

Semi Pro Ballplayers in Service

This month's issue focuses on some of the semi-pro ballplayers who served with the armed forces during World War II.

There were countless ballplayers who were playing on semi-pro teams across the United States and Canada who answered the call to military service during the war. Many were exceptional ballplayers and many chose to play for semi-pro teams rather than minor league teams because the pay was often better and frequently came with the offer of a job in the winter months.

Surprisingly WWII proved to be a spotlight for many of these talented players as they played side by side with major league and minor league players and received offers to turn pro after the war. Nevertheless, up to five years of military service usually meant they were a little too old to pursue a career in professional baseball when peace finally arrived in late 1945 and most returned to their home town teams.

These players may not appear in the record books of organized baseball but their love of the game cannot be denied. Let's take a moment to remember them.

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Red Dugan (second left) discusses pitching techniques with Hal Caskey (fourth left)

Ralph "Red" Dugan, who played semi-pro baseball in Goff, Kansas, before entering the University of Kansas in 1937, coached the Horned Toads ball team at Las Vegas Army Air Field during World War II.

The Horned Toads were one of the strongest teams in Nevada in 1942 and were led on the field by Ernie Wade of the Philadelphia Athletics and Alex Oshkello, a catcher in the New York Giants' organization.

On July 25, 1942, the Horned Toads faced Reno Baseball Club for the state semi-pro baseball championship at Idlewild Park (a softball field converted for baseball) in Reno. At stakes for the game was a trophy presented by the National Semi-Pro Baseball Congress, \$150 donated by Harold's Club of Reno, 60 per cent of the money collected by passing a hat through the stands (there was no admission fee), and the right to compete in the national semi-pro tournament in Wichita in August.

Reno Baseball Club were the defending

champions and 3,000 fans bulged the bleachers and lined the field for a record crowd at Idlewild, only to see the local boys beaten, 7 to 1, by the Horned Toads on the three-hit pitching of Ernie Wade, and four hits (including two doubles) by right fielder Johnny Arden.

For the semi-pro finals, the Horned Toads made the journey to Wichita, Kansas by plane. But their winning streak soon came to an end as they were beaten, 7-1, by the 326th Glider Squadron from Alliance, Nebraska, on August 17 and then eliminated in a 10-2 rout by the Fort Riley Centaurs the following day.



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Semi Pro Ballplayers in Service

Darrell Heath

Date and Place of Birth:

July 6, 1923 Chicago, Illinois

Date and Place of Death:

March 18, 1994 Chicago, Illinois

Position:

Outfielder

Rank:

Private

Military Unit:

L Cpy, 3rd Battalion, 8th Regiment, 2nd Marine Division

Area Served:

Pacific Theater of Operations

For most of his life, Darrell W. Heath was engrossed with the game of baseball.

In the late 1930's or early 1940's Heath played outfield for the Chicago Mills Semi-Pro baseball club of Chicago, Ill. Around that time, he was invited to Wrigley Field to try out for the Chicago Cubs.

Shortly after, on Jan. 3, 1942, Heath enlisted in the United States Marine Corps, just as many other patriotic Americans. While his quest to play professional baseball was interrupted, Heath believed serving his country in World War II was a greater calling.

After training in California, Heath shipped out to New Zealand with the rest of the 2nd Marine Division. He spoke very highly of the New Zealanders who treated the U.S. Marines well during the time they were based in their communities.

While in New Zealand, Heath played on a U.S. Marine Corps baseball team. On March 5, 1943, he competed in an exhibition game at Athletic Park in Wellington, New Zealand. Over 25,000 fans attended the game. Heath said the New Zealanders were unfamiliar with the game, and he remembers fans cheering routine plays such as high fly balls, and booing home runs as play was halted while the ball was retrieved from the stands.

On Oct. 18, 1943, Pvt. Heath embarked on



the *USS Monrovia* and sailed to Efate, New Hebrides. There, he and the rest of the 2nd Division conducted practice-landing operations.

On Nov. 13, Pvt. Heath again embarked on the *USS Monrovia*. His ship arrived at a location off the coast of Tarawa Atoll on Nov. 20, 1943. Late that morning, Pvt. Heath's 3/8 Marines were ordered to land on the island of Betio. By all accounts, the landing was very difficult and a multitude of casualties were endured.

Pvt. Heath made it to the beach that day and spent the rest of the night fighting beside his fellow Marines. On Nov. 21, the second day of the battle, Pvt. Heath was wounded in action. He was eventually evacuated to a Naval hospital in Hawaii where he recovered from his wounds. On May 31, 1944, Pvt. Heath was honorably discharged from the U.S. Marine Corps.

Upon returning to Chicago, Heath was again called to a

Major League tryout, this time, for the Chicago White Sox at Comiskey Park. He enjoyed the experience, but age 23, was thought to be too old to develop in time to contribute to the big league club. He was not offered a contract.

However, Heath continued to enjoy baseball well after his playing days ended. He instilled his love for the game in his three grandsons. He gave tips, hit groundballs, flyballs and tossed batting practice to them at a park near his Chicago home. Heath also attended many youth baseball games to support his grandsons, two of which enjoyed successful college baseball careers, and one who created his own recreational baseball league. Within them, Heath's love of baseball endures.



Darrell at Comiskey Park in 1944



USMC team in New Zealand (Darrell Heath is back row, fifth from left (tallest))

Semi Pro Ballplayers in Service

John Chopick

Date and Place of Birth:

June 1, 1918 Courtdale, Pennsylvania

Date of Death:

April 22, 1999

Position: Pitcher

Military Unit:

29th Infantry Division, US Army

Area Served:

European Theater of Operations

John Chopick was a broad-shouldered, right-hander who played for Edwardsville High School and Edwardsville Royals semi-pro team in Pennsylvania before the war.

Entering military service in December 1941, Chopick served with the 29th Infantry Division in England at the 10th Replacement Depot in Lichfield. It was during this time that Chopick had the opportunity to play plenty of baseball. Playing in the Midland League, which consisted primarily of British teams representing manufacturing plants involved in essential war work, the 10th



RD clinched the championship in 1944 and 1945.

Chopick met his wife, Margaret, when the 10th RD team traveled to Clifton College in Bristol as part of a UK tour. They were married at St Bonaventure Church and their first son, Robert, was born in Bristol in August 1945.

After the war Chopick worked as a motorman in the mines and as a machinist in various manufacturing plants.



10th Replacement Depot baseball team at Lichfield, England in 1944 (Chopick is front row, second from right)

Semi Pro Ballplayers in Service

Sheldon Bowen

Date and Place of Birth:

1919 Harrisville, New York

Date and Place of Death:

May 1982 Harrisville, New York

Position: Outfield

Rank: Private

Military Unit:

1st Armored Division

Area Served:

European and Mediterranean Theaters of Operations

Sheldon M Bowen was born in Harrisville, New York in 1919. He played semi-pro baseball in the local area and was inducted into the Army on April 17, 1941 at Camp Upton, New York. In the spring of 1942 he was sent to Northern Ireland where British instructors taught the use of light and heavy anti-aircraft weapons.

Sheldon Bowen had the opportunity to pull on his baseball uniform in Northern Ireland, played centerfield for the 1st Armored Division Wildcats ball team. On July 4, 1942, the Wildcats played the 34th Infantry Division Midwest Giants in Northern Ireland's first officially recognized baseball game of World War II. Although the Wildcats were beaten, 3-2, Bowen scored the first run of the game in the third inning.



Bowen later served with the 1st Armored in North Africa, where they set up their AA guns around important air fields and seaports. Leaving Tunisia in July 1943, he took part in the invasion of Sicily, his unit giving support to the 1st Infantry Division.

In June 1944, Bowen's unit was at Normandy, again supporting the 1st Infantry. In Normandy, they were under fire day and night for over one month. After a month's rest they were back in action, taking part in the breakthrough at St Lo. In Belgium on September 13, 1944, during the advance on Germany, Bowen was wounded during an air attack. His left arm suffered severe shrapnel and after receiving first aid from combat medics he was removed to the 1st Division Field Hospital where the shrapnel was removed. Bowen was then evacuated to England to receive treatment that included bone grafts, tendon transplants and 16 months of hospitalization.

After 57 months in service, Corporal Sheldon Bowen finally arrived home in Harrisville, New York in February 1946. He never regained full use of his left arm but continued to play baseball in Harrisville with courage and determination.

"Many, many times," said his widow, Regina, "Sheldon spoke of playing baseball and the joy it gave him. Sports were a big part of his life. After the war he unable to excel in the game, but he always tried and gave it his best."

Sheldon Bowen passed away in May 1982. He was 63.

Pete Giovanella

Date and Place of Birth:

1917 Cobalt, Ontario Canada

Date and Place of Death:

July 18, 1989 Kirkland Lake, Ontario

Position: Shortstop

Military Unit:

Canadian Army

Area Served:

European Theater of Operations

Pete Giovanella played semi-pro baseball with Toburn Gold Mines of Kirkland Lake, Ontario from 1933 to 1940.

He enlisted in May 1940 and served in England for over five years as a sergeant with the Royal Canadian Engineers. In 1942, Giovanella was the shortstop on a Canadian all-star team that beat a US Army all-star team, 5-3, at Wembley Stadium in London. It was a major upset for the Americans. While in England he played mainly for the DeHavilland aviation company team.

Following the war, Giovanella was employed as an accountant with the Heath and Sherwood Drilling Company and coached junior league baseball in Kirkland Lake.

Pete Giovanella passed away in July 1989 at age 81.



Pete Giovanella (front row, far right) played for the Canadian Military HQ team at Wembley Stadium, London, England, in 1942

Semi Pro Ballplayers in Service

Bill Brech

Date and Place of Birth:

February 8, 1922 Secaucus, New Jersey

Date and Place of Death:

June 1978 Secaucus, New Jersey

Position:

Pitcher

Rank:

Sergeant

Military Unit:

988th Military Police (Aviation) USAAF

Area Served:

European Theater of Operations

William "Bill" Brech was born in Secaucus, New Jersey on February 8, 1922. A semi-pro right-hander before the war, Brech was arguably the best pitcher to serve with the Air Force in England during World War II.

Brech was well known in his hometown before the war as a pitcher with the Otto Mack team. He entered military service in January 1942 with basic training at Camp Lee, Virginia, and was later transferred to Barksdale Field, Louisiana, and Fort Meyer, Florida, before arriving in England at the end of the year.

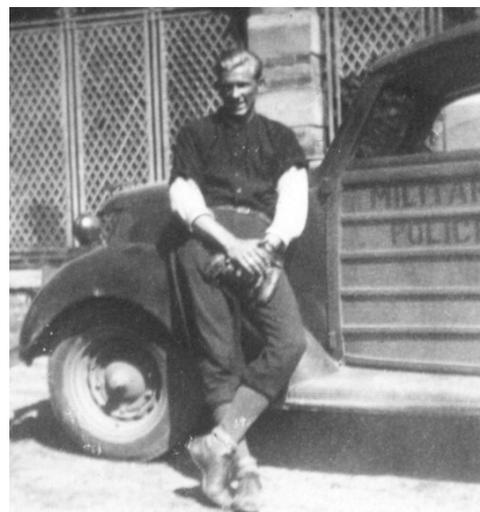
The high point of Brech's military baseball career was a sensational no-hit performance against the US Army in the 1943 all-professional game at Wembley Stadium. "If there is such a thing as a baseball Hall of Fame in England," wrote Charles F Kiley in *The Stars and Stripes*, following Brech's no-hitter. "The name of Bill Brech today occupies a prominent place in that institution."

Brech pitched a total of three seasons with the 988th Military Police Fliers and won more than 20 games, including a no-hitter against the 1st BADA Bearcats in the 1944 Air Service Command Championships.

Brech was 24 years old when he returned home to Secaucus, NJ in 1945. There was no question he was a



he passed away in June 1978.



talented pitcher, but he had no previous experience in professional baseball, and although he signed with Harrisburg of the Class B Inter-State League for the 1946 season, he did not play. Instead, Brech worked for the shipping department of the Inland Steel Container Company and continued to play semi-pro baseball with the Otto Mack team, which toured the northeast coast of the United States for several years. Brech was just 56 when



Bill Brech (row row, first left) with the 988th Military Police team in France in 1945.

Semi Pro Ballplayers in Service

George Burns

Date and Place of Birth:
1917 Sylacauga, Alabama
Position: First Base
Rank: Staff Sergeant
Military Unit:
660th Engineers US Army
Area Served:
European Theater of Operations

George Burns was born in Sylacauga, Alabama in 1917. He was a pre-war semi-pro player who was drafted by the Army on November 8, 1941.

Burns served in England with the 660th Engineers and played first base for Chuck Eisenmann's CBS Clowns, probably the best US Army team in England during the war. The big left-hander also played in the all-professional game at Wembley Stadium in London on August 3, 1943, with news of the event getting back to Sylacauga in September. "Corporal George Burns," wrote the *Sylacauga News* on September 2, 1943, "played in both ends of a double-header at Empire Stadium, Wembley, England, recently when the Central Base Section team downed the Canadian Military Headquarters by 6 to 3 and an all-professional Air Corps nine bested the

Ground Force by a 1-0 count.

"Banging out two hits, a single and a double, Burns drove in two runs in the opening game. The corporal played flawless ball at first base during both games."

Burns continued to play baseball when his unit was sent to France, playing with the Seine Base Clowns - one of mainland Europe's toughest teams in 1945.

George Burns was honorably discharged from military service on November 14, 1945, and returned home to Sylacauga.

George Burns played first base for both the US Army and US Ground Forces teams at Wembley Stadium, London on August 7, 1943.



George Burns (front row, second left) with the Seine Base Clowns in France in 1945.



Semi Pro Ballplayers in Service

Nick Fracaro

Date and Place of Birth:

March 19, 1920 Lockport, Illinois

Date and Place of Death:

May 10, 1995 Joliet, Illinois

Position:

Outfield

Military Unit:

8th Air Force Bomber Command HQ

Area Served:

European Theater of Operations

Nick Fracaro was a naturally gifted athlete from Joliet, Illinois. He was a football star at Joliet Catholic High School before the war and starred with the Joliet Rivals baseball team.

Fracaro entered military service in February 1942 and served with Eighth Air Force Bomber Command Headquarters in England from 1943 to 1945. He played outfield with the formidable Bomber Command Bombers and team manager, Lieutenant Louis Cornibert, wrote to New York Giants' manager Mel Ott to rave about his playing abilities. "Hold him for the Giants," Ott replied.

After the war, Fracaro continued to play baseball with the Joliet Rivals Baseball Association and the Lockport Moose team, and worked as a pipe fitter for Texaco until his retirement. He became an Honorary Lifetime Member of the Old Timers Baseball Association.

Nick Fracaro passed away in May 1995 at age 75.

Jack Gaston

Date and Place of Birth:

February 4, 1911 Oostanaula, Georgia

Date and Place of Death:

September 26, 1994 Lindale, Georgia

Position:

Outfield/Pitcher

Military Unit:

HQ Company, 8th Air Force Fighter Command

Area Served:

European Theater of Operations

Jack B Gaston was born on February 4, 1911 at Oostanaula, Georgia. An outstanding baseball player, he led the Northwest Georgia Textile League with a .422 batting average while playing for the Lindale Pepperell Mill team in 1936. Gaston entered military service on



Nick Fracaro (middle row, second left) and Jack Gaston (middle row, second right) with the Eighth Air Force All-Stars in England in 1943

February 25, 1942. He took basic training at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, and was stationed at Savannah, Georgia, and Fort Dix, New Jersey, before being sent to England to serve with the Eighth Air Force Fighter Command Headquarters in May 1942.

Sergeant Gaston regularly played for the Fighter Command Thunderbolts ball team, and in August 1943, he was selected to play with the Eighth Air Force All-Stars – a team of professionals who were led by former Senators' pitcher, Montie Weaver. Before a crowd of 20,000 at London's Wembley Stadium, the All-Stars defeated a hand-selected team of US Army professionals, 1 to 0, on August 7, and so impressed the commander of the Eighth Air Force - Lieutenant-General Ira C Eaker – that he awarded the team with a 30-day tour of military bases throughout Britain. The All-Stars played 29 games and won 28. Gaston played 17 games and batted .400 with three home runs.

He also turned to pitching during the war years and when he returned to the United States at the beginning of 1945, he quickly established himself as the mound ace for the Stewart Field Airmen team in Newburgh, New York. "Jack isn't just another chucker," declared the base newspaper in 1945, "he's a real pitcher who knows how to use his talents to the utmost. His slow ball is a honey and will cause many a strained back this season. Along with his pitching equipment Gaston wields a mean bat."

Apart from batting over .500 all season,

Gaston won many games for the Airmen, including an 11 strike out performance against the Greenhaven Guards when he struck out Wes Westrum twice.

Gaston returned to the Pepperell Mill team after military service. In 1948, he batted .428 for the season, posted a perfect 7-0 record, and was the most valuable player in the league playoff series.

Jack Gaston continued playing into the 1950s. By the time he retired from the game he had played 25 years in textile league baseball. But he didn't stop swinging a bat for many more years, and in 1984, at the age of 73, he slapped an inside-the-park home run to lead his slow pitch softball team to an 11-0 win!

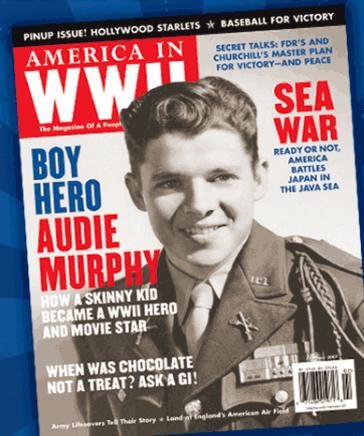
In 1988, Gaston was inducted into the Rome-Floyd County Sports Hall of Fame. He passed away in Lindale, Georgia, on September 26, 1994, aged 83.



Former Washington Senators' pitcher Montie Weaver was the coach of the Eighth Air Force All-Stars in England in 1943.



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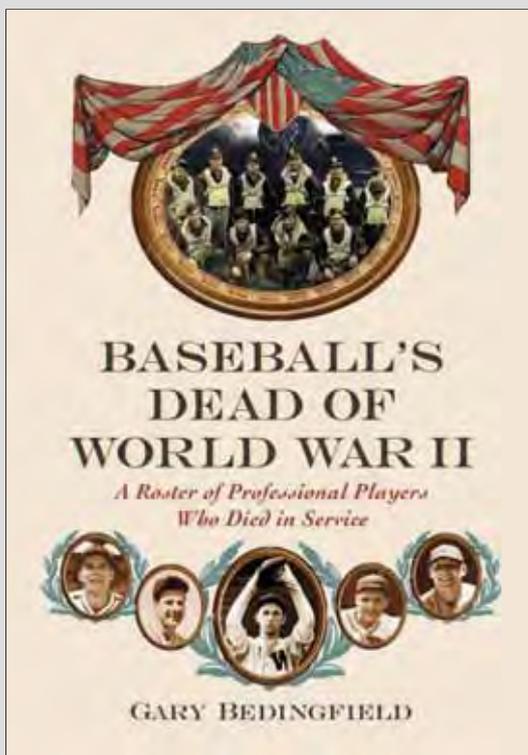
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It's a well-known fact among baseball fans that two major league players made the supreme sacrifice during World War II. What is far less commonly known is that at least 125 minor league players also lost their lives while serving their country. In addition to providing an extensive overview of baseball and the home front during the war years, *Baseball's Dead of World War II* draws on extensive research, and interviews with surviving family members to give the first published insight into the personal lives, baseball careers and tragic sacrifices made by baseball's forgotten heroes.

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