

## News From Home 20

Text Copyright © 2005 Richard Thompson

[www.richardthompson-music.com](http://www.richardthompson-music.com)

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any forms or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any other information storage and retrieval system, without the written permission of the publisher.

10/19/05

It was almost perfect duelling weather – still an hour before sunrise, and a ground mist just starting to thin and melt back into the forest, as if beckoned by the unseen hand of a witch; indeed, a scene almost fit for a Grimms' fairy tale, with the creatures of the night still rustling in the shadows, and the play of moonlight making gnarled faces on the twisted tree trunks. Almost perfect; if it failed to give the full effect, it was perhaps the fault of the climate; it was all of thirty degrees too warm to generate that ideal sharp frost, to make breath visible, sparring footsteps crunch, and wounds steam; for there is a kind of honour and its satisfaction that require a rigor of the hour and temperature; unless, of course, it is to be that hotheaded style of Mediterranean vengeance, all passion and over in the flash of a blade. This was a colder, stranger meeting, of men who should have tired of duelling, of even raising their voices, for whom honour should have given way to self-preservation and remorse for life's follies long ago. Yet here they were, my old friend Alphonso Contepomi, and his neighbour, Colonel Dwight Briggs, fighting, if not for the honour of Mrs. Sandy Briggs, who didn't have much of that stuff left, then for easement of the pain of being cuckolded, even at pensionable age.

Mr. Alphonso and I made our way to the appointed clearing, and found the dew still wet on the grass, but the going firm beneath, well suited to wheelchair

manoeuvres. We found the other party already arrived, Colonel Briggs being seconded by a Colonel Sanchez. I took Sanchez to one side, to discuss the rules of engagement, and he and I agreed to make one final plea to the combatants to stop this madness, shake hands, and go home. But Briggs was set in his intent, muscles taught, eyes murderous, and breath tinged with a couple of fortifying snorters. I was surprised that Mr. A also was keen to go ahead – but he said it was the most exciting thing he had done for thirty years, and he wasn't going to miss this for the world. He said he was also an old cripple, and he had lived a full and eventful life. So be it. Sanchez and I also devised a plan in the event of discovery, our activities being, of course, illegal; we would describe the action as martial arts practice, and if blood was drawn, it would be by way of an unfortunate accident. The rules were largely as agreed upon the previous evening; sabers as weapons, and both combatants to be in wheelchairs. First blood would decide the winner. Sanchez insisted that Briggs be tied into his chair, in case he forgot himself in the heat of the moment. This was done, we paced out a suitable distance between them, and on a count of three, the duel began.

It cannot be overstressed how difficult it is to manoeuvre a wheelchair and fight with a sabre at the same time. Two hands, of course, are needed for the chair, and one hand for the sword. This makes three hands. Humans generally are equipped with just the two. Therefore, to travel back, forwards, or spin to the left or right, the sword must be either laid on the lap, or held in the hand partially, allowing enough of the palm, or fingers, to push the wheel. Mr. A seemed to have worked this out – as a perpetual wheelchair occupant, he had the advantage in this respect. Colonel Briggs seemed rather surprised at the lack of an extra hand, and he spent the first two minutes of the duel brandishing his sword above his head with his right hand, and pushing frantically forward on the left wheel with his left, spinning himself round in circles. The effect was somewhat ridiculous. Mr. A merely stayed back where he was, plunged his weapon into the ground, and

watched with amusement. Briggs finally stopped, and thought it through. His next ploy was to develop as much speed as possible, with the sword on his lap and two hands pushing, and then freewheel into Mr.A., picking up the sword and swinging hard when within range, Another good plan, if Mr.A had stayed put. But my friend merely waited until his adversary was about three yards away, and coasting nicely, to nip quickly backwards and out of reach. Briggs rolled by harmlessly. The Colonel was becoming more and more infuriated.

After about six or seven minutes of teasing, Mr. A seemed to become bored with his tactical superiority, and decided to engage, perhaps sensing that this thing would have to be fought at some point, and may as well get it over, but perhaps also sensing that some of the sting had been drawn from his opponent. This time, he allowed the Colonel to close with him, and as their wheelchairs collided, their sabres clashed. The ring was surprisingly loud, reverberating through the wood, and was a chilling sound. Having locked swords, there was something of an impasse, as a trial of strength proved inconclusive. On paper, Colonel Briggs may have been a favourite for upper body development, being ex-military, and only recently a retiree from 'Iron Man' contests – those murderous triathlons for the super-fit. But Mr. A had been pushing a wheelchair for some years now, and I knew from experience that he could arm-wrestle gorillas twice his size. It seemed now that if anyone was winning, it was Mr. A - slowly, slowly pushing Brigg's sword away, and taking up a fresh position. Mr. A also started laughing. I don't think his intention was to humiliate Briggs – I think he was really just having a whale of a time. Over and over again, their swords locked, and Mr. A forced his opponent's weapon away, or aside, or down. We had reached about minute fifteen of the contest, and the Colonel was beginning to tire. Both men were sweating, but Briggs was breathing hard, and Mr. A's parries were becoming easier, and with the ease, his laughter rose in pitch. Suddenly, as Briggs paused to gather his strength, and as if the moment had been pre-arranged, he knocked Brigg's sword from his hand, reached over – and cut the end of his nose off!

It was as if time had stopped. Mr. A held his pose at end of sword-cut, Colonel Briggs was frozen in shock, and we seconds were not believing what we saw, and remained rooted to the spot for long moments. After an age, there arose a crescendo of a howl from the victim, and the spell was broken. I never knew a nose could hold so much blood. There was really no need to say it, for the fight was over, but Sanchez and I, in perfect chorus, yelled, "First blood!" Sanchez rushed to Brigg's side to offer aid, medical kit in hand, and bandages were applied. Mr. A, rather thoughtfully, reached down and picked up the severed tip, and handed it to Sanchez. "Keep it on ice", he said. "I don't think we brought any", said Sanchez. "I did", said Mr. A.