



COLUMNISTS

Dutch Treat

Hans Ree



Claude Bloodgood

ON AUGUST 4 the American chessplayer Claude Bloodgood died in the hospital of a prison in Richmond, Virginia. According to himself and to his friends he was 77 years old, which may or may not be true.

He had been a prisoner since 1962, with three short periods of interruption when he was a free man. His life before that time had been eventful, that is if you believe the account he gave in 1999 to Julian Borger, a journalist working for the English newspaper *The Guardian*.

He was born in 1924 in Mexico as Klaus Bluttgutt III, the son of German parents. His father (still according to the story in *The Guardian*) was a spy for Germany who together with his son in 1931 settled in the US, with help of false papers, under the name Bloodgood. In 1938 little Klaus was sent to Germany, where he made a quick career in the Nazi Party and in the Abwehr, the German counter-intelligence service headed by admiral Canaris.

Apart from that he was considered a chess prodigy and played with Canaris, General Rommel and Himmler, the head of the SS. Did these people really play chess? To my knowledge they do not appear in the extensive "celebrities playing chess" literature.

During World War II he landed several times via German submarines on American shores to exchange information with his father, the spy. During his last trip the sub was hit and wrecked. Klaus managed to save himself and stay out of the hands of American authorities (the only member of the crew who did so) and resumed his life as the American citizen Claude Bloodgood.

During the fifties he went to Hollywood as a professional chess hustler and played there with other stars, no Nazi leaders this time, but famous actors such as Humphrey Bogart, Gary Cooper, Richard Widmark, David Niven, James Mason and James Cagney. For a short period he was married to Kathryn Grayson, who starred in successful musicals.

Of course the journalist Julian Borger tried to check if this story was



true. He didn't find anything that confirmed it, not about the Nazi period, not about Bloodgood mingling with the Hollywood stars and not about his marriage. He did find in an FBI file a reference to Claude's father, who was said to be born in 1910. If that year is right, it would cast grave doubts on Claude's own year of birth as 1924, and on the whole Nazi period.

Nevertheless Borger seemed impressed by vague indications suggesting that some parts of the story might be true. And he didn't doubt that Bloodgood was an "undisputed chess genius" and a "grandmaster". This Bloodgood was not, though he was a competent and enterprising player and a real chess fanatic.

About the second part of his life we have better documentation. From 1962 till 1964 and from 1965 till 1967 he was imprisoned for burglary, from 1968 till 1969 for forgery and from 1970 till the end of his life for the murder of his stepmother, apparently in a fight about an inheritance.

He was sentenced to death, which in a way suited him, for while he was on death row the prison system paid for his stamps, so that he could play correspondence games, sometimes 2000 at the same time.

After his sentence had been commuted to life imprisonment this was not possible anymore, but soon he was allowed to organise chess events in the world outside the prison. This was extraordinary for a prisoner who had been condemned to death, but when asked about it, Bloodgood smiled and said that much was possible if you knew how to play the prison bureaucracy.

After an unsuccessful escape attempt in 1974 this too was a thing of the past and since that time he played against his fellow-prisoners, thousands of games a year.

Because of a bug in the American rating system, in 1996 he saw himself, without ever having encountered a really strong player, ascending to second place on the American rating list (Gata Kamsky being first) with a rating of 2702. American chess officials were confronted with the unnerving prospect that Bloodgood might demand a place in the team for the Olympiad, but this never happened.

While in prison, Bloodgood wrote three books, *The Tactical Grob* on 1. g4, *The Blackburn-Hartlaub Gambit*, on 1. d4 e5 2. dxe5 d6 and *The Nimzovich Attack: The Norfolk Gambits*. Norfolk was the city where his father supposedly had worked as a spy. With some good reason these openings have been characterised as mad, bad and dangerous. They suited his adventurous style. One of the "Norfolk Gambits" was played by Bloodgood in 1999 in a correspondence

game with the journalist Julian Borger who would spin such a riveting yarn about Bloodgood's life.

White: Bloodgood Black: Borger

1. Ng1-f3 d7-d5 2. b2-b3 c7-c5 3. e2-e4 d5xe4 4. Nf3-e5 Qd8-d4 5. Bc1-b2 Qd4xb2 6. Nb1-c3 Qb2-a3 7. Bf1-b5+ Bc8-d7 8. Ne5-c4 Qa3-b4 9. Bb5xd7+ Nb8xd7 10. a2-a3 Black resigned. This may have been a real money-earner during his hustler times. Inside and outside prison Bloodgood played this same game many times.



You may notice something wrong with the diagram of the final position, but according to the Chess Addict columnists Mike Fox and Richard James this is how it appeared in *The Guardian*. Ah, well, even a quality paper can't have everything right.

A certain flourish as a chessplayer cannot be denied to Bloodgood, but naturally he wasn't often able to meet strong opponents. The next game was played in 1973 within the framework of a Virginia Penitentiary Chess Program.

White: Bloodgood Black: Sanderson

1. g2-g4 e7-e5 2. d2-d3 Bf8-c5 3. h2-h4 d7-d5 4. g4-g5 Bc8-g4 5. c2-c4 Ng8-e7 6. Bf1-g2 Bg4-e6 7. Qd1-b3 Bc5-b6 8. Nb1-c3 d5xc4 9. Qb3-b5+ Nb8-c6 10. d3xc4 a7-a6 11. Qb5-a4 0-0 12. Bg2-h3 Be6xh3 13. Ng1xh3 f7-f5 14. c4-c5 Bb6-a7 15. Qa4-c4+ Kg8-h8 16. h4-h5 Nc6-d4 17. Nc3-d1 Qd8-e8 18. h5-h6 g7-g6 19. f2-f4 Ra8-d8 20. f4xe5 Ne7-c6 21. Nh3-f4



21...Nc6-b4 21...Nxe5 would be good for Black. 22. e5-e6 Nb4-c2+ 23. Ke1-f2 Nc2xa1 24. e2-e3 Nd4-c6 25. Qc4-c3+ Nc6-d4 26. e3xd4 Qe8-e7 27. d4-d5+ Kh8-g8 28. Bc1-e3 b7-b6 29. Nf4xg6 h7xg6 30. h6-h7+ Black resigned.

After Bloodgood's death a long obituary appeared in *The Week in Chess* 354, written by Pierre Barthélémy, a journalist of the French newspaper *Le Monde* who knew Bloodgood well.

His description of Bloodgood's life, far more sober than that by Borger, Barthélémy concluded thus: "On a personal note, I knew Claude for close to a decade and became good friends with him. I found him to have a brilliant mind, a great sense of humor, to be a loyal friend, and to be kind and generous with others. Even though he had only limited finances, for example, he was always quick to share what little he had with other inmates, particularly when it came to promoting prison chess ... The chess world will be less interesting without him. I will miss him very much."

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