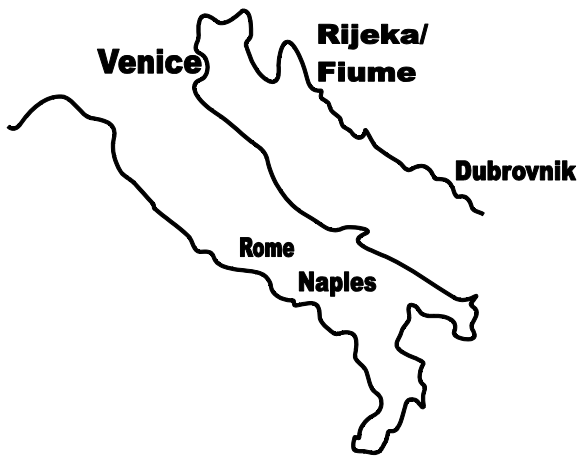
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Myth and Legend



Fiume – May 1940

On a bright, warm day, five men walked down the street away from the stadium. Laughing and carrying on, as young men are known to do, one of them leaped forward and mimicked a kick. As he did, he called out to the others, “Did you see that goal? Man that felt good!”

The second man in the line gave the first a shove and said, “You had the luckiest shot ever! But it feels good to beat up on that team.”

All five men played together on the US Fiumano pro soccer team in the Italian occupied city of Fiume. The twenty-four year old men were an important part of a soccer team that was very successful on the field and

helped unify a city in constant turmoil. Once a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Fiume broke free after World War I becoming an independent state under its own rule. Unfortunately for the citizens, the Italians, Serbs, and Croats could not give up the idea of owning the city and fighting was constant. The independence lasted only four years. In 1924, the Kingdom of Italy took control of the city. Begrudgingly, the citizens lived under Italian rule and were conscripted to fight for Mussolini's military alongside Hitler and the Nazi regime.

As the men continued down the road, on their way to dinner and what they expected was a long night of partying, they continued to talk about their exploits on the field - each man besting the others with an in-game story of machismo and bravado. The men slowed outside the BB Tavern, a restaurant they frequently enjoyed after a game. When they entered the tavern, however, they were not welcomed in the usual way. Instead of the regular cheers and handshakes, the five men were greeted at the door by two men clothed in grey uniforms with black bands on their arms, indicating MP – Military Police. The MPs spoke in Italian to the soccer players, demanding, "Which of you is George?"

The five soccer players looked at each other, stunned, but did not say a word. The larger MP with the big nose spoke again, "I said, which of you is George?"

Again, the players did not speak. They knew that their friend was about to be conscripted to fight for Mussolini. They also knew that George was strongly opposed to fighting for anyone that took the side of Adolf Hitler. George, the third man in the line of soccer players, had grown up in Fiume. He had seen war around him all of his life and he had finally found a place where he was happy. Not the best player on his team, as a hometown boy, George had a big fan base at the soccer games. A whole section of fans at the stadium had been dubbed "George's Junkies" and they held signs and chanted his name at every home game. It made his day to go to the stadium for every game. To top it off, George had been married a year and a half earlier and wanted nothing more than to start a big family.

As the MP began to speak again, George's four friends knew what they had to do. Without speaking to one another, the four men stepped forward creating a blockade in front of the MPs. As they did, all at once a yell went up, "Lotta!!!" The patrons of the tavern heard the Italian word for fight and mayhem broke loose. The

MPs tried to push through the blockade, men sitting at tables next to each other started throwing glasses across the room. Punches started flying between people who moments earlier were simply enjoying their drinks. Chairs were broken, windows were smashed and the MPs were in a battle they had not expected. George's four friends kept the MPs pinned to the floor but when the fighting tapered off and the dust settled there were fifteen more military police standing in the tavern doorway.

The four soccer players were arrested but George was gone.

George ran. He had once been part of the Ustase militia and wanted no part of the Axis powers. He ran as fast as his legs would let him go an hour and a half after the late afternoon soccer game. Standing 5' 10" tall, with straight, thick, dark hair and 6-pack abs, George had two things on his mind. The first was that he needed to find a place to hide. He knew that if he was found, the military would either force him to fight for the Axis powers or throw him in jail. Neither option was a pretty thought.

Jail in Mussolini controlled Fiume did not mean steel bars and a six foot by eight foot space. In Fiume

opponents of the political policies of Mussolini were sent to concentration camps, along with Jews and gypsies. Others were sent to the foibe - large sinkholes caused by an underground river. Many foibe measured as deep as twenty metres and as wide as ten metres. No guards were necessary, no bars and no chance for parole.

George had heard the stories. Legend had it that if the military decided that the foibe was to be your punishment you should take one last look at the sun. Local storytellers told of large rocks being tied to the prisoner's legs, while their hands were tied together. Prisoners would be led to the edge of a foiba and commanded to jump. If the prisoner refused to jump, the military police would shoot at the prisoner until he jumped or was shot off the edge. It was rumoured that prisoners would either hit the hard surface below and die of injuries or land in an underground river and drown with the rock tied to their feet.

George ducked behind a stack of wooden crates. The second thought on his mind was of his young wife at home. He needed to get a message to her quickly. George took a small note pad and a pen out of the breast pocket on his blue short-sleeved dress shirt and began to write.

“Dearest Ersilia,
The devil has come for me
tonight. I must make myself
disappear. I will write at every
opportunity and we will be
reunited. Stay safe.
With love, George.”

As he finished writing, George saw MPs run past the alleyway. He slowly stood up and quietly continued to the other end of the ally. He emerged out of the darkness into a group of young boys playing soccer on the street. They immediately recognized him and cheered as he showed off his skills with their ball. George’s heart nearly beat out of his chest when he realized that the boys’ cheers had alerted the MPs of his presence. He quickly handed the note to one of the boys and told him where to deliver it.

“Go!” George said to the boy. “You must get that note to her safely. Don’t let them see you.”

George tried to run again but it was no use. His legs were simply too tired. The MPs moved in around him, beat him to the ground with their batons, and dragged George down the street.

Konrad and Kristof, the two MPs who first showed up in Fiume to find George now had the evil pleasure of escorting him to prison. There was not a trial and there was not a choice for George now. By running, he had already told the military that he was not going to join them. The small convoy of three military vehicles slowed as they approached the bottom of a hill just north of Fiume. As they pulled to a complete stop, Konrad spoke in German to Kristof. They laughed, and then played a game of Rock, Paper, Scissors. Konrad won by placing his paper overtop of Kristof's rock.

Six MPs dragged three prisoners from the vehicles. The prisoners were pushed and poked and prodded down a rocky path toward a large hole in the ground. George realized what was about to happen. His knees began to quiver under him. His heart raced and he began to sweat. One of the other prisoners fell to the ground.

"Get up Ricardo!" yelled the MP in control of the man. Ricardo was a tall, lanky man. Thin with a big nose and black moustache, he was clearly frightened by what was to come.

The third prisoner, a chubby fellow by the name of Mario, helped Ricardo to his feet. For this act of

kindness Mario was hit with a baton behind his knees. He crumbled to the ground as his MP escort laughed, “A warning to you. Next time it will be a bullet.”

The three prisoners were led to the edge of the hole. Without warning, Mario was pushed off the edge into the hole. He held his breath as he fell and splashed into a river below. Ricardo was then led to the edge and told to jump. He could not bring himself to do it and just stood there sobbing. Ricardo’s military escort pulled out his gun but before he could shoot, George pushed Ricardo who screamed like a hyena until he splashed into the cold, clear river below.

As George himself approached the edge of a foiba he realized that only part of the stories were true. He was about to jump into a large sinkhole. He was meant to be left there to die. But his hands were not tied and there was not a rock around his legs. Still frightened, the athletic George saw a glimmer of hope.

Konrad walked behind George and pushed him forward over the edge. George fell about twenty-five feet, straightened his legs, pointed his toes downward and then cut through the surface of the water just two feet further down.

When he resurfaced he took a deep breath, looked around and saw that both Ricardo and Mario had both found a spot where they could hold onto the dirt wall. George was a great swimmer, having grown-up on the shores of the Adriatic Sea. He calmly treaded water, looking around the deep pit, until he found a good spot for him to hold on. George did better than find a spot to hold on. He found a small piece of land about two feet wide by two feet long - a square just big enough to stand on.

Over the next few hours the three men talked about how they ended up in the large pit and about their fears of the war and their fears for their families. The men recanted stories they had been told about the foibe and how impossible they were to escape. The stories included men falling to their death when they tried to climb the wall, or the three armed guards with dogs that patrol the area. The three prisoners could hear the military police officers that pushed them into the pit, laughing and making jokes at their expense. This seemed to confirm the idea of guards and dogs at the top of the wall.

Their situation was alarming because most stories about the foibe simply told of men wasting away at the

bottom from starvation, broken bones or infections. On the morning of the second day, the noise from the guards disappeared. The three prisoners talked about trying to get out of the deep pit by following the underground river that created the pool of water in which they were stuck. Each man took his turn trying to dive down into the water and find an entry or exit point for the water. In the fresh underground river, visibility was good and Ricardo managed to find a tunnel but it was too small for him to swim through.

The men worked together all morning to try to make the hole large enough to swim through. Unfortunately, with only their hands to do the digging and with the hole below water, the digging was slow. The men did manage to make the hole large enough to get their shoulders into but realized that the tunnel that the water's path had created continued to be narrow and they would need to continue to dig their way through. With no idea how long the tunnel was, the men gave up around three o'clock in the afternoon. The men were hungry and tired, and George noticed that Ricardo was shivering from the prolonged, complete immersion in the cold river water.

By the third day Ricardo was barely able to hang on to his slab of earth. He hadn't slept since the night he

was arrested and hadn't eaten since that same afternoon. Mario piped up. "Is there any chance anyone is coming to save us?" he said to nobody in particular.

George replied, "Not likely. Any other ideas?"

To keep their minds occupied, George and Mario threw around ideas about how they could be saved. They tried to include Ricardo but he just wasn't into it. He sobbed and moaned. Suddenly, as they spoke an idea sparked in George's head.

"Hey, Mario, how much can you press?" George inquired.

"Huh?" said Mario.

"You know, bench press. How much can you bench press?"

"About 180," said Mario. "Why?"

"Ricardo, how much do you weigh?" questioned George.

"Uh, 150, I guess," replied Ricardo, faintly.

"Alright boys, we're going up tonight."

“Ricardo,” George said as he unleashed his plan, “I’m going to push you onto Mario’s shoulders. You reach up and grab the rock and pull yourself up to the ledge.”

George had noticed a small ledge about fifteen feet up on the first day he was in the pit. He waited while Mario climbed onto the piece of land that he had called home for three days. He then pushed Ricardo onto Mario’s shoulders. “Okay Mario, help him stay balanced,” said George.

Ricardo was wobbly on Mario’s shoulders. He weakly reached for the rock but missed by a couple inches. As he reached, Ricardo’s foot slipped off of Mario’s shoulders and he tumbled backward into the river.

“George, what are we trying to do?” questioned Mario. “Are you really thinking that we can all climb forty feet out of this hole? Look at Ricardo. He’s in no shape for this.”

“No!” said George, with certainty, “we only need to climb thirty five feet.”

Mario was not laughing. “I think Ricardo’s got the right idea,” he said, “we may as well find a good spot to curl up and let ourselves go.”

“No chance!” yelled George, desperately. “I have a wife at home waiting for me. I am getting out of here and you are helping me. We can do this.” George took a deep breath, sighed hard and then proceeded to explain, “Listen, Mario, I’m going to climb on your shoulders. Then, be ready. I’m not tall enough to touch the rock. I’m going to have to jump. I need you to hold strong so I can get enough air under me.”

“Whoa, you are going to jump off my shoulders?” Mario said, “Okay, I guess.”

“Listen, if I can grab that rock I know I can pull myself up. I do at least fifty chin-ups every day. That will put me about fifteen feet up. Add my height onto that and I’m less than ten feet from the top. I’ve got to try it.”

“OK, so let’s just say you get out of here,” said Mario, “what about us?”

“I promise; I’ll come back for you.”

“Not a chance,” said Mario.

“No, really, I will,” said George. “I will come back with rope. You climb up. Then we can send the rope back down, Ricardo can tie it around himself and we will pull him up.”

Mario moaned and groaned but ultimately knew it was no good to fight. If George managed to escape there was at least a chance of his own survival. If they spent time fighting, Mario knew they were all sure to die.

“Okay,” said Mario, “climb up.”

With that, George quickly shimmied up Mario’s back and stood on his shoulders. For an athlete like George, that part was easy. But after three days of not eating and not sleeping, the next climb was going to be a challenge. George’s shorter stature was going to make it hard to reach the rock handhold above but he was counting on his ab strength and flexibility to help him get to the top of the foiba.

“Are you ready, Mario?”

“No, but go ahead,” Mario replied, with a grimace on his face.

George counted, “Uno, due, tre...” and jumped toward the handhold. Mario, whose back was against the wall of the cavern, was sent flying forward. He landed with a splat, on his belly in the water.

He pulled his head out of the water and called to Ricardo, “Did he make it?”

Ricardo, who was now floating on his back waiting for the worst to happen, opened his eyes and saw George, hanging from the side of the foiba. George managed to leap high enough to get his fingers on the rock handhold.

Holding on with one hand, George gnashed his teeth together and focused on getting his other hand up to the rock. Like a cricket bowler, George pulled his hand to his right side and then threw it straight over his head. He latched onto the rock, now holding on with one hand cupped over the other – a perfect position given that he was going to need to pray in order to make this work. George had thought this through. He leaned back and swung his feet forward so that they could be used as another point of contact with the wall. Using his feet and knees against the dirt wall, he scurried his lower body upwards like a beetle in the dirt. While still on the ground George had noticed a tree root that had pushed its way through the dirt and then looped back into the soil. That was his next pursuit.

After kicking a foothold into the side of the cavern, George was feeling a little more comfortable with his position. He called down to his new friends, “I’ve got

this!” Then he added, “but you might want to say a little prayer right now.”

Not taking any chances, both Ricardo and Mario clapped their hands together. Ricardo led a very pointed prayer, “Dear Lord, if you truly love us, give George strength and get us out of this hole.”

George knew what he had to do. He pushed up with his feet while at the same time flexing all of his core muscles. His body flew through the air like a trapeze artist; his two arms outstretched waiting to connect with the root above him. In fact he missed the root. He saw it pass by his eyes. Thinking quickly, George kept his arms outstretched and on the way back down, wrapped his fingers around the piece of wood.

He performed one very precise chin-up and put his feet on top of the rock he had originally held. And there he would stand with his friends cheering below. George stood with his arms wrapped through the root.

“What’s up?” asked Mario. “Why are you stopping?” He had no idea the type of stress and exhaustion that George was facing.

George muttered a couple words that he probably shouldn’t have said and Mario took the hint. Five

minutes passed, then ten. After fifteen minutes Ricardo called up, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," George called back. He had been studying the wall while catching his breath. "I'm just charting my course." Like a thrill seeker facing the rocks of K2, George wanted to be certain he was going to take a safe route up the sheer cliff.

"You can do this, George," Mario called up.

With that nudge, George took a sharp stone out of his pocket. He prayed quietly, took a deep breath and began his climb. He needed to make about eight feet to reach the top of the foiba. He had thought ahead. George had picked up the stone from his patch of dirt that he took ownership of, alongside the underground river. The stone was just smaller than his clenched fist and pointed just enough to dig into the dirt wall.

As he dug the stone into the wall he also kicked small divots to place his feet. Small steps and quick reaches propelled George deliberately up the wall. His friends below watched with trepidation, hoping that George could make it to the top but secretly expecting him to come crashing back to the river. George took three more steps upward but on the fourth his right foot slipped as the dirt and rock crumbled. He was left hanging onto his

stone with his feet dangling. Mario and Ricardo couldn't watch but George did not struggle. He knew that if he jerked too much he would pull the stone out of the wall and crash to the bottom of the foiba. Moving only his eyes he spotted another root just inches above his head. Using the same cricket bowler type movement he had used earlier, George threw his left arm into the air and pulled his legs upward. As he did, the stone in his right hand pulled loose from the wall. For a split second he was suspended in mid-air. To his audience below, now being compelled by that same force that makes you stare at a car accident, time seemed to stop, and George appeared to freeze twenty-six feet in the air.

Mario allowed himself to blink and when his eyes opened, George had a hold of the root and had dug himself another foothold. George's eyebrows were now even with the top of the foiba wall. With nothing left to do but pull himself out of the hole, George grinned as the men below hooted and hollered with excitement.

He pulled himself to his feet and called back down the hole, "I'll be back! I promise."

George did come back. It took him another full day but he managed to sneak back into Fiume at night,

gather some supplies including a long rope and get back to the foiba without being seen.

Over the next four weeks George, Mario and Ricardo moved on foot, on horse, on donkey and hanging onto the back of a train. They trudged through swamps, hiked over treacherous mountain passes and galloped past forests. Careful to stay out of big cities and away from any war efforts, their journey took them through Greece and Turkey, Syria and Jordan, until they reached Sharm El-Sheikh in Egypt. The men took a short break on the shores of the Red Sea, boldly found their way to the pyramids at Giza, and finally the escaped prisoners procured themselves some camels and rode deep into Africa.

Riding high atop his camel, George pulled a small oval shaped object from his pocket. He examined it closely as the sun shone off the sparkling stones embedded in its top side. The bottom had some lines etched into it and an ancient Egyptian symbol that represents the letter N. "What do you think this is?" he asked Ricardo.

"Looks like some kinda bug," Ricardo replied. "Where did it come from?"

"I picked it up when we were inside the pyramid."

“Whoa,” Mario chimed in. “You took something from inside the pyramid? Do you know what kind of curses come from the pyramids? And did you say it looks like some kind of bug?”

“Ya,” said Ricardo, “a bug.”

“George,” Mario spoke again, “that bug, let me see it.”

George tossed the bug to Mario who stated with certainty, “this is a scarab! These things are known to have many curses. They bring damage, even destruction, wherever they are. In Egyptian times,” Mario continued, “these scarabs were used for many things. They had many religious affiliations and were thought to be good luck charms. But now, the ancient scarabs come from tombs of the pharaohs. Tombs that carry great curses. I don’t know what it will do but I’m not happy being anywhere near it.”

“Come on,” said George, “you can’t be serious.”

“I am serious. If you are going to carry that thing around, I will be riding in the opposite direction.”

Knowing that he might need Mario’s help if he ran into any trouble, George thought about it for a while and then agreed to get rid of the scarab. As the three men

were approaching the next small town, George tossed the oval ornament on the ground and rode on.

Three days later, an officer from the British military forces stationed in Uganda was walking down the street kicking stones as he walked. He bent down when he noticed something shiny in the dirt. It was a small oval shaped bug with shining beads on its back and some lines on its front. He put it in his pocket and took it back with him to his barracks. Not too long after that there were reports from the base about small explosions in some tunnels. Then a fire broke out, starting in the kitchen then working its way to some storage areas. Ammunition exploded like fireworks. Luckily, nobody was seriously injured but the coincidence was just too eerie. The officer had seen his share of Mummy movies and immediately reasoned, this scarab must be cursed.

