

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/3

*Tom Sheehan
Bobby Thomson Homers
3:58 PM EST 3 October 1951 Polo Grounds, NY*

(A letter written to author Josh Prager when he was researching his eventual book on Bobby Thomson's homer, the one heard 'round the world, which turned out to be *The Echoing Green* .. with a few updates in my text to greet the times.)

Dear Josh Prager,

Glad to see your request. I was in Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 31st Regiment, 7th Division, on that memorable day when Bobby Thomson hit that homer heard 'round the world. Myself and others with me, no doubt, color it up a bit because we have seen the newsreel of it a thousand times since then. But here's what I remember, from senior moments at times that last a damn hour, as another old vet says:

We were defilade, near a place called Yang-du or Mung-dung-ni on the front lines, plunked down in a narrow valley to which Chinese artillery had difficulty gaining entrance. Does the name of the place or site matter? Mortar Junction was better suited, or any of the other hundred names we gave to places we revered and thus remember, not because of the territory or the geography, but because of those we left behind. There was Salaza, on his last goddamn night staying with his buddies down in a listening post bunker and a Chinese came up during the night and threw in a grenade, and him already with three brothers not yet home from someplace in World War II. There was Maciag, of whom I have said he was all bone, knees, elbows and jaw; wanted home so badly it burned his soul. We leaned up that mountain near Yangu. Wars hurricane tore our ranks, trees of us lifted by roots. I came running down three days later. Like cordwood the bodies were all stacked between two stakes, all Korean except that jaw of John Maciag I saw, a log of birch among the pile. The sergeant said move on, I said maybe never. I am going to sit here waiting to see what the fuel of him will light, perhaps he will burn the glory of god, or man.

There was Billy Pigg I baptized from a canteen, who said "Shit," when he died. There were others.

The time span beats the hell out of you these days. A couple of years ago I received an email from a guy who was in the 3rd battalion commo crew in '51. Now he's in the Philippines with his wife. He used to work as a kid in Maine for Lady Astor. He made battery packs for portable radios. Him and my pals in the radio repair section made battery packs out of BA30s and BA 48s, I think, and taped them together, and we could listen on an Arvin portable radio to *Fearless Frolics* on Armed Forces Radio (once he advertised "fur-lined fox holes with the theme song, 'You'd be so nice to crawl into, you'd be Paradise I know.' He was the forerunner of "Good Morning Viet Nam!!")

And we listened to the game on our Arvin portable radio and piped parts of it through landlines to guys in their bunkers on the lines, maybe 500 or more of them out there on the crowns of hills, 500 of them keeping score, counting their Rotation Points. It was pretty damn efficient use of GI

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material and equipment for a few Dogfaces. I don't doubt that some guys from Brooklyn or the Bronx made up and kept scorecards. If I had, I'd still have it, being the pack rat that I am. (I'll look through some old Regimental and Battalion newspaper to see if I can find a report on the game for you. It's damn possible that I have seen one hereabouts in this quagmire. I am a pack rat).

A few years ago, in Chicago, and in Crown Point, Indiana, I saw three of those guys I hadn't seen in 60 years. Stan Kujawski was Commo Chief, Bob Breda was one of the guys who made battery packs for portable radios. Breda helped us to hear about Bobby's homer. He didn't remember it; I did. Kujawski did because he was a ballplayer out of the Chicago Industrial loop and once pitched two no-hitters and a one-hitter in softball against the old West Point quarterback Arnold Galiffa (handed off a few to Mr. Outside and Mr. Inside) who was at GHQ in Tokyo before the outbreak that previous June (and Kujawski lost two of those games).

Your subject game was memorable. My guys are memorable. I searched for them for a long time, kept up contact with a few others. Found another Repair Chief, Londo Leuter, in Las Vegas back in 2004. We did a lot of emailing those days, talked on the phone too, and brought names back into the fold, though they've never moved out of the fold. Londo then could dredge up a bit of memory, about Leo the Lip and Don Newcombe and his buddy Roy Campanella who played right here in Lynn, MA, right next door to me, when they were in the minors, playing for Nashua against the Lynn Red Sox at Fraser Field, where Harry Agganis played, an old enemy of mine and one-time teammate played. And Leo Durocher was a kick-ass manager, abdicating the throne in Dodger land in mid-season and going to the cellar-welling Giants and making that phenomenal run. A kick ass manager he was!

You might think most of this, or much of this is disparate, irrelevant, Josh, but I'll tell you straight up, you don't lock up one precious memory at the price of another one, by locking an element out of the whole. They are part of this just as much as Ralph Branca's pitch, Bobby's cut at the ball, Leo's dipsy-doodle at third, or Bobby's reception at home plate. You never cheat your comrades, not for one minute in this lifetime; never. When you mix with heroes, they don't let go of you.

For years I've looked for Jack Slack, one of the great ones. In my search for Jack I've enlisted (free) detectives who were veterans, newspaper people, and called/talked to 171 John R. Slack numbers found in White Pages or left a message. I've been offered Slack family histories, dinners if we get by (assuming Jack is with me), and all have been cordial. I have knocked on the doors of half the houses on Van Schoick Street in Albany, talking to neighbors who might have known some of the Slacks who lived there back in 1950 where Jack left to go into the Army. I introduced myself to one guy; "I'm from Saugus, MA," I said. He said, curtly, "Yuh, I know. I got your letter. Go see the guy around the corner. He's the only one who might know anything."

Nothing from him yet. But I have to share the following with all the searchers out there, a morsel for you, from one of my free calls I did on the computer looking for Jack. I got a woman answering the phone, some-

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place out West during a host of random calls, and follows the conversation and what went with it:

"Ma'am, I'm calling from Boston and I'm looking for a John R. Slack who served in Korea in 1951." Great noise, exuberance, yelling to her husband: "Daddy, daddy, there's one of the guys from Korea on the phone."

Chair-moving sounds in the background, the sound of a book dropping on the floor, some other unintelligible menial and muffled racket. I thought of a walker in use, crutches, a cane, had awful pictures in the back of my head.

He comes on: "Slack." The voice hard and steady and not like the pictures I had in my mind.

"John R. Slack?"

"Yup"

"You in Korea in '51?"

"Yup."

"You there in '52, too?"

"Yup."

"You in the 31st Regiment?"

"Shit, no. I was in the Marines."

"Oh, shoot. I thought I had you."

Lots of noise on the other end, part of a hacking cough. "Hey, Mary, whaddya think of this sonofabitch! Here I've been telling you for forty-five years of married life that there's only one of me in the whole world, and now this strange sonofabitch from out of nowhere is trying to tell me that there is two of me."

We talked a good thirty minutes on the phone, at times hilarious, at times sad, some old pals really missing, and on parting he said, "I hope you find your pal, Tom, and let me know if he's as good lookin' as me."

As one Albany newspaperwoman said to me, "It's not always the destination, is it?" She's a great help, got a detective on the job for me, a former paratrooper, but can't get a special assignment out of her editor because "that war" is old news, I guess. Pro Patria to her.

The major update herein is finding that Master Sgt. Retired John R. Slack had been buried for 15 years in a military cemetery in Texas.

So a lot of this is inseparable from its parts, and a lot of it mingles with the mind's debris, and some of it becomes slag, but there is an honor to memory, and Bobby's blast, going out over numerous landlines from a punky little Arvin portable radio is one gut-full of memory, a swallow of escape in a sordid moment of war, of pain.

I know where I was when Bobby blasted it, who was with me at the moment, where I was when John Kennedy was assassinated, where I was when Harry Agganis got his first hit at Fenway Park, where I was when

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Gus Grissom cried out from the fiery launch pad, and who told me John Maciag had gone thee hill ahead of me and little Salaza, comrades to the end.

This too I have said:

BORN TO WEAR THE RAGS OF WAR

*The day had gone over hill, but that still, blue light remained,
cut with a gray edge, catching corners rice paddies lean out of.
In the serious blue brilliance of battle they'd become comrades
becoming friends, just Walko and Williamson and Sheehan
sitting in the night drinking beer cooled by Imjin River waters
in August of '51 in Korea.*

*Three men drably clad,
but clad in the rags of war.*

*Stars hung pensive neon. Mountain-cool silences were being earned,
hungers absolved, a ponderous god talked to. Above silences,
the ponderous god's weighty as clouds, elusive as soot on wind,
yields promises. They used church keys to tap cans, lapped up
silence rich as missing salt, fused their backbones to good earth
in a ritual old as labor itself,
these men clad in the rags of war.*

*Such an August night gives itself away, tells tales, slays the rose
in reeling carnage, murders sleep, sucks moisture out of Mother Earth,
fires hardpan, sometimes does not die itself just before dawn,
makes strangers in one's selves,
those who wear the rags of war.*

*They had been strangers beside each other, caught in the crush
of traced night and starred flanks, accidents of men drinking beer
cooled in the bloody waters where brothers roam forever, warriors come
to that place by fantastic voyages, carried by generations
of the persecuted or the adventurous, carried in sperm body, dropped
in the spawning, fruiting womb of America,
and born to wear the rags of war.*

*Walko, reincarnate of the Central European, come of land lovers
and those who scatter grain seed, bones like logs, wrists strong
as axle trees, fair and blue-eyed, prankster, ventriloquist who talked
off mountainside, rumormonger for fun, heart of the hunter,
hide of the herd, apt killer,
born to wear the rags of war.*

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*Williamson, faceless in the night, black set on black,
only teeth like high piano keys, eyes that captured stars,
fine nose got from Rome through rape or slave bed unknown
generations back, was cornerback tough, graceful as ballet dancer
(Walko's opposite), hands that touched his rifle the way a woman's
touched, or a doll, or one's fitful child caught in fever clutch,
came sperm-tossed across the cold Atlantic, some elder Virginia-
bound bound in chains, the Congo Kid come home,
the Congo Kid, alas, alas,
born to wear the rags of war.*

*Sheehan, reluctant at trigger-pull, dreamer, told deep lies
with dramatic ease, entertainer who wore shining inward a sum
of ghosts forever from the cairns had fled; heard myths
and the promises in earth and words of songs he knew he never knew,
carried scars vaguely known as his own, shared his self with saint
and sinner, proved pregnable to body force,
but born to wear the rags of war*

-----Walko: *We lost the farm. Someone stole it. My father
loved the fields, sweating. He watched grass grow by starlight,
the moon slice at new leaves. The mill's where he went for work,
in the crucible, drawing on the green vapor, right in the heat of it,
the miserable heat. My mother said he started dying the first day.
It wasn't the heat or green vapor did it, just going off to the mill,
grassless, tight in. The system took him. He wanted to help.
It took him, killed him a little each day, just smothered him.
I kill easy. Memory does it. I was born for this, to wear
these rags. The system gives, then takes away. I'll never
go piecemeal like my father.*

These rags are my last home.

-----Williamson: *Know why I'm here? I'm from North Ca'linia,
sixteen and big and wear size fifteen shoes and my town
drafted me 'stead of a white boy. Chaplain says he git me home.
Shit! Be dead before then. Used to hunt home, had to eat
what was fun runnin' down. Brother shot my sister
and a white boy in the woods. Caught them skinnin' it up
against a tree, run home and kissed Momma goodbye,
give me his gun. Ten years, no word. Momma cries about
both them all night. Can't remember my brother's face.
Even my sister's. Can feel his gun, though, right here
in my hands, long and smooth and all honey touch. Squirrel's
left eye never too far away for that good old gun.
Them white men back home know how good I am, and send me here,
put these rags on me. Two wrongs! Send me too young
and don't send my gun with me. I'm goin' to fix it all up,
gettin' home too. They don't think I'm coming back,
them white men. They be nervous when I get back, me and that
good old gun my brother give me,
and my rags of war.*

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-----Sheehan: Stories are my food. I live and lust on them.
Spirits abound in the family, indelible eidolons; the O'Siodhachain
and the O'Sheehaughn carved a myth. I wear their scars in my soul,
know the music that ran over them in lifetimes, songs' words,
and strangers that are not strangers: Muse Devon abides with me,
moves in the blood and bag of my heart, whispers tonight:
Corimin is in my root cell, oh bright beauty of all
that has come upon me, chariot of cheer, carriage of Cork
where the graves are, where my visit found the root
of the root cell---Johnny Igoe at ten running ahead
of the famine that took brothers and sisters, lay father down;
sick in the hold of ghostly ship I have seen from high rock
on Cork's coast, in the hold heard the myths and music's
he would spell all his life, remembering hunger and being alone
and brothers and sisters and father gone and mother
praying for him as he knelt beside her bed that hard morning
when Ireland went away to the stern. I know that terror
of hers last touching his face. Pendalcon's grace
comes on us all at the end. Johnny Igoe came alone at ten
and made his way across Columbia, got my mother who got me
and told me when I was twelve that one day Columbia
would need my hand and I must give. And tonight I say,
"Columbia, I am here with my hands
and with my rags of war."

I came home alone. And they are my brothers.
Walko is my brother. Williamson is my brother.
Muse Devon is my brother. Corimin is my brother.
Pendalcon is my brother.
God is my brother.
I am a brother to all who are dead,
we all wear the rags of war.

Be well, Josh, and stay with the graces,

Tom Sheehan

HQ Co 1st Bn 31st Regt 7th Inf. Division, Korea 1951-1952