

## Baseball's Greatest Sacrifice

**T**his issue of the Baseball in Wartime Newsletter sees the launch of a new feature focusing on players who lost their lives in World War II.

More than 100 players with professional baseball experience died in service during the war. Two of them - Elmer Gedeon and Harry O'Neill - had a brief taste of the game at the major league level. The others were all minor league players at various stages of their careers. Some had already retired and were pursuing work in different areas, others were in the midst of their climb up the minor league ladder, while some were just starting out after high school or college.

On the following pages you will read about Gedeon and O'Neill as well as Billy Southworth Jr, Medal of Honor winner Jack Lummas and Keith Bissonette.

Their stories - just like the others who made the ultimate sacrifice - are unique and personal. A forgotten tragedy in a time of worldwide suffering and devastation. Many are unknown to the baseball community of today and I'm proud to bring their stories to your attention.

Look out for more biographies of players who lost their lives - Baseball's Greatest Sacrifice - in the next issue of the Baseball in Wartime Newsletter.

*Gary Bedingfield*

*(Founder and Editor of www.baseballinwartime.com)*

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Friday's events include Baseball and World War II - Major League Baseball players who put their careers on hold to serve in the military during WWII. Featuring Bob Feller, Monte Irvin, Lou Brissie, Jerry Coleman and Mickey Vernon.

Plus a reception in honor of the Major League Baseball veterans of World War II, with a special tribute to Bob Feller on his 90th birthday.

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## Baseball's Greatest Sacrifice - Elmer Gedeon

*"I had my accident. It's going to be good flying from now on," Elmer Gedeon told his cousin, Bob, in 1942. Less than two years later, Gedeon was killed in action when his bomber was shot down over the battlefields of Europe.*

Elmer Gedeon - nephew of former major league infielder Joe Gedeon, University of Michigan three-sport star and major league outfielder - was a naturally gifted athlete. In addition to playing baseball and football at Michigan, Gedeon excelled in track and was a two-time Big 10 hurdles champion. But Elmer loved baseball and he was good enough to be signed by the Washington Senators following graduation in the summer of 1939.

The 22-year-old played for Orlando of the Florida State League his rookie year before joining the Senators at the end of the 1939 season. His first major league appearance was on September 18 at Griffith Stadium, as a late-inning replacement in Dutch Leonard's 19th win of the season against the Tigers. The following day, he was the starting centerfielder, collecting three hits in a 10-9 win over the Indians.

In 1940, Elmer was with the Senators for spring training but spent the season with the Charlotte Hornets in the Piedmont League. As January 1941 and thoughts of spring training rolled around, Elmer received his summons for military service and joined the Army in March 1941. He reported to Fort Riley following basic training but transferred to the Army Air Corps around Memorial Day. Elmer earned his pilot's wings and a commission as a second lieutenant at Williams



Field, near Phoenix in May 1942, and trained with the 21st Bomb Group at MacDill Field in Tampa.

Flight training was a hazardous time and almost claimed his life on August 9, 1942. Gedeon was the navigator in a North American B-25 twin-engined bomber that crashed on take off and burst into flames at Raleigh, North Carolina. Despite suffering three broken ribs, he managed to free himself and crawl from the wreckage, then realized a crewmate - Corporal Rarrat - was still inside. Without a moment's hesitation, Gedeon went back inside the burning plane and pulled Rarrat to safety. Two men died in the crash and the five surviving crew members were hospitalized. By July 1943 - with his wounds healed - Gedeon was training on Martin B-26 Marauders, and in February 1944, newly-promoted Captain Gedeon arrived at Boreham Airfield in England with the 394th Bomb Group.

On April 20, 1944, just five days after celebrating his 27th birthday, Elmer piloted one of 30 B-26s that left England to bomb

German construction works in France. As they approached the target area, anti-aircraft fire intensified and Gedeon's bomber was severely hit by flak. "We got caught in searchlights and took a direct hit under the cockpit," says his co-pilot James Taaffe. "I watched Gedeon lean forward against the controls as the plane went into a nose dive and the cockpit filled with flames."

Taaffe was the only crew member able to escape the flame-engulfed airplane. As he descended by parachute, and captivity at the hands of the Germans, he watched the bomber smash into the ground, carrying Gedeon and five others to their death.



## Baseball's Greatest Sacrifice - Harry O'Neill

*In 1939, Harry O'Neill appeared in just one game for the Philadelphia Athletics, but he would go down in history as one of only two major league players to be killed in World War II.*



Harry O'Neill was a standout athlete at Darby High School, Pennsylvania and progressed to Malvern Prep School before entering Gettysburg College - a private four-year liberal arts institution - where he studied history. At Darby High he played guard on the team that won the



Kiwanis basketball tournament and was on the All-Kiwanis team selected by the *Chester Times* newspaper. At Gettysburg he was a three-sport star playing center on the basketball and football teams and catcher with the baseball nine.

In baseball, Harry helped coach Ira Plank (brother of former major leaguer Eddie Plank) capture the 1938 Eastern Pennsylvania Intercollegiate baseball title. "Porky O'Neill reached the status of a hero here today," claimed a local paper on May 4, 1938, "when his single in the ninth inning drove one run home and enabled the Gettysburg Bullets to nose out a stubborn Nittany Lion in nine grueling innings 5-4."

The 6-foot-3, 205-pound youngster was a much sought after athlete and signed with Connie Mack's Philadelphia Athletics immediately after his graduation on June 5, 1939. He spent the rest of the year with Philadelphia as their third-string catcher, and made his only major league appearance on July 23, 1939 as a late-inning defensive replacement for Frankie Hayes against the Tigers.

In 1940, Harry was assigned to the Allentown Wings of the Interstate League, and then in July he joined the Harrisburg Senators of the same league. He quit baseball the following year and taught history at Upper Darby Junior High School in Pennsylvania, joining the Marines in September 1942.

He attended officers' school at Quantico, Virginia and was promoted to first lieutenant at Camp Pendleton, California, in January 1944. That same month, his wife, Ethel, visited him in

California before he shipped out for the Pacific Theater with the Fourth Marine Division.

O'Neill made major amphibious assaults at Kwajalein, Saipan and Tinian, and by February 1945, he was on his way to Iwo Jima to help secure the island for use as a base for long-range fighters to escort bombers on their missions to Japan.

The island was riddled with pillboxes, gun-pits, trenches and mortar sites and a three-day naval bombardment, beginning on February 16, was intended to rid the island of much of its defense. But the bombardment had minimal effect and American forces met fanatical resistance when they hit the beaches on February 19.

On March 6, 1945 - as the battle moved inland - Harry O'Neill was killed. "We are trying to keep our courage up, as Harry would want us to do," wrote his sister, Suzanna, in a letter to Gettysburg College shortly after his death. "But our hearts are very sad and as the days go on it seems to be getting worse. Harry was always so full of life, that it seems hard to think he is gone."



## Baseball's Greatest Sacrifice - Billy Southworth Jr

*As a youngster, Billy Southworth Jr had two loves in his life - baseball and airplanes. He would grow up to be an outstanding ballplayer and an exceptional pilot, but with tragic consequences.*



At the time of his birth in 1917, Billy Southworth Jr's father was an outfielder with the Portland Beavers of the Pacific Coast League and would go on to enjoy a 13-season playing career in the major leagues, 12 years as a major league manager and earn selection to the Baseball Hall of Fame in 2008.

Billy Jr was, himself, a standout athlete at East High School, in Columbus, Ohio, and signed a professional contract to play baseball with Asheville of the Piedmont League in 1936.

Steadily progressing through the minors, he was with Kinston of the Coastal Plain League in 1938 and appeared in 103 games, batting a respectable .283 with 14 home runs. The following year was to be Billy Jr's best in professional baseball. Playing with the Rome Colonels of the Canadian-American League, he batted .342, homered 15 times

and had 85 RBIs to earn league MVP honors. At the end of the season he was sold to the Toronto Maple Leafs of the International League - one level below the majors.

Meanwhile, war was raging across Europe and Southworth had been paying particularly close attention. "I think it's my duty to enlist, because they're going to need us," he told his father who was now managing the Rochester Redwings of the International League. On December 12, 1940, Southworth enlisted in the US Army Air Corps.

He took to flight training with ease and received his bomber pilot's wings at Brooks Field, Texas on August 29, 1941. He then served overseas with the 303rd Bomb Group in England, where his fellow airmen dubbed him "the flying outfielder." His first Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress was christened "Bad Check" because it kept coming back. His second - "Winning Run" - clearly referred to his baseball background.

Southworth completed his 25-mission tour of duty in Europe without a single injury to any member of his crew. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and Air Medal.



Returning to the United States at the end of 1943, he served as an instructor and visited his father at home in Sunbury, Ohio in November 1944, before leaving for duty at Grand Island Army Air Field in Nebraska. It was their last time together.

On February 15, 1945, Southworth was piloting a B-29 that left Mitchel Field in New York bound for Florida. At 3.50pm, the four-engined bomber appeared over LaGuardia Field with the left outboard engine stopped. Struggling at the controls of the huge plane, Southworth overshot the runway as he attempted an emergency landing. He tried desperately to climb above Flushing Bay but the airplane clipped the water and somersaulted before bursting into flames.

Five crew members were rescued but a further five - including Billy Southworth Jr - were missing in the front section of the plane which sank in 30 feet of water.

On August 4, 1945, 24 weeks after the crash, a body washed ashore at the confluence of the East River and Long Island Sound. Dental records identified the body as Billy Southworth Jr.

## Baseball's Greatest Sacrifice - Jack Lummus

*Jack Lummus was an outstanding athlete who played both professional football and baseball. He is one of only two pro baseball players to be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.*



Jack Lummus was born on a cotton farm in Ennis, Texas, in 1915. He attended Ennis High School where he excelled in football and track, earning all-district honors. Lummus graduated from high school in 1934 and accepted a two-year sports scholarship to Texas Military College, where he earned all-conference honors in football. At age 21, he enrolled at Baylor University again earning honors in football but also in baseball. He was a superb defensive centerfielder and signed a professional contract with Wichita Falls of the West Texas-New Mexico League, batting .257 in 26 games. During the winter of 1941, he also signed with football's New York Giants.

On January 30, 1942, Jack joined the Marine Corps and took basic training in San Diego. At the end of the year he was appointed a second lieutenant and spent 1943 in California.

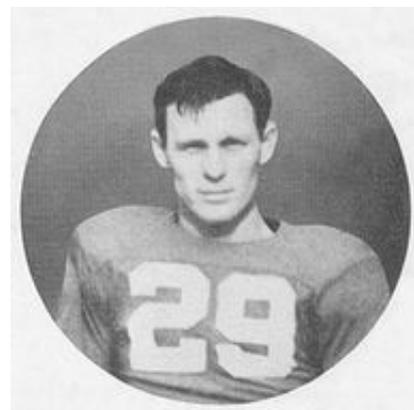
With the 27th Marines, 5th Marine Division, Lummus left the mainland in August 1944, bound for Camp Tarawa in the Hawaiian Islands. "Our baseball league ended last week," he wrote home on November 23. "My team took top honors, winning in a breeze with only one loss."

On February 19, 1945, First Lieutenant Lummus was in the first wave that hit the beaches at Iwo Jima - a tiny island the Japanese had turned into a maze of underground tunnels and defensive bunkers. Lummus led 3rd platoon through rugged, hostile terrain towards Kitano Point on the northernmost tip of the island. On March 8, he led an assault on three concealed Japanese pillboxes. Single handedly, and despite being wounded by exploding hand grenades, Lummus knocked out all three pillboxes before stepping on a landmine. Despite being mortally wounded he still shouted encouragement to his troops - urging them to continue the advance - before being stretchered to an aid station. The 29-year-old Marine Corps hero's life tragically came to an end on the operating table the following day.



Jack Lummus was buried at the 5th Division cemetery at the base of Mount Suribachi on Iwo Jima. At a ceremony at his hometown of Ennis on May 30, 1946, Mrs Lummus received the Medal of Honor on her son's behalf.

His body was returned to Ennis in April 1948, and now rests at the Myrtle Cemetery. In December 1986, the Jack Lummus Memorial Park was opened in front of the Ennis Chamber of Commerce, and his name lives on today after a US Navy vessel was named in his honor. The *USNS 1st Lt Jack Lummus* carries a full range of Marine Corps cargo, enough to support a Marine Air Ground Task Force for 30 days.



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## Baseball's Greatest Sacrifice - Keith Bissonnette

*Keith Bissonnette flew over 200 missions as a Republic P-47 Thunderbolt pilot, earning the Distinguished Flying Cross and Air Medal with three Oak Leaf clusters.*



Keith Bissonnette was born in Enderlin, North Dakota, a picturesque town in the southeastern part of the state. His father, Jesse, a former Dakota League ballplayer, moved the family to St Paul, Minnesota when Keith was quite young and it was there that he began to develop his baseball skills.

A pitcher in grade school, his hitting was so hefty that he was switched to first base to get his batting power in the line-up every day. At Cretin High School (a private, Catholic school, now known as Cretin-Derham Hall High School) he was the bulwark of the school's baseball team for four years, and blasted a 420-foot home run in the scholastic play-off championship in his senior year.

Keith also played hockey and basketball in high school and was a standout football player. But the 6-foot-2 right-hander chose baseball for a career and signed with his hometown St Paul Saints of the American Association at the end of 1939. He was assigned to the Leesburg Anglers in the Florida State League in

1940 and batted .277 with 67 RBIs in 134 games as the Anglers' first baseman.

In 1941, he played 32 games with the Utica Braves of the Canadian-American League and was batting .286 when he was optioned to the Augusta Tigers of the South Atlantic League. Bissonnette played 91 games for the Tigers as an outfielder/first baseman and batted .291.

In 1942, Bissonnette was tearing up South Atlantic League pitchers while playing second base for the Jacksonville Tars. He batted .326 in 59 games and spent the second half of the season with St Paul in the American Association, batting .237 in 42 games.

Bissonnette - who was married to Dorothy Johnson by this time - was drafted by the Army at the end of the season and entered service with the Army Air Force in February 1943 after passing his cadet examinations. He earned his pilot's wings and was commissioned as a lieutenant in late 1943. Their son, Gary, was born in October 1943, and Lieutenant Bissonnette went overseas to Burma to serve with the 80<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group in April 1944.

Known as the Burma Banshees, the 80th Fighter Group was a vital element in the victory in Burma. During its two years in combat they flew patrols in support of the cargo airlift over the "Hump" between Assam and Kunming, China. Their official mission was later extended to include offensive strikes in northern Burma to prevent the establishment of enemy bases



from which Allied airlift planes might be attacked.

Bissonnette flew over 200 missions as a Republic P-47D Thunderbolt pilot, earning the Distinguished Flying Cross with one oak leaf cluster for "heroism or extraordinary achievement" and the Air Medal with three Oak Leaf clusters for "meritorious achievement."

On March 28, 1945 - two months after the birth of his daughter, Diane, back home in St Paul - First Lieutenant Keith Bissonnette was killed when his plane crashed two miles southeast of Keng Tung in Burma.



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**Recent Passings**

**Ernie Andres**

*January 11, 1918 to September 19, 2008*

Ernie served with the Navy during WWII and was at Great Lakes in 1942. He later served a five-month tour of duty aboard a sub-chaser in the Pacific, and became the athletic officer at Miami Navy Training Center in Florida upon his return.

He moved to Shoemaker Naval Receiving Barracks in California in 1945, and was discharged from service at the beginning of 1946.

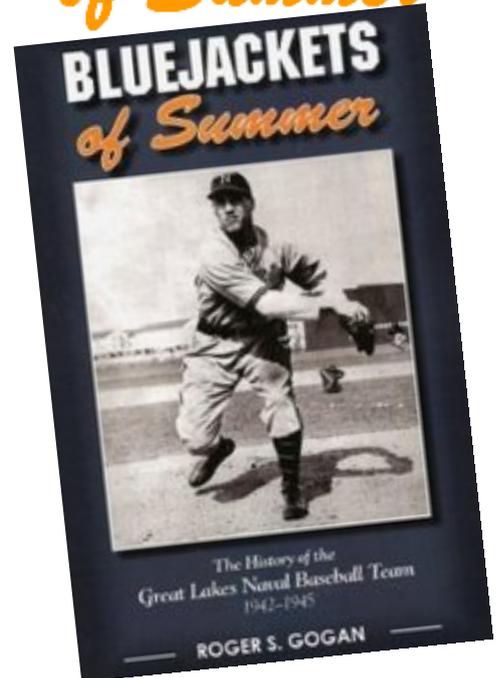
**Mickey Vernon**

*April 22, 1918 to September 24, 2008*

Mickey was inducted into the Navy at Sampson Naval Training Station in New York in 1943. He was at Norfolk Naval Air Station in 1944, and arrived in Hawaii in October. Vernon took part in the Navy's Western Pacific Tour, playing for the Fifth Fleet team at islands including Kwajalein, Saipan and Guam. Following the tour, he was sent to Ulithi Atoll, where he refereed basketball and umpired softball games.

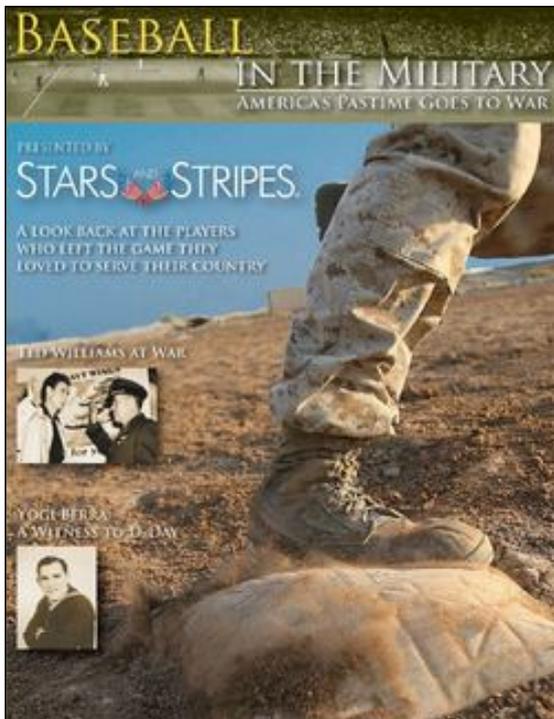
Mickey was discharged from service on October 4, 1945,

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