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The Magommba Wasp

By: GA Anderson -- adapted for narration

Telling time: Approx. 15 - 20 minutes



The set-up:

I first heard this story when I was about seven. I remember my father telling it like it was an old sailor's tale, something made up to scare little boys – *like boys sitting around a campfire, surrounded by the dark, and whatever boogiemens might be waiting in the woods-- just outside the ring of light. In the shadows.*

The story of the Magoomba wasp was an old family legend that started with my great great great great grandfather... a sailor on one of those old wooden sailing ships back in the 1700's. He was a Master Boatswain, (that means he was the "Boss" sailor), on a merchant ship that sailed between the United States and South America.

Anyway, it all started in a little port town called Wahpaygo.

One day the people in Wahpaygo spotted a ship heading in their direction. As it got closer they saw that the sails were just sort of flapping in the wind - they weren't up like sails were supposed to be.

And... the ship didn't seem to be changing course to head towards the shore. It just kept on straight, kind of drifting with the wind.

After a while, curiosity got the best of them, and the town sent out a welcome boat. As it got closer they started hailing the ship, "*Ahoy there. Ahoy the ship,*" -- *but there was no answer.* And not only that, they didn't see any crew on deck either

When they got close enough, they threw grappling hooks over the ships side rails and a couple sailors climbed up and rolled over the rails onto the deck. That was when they saw why no one had answered.

The deck was covered with blood... and... bloated bodies, and pieces of bodies, and flies, thousands and thousands of flies sucking on the dried blood and rotting bodies.

The bodies were all contorted and twisted. Most seemed to have died with their hands clawing at their heads. Bloody fingers frozen in deep gouges on their face.

As they explored the rest of the ship, they keep stumbling across more bloody bodies. And just like on deck, they were all bloated and bloody. It was as if these dead sailors died trying to tear their face and ears off in agony.

The swarms of buzzing flies and insects were so bad that those sailors could hardly breathe. Those buzzing, crawling insects were landing on every bare spot of skin, every eye and ear.

Covering their mouths with kerchiefs, and flailing their arms and hands to clear the way, they quickly ran back on deck. Everyone on the ship was dead.

Not knowing what else to do, they steered the ship toward shore and dropped anchor. Since it was getting dark, they decided to come back the next day.

Before it got too dark they took a closer look at some of the bodies, the ones that were still in one piece, and not too bloody. It was curious but it looked like they all had one thing in common, well beside being dead and bloody I mean, almost every body that still had ears, had little streams of blood draining from the ears. Still wet.

Now you can probably guess, but after their spooky experience, nobody was willing to stay on that ship overnight, and the first place the welcome boat sailors went when they got back into port was the tavern. And they didn't waste any time getting more than a little drunk. The drunker they got, the more bloody and gory the story got as they told their friends about it. They didn't notice that a salty old sailor with only one ear was listening too.

Pretty soon the old sailor was banging the table and muttering. "*Burn it, burn it up now. Magoomba, Magoomba, burn em up now.*" Nobody was really paying attention to him, and he just kept banging the table and muttering "*burn em up now.*"

That "Old salt" was my great great great great grandfather. Ramos [*your last name*].

When morning came, the story was all over the village, and when it was time send out another boat, the old salt from the tavern was the first in line to get on.

They pulled alongside the ship and tossed the climbing ropes over the rails. The old salt was the first one to start climbing up. And what a sight he was. He had two bandanas wrapped across his ears. It was like he had two big x's – one on each side of his head, completely covering his ears. Well his one ear anyway.

But as soon as he reached the ships rail he took out his knife and slashed the climbing ropes so nobody could climb up behind him. "*Stay back,*" he yelled. "*Stay back, till I call you.*" It was the look on his face, and the crazy bandanas covering his ears that made the rest of the crew do what he said.

As he turned around, he saw what the other sailors had seen, slashed bodies and dried blood everywhere. He checked the whole ship, he checked each single body closely to make sure he was right. And he was - every body he checked had the same trickle of blood still draining from each ear.

He tried to tell everyone it was the Magoomba wasp, and they had to burn the ship right down to the water, but they thought he was crazy. They just pushed him aside, and sailed that ship right into that little port town.

This is what the first entry in great grandfather's journal said about what he saw on deck that day:

"The first thing I saw was the blood flowing from his ear. The dark, bloating body was lying sprawled on the open deck, and his head was surrounded by a black pool of dried blood. He looked like he had been dead for days, maybe weeks, so why was blood still flowing from his ears? Bending over to take a closer look, I saw that what I thought was flowing blood was actually hundreds, maybe thousands, of tiny squirming blood-red bugs, Magoomba Wasps!."

Journal entry – 6 October, 1721, Ramos [*your last name*]

It turns out that the cargo that looked like tree roots, crooked, knarly roots, and some of them with bulges as big as bowling balls, were "Water Tree" roots from Brazil. And valuable too.

See, a Water Tree will grow anywhere. Swamps or deserts, it doesn't matter. Those old roots could be sliced and planted just like seeds.

Those merchants made a fortune selling that cargo of Water Tree roots. Up and down the river, and cross-country to places hundreds of miles away.

But they never knew that those big bulges on the roots weren't part of the tree, they were Magoomba wasp nests.

Anyway, that's where it started. And nobody heard anything else about those Magoomba wasps for a lot of years.

The second Magoomba wasp outbreak was about 17 years later and hundreds of miles from that little town of Wahpaygo.

It happened in a frontier town called Swampsburg. A traveling salesman rode into town one misty morning and found everybody in town dead – bloated and bloody, with dark red blood still draining from their ears - just like the sailors on that ship. Scared him so bad he galloped out of there as fast as he could.

Then it happened again, in another frontier town, another 17 years later, and even farther away from the port than Swampsburg.

This time it was a Calvary patrol that found them. And once again, the whole town was dead, and all the bodies were twisted and contorted and covered in dried blood, and it looked like most of them had tried to tear their ears off.

And even though they had been dead for days – each body, at least the ones that still had heads, had what looked like fresh blood dripping from their ears.

But this time there was a real doctor to examine the bodies. He was part of the Calvary patrol. And he was also a sailing history collector. He had read stories of that original ship in Wahpaygo – and he had read of my great, great, great grandfather's sailing journal.

And he knew the Magoomba Wasp legend. Matter of fact, I think that second town used to be just a few miles from this campsite, but of course this area was all wooded wilderness back then. Still...

You see, the Magoomba Wasp was a lot like what we Americans call the 7-year Locusts.

Anybody ever heard of them?

Well, they're real, and they look like grasshoppers.

They lay their eggs in the ground, and those eggs stay in the ground and for seven years while they grow from eggs to full-grown locusts. Then they dig their way out and eat everything in sight for a couple weeks. Then they lay new baby locusts eggs in the ground – and die.

And that's the end of those locusts for another seven years – until it's time for those buried locusts to dig out and do the same thing all over again.

The Magoomba wasps were like that too – except it took 17 years for them to grow – instead of seven, and instead of laying their eggs in the ground – they like to lay their eggs in wet soggy stuff – like those Water Tree roots from Brazil.

And that's what happened on that old sailing ship. Their 17-year clock was up. And when the Magoomba wasps crawled out of those old dried tree roots – they couldn't find anywhere warm and wet to lay their eggs. Until they found those sailors sleeping on the ship.

You see, Magoomba wasps are so small that they could crawl right in a sailor's ear – without them even feeling it. And you know what they found? A nice warm wet place to lay their eggs.

And when those eggs began to grow – they needed food to keep growing. Now, when they were in those Water Tree roots they would just eat the stuff in the tree roots to grow. But the only thing to eat in those sailor's heads... was their brains.

Now a brain doesn't feel pain – but those sailors could feel those hundreds, maybe even thousands of baby Magoomba wasps crawling around in their head. And they could not get them out.

At first it just felt like a little itch. But as those little wasps got bigger, and the more brain they ate, the more crazy it made the sailors – until their minds were so far gone they went crazy. They just couldn't stand it anymore.

That's when they went berserk and tried to tear their ears and faces off to get to those devil creatures in their head.

It was the same way in those frontier towns too. The same thing happened to those early settlers.

And that's how the legend of the Magoomba Wasps of Brazil came to this country. But that was a long time ago. And a long ways away from here.

Maybe...

Like I said, those early merchants sold those Water Tree roots all over the country. And now that I think about it, I do think I remember that the second town was just a few miles from this campsite, but of course this area was all wooded wilderness back then.

Still... I wouldn't take any chances sleeping on the ground. At least not with my ears open.