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Ultimate Sacrifice

At age 33 in 1917, the Harvard-trained lawyer and Major League baseball player Eddie Grant volunteered to serve in World War I. He fought as he'd played: selflessly

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A chill rain, half sleet at times, had fallen through the night in the craggy ravines of France's Argonne Forest. Now, at dawn, fog hung low over the ground. Pale light seeped in from a sun rising somewhere out of sight. Capt. Eddie Grant and the men of his weary infantry company roused themselves from their damp sleep beside a muddy stream. Surrounded by a dense wall of trees whose leaves had just begun to yellow, they could see no farther than a grenade's throw ahead.

Somewhere out there Germans waited in an elaborate network of trenches they had occupied for four years. Behind Grant and the men of Company H stretched a trail of dead and dying soldiers. The Americans had covered three miles in six days, lightning speed in a war that often measured victories in yards, but they still had many more miles to go, through the most unyielding and unforgiving territory along the Western Front. Their orders, from the commander of the American Expeditionary Forces, Gen. John J. Pershing himself, were to move forward, only forward, at all cost.

Eddie Grant had been in France the length of a baseball season, and now was the time of year—the first week of October 1918—when his attention would normally have turned toward the World Series. Five Octobers ago he had played in one himself, with John McGraw's New York Giants. "Attorney Eddie Grant, came through from second base like the Twentieth Century Limited traveling past a flag station," the *New York Times* described his appearance as a pinch runner in the tenth inning of the second game. He scored, winning the game for the Giants, but it was the only one the team would win in the Series; the Philadelphia Athletics would sweep the next three.

Sportswriters called him names like "Attorney Grant" or "Harvard Eddie." In an era when many ballplayers were rough-edged illiterates with plow-calloused hands, Grant's unusual academic pedigree became his defining characteristic, like pitcher Mordecai Brown's three fingers, pitcher

Chief Bender's Chippewa heritage, or outfielder Wee Willie Keeler's height. Grant had started his professional career in 1905, before graduating from Harvard, to which he returned in the off-seasons to finish law school. While his teammates crowded saloons after games, Grant went to the opera or the theater. On long train rides to Chicago and St. Louis, he passed up the card games for hours alone with his pipe and a book. Other players often asked him—the only member of the Massachusetts bar able to hit a big-league curveball—for advice on their contracts. He was better in the field—third base mostly—than he was at bat, although in 1909 he did get seven hits in a row in a double-header against two future Hall of Famers, Christy Mathewson and Rube Marquard.

Grant was tall and rangy, with a hangdog look about him—jug ears, receding chin, freckles—and a New Englander's native reserve. His eyes were a piercing blue; his sense of humor was dry, not broad. "My grandfather, General Grant, was a little rough on you down here when they got him riled," he once taunted a crowd giving him a hard time at an exhibition game in Texas (though he was no relation to the Union Army hero). Toward the end of his career, and during his time in the Army, Eddie Grant's taciturnity deepened into something more like melancholy. In a dugout in France one day, he pulled out a small picture from the diary he carried with him, and showed it to his commander, another Harvard man, Maj. DeLancey Jay. It was a portrait of a pretty young woman in a prim, high-necked suit with a platter-size hat and a wistful, vaguely aristocratic gaze.

"This is a picture of my wife," he told Jay, quietly and unexpectedly announcing the existence of a woman no one in his regiment had ever heard him speak of before.

Like many of his comrades in the polyglot 77th Division—from fresh-off-the-boat Italian masons to college men like himself—Grant was in France because he had asked to come, not because he had been told to go. When America entered the Great War in April 1917, he had every reason to watch from the bleachers: at 33 and more than a year out of baseball, he was beyond the draft's reach, working as a lawyer in New York City. But he believed in the cause his country had been called to by his fellow Ivy League idealist President Woodrow Wilson—a crusade to make the world "safe for democracy." By May, along with law school classmate Charles Whittlesey, he was wrapping puttees around his shins at officer training camp.

Now it was that same former classmate Grant was determined to rescue on this wet October day in the Argonne. Major Whittlesey commanded what was already being called the Lost Battalion—550 soldiers who, in the confused headlong rush toward the enemy three days before, had pushed more than half a mile farther than the troops on either flank, so far ahead, in fact, that they found themselves stranded in a small valley, encircled by Germans. German marksmen were picking them off almost at will, a hellish microcosm of a brutal war that was claiming casualties at a horrific rate. The men of the Lost Battalion were so low on food and ammunition that they risked sniper fire to scavenge rations and cartridges from the fallen bodies of their dead. Using their own blood for ink, they wrote farewell messages on scraps of bandages and on shirttails. The only way for them to communicate with other Americans was by carrier pigeon.

“Men are suffering from hunger and exposure; and the wounded are in very bad condition,” Whittlesey had reported the previous morning in a message carried by one of his last pigeons. “Cannot support be sent at once?”

So far, every attempt to reach Whittlesey and his men had been turned back, and three of the planes that had tried to spot them from above had been shot down.

Artillery barrages aimed at the Germans had fallen instead on the Americans, and food drops meant for the Americans had landed on the Germans. Pershing’s patience was wearing thin. “I direct that a vigorous effort be made this afternoon to relieve the companies on the left of the 77th Division that are cut off,” he had ordered the morning of Saturday, October 5, 1918.

It was the kind of stern order that the war’s long stalemate had driven commanders to issue—asking their men to make almost suicidal runs into the teeth of the enemy. Eddie Grant was sitting on a stump, coughing from the bronchitis that he could have used as a ticket off the line and barely able to drink a cup of coffee, when word came to move out and rescue the Lost Battalion.

Edward Leslie Grant—in his family he was often called Les—was born in 1883 in the town of Franklin, Massachusetts, halfway between Boston and Providence, the son of a contractor who built many of the Victorian houses that still line its streets today. His baseball career began at a local prep school, Dean Academy, and continued on the freshman team at Harvard. He was eager to join the varsity—then perhaps the best collegiate team in the nation—when he returned as a sophomore, but word had reached school officials that he had earned \$40 plus room and board for a summer playing semipro ball in North Carolina, costing him his intercollegiate eligibility. He played varsity basketball instead, starred on the intramural baseball teams, and grew impatient to graduate and pursue the unique dual career path he envisioned for himself—professional baseball and the law.

“I would respectfully petition to be allowed to take six and one half courses during the first half of the ensuing year,” he wrote to one of Harvard’s deans in September 1904. “I wish to do this as this number will give me just enough for my degree and I may be enabled to enter the Law School next year.”

By the end of the spring semester in 1905 he needed but one more course. He read Dante for his Italian class that summer, played semipro ball in nearby Lynn, and made a brief Major League debut. When the Cleveland Indians came to play the Boston Red Sox in August, their star second baseman, future Hall of Famer Napoleon Lajoie, was sidelined with an infected leg, and the team picked up Grant as a substitute. He had three hits in his first game—and “showed promise as a second baseman,” according to the *New York Times*—but got none in his second, and he returned to Lynn when Cleveland moved on.

Grant was a student of modest achievement—just above a C average in that age before grade inflation—and wide interests. He studied Greek, Latin, German and Italian, as well as history and economics; and like all undergraduates, he was bathed in the heady idealism championed by a faculty that had a defining influence on America’s moral and intellectual climate. To pass

through Harvard in Grant's era, as Walter Lippmann, T. S. Eliot and W.E.B. Du Bois did; to study under such intellectual giants as George Santayana, Josiah Royce, William James, Hugo Münsterberg and George Herbert Palmer; to grow to political awareness under the progressive leadership of one of Harvard's proudest graduates, President Theodore Roosevelt (class of 1880), was to acquire almost inevitably a belief that humanity was evolving toward a more perfect state and that the duty of all individuals was to devote themselves, even to sacrifice themselves if necessary, to that higher cause.

"The social order of the future is neither that of paternalism nor that of individualism, but that of fraternalism," declared clergyman Lyman Abbot, a baccalaureate speaker at Grant's graduation in June 1906. "It will be a social order in which each member of society will recognize that the interest of one is the interest of all." When Grant started law school, one of the first people he befriended was Charles Whittlesey, a tall, bespectacled Williams College graduate with the same prim schoolmaster's visage as Woodrow Wilson. They often sat talking on the law school steps, strolled around Cambridge Common and occasionally ventured into Boston together. In the spring of 1906, Grant signed on in the minors with the Jersey City Skeeters and led the Eastern League with a .322 average. The Philadelphia Nationals, also known as the Phillies, signed him in 1907, and by 1908 he was their regular third baseman. By 1909, he was their leadoff batter, with 170 hits, second in the National League.

In those years, baseball was assuming its dimensions as the national pastime. The first World Series had been played just six years earlier, attendance was soaring at new stadiums that were rising everywhere, and "Take Me Out to the Ball Game"—written in 1908—seemed on everyone's lips. "The 'mob and hoodlums' that hurled epithets and missiles at the umpire, that waited with stones outside the ball grounds to make it pleasant for the opposing nine, have passed away," *Pearson's Magazine* noted in 1909. "The 'rowdies' who filled the air with profanity, who made the game a slugging match in which brute strength and arrogance were the only assets—they, too, have departed."

A new kind of player was emerging, as well, the magazine claimed: "clear-brained, clear-eyed young men" who play the game "on lines that are purely scientific." Leading examples of these "Transformers of Baseball," as it dubbed them, were Christy Mathewson, Honus Wagner, Frank Chance, Johnny Evers and the "Harvard man . . . playing third base with the Philadelphia Nationals," Eddie Grant.

"There are more college men playing ball every year, but they are no higher type than most of the non-college men," Grant modestly told *Pearson's*.

Baseball was a different game then, built more on speed and finesse than power. The bunt was an important strategic tool, and Grant was adept on both sides of it—laying them down and scooping them up. "As a batter Grant was noted for his ability to sacrifice," a fellow player, Mike Donlin, once observed, "and he could lay back near third base and still throw out the fastest runners after they had bunted."

Near the end of the 1910 season, the bachelor third baseman walked into a Philadelphia drugstore one afternoon to buy some cigars. As the clerk waited on him, a tall, handsome young

woman came in. “Have you ever happened to meet Miss Soest, Mr. Grant?” the clerk asked. He hadn’t, but he was more than happy to do so. She was 20, her name was Irene, and they walked along the street together that very afternoon. He began to call at her house, where her mother had yet to hear the news that baseball players these days were gentlemen, not ruffians. After the season ended, Grant came back to Philadelphia to spend Thanksgiving with Irene, and then Christmas too, when he gave her a diamond to announce an engagement her mother only grudgingly approved. They were married February 28, 1911, at Epiphany Chapel at 17th and Race, where Irene had taught Sunday school and was active in the Girls’ Friendly Society. “On that day my blessed sweetheart became my wife,” he later wrote. “How radiant and happy she was.”

The newlyweds planned to live near Irene’s mother, but Grant was traded to Cincinnati before the new season started. The move didn’t trouble him much—he was in love, and he expected 1911 to be his last year in baseball. After the season, he and Irene would settle in Boston where he would devote himself to his fledgling law practice. Late in November, he took his young bride into Boston from their apartment in Brookline and bought her a moleskin stole and a muff. They were going to his alma mater for the big football game with Yale, and he wanted her to stay warm in the windswept bowl of Soldiers Field. But the morning of the game, not quite nine months since their wedding, Irene awoke at seven complaining of pain around her heart. “She died in his arms before aid could reach her,” the obituary in a Philadelphia newspaper reported. The typhoid fever she had contracted as a girl, the doctors surmised, must have left undetected damage.

“The terrible shock and the ending of a truly great love did something to Eddie from which he never recovered,” his sister Florence Grant Robinson would later write. She never heard him speak Irene’s name again. The day after a family Christmas in Franklin that year, he took his gun, his fishing gear and his copy of Emerson’s essays up to a camp in New Hampshire, where he spent several solitary weeks contemplating his loss. He also filled a leather-bound notebook with a tender memoir of his life with Irene.

“The happiest moment was when I put the ring upon her finger,” he wrote about their wedding day. “She was to be mine for all time—not only in this life but in the life to come. And then after signing a book and receiving happy wishes we were ready to start on our life together—all too short it was to be.”

Eddie Grant went back to Cincinnati after all, alone, and played another season and a half there before the Giants, the dominant team in the National League, acquired him in the middle of the 1913 season. Manager John McGraw valued both his hands and his brain, relying on him as a utility man and a bench coach. Grant spent some time at every position in the infield, from his accustomed third base all the way around the horn to first, and hit for his highest full-season average ever (.277) in 1914. His numbers slipped in 1915, and he retired at the end of the season at age 32. He spent 1916 dabbling in law and coaching a Giants farm team in New Jersey.

As Grant’s baseball career was tailing off, the Great War in Europe was raging, and America’s entry into it began to appear ever more likely. College students and businessmen were being recruited into what came to be called the Plattsburg movement—named for the Plattsburg

Barracks in upstate New York—to sign up for private officer training camps started by another Harvard man, Gen. Leonard Wood, championed by Theodore Roosevelt, and meant to foster a well-trained officer corps. One-third of the 1,200 men who attended the first camp were from Harvard. The movement attracted many of Grant's peers, adventurous idealists who had been drilled with the dictum of Harvard's Josiah Royce that the highest good could be achieved only by "the willing and practical and thoroughgoing devotion of a person to a cause."

Grant found his cause when America entered the war in April 1917, and he signed up immediately for Plattsburg—"keen for war's grim game," as the *New York World* reported in a photo spread about prominent enlistees. Theodore Roosevelt Jr. was at camp with him, along with Charles Whittlesey. "I am going to try to be an officer," Grant wrote a friend. "I don't know how much of a success I shall make at it. I had determined from the start to be in this war if it came to us, and if I am not successful as an officer I shall enlist as a private, for I believe there is no greater duty that I owe for being that which I am—an American citizen."

In April 1918, Grant landed in France as a captain with Company H of the 307th Infantry Regiment in the 77th Division, the so-called Statue of Liberty Division from New York City. "I want also to impress upon you that I am not the least bit pessimistic about this. And can't see why any of you should be," he wrote to his sister Florence. "Why the Germans won't be able to win a game from us. We would knock old Hindenburg out of the box in the first inning."

The war's brutal toll quickly belied such optimism. Grant kept a diary his first few months in France but stopped abruptly on July 30, as his unit neared more serious action. "I look forward to staying here to the end," he wrote in his last entry. "All I hope is that I am lucky enough to do that." The men from Company H had been falling steadily—blasted by German shells, riddled by nests of machine gunners, picked off by snipers, bayoneted in hand-to-hand combat. Marini was dead, and Stein and Romanchuk and McCallister and Farrell and Dubinsky. Germany was collapsing at the top, but its soldiers were still killing their enemies as if it were 1914. "To avoid further bloodshed, the German government requests the President to arrange the immediate conclusion of an armistice on land, by sea and in the air," the German chancellor had cabled Woodrow Wilson on October 4.

Of course Grant and the rest of Company H knew nothing of these high-level discussions. On the morning of October 5, they were concerned only with their more immediate mission to rescue Whittlesey's Lost Battalion.

Grant tossed aside the dregs of his coffee and gathered his men. He walked wearily with the column, leading them through the hills and trees toward the valley where his classmate was stranded. They hadn't gotten too far when they met two stretcher-bearers carrying a familiar figure, Maj. DeLancey Jay, the officer to whom he had once shown Irene's picture. Jay had been wounded trying to do just what Grant was now attempting.

"Take command of the battalion," Jay ordered Grant, now the senior surviving officer.

As Jay was carried back, Grant moved forward. He was soon stopped again when a German shell ripped through the curtain of yellowing leaves. His lieutenant fell.

“Flop, everybody!” he shouted, trying to bring order to the chaos. He stayed standing himself, though, and called for help for the wounded man.

“Stretcher! Stretcher! Stretcher!”

A second shell tore through the trees, and as it exploded a jagged piece of shrapnel sliced into Grant’s side, dropping him to the forest floor, dead in an instant. Folded in his map case was a map of this sector of the Argonne. A fellow officer who later retrieved the map was astonished to find when he opened it that one of the four jagged holes the shrapnel had ripped through it—the second from the top—marked the precise spot of Grant’s death, in front of the trench La Pavillon at map coordinates 73-97. At the place where the third baseman who was so adept at the sacrifice bunt had stood for his last breath was now a tear in the map in roughly the shape of a triumphal arch.

A colonel halted the attack soon after Grant was killed. “We can’t afford the price,” he said. “My men deserve a better break than being sent to slaughter.”

The Americans finally broke through to the Lost Battalion two days later. Whittlesey and 193 of his men were able to walk out; the other two-thirds were either dead or too injured to move under their own steam. A month later the armistice was signed. Whittlesey was acclaimed a national hero and awarded the Medal of Honor, but in a newspaper interview upon his return he modestly tried to deflect the glory to the comrades who had tried to reach him—especially the one with whom he had strolled around the Common in Cambridge and drilled at Plattsburg. “I can just see and hear that boy when he heard that my battalion was trapped in the woods, saying ‘Well, if there is any chance to get my old friend “Whit” out of that hole, I want to be the man to do it.’ ” Whittlesey said. “When that shell burst and killed that boy, America lost one of the finest types of manhood I have ever known.”

Eddie Grant was not the only baseball player to die in combat, but he was by far the most prominent, not just in World War I, but in any subsequent war. (Pitcher Christy Mathewson was gassed in an Army training accident, which may have made his lungs more vulnerable to contracting the tuberculosis that eventually killed him, at age 45, in 1925.)

In the sunny pause between a Sunday double-header in the spring of 1921, a military band led a solemn parade of ballplayers and soldiers across the wide lawn of the Polo Grounds to a spot as far from home as they could get without leaving the field. They stood in ranks around a flag-draped monument about the size of a batboy that had just been planted in the deepest part of center field, where long fly balls went to die. It was Memorial Day, and they had come to honor Eddie Grant, who had been, as sportswriter Fred Lieb put it, “called out by the great Umpire.”

Men Grant had served with in France offered testimonials to his character and courage, as did New York Giants manager John McGraw and a representative of his alma mater. “He made his sacrifice hit, and it was such hits that won the game,” said Thomas Slocum, vice president of the Harvard Club.

As Grant's sisters pulled aside the American flag covering the granite monument, the band struck up "My Country 'Tis of Thee." "Soldier, Scholar, Athlete," read the bronze plaque affixed to the monument. The great sportswriter Grantland Rice (himself a veteran of the late war) wrote a memorial poem for the occasion, saying in its first stanza: "Far from the Game and the cheering of old, / Across in the Argonne will tell you the story, / Where each one may read on its rain-battered mould / A final box score that is written in glory. / A final box score of a Player who gave / The flag that he fought for, his ghost—and his grave." Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis—the stern, whitemaned commissioner who would soon order the expulsion from baseball of the eight players involved in the Black Sox cheating scandal—lauded Grant as a man who gave "his all not for glory, not for fame, but just for his country," and predicted that his "memory will live as long as our game may last."

In the years that followed, whenever a ball was hit into deep center at the Polo Grounds, radio announcers would say it had gone "all the way back to the Eddie Grant monument," keeping his name alive. Landis later championed him for election to the Hall of Fame. "Regardless of baseball performance, I would like to see Eddie Grant's name on that list," the commissioner wrote.

Grant didn't make it into the Hall, though, and despite Landis' prediction, his memory gradually faded. So did that of his friend and comrade in arms Charles Whittlesey, who had committed suicide in November 1921, jumping overboard from a ship bound for Havana, after serving as an honorary pallbearer at the dedication of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. And even before the global turmoil of the 1930s, the ideals that had sent Grant, Whittlesey and many of their high-minded comrades to France—the dream that their sacrifice would redeem civilization and that organizations like the League of Nations would assure lasting peace—were looking increasingly frayed. The war fought to end all wars turned out to be just the opening battle in history's deadliest century.

Grant is buried with 14,245 other Americans in the Meuse-Argonne cemetery in France, in one of the long, pristine rows of white headstones—an ocean away from his family home in Massachusetts, and from Irene's grave in Philadelphia. After the Giants played their last game in the Polo Grounds in 1957, fans tore apart the field, and the bronze plaque from the memorial that was meant to mark his name forever disappeared.

The plaque never resurfaced, as the Giants had promised, in their new San Francisco home.

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