Sacrifice Fly

By Tom Sheehan

The last man standing in the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) post in my hometown of Saugus, MA was Doctor George W. Gale. The post was Gen. E. W. Hinks Post 95, Grand Army of the Republic. Dr. Gale died in 1936 at the age of 99. He had 7 years of military service. The charter of the post was surrendered on June 8, 1936. Over the years I had seen pictures of him at Memorial Day parades and other civic ceremonies. Older citizens around our local ball parks, prodding their own bits of legend, often told stories of his love and interest in baseball. Also, it was said, he told many stories of the war to patients and friends alike, and on many occasions took himself and others to see major league baseball games in Boston, about a dozen miles away. So it was, years after his death, amongst his papers were found the skeletal elements of this story, which I have scratched together from those papers gifted to me, and for the first time in 140 years replay it here as if it were a throwback piece of television, history with attendant drama; our country, our war, our game.

21-year old Corporal Durvin Broadmoor of the 28th Massachusetts of the Irish Brigade woke with a start from a dream on a hill in far off Virginia. War had come again with the false dawn of a June day in 1864. His mouth felt muddy, constrictive, and someplace as yet untouched a bone ached. The narrow red scar on his face reared its thin but ugly edge, as if the initial wound's cause for a moment was known again. An itch was at his neck without stop. The imprint of the wagon wheel, against which he had slept fitfully, was surely etched on his back, but the dream, as always, was elusive. Crowd noise had sounded there in the dream, he remembered piecemeal, hawkers and criers loose among massed people each time, but all other elements of the phantasm faded as quickly as clarity came to him. And just as quickly, the crowd dissipated and fled ethereally. Only the diamond shape of the grass surface stayed with him, and a ball in flight, a ragged, not quite round ball working its way in the air, gyrating, pulsating. At length, the sky gray, shadows starting, the ball disappeared, but there was a magic in the disappearance. And that magic lay under his skin.

A state of mind, he knew, had been created, had character to it if not a body of its own. Days, events, life itself, often begin at opposite ends of a wide spectrum. But there comes at times to such beginnings

the strangest connection. Some call it fate or karma or chance. Some call it odds. In war, in battle, it doesn't need a name. It does its own thing, as it does in baseball.

Once he had been a striker in front of 4,000 people, and some part of that day had found its way under his skin as sure as a tic had done its dowser work. A love had burrowed deeply; baseball has such a shovel, he believed. But New York, where he had played his last game, as well as his home in Massachusetts, was months and miles in the past.

Images, all related to the ball, to the flight of a ball, struggled for windows or doors at the back of his mind, looking for a way in or a way out. When he was hit this way, caught up in a feverish wash, he was never sure of the route or the portico. Everything round or nearly round leaped through him in a hardware of imagery, of like correspondence… at once came the end of the hand-crafted bat sitting on the mantel at home, then the driven orb of another ball his swing had powered over the head of Shannon, that center outfielder in the New York game, and, blue and untamed like late night small campfires, Beth's eyes watching him as the chief striker in the last game he had played. He could feel the continuity of her stare.

At that same moment of Durvin's reverie, a replica intensity of watchfulness was being exerted down across the field from a gathering of cottonwoods and a few straggly birch trees on the far reaches of the now-peaceful meadow. There, the lead scout of a southern infantry group, a Georgian named Sgt. Elwood Plunker, crawled a few feet closer from his lookout position in the copse. The Yankee defense line, ragged he was sure, was somewhere off at the other edge of the wide meadow, under cover of any sort, masqueraded, camouflaged, counting their wounds. Plunker, head down, prone as tight to the ground as he could get in an attempt at cover, laid his weapon against a blow-down. The rifle musket, of which he was extremely proud, had been made in Richmond from equipment confiscated from the armory at Harpers Ferry under the very nose of the enemy. And he was a dead shot with it, as deadly as one could get.

Sergeant Plunker saw a Yankee soldier, a tall lanky fellow alone at the edge of the meadow, turn and urinate directly onto southern ground. From a mere two hundred yards he noted the man's corporal stripes. Plunker was infuriated by the urination. He had been three years from home in Georgia, with the prospects of getting back there being lessened every day now. The taste of his grandmother's peanut spread was alive at the back of his throat, and thick and sticky. His throat was dry and felt as if it would crack or open up on him. Breathing came with some difficulty, as if moving past sharp edges. At the back of his head he could see fields of peas and corn waving in a late morning breeze. The fields crawled and undulated, waving crop tops like the thousand hands of a huge gathering. And he could taste the well

water taken from the deep throat of rocks with a bucket he had made himself. Inwardly a groan mounted and was silenced. He had much earlier learned to control many bodily functions. He was a soldier, bred for rigors, but his mind held onto a longing and a hatred he could neither dislodge nor forget. And here was a bluecoat pissing on good southern soil. The hackles rose again with their decided edges and he wondered what the enemy's day would bring. He would surmise while at rest. He would watch, he would signal back any information that came to him visually, and he would bide his time. Time being the only thing he had plenty of.

At the same moment of Plunker's recollection, atop a nearby hill, in the announced meshing of fateful lives, Nancy Petticot of Nanticoke, Virginia had planned her day. She had risen from an irregular sleep also filled with dreams. Nancy was a listener, it was easily said. When she spun about and swept a dangling spider out the window, she might well have heard it descending on that silvery thread. Chickens spoke early to her, guinea hens roosted in the trees chattered like backyard gossips and could have been telling her of their night, and the one last piglet made its own noisy contribution. At 17 she was the lady of the house, her mother Anstrice dead from a runaway wagon only six months past, her father Desmond off three years now with the Army of the South; and not a word from him in more than a year. Her three younger brothers lived by her hand and off her wits. Threats to their existence had bounced around them for a few years, but she held the reins firmly.

Nancy was a dark-haired beauty of a girl, with deep eyes of an unknown color as if caught up in the rotation of emotions. Perhaps she oscillated, but she never flagged in her push. She wore a complexion worthy of any good habit, and was graced with a startling carriage. Like temptresses her lashes floated, full of messages, full of promise, and yet she appeared ragged with a kind of despair few might notice while she was about her work. Men had noticed her at least three years earlier, and that included most of the soldiers that had passed by their rough house, passing on to their savage destinies, and taking some of the chickens and all but the last piglet.

Yet character floated about that house of hers. Three of its walls were made of logs. The fourth wall was constructed of old barn boards that Desmond had reclaimed from a barn that had burned at the end of the valley. She remembered the day he had come home all sweated up, the wagon piled high with wide boards. Two days later, hammer and saw irrepressible, the house was completed. Now, cozy inside its walls, old coffee talked to her almost as loud as the guinea hens. The smoldering late fire, holding its breath in the fireplace, showed the comfort of many embers gone gray and white. Shadows in the house were subtle and cool and the bare breath of a breeze rustled the flour-sack curtains at the end of the

room. The faint rustling of fabric gave the room a sense of depth and the cool quality of a tossed mantle. Wide boards of the floor were rugged but noiseless spans, and did not echo an ounce of her weight on them. She thought an army could walk on them and not give that army away. And she harbored no thoughts of ghosts or specters.

In the darkness not yet fully letting go she yelled down the hallway to Daniel, the young voice fading with her short measure at authority.

"Get hitched up to the day, Dan'l. Today we will picnic under the high trees and watch the war. We can count cannon volley or count horses, whatever. You can have your choice today." She paused, took a breath, measured the oncoming dawn still at a distance down the Chawkenauga Valley, saw gray holding back in all the corners. Remnant mule smells, tired barn and old leather odors and the dust of chickens crept through the house. A stale pickle in some corner of the house gave evidence of itself. "Today will be a solemn day. Shake the others from dreams."

Daniel, 14, blond, just beginning to broaden at his shoulders and through his chest, a bit surprised at the morning call, leaped from bed, tore off his night shirt, pulled the covers off Micah and Judah clustered like the last two bananas in the bunch. He admired their blond heads, and the sleep rolling out of their blue eyes suddenly wide. He knew where they had been in their run at sleep. It was not the war that would excite them this day; it was the game they hoped to see.

Baseball rather than death had visited their dreams. A week earlier, down on the valley floor, they had watched a slim Yankee soldier drive the ball high over the head of a far fielder. They had whooped it up even for the Yankee running the square circle of the bases. That night they had spoken deep into the darkness about the game's exploits, wondered what the striker's name was, where he came from before the war grabbed him in its lethal grasp. Micah had dubbed him Hammer.

Now the name dropper sat up and rubbed his eyes. "Think they'll play today, Dan'l? No game yesterday. Think Pa plays it wherever he is? How could he do that?" He shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. "He never did see a game that I know of. What kind of a striker could he be, never swung a bat afore?" From his dropped head, almost talking into his own lap, he said, "Think Pa's awright, Dan'l? Think he's coming home?"

Daniel leveled a finger at him. "You ask more questions than a suitor, Micah. Always looking to see what road's been traveled, I swear."

From the depth of the kitchen they could hear the new mother at pots and pans. The sizzle of bacon crept to their ears. Then the smell of bacon, toes turning up in the skillet, sauntered into the room.

On a nearby hill, perhaps a mile distant, Capt Miles Murtaugh slapped Cpl. Durvin Broadmoor on the back.

“Well, old Knickerbocker hisself, think we have a game at hand today, Johnny Reb don’t make a perfect mess of this day?

“Well, Captain,” Broadmoor offered, “they need a break much as we do. Certainly makes war look damn foolish when we play baseball. I’d love to play a game against them, and knock the skin of that tater, as they might say. Play their artillery, the big gun boys and teach them a lesson. Joy of joys that’d be.”

“How good was that team of yours, Durv?” Murtaugh wore a warm smile on his face as he looked down the sweep of the valley and across the low spread of scrub and meadow between their position and Johnny Reb’s. Three mad charges in three days he had been in and his army time measured but in weeks.

Pride rippled and showed itself in the young corporal’s face. He too passed his gaze across the open land that drew warriors in desperate turns. Trees, those that were left, were stripped of limbs, leaves, lives. Brush and bush in the rough turmoil of battle had been uprooted and tossed together. In the morning light they looked like breakwaters at some wide harbor, ready to hold off the waves of men poised on either side.

“We could have been a dynasty, sir, I swear. We had capability at every position, had players not always in the game could have played for all the other teams we played against. Yes, sir, we were that good. Makes a commanding prospect walking up to your turn as striker, like the whole park knows what you’re at. That’s a kind of excitement I never had in anything else I ever did try. Makes the neck stiff with joy, ripples your arms.”

“If it’s so blasted good, as you say, there must be a bad side to it. A counterbalance. A twist of the blade, if you must. What might that be?”

As if called for, down the Chawkenauga Valley came the single report of a canon, then a tearing, rending sound at another distance, and utter silence as if Time itself was at attention, waiting to see what had happened.

Durvin looked over his shoulder at the canon’s sound. His shoulders flinched once, his eyes blinked. “Oh, it’s not the losing, sir, but being the ultimate out for the other side’s win. That can stick in the craw at least until the next game.” His snicker told another story. “Teammates usually don’t come back to it. They let it go. There’s always another day, another game, when the war’s not in the way, when you can make it up to them… strike one for the total bases.” The echo of the artillery round came up the valley as if it had shot off a stone wall. “As Alexander Cartwright himself said, ’Take the game seriously, but not yourself in

it.'"

Behind them, on a high hill, Nancy Petticot and her brothers had come out to watch either the war or a baseball game. All of them hoped for the ball game. The ground they chose was somewhat level though interspersed with tree roots that appeared to have crawled into place. Nancy put down a piece of canvas and placed their day's rations on it. Thin slices of pork and thick slabs of bread were the main course. A few dill pickles sat in a container, and another tin contained a drink their father had called berrywash. It was close to sweet but not quite there. They had heard a single and distant canon shot, but the echo died quickly. A bird-broken silence came into place, catching them at attention.

Micah said, "Look, over there in that field. There's room for a game there. Looks like it drops off on the far side only a little, towards those cottonwoods. Oh, I hope they play. I hope the striker bangs it out like a shot and races all around. I hope they play today." His voice had climbed up a rung or two on the ladder.

Both Nancy and Daniel saw the excitement in Micah's eyes, and nodded at each other. Judah, sitting on a log, pointed across the broad width of Chawkenauga Valley, his finger stiff and arrow-straight. "Johnny Reb's over there, at that end, hundreds of them. If Pa's there, I'd bet he'd be here. They're having breakfast or lunch I bet. See the smoke coming out of that deep spot in the woods way way off."

Micah said, "The Blue's eating too, a picnic like we have. They ought to make their minds up to play a game today. It'd be better than that other stuff, taking our chickens, the piglets like they belonged to them."

Close in against the hill they were on, Union troops, some cavalry and some artillery, had seized the moment. The Petticot family saw the start of a baseball game in the shadow of the hill, in the shadow of the war. Three men trotted out to the far side of the meadow and spaced themselves equally apart, as if a fan was spread out.

Nancy saw the blond boy in the middle as he raced out to his position.

Daniel said, "He's a center outfielder, sis, the middle one. He's the one we saw the other day, the one who ran the whole circuit of bases so fast."

"I remember him," Nancy said, her eyes on the slim sprinter bouncing lightly on his feet in the distant part of the field.

Corporal Nathan Brewers was chiding teammate Durvin Broadmoor from his position in left field. "Durvy, you mess up out here that old captain gonna get you sent up to infantry quick as a wink. No sense bringing your glove you go up there." He pounded his fist into his own glove, a small, sewn collection of

fingered canvas, worn to the thinness of comfort. Like Broadmoor, he was tall and lean and quick of hand and foot. The pair could have passed for twins.

"Get all the outs out here and make none at the striker's box." Durvin Broadmoor announced his game plan. "If you make the final out, do it here with the glove." He held up a triple sheath of canvas, also cut in the shape of the hand. Out of use, it would fold easily and fit in his pocket.

Back and forth the game went, beneath quiet skies, in the middle of a war, and at a clearly visible point from the picnicking family of siblings on the top of a Virginia hill.

Nancy Petticot could not take her eyes off the loping center outfielder who had caught five high fly balls, one of them on the dead run the way her father once chased a runaway horse and wagon. Micah and Judah and Daniel marveled at the play of some ballplayers, in the field and at the batting box.

"See, there's that big fellow again, Daniel," Micah said, pointing out an opponent of Durvin Broadmoor's team. "He's the one whacked it like the fire bell and that other fellow, the one sis remembers, caught it on the run. He's at striker again. What's the score now, Daniel?"

"I figure it is 11 to 9 for sis's team, her favoring that lanky guy so much. We'll see what the big guy can do. But it looks like we're getting close to the end of it. May be decided pretty quick."

Two strikers from one artillery team had earned their way onto the bases while two others had failed. The big batter, announced by Micah, was advancing to the plate, his bat ominously large, like a blunderbuss among weapons.

Sgt. Plunker, in the distance, studied the game from the blow-down, mesmerized at first. The lanky corporal had smashed the ball twice deeply to the other team. Justice seemed distant, a complete stranger.

This was a game they were playing out in front of him! Deep down inside, where all kinds of engines make themselves known to a man in turmoil of any kind, Sgt. Elwood Plunker suddenly knew he was never going to get home. At the back of his head he saw old Joseph Kava Kava, the old black man who had been nothing but kindness in his life and he shuddered inward when he remembered the ankle and wrist scars the old man wore for most of his grown life. Now the deadly sharpshooter Elwood Plunker knew truthfully that old Joseph Kava Kava should never have been a slave to any man.

The awful engines moaned in the universe, as the big striker swung at a thrown ball and drove it outward, toward the man who had urinated, with incredible speed in its flight. Plunker saw the outfielder turn and race toward his own spot in the copse, his legs pumping swift as a runaway horse's, arms matching his enormous stride. Like some god truly in flight, the player raced across the meadow, for the

moment as totally free as an arrow from its quiver, and from its bow. The ball seemed unreachable, the player's speed incomprehensible, the war an abomination to all and for all.

The eternally sad songs that Joseph Kava Kava had sung all his life were heard again. Then, as the awful engine's sounded down inside him, homebody Elwood Plunker, dead shot and marksman of the first order from Georgia, laid his rifle across the soft moss on the blow down, knowing the distance was in his favor, took aim and fired at the sprinter coming at him, just as the sprinter leaped in the air and caught the ball over his head.

In that small piece of heaven in the middle of the Chawkenauga Valley in far off Virginia, all the pertinent entities collided, as called for since the beginning of time.

Nancy Petticot's sudden but short dream fell into the defilade portion of the meadow when ball and player came together. To her eyes the puff of smoke from the edge of the copse was merely a quick piece of punctuation. The baseball and the player were together for eternity. Not Nancy Petticot or her brothers or Durvin Broadmoor or Nathan Brewers or Captain Miles Murtaugh or Sgt. Elwood Plunker knew at that moment of collision that a half inch, .58 caliber Minie Ball was also in a place of rest, in the last game of baseball Durvin Broadmoor would ever play, the line drive still in his glove for the final out.

It would be 140 years or so before this replay is seen, as I present it here. All of it strives to include the graceful therapeutic panacea that baseball is, to player and fan alike, oh the diamond's elixir, the catholicon of it all! I bring it here from the edge of the battlefield, to what it has become, as indeed Alexander Pope might have said of it when he wrote, "the physic of the field." And it all comes along with a further fitting salute from new Commander Abraham Lincoln's words about the fallen, including the rangy striker and center outfielder Durvin Broadmoor, as they were often heard during the span of those years after his first inaugural address on March 4, 1861: *When again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.*

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