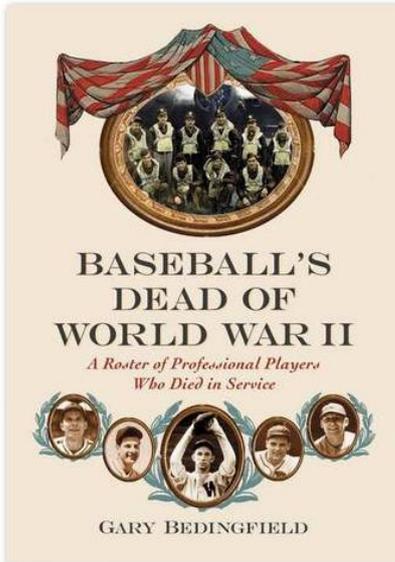


## Professional Baseball Players Who Died in World War II



**A**t the beginning of January 2010 my book "Baseball's Dead of World War II" was published by McFarland. It was the first ever detailed account of former professional baseball players who lost their lives while serving with the armed forces during WWII. The book detailed the lives of 127 men whose ballplaying careers were halted by military service and whose lives were ended in tragic circumstances,

often thousands of miles from home.

At the time of publication I knew the list wasn't complete. The majority of the names included in the book I had unearthed myself during my own research; there were no official records to go by.

Consequently, since the publication of "Baseball's Dead of World War II" I have continued to conduct research on this subject and have now uncovered an additional 14 names, bringing the total number of former ballplayers who died in military service in WWII to a staggering 141.

While I have included these additional players on the Baseball in Wartime website and also the Baseball in Wartime blog, I felt it was time to include them together in a single publication. Hence, this special edition of the Baseball in Wartime newsletter.

On the following pages you will find the biographies of the 14 players who didn't make it into "Baseball Dead of World War II" back in January 2010. I hope you'll take a few moments to read through them and then, perhaps, give them a moment of silence as a way of saying thank you for the sacrifice they made.

Gary Bedingfield—Glasgow, Scotland  
Founder and editor of Baseball in Wartime  
gary@baseballinwartime.com

The Additional 14 Players Who Made the Ultimate Sacrifice in World War II

**JERRY M. ANGELICH**

**CLARENCE W. CLAYTON**

**LESTER O. CLOTIAUX**

**EUGENE L. DELLINGER, JR.**

**JOHN H. FESSLER**

**TROY L. FURR**

**EUGENE J. GABRYCH**

**ROBERT J. GRUSS**

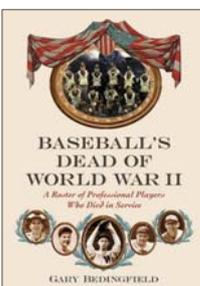
**ROBERT F. NIEMAN**

**LUSTER PRUETT**

**JAMES G. ROBERTSON**

**HERMAN P. RUSH**

**JAMES E. STEWART**



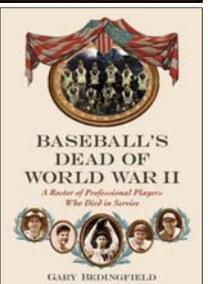
**Baseball's Dead of World War II**

A Roster of Professional Players Who Died in Service

by Gary Bedingfield

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# Jerry Angelich

## Jerry M. Angelich

**Date and Place of Birth:** 1916

Wilmington, California

**Date and Place of Death:** December 7, 1941 Hickam Field, Honolulu, Hawaii

**Baseball Experience:** Minor League

**Position:** Pitcher

**Rank:** Private

**Military Unit:** Headquarters Squadron, 17th Airbase Group, US Army Air Corps

**Area Served:** Pacific Theater of Operations

Jerry M. Angelich was born in Wilmington, a district of Los Angeles, California, in 1916, and was a star athlete at local Banning High School. A slow ball pitcher, he had trials with the Sacramento Senators of the Class AA Pacific Coast League in 1935 and was with the team for pre-season exhibition games in early March.

On March 18, Angelich was selected by manager Kettle Wirts to start for the Senators against a touring Japanese professional all-star team at Moreing Field. Before a crowd of 4,200, and with Wirts behind the plate, Angelich was locked in a pitching duel with 18-year-old Japanese ace Eiji Sawamura. In Japan, the previous November, Sawamura had faced a team of visiting major league all-stars including Babe Ruth, Jimmie Foxx, Lou Gehrig and Charlie Gehringer. Entering the game in the fourth inning, the high school pitcher struck out nine batters and held the Americans to a single run over five innings; a home run by Gehrig in the seventh that left Sawamura with the loss. However, he was immortalized by Japanese fans for striking out Gehringer, Ruth, Gehrig, and Foxx in succession.

Angelich, who hurled eight innings and was relieved by Bill Hartwig in the ninth, was beaten by Sawamura, 2-1. The Senators managed just five hits off the Japanese youngster.

Angelich signed a contract with Sacramento on April 5, but was released on April 20. He had a further trial with Sacramento in 1936, and later played for the Provo Timps of the Utah Industrial League - a thriving semi-pro circuit with six teams fielding formidable line-ups that competed throughout state. On September 3, 1939, he pitched a 3-1, five-hitter over Magna-Garfield to take

Provo to the league championships, which they clinched over Pinney Beverage for their first title since 1932.

Angelich entered military service with the Army Air Force on August 19, 1941. He was stationed at Hickam Field in Hawaii with Headquarters Squadron, 17th Airbase Group.

On December 7, 1941, during the Japanese surprise attack on Hawaii, their planes bombed and strafed Hickam to eliminate air opposition and prevent U.S. planes from following them back to their aircraft carriers. Hickam suffered extensive damage and aircraft losses, with 189 people killed and 303 wounded.

Private Angelich was attempting to operate a machine gun in a wrecked airplane when he was killed by strafing Japanese fighter planes. He is buried at the Honolulu Memorial in Hawaii.

Sawamura, the Japanese pitcher Angelich hurled against in 1935, went 15-3 in 1936 for the Tokyo Giants in the first professional season. On September 25, 1936, he pitched the first no-hitter in Japanese professional baseball history. He had an incredible 33-10 record and 1.38 ERA in 1937, but was drafted for military service in January 1938. Aged 23, he returned to professional baseball

in 1940 but was unable to put up the numbers he achieved in previous years. A second tour of duty came in 1942 before playing his last professional season in 1944. Sawamura ended his career with a 62-22 record and 1.71 ERA. Serving with the Imperial Japanese Navy, he was killed near the Ryukyu Islands when his ship was torpedoed on December 2, 1944.

Eiji Sawamura was inducted into the Japanese Baseball Hall of Fame in 1959. Since 1947, the Sawamura Award (Japan's equivalent to MLB's Cy Young), has been given to the best pitchers in professional Japanese baseball.

### Angelich's Pro Experience

1935—Trials with Sacramento Solons of Pacific Coast League.

1936—Trials with same team.



Hickam Field burns during the Japanese attack, December 7, 1941

# Clarence Clayton and Les Clotiaux

## Clarence W. Clayton

**Date and Place of Birth:** 1926

Middletown, Ohio

**Date and Place of Death:** May 1, 1945

Czechoslovakia

**Baseball Experience:** Minor League

**Position:** Second Base

**Rank:** Private First Class

**Military Unit:** 358th Infantry Regiment,

90th Infantry Division US Army

**Area Served:** European Theater of Operations



Clarence W. Clayton was born in 1926 in Middletown, Ohio. The son of Mr. and Mrs. George Clayton of 718 Fifteenth Avenue, Clayton was an outstanding ballplayer at Middletown High School and signed with the Boston Red Sox organization upon graduation in June

1944.

Clayton joined Boston's farm team in his home town, the Middletown Red Sox of the Class D Ohio State League, who were managed by Red Barnes, an outfielder with the Washington Senators in the late 1920s. Batting second in the line-up and playing second base Clayton appeared in 101 games and hit .246 with 40 RBIs. He led the league's second basemen with a .923 fielding percentage and played for the Ohio State League all-star team in July when they walloped Newark, 19-3. Clayton went 1-for-2 in the game.

Clayton's career was short-lived, however. He entered military service in October 1944 and was soon in Europe with the 358th Infantry Regiment, 90th Infantry Division.

On May 1, 1945 - just one week before the end of the war in Europe - Private First Class Clayton was killed in action in Czechoslovakia. He was awarded the Bronze Star and Purple Heart and is buried at Lorraine American Cemetery in St. Avold, France.

### Clayton's Pro Experience

1944—Middletown Red Sox of the Class D Ohio State League (league all-star).

## Lester O. Clotiaux

**Date and Place of Birth:** August 16, 1921

Nederland, Texas

**Date and Place of Death:** August 9, 1945

Smiley, Texas

**Baseball Experience:** Minor League

**Position:** Catcher

**Rank:** Corporal

**Military Unit:** USAAF

**Area Served:** United States

Lester O. "Les" Clotiaux was born in Nederland, Texas on August 16, 1921. Clotiaux graduated from Nederland High School in 1937 and went to work for the Gulf Refinery in Port Arthur where he played baseball with the Barrel House Bees in the Gulf Refinery League.

In 1941, Clotiaux was among four catchers on the spring roster of the Port Arthur Tarpons of the Class D Evangeline League and was with manager Harry Strohm's squad when they hosted the Brooklyn Dodgers in an exhibition game at Legion Stadium on March 28 (for the record, the Dodgers walloped the Tarps 17-0).

Clotiaux was released before the season began and played for the Grammiers, a top-notch local semi-pro team, as well as continuing to play for the Barrel House team where he worked.

Clotiaux entered military service on August 29, 1942. He served as a corporal with the Army Air Force at Foster Field, Texas and was the regular catcher on the Foster Field Falcons baseball team.

On August 9, 1945, the Falcons traveled to Childress Army Air Base in Texas for a ballgame. The Falcons won that contest and five of the players - Clotiaux, Duard Lawson, Harold Phillips, Chester Seipp and Pete Zarrilla, along with pilot Second Lieutenant Peter R. Davis (an experienced pilot with over 1,500 hours during the previous year) - flew back to Foster Field in a twin-engined Beechcraft AT-7C. On the return journey the plane crashed near Smiley, Texas. Corporal Clotiaux and the other five men on board were all killed.

On August 12, 1945, funeral services were held for Corporal Clotiaux at the First Methodist Church in Nederland, with Reverend John R. Lockhart

officiating. He was buried at Block Cemetery in Nederland and the burial included a military escort from the Lake Charles air base and US Marine Corps pallbearers from the Marine base at Mid-County Airport in Nederland.

### Clotiaux's Pro Experience

1941—Trials with Port Arthur Tarpons of the Class D Evangeline League.



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# Gene Dellinger

## Eugene L. Dellinger

**Date and Place of Birth:** June 30, 1926  
Bahama, North Carolina

**Date and Place of Death:** January 31,  
1946 Northington General Hospital,  
Tuscaloosa, Alabama

**Baseball Experience:** Minor League

**Position:** Outfield-First Base

**Rank:** Sergeant

**Military Unit:** US Army

**Area Served:** European Theater of  
Operations

Eugene L. "Gene" Dellinger was born on June 30, 1926 in the small town of Bahama, North Carolina, about 14 miles north of Durham. Dellinger loved baseball and played the game every opportunity he had while growing up.

"Eugene and I grew up in Bahama, and we lived within 150 yards of each other," recalls his boyhood friend Alton P. Mangum. "We played together from the time we could walk. We were both in the Boy Scouts, and we hiked and camped with our Scout troop, and we were as close as brothers.

"When Eugene was about 10 years old, his daddy helped him in changing his swing from the right side to the left. He had a very natural swing left handed, and he reminded me of Ted Williams in the way he snapped his wrist when he swung at a ball.

"We both played baseball at every opportunity as we grew up. If we weren't playing in a game, we were throwing the ball to each other. His dad had broad shoulders, and Eugene took after him."

Dellinger played shortstop with the Mangum Township High School team in Bahama; Mangum played first base, and the two of them regularly attended ballgames at Durham Athletic Park, home of the Durham Bulls who were a Brooklyn Dodgers farm club at the time.

"When the Bulls held a tryout day, Eugene attended," says Mangum. "After displaying his baseball skills, they talked to him and signed him after he graduated from high school."

Joining the club in 1943, and playing for former St. Louis Cardinals infielder Bruno Betzel and alongside future Brooklynites Gene Hermanski, Rex

Barney and Gene Mauch, Dellinger appeared in 10 games as an outfielder and batted .293 before being assigned to the Olean Oilers of the Class D PONY League. At Olean, Dellinger played for former Pirates second baseman Jake Pitler and had Ralph Branca and future American League infielder Billy DeMars as teammates. In 80 games (46 in the outfield, 14 at first base and 13 at shortstop), the 17-year-old batted .257 with 35 RBIs and led the team with 300 at-bats, 77 hits and 14 doubles.

In 1944, he advanced to the Montreal Royals of the Class AA International League - one level below the majors - and appeared in an exhibition game against the Brooklyn Dodgers on July 11.

"After the game," recalls Mangum, "Leo Durocher went to Eugene and talked with him, and Eugene told him it looked like he was going to be drafted in the Army. Leo told him if he went into the Army to call him after the war and that he wanted him with the Dodgers."

Playing again for Bruno Betzel, Dellinger batted .185 in 28 games for the Royals and was assigned to the Newport News Dodgers of the Class B Piedmont League where he was reunited with another former manager, Jake Pitler. Playing first base, third base and the outfield, Dellinger batted .304 in 85 games and drove in 56, while his teammate, future Hall of Famer Duke Snider drove in 50 runs and batted .294.

In November 1944, Dellinger was drafted by the Buffalo Bisons of the American Association but he would never get to play a game for them because he entered military service with the Army the same month.

Dellinger, who attained the rank of sergeant, spent much of his military service playing baseball; first in the United States and later in France. It was while traveling with his Army team near Brussels in Belgium that tragedy struck. "The ball team was riding in the back of an Army truck when it struck a train," remembers Mangum. "He was burned badly and was transferred to the Veterans hospital in Tuscaloosa, Alabama."

Several soldiers were killed in the accident. Dellinger was flown back to the

United States and survived a few weeks at the Northington General Hospital before succumbing to his injuries on January 31, 1946. He was 21 years old.

Eugene Dellinger's body was returned to Bahama, North Carolina. He now rests at the Mount Bethel United Methodist Church Cemetery in Bahama.

Alton Mangum will never forget his childhood friend: "Eugene was a great athlete - playing baseball, basketball and football. He was extremely well liked, and his death was certainly a shock to our small community."

### Dellinger's Pro Experience

1943—Olean Oilers of the Class D PONY League and Durham Bulls of the Class B Piedmont League.

1944—Montreal Royals of the Class AA International League and Newport News Dodgers of the Piedmont League.

Drafted by Buffalo Bisons of Class AA American Association in November 1944.



# John Fessler and Troy Furr

## John H. Fessler

**Date and Place of Birth:** 1915 Pine Grove, Pennsylvania  
**Date and Place of Death:** June 10, 1944 Normandy, France  
**Baseball Experience:** Minor League  
**Position:** Shortstop  
**Rank:** Staff Sergeant  
**Military Unit:** Service Company, 507th Parachute Infantry Regiment US Army  
**Area Served:** European Theater of Operations



John H. Fessler was born in 1915 in Pine Grove, Pennsylvania. He signed with the Centreville Colts of the Class D Eastern Shore League – a Phillies farm team – in 1938. After a slow start he was released in

June and immediately signed by the Easton Cubs of the same league. Fessler, who played shortstop and second base, appeared in 25 games and batted .180 with one home run. Fessler was out of organized baseball in 1939, but returned in 1940 to play in the Class D Mountain State League with the Huntington Aces and the Bluefield Blue-Grays. In 70 games he batted .243 and drove in 25 runs.

In 1941, Fessler played 116 games at shortstop with the Goldsboro Goldbugs of the Class D Coastal Plain League and batted .279 with 43 RBIs and league high 37 stolen bases. He also led the Goldbugs in games played and runs scored (88), while leading the league with 481 at-bats.

Fessler entered military service on April 25, 1942 and served with the 507th Parachute Infantry Regiment. He was an outstanding member of the regiment's basketball team.

On June 6, 1944, Staff Sergeant Fessler parachuted into Normandy and landed close to the Merderet River. He was killed in action just four days later on June 10, 1944.

In November 1948, Fessler's body was returned to Pine Grove and finally laid to rest on November 7.

### Fessler's Pro Experience

1938—Centreville Colts and Easton Cubs of the Class D eastern Shore League.  
 1940—Huntington Aces and Bluefield Blue-Grays of the Class D Mountain State League.  
 1941—Goldsboro Goldbugs of the Class D Coastal Plain League.



## Troy L. Furr

**Date and Place of Birth:** July 11, 1923 Concord, North Carolina  
**Date and Place of Death:** January 3, 1945 Philippsbourg, France  
**Baseball Experience:** Minor League  
**Position:** Second Base  
**Rank:** Private First Class  
**Military Unit:** Company M, 275th Infantry Regiment, 70th Infantry Division US Army  
**Area Served:** European Theater of Operations

Troy L. Furr, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Bill Furr, was born in Concord, North Carolina on July 11, 1923. An infielder, he was playing semi-pro baseball in the Concord City League in 1943 and led the circuit in pitching and fielding.



With ballplayers being called into military service at an alarming rate, Earl Mann, president of the Atlanta Crackers of the Class A1 Southern Association, signed Furr during the winter of 1943 in

the hope he would be a useful infielder for the club's 1944 season.

Unfortunately, military service intervened before he could play a game as a professional, and Furr entered service with the Army at Fort Bragg, North Carolina on April 13, 1944. Following basic training he was sent to France where he served with Company M - a heavy weapons company - of the 275th Infantry Regiment, 70th "Trailblazers" Infantry Division. The division had landed at Marseille, France, in December 1944, and reached the front on December 28, near Bischweiler on the west bank of the Rhine River.

On January 3, 1945, while in combat as a machine gunner during the battle for the town of Philippsbourg in north-eastern France, Private First Class Furr was reported missing. It was later confirmed he had been killed in action that day.

Troy Furr is buried at Oakwood Cemetery in Concord, North Carolina.

### Furr's Pro Experience

Late 1943—signed with Atlanta Crackers of the Class A1 Southern Association (did not play).



# Gene Gabrych

## Eugene J. Gabrych

**Date and Place of Birth:** 1920 Winona, Minnesota

**Date and Place of Death:** July 5, 1944  
Foret de Mont Castre, near St. Jores, France

**Baseball Experience:** Minor League

**Position:** Shortstop

**Rank:** Sergeant

**Military Unit:** 2nd Battalion, 359th  
Infantry Regiment, 90th Infantry Division  
US Army

**Area Served:** European Theater of  
Operations



Eugene J. Gabrych was born in Winona, Minnesota, in 1920. He and his brothers, Elmer and Ray, played baseball for the Polish National Alliance (PNA) team of the local Bi-State League in the late 1930s, and helped the club to an 18-3

record in 1938, including an 8-4 win before a capacity crowd against the J.J. Kohns team from St. Paul, who were the 1937 National Amateur champions. "Both the fielding and batting of Gene Gabrych, PNA second baseman," declared the local press, "gave the Kohns plenty of trouble. Gabrych collected two hits and drove in three runs; he had five put-outs and three snappy assists."

Gene Gabrych had become quite a local celebrity with the PNA team and he signed with the Eau Claire Bears of the Class D Northern League in 1940, making just a couple of appearances. In 1941, he joined the La Crosse Blackhawks of the Class D Wisconsin State League and, playing as Gene Gabrych, appeared in 111 games, batting .255, driving in 82 runs (sixth best in the league) and often dazzling fans with his defensive skills. "Gene Gabrych . . . handled four putouts and three assists without an error, went behind third to catch a fly, and pulled a classy double play, Gabrych to Neuman," announced the La Crosse Tribune and Leader Press on July 20, 1941. "He

went behind second base to get Moxie Muhr's grounder in the eighth and caught him by a step with a fine underhand throw to Neuman."

But the youngster was also impressing fans with his bat. "Gabrych Smacks Homer To Beat Sheboygan Nine," was the headline for the La Crosse Tribune and Leader Press sports page on August 19, 1941. La Crosse hurler Don Schoenborn pitched a three-hitter that day and "Gene Gabrych came through in the hero's role," the article declared, "blasting a home run over the right field fence in the sixth inning with Ed Gittens on base."

Excellent defensive skills coupled with occasional power at the plate spelled a promising future for the 21-year-old, but military service beckoned before the 1942 season got under way. Gabrych was assigned to the U.S. Army's 359th Infantry Regiment of the 90th Infantry Division at Camp Barkeley, Texas, where he had the opportunity to play for the regimental team in the Division baseball league.

After training in Texas the Division went to the Louisiana and California-Arizona Maneuver Areas before sailing for England on March 23, 1944. On June 7, 1944, D-plus-1, Gabrych was bound for Normandy aboard the transport ship USS Susan B. Anthony (AP-72) when it struck a mine and lost all power. Despite this near disaster, Gabrych's entire battalion waded ashore without loss, except for their weapons.

The "Tough 'Ombres" as the 90th Infantry Division quickly became known, went into action against German forces on June 10. On July 5, Sergeant Gabrych was with the 2nd Battalion of the 359th Infantry Regiment as they attacked the northeast corner of the Foret de Mont Castre, near St. Jores in Normandy. Heavy resistance was encountered and the battalion was held short of its objective, suffering many casualties, including the loss of Gene Gabrych.

News of his death deeply affected the close-knit community of Winona, and permission to rename East End Park as Gene Gabrych Park was announced in March 1946 by Mike Libera, business manager of the PNA Baseball Club. Dedication ceremonies were held at the

PNA's opening game against Rochester on May 5. H. Irving Tingley was Master of Ceremonies, the Winona Municipal Band played, and speeches were given by Mayor Joseph Druey, Postmaster Leon Bronk, Council President John Dugan and Recreational Director M.J. Bambenek.

Gabrych's body was returned to Winona in 1948. On May 1, funeral services were conducted at St. Stanislaus Church with burial at St. Mary's Cemetery.

In the shadow of his older brother and on the infield dirt of the ballpark named after him, Gene's younger brother Ray fine-tuned his baseball skills with the PNA team during the 1946 season. He signed with the Marion Indians of the Class D Illinois State League in 1948 and batted .214 in 97 games. The following year he joined the Greenville Bucks of the Class C Cotton States League where he concluded his professional playing days batting .186 over 28 games.

Aged 83, Ray Gabrych passed away on October 22, 2009. Elmer Gabrych passed away in October 2010.

Gene Gabrych Park remains in use today although the covered wooden grandstands have long since been removed and replaced by modern metal bleachers. Nevertheless, proudly displayed upon the backstop is a sign that reminds everyone how the park got its name:

GABRYCH PARK  
NAMED IN HONOR OF  
GENE GABRYCH  
DIED IN WORLD WAR II

### Gabrych's Pro Experience

1940—Eau Claire Bears of the Class D Northern League.

1941—LaCross Blackhawks of the Class D Wisconsin State League.

# Bob Gruss and Bob Nieman

## Robert J. Gruss

**Date and Place of Birth:** 1924

Lakewood, Ohio

**Date and Place of Death:** August 19, 1944 nr. Tonopah, Nevada

**Baseball Experience:** Minor League

**Position:** Outfield

**Rank:** Corporal

**Military Unit:** 442nd Base Unit, USAAF

**Area Served:** United States



Robert J. Gruss was born in Lakewood, a suburb of Cleveland, Ohio in 1924. He was a backfield star on Lakewood High School's football team, among the top scorers of the

lake Erie scholastic league in 1942, and signed with the Cleveland Indians organization after graduating in June 1943.

Adept at baseball as he was at football, the Indians assigned Gruss to the Batavia Clippers of the Class D PONY League and the young outfielder appeared in 20 games, batting .329 with 12 RBIs and six stolen bases. He appeared to have a promising career ahead of him but military service beckoned and Gruss was a corporal with the Army Air Force before the 1944 season came around.

Gruss trained as an aerial gunner at Tonopah Army Air Field, one of the largest military bases in Nevada. As part of the 4th Air Force's 442nd Base Unit, Corporal Gruss was involved in high altitude bomber training in Consolidated B-24 Liberators.

On the morning of Saturday, August 19, 1944, Bob Gruss was aboard a B-24E that left Tonopah on a routine first phase training flight never to return. The four-engined bomber was being flown by Captain Robert E. Sweet - an instructional pilot with overseas service and recipient of the Distinguished Flying Cross - and Second Lt. Robert L. Pyle. Exactly what went wrong remains a mystery, but it is believed there was a failure of the right vertical stabilizer. The plane crashed in the Nevada wilderness

about 20 southeast of the airfield killing all nine crew members.

The young airman's body was returned to his parents Albert and Mary in Lakewood and buried at Calvary Cemetery in Cleveland on August 28.

In 1991, Bob Gruss was inducted in the Lakewood High School Sports Hall of Fame.

### Gruss's Pro Experience

1943—Batavia Clippers of the Class D PONY League.

## Robert F. Nieman

**Date and Place of Birth:** 1919 Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

**Date and Place of Death:** August 23, 1944 nr. Muroc Army Air Field, California

**Baseball Experience:** Minor League

**Position:** Shortstop

**Rank:** Corporal

**Military Unit:** 421st Base Unit, USAAF

**Area Served:** European Theater of Operations and United States

Robert F. Nieman was born in 1919 in the Northside district of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The son of Lawrence and Mary Nieman, and a graduate of Oliver High School, he played semi-pro baseball with the Bellevue club of the Allegheny County League from 1935 to 1940 (Bellevue were league champions in 1940).

In 1941, Bellevue joined the Greater Pittsburgh League and was counting on the contributions of their hard-hitting, 180-pound shortstop, Bob Nieman, but professional baseball had their eyes on the 22-year-old. In April 1941, Nieman signed with the Akron Yankees, a New York Yankees farm team in the Class C Middle-Atlantic League.

The Akron club was strong, with a line-up that featured future major leaguers Gus Niarhos, Joe Buzas, Monk Dubiel, Joe Lutz, Joe Murray and Ed Sauer. Whether Nieman would have been able to hold his own against these players we will never know because on May 15, military service beckoned before he had an opportunity to play a game.

Nieman spent 11 months in England with the U.S. Army's Medical Corps before returning to the United States in

July 1943 to enter service with the Army Air Force. He was assigned to the 421st Base Unit at Muroc Army Air Field (now Edwards Air Force Base) in southern California, for combat flight training as an aerial gunner.

At around 9pm on Wednesday, August 23, 1944, Corporal Nieman was aboard a Consolidated B-24D Liberator bomber that lifted off the runway at Muroc to give both its pilots some instrument flying time and to practice dropping bombs. Piloted by Lieutenant John L. Graves, and co-pilot Flight Officer James L. Redd, the B-24D flew without incident for the first couple of hours, but around 10.55pm the crew had problems with number three engine and were forced to shut it down. This, however, didn't stop it from catching fire and Lt. Graves gave the order to abandon ship. A short time later there was an enormous explosion and the flame-engulfed right wing of the bomber was ripped off.

As the bomber spiralled to the ground, and amid unimaginable terror, the crew struggled to escape. Of the ten airmen onboard that night, five remained trapped in the falling wreckage, and died upon impact with the desert below.

Bob Nieman, along with Lt. Graves, Flight Officer Clifton C. Watts, Cpl. Bernard D. Fogel and Pfc. James W. Flitcroft all lost their lives that night.

Bob Nieman's body was returned to Pittsburgh, where a Requiem High Mass was held at St. Cyril of Alexandria Church on September 1, 1944.

### Nieman's Pro Experience

April 1941—signed with Akron Yankees of the Class C Middle-Atlantic League (did not play).



# Luster Pruett

## Luster Pruett

**Date and Place of Birth:** 1921 Vandalia, Illinois  
**Date and Place of Death:** January 11, 1945 Rittershoffen, Germany  
**Baseball Experience:** Minor League  
**Position:** Outfield  
**Rank:** Private First Class  
**Military Unit:** Company B, 68th Armored Infantry Battalion, 14th Armored Division U.S. Army  
**Area Served:** European Theater of Operations

Luster Pruett was born in 1921 in Vandalia, Illinois, a town in Fayette County on the Kaskaskia River, about 70 miles northeast of St. Louis.

He signed with the St. Louis Cardinals organization in 1941 and joined the Fostoria Red Birds of the Class D Ohio State League that year. Pruett played right field for 26-year-old manager Len Ellison and batted .340 in 87 games with four home runs and 48 RBIs. He was named to the Ohio State League all-star team in August and sold to the Meridian Eagles of the Class B Southeastern League the same month. In 14 games with the Eagles Pruett batted .205.

On March 2, 1942, Pruett entered military service with the Army at Scott Field, Illinois. Stationed at Camp Campbell, Kentucky, with the 14th Armored Division, Private First Class Pruett played on the division baseball team until going overseas in October 1944. The 14th Armored Division arrived at Marseilles in France on October 29, and Pruett was in combat with Company B of the 68th Armored Infantry Battalion by mid-November.

Also with Company B and in the same squad as Pruett was James Kneeland from Grafton, Massachusetts. "He was a real nice fellow, everybody liked him," recalls Kneeland.

The 14th Armored Division battled its way across France and first entered Germany on December 16, 1944. On January 13, 1945, the Division was in the vicinity of Rittershoffen, just north of the Haguenau forest, when German forces broke through and drove out the U.S. 42nd Infantry Division.

The re-equipped German 21st Panzer, 25th Panzergrenadier, 7th Fallschirmjäger and 47th Volksgrenadier were occupying Rittershoffen, and PFCs Pruett and Kneeland were among those rushed forward to try and take the town.

They were helping each other strap on their gear when Pruett said to Kneeland, "Jim, I got a funny feeling in my stomach. I don't know if I'm gonna come through this."

Jokingly, Kneeland told his buddy that he always felt that way.

"This time it's different," Pruett replied.

It was a bitter cold day and the infantrymen were approaching the town through an orchard when the Germans opened fire with machine guns, tanks and just about everything they had. Kneeland jumped into an abandoned fox hole. He was just five yards away from Pruett.

"I'm hit!" the young ballplayer shouted.

"Can you crawl over here?" Kneeland called out.

Pruett began to move slowly towards the foxhole as Kneeland returned the fire coming from the buildings ahead. Suddenly, a burst of machine gun fire filled the air. When Kneeland looked up, Pruett was dead.

When Pruett's body was recovered it was riddled with nine bullet holes.

"He was a wonderful buddy and a great ballplayer," recalls Kneeland. "He wouldn't brag about it, even though he used to receive letters from the Cardinals. I think he even got a letter from Billy Southworth."

Luster Pruett was 23 years old. He was buried at the Epinal American Cemetery in France.

James Kneeland, who was later promoted to sergeant, survived the nightmarish and terrifying 12-day conflict that became known as the Battle of Hatten-Rittershoffen. He lives in Grafton, Massachusetts.

## Pruett's Pro Experience

1941—Fostoria Red Birds of the Class D Ohio State League (league all-star) and Meridian Eagles of the Class B Southeastern League.



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# Jim Robertson

## James G. Robertson

**Date and Place of Birth:** August 31, 1919 Albany, Oregon

**Date and Place of Death:** April 20, 1944 off Green Island, Pacific Ocean

**Baseball Experience:** Minor League

**Position:** Catcher

**Rank:** First Lieutenant

**Military Unit:** VMB-413 U.S. Marine Corps

**Area Served:** Pacific Theater of Operations



James G. Robertson, the son of Robert and Lola Robertson, was born on August 31, 1919, in Albany, Oregon about 30 miles south of Salem. He attended Albany High School where, as a catcher, he led

the Bulldogs to three consecutive championships and was named to the county all-star team each year. In his senior year the Bulldogs lost to Eugene in the district finals and won the Strawberry Fair championship. He also played football and was an all-star basketball player; a league high scorer his senior year and recipient of the school's outstanding all-around athlete award.

Beginning in 1938, Robertson continued his high profile athletic pursuits at Willamette University in Salem. Under the guidance of coach Roy "Spec" Keene (Oregon Sports Hall of Fame inductee 1982), Robertson was the Bearcats' starting catcher for four years. In 1940 he caught every inning of the team's 22 games as they clinched the Northwest Conference championship for the first time since 1931. Among his teammates at Willamette were pitchers Bill Hanauska and Earl Toolson, and infielders Clint Cameron and Lee Shinn, who all went on to play minor league ball.

Robertson finished his collegiate catching days in the spring of 1941 and played summer ball for the Silverton Red Sox of the Oregon State League – the same team Boston Red Sox infielder

Johnny Pesky had played for two years earlier (many of the Silverton Red Sox players worked for the Silver Falls Timber Company which was owned by Boston Red Sox owner Tom Yawkey). The Red Sox were state semi-pro champions that year and clinched the league title in September with a 14-5 win over Medford. The Silverton line-up of 1941 featured Willamette teammates Toolson and Shinn, future PCL outfielder Bill Carney and big leaguer Dick Whitman.

Robertson completed his basketball competition at Willamette in the winter – where he was named to the Northwest Conference all-star team – and signed with the Salem Senators of the Class B Western International League in February 1942. One of his first games for the Senators was against his alma mater on April 23 at George E. Waters Park – home of both the Senators and Bearcats. In a close fought contest it was Robertson's infield dribbler that scored the only run of the game in the bottom of the ninth.

Playing for first year manager Charlie Petersen, Robertson held his own behind the plate and with the bat for the Senators. He had a three hit game against the Spokane Indians in May and was batting .250 in 21 games when military service beckoned in June.

Jim Robertson initially served with the U.S. Navy but transferred to the Marine Corps after completing pre-flight training at St. Mary's, California, NAS Pasco, Washington and NAS Corpus Christi, Texas. After earning his wings, Robertson joined VMB-413 – the Marine Corps' first medium bomber squadron. With 1st Lieutenant Jim Robertson as pilot and squadron athletic officer, VMB-413 deployed to Hawaii in January 1944. The squadron flew North American PBJ-1s; the U.S. Navy's equivalent of the famous B-25 twin-engine Mitchell bomber, and the flight echelon flew to the island of Espiritu Santo, part of the New Hebrides, at the end of the month. Following a brief training period, the squadron then moved northward to Stirling Island (part of the Treasury Islands) from where it flew night-time missions against Japanese

forces at Rabaul and neighboring islands.

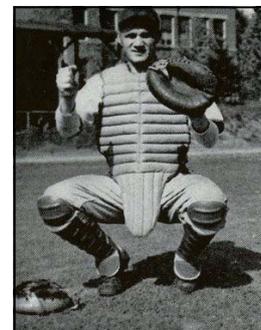
Shortly before midnight on April 20, 1944, Robertson, with the squadron's executive officer Major Douglas E. Keeler at the controls of the PBJ-1D, was returning from a mission over the Japanese stronghold of Kavieng on the island of New Ireland. The bomber had been damaged by Japanese anti-aircraft fire and was attempting a landing in heavy rain at the Allied airstrip on Green Island when it overshot the runway and crashed into the lagoon killing all on board. In addition to Jim Robertson and Major Keeler, other crew members were Second Lieutenant Charles F. Leidberg from Chicago; Staff Sergeant Gilbert V. Enck of Portland, Oregon; Sergeant Aaron S. Johnson Jr. of Pluckemin, New Jersey; and Sergeant Robert C. Hubbell of Philadelphia.

"'Robbie,' as he was affectionately known by friends and athletic foes alike, was . . . one of Willamette's best baseball players," recalled the Willamette Collegian newspaper upon news of his tragic death.

Jim Robertson, who was about to receive a captain's commission, was survived by his wife and a one month old daughter named Dotty Ann, whom he had never seen.

### Robertson's Pro Career

1942–Salem Senators of the Class B Western International League.



Willamette University Bearcats baseball team (Robertson is front row, second left)

# Herm Rush

## Herman P. Rush

**Date and Place of Birth:** July 20, 1917  
 Long Beach, California  
**Date and Place of Death:** December 7, 1945  
 Modesto, California  
**Baseball Experience:** Minor League  
**Position:** Catcher  
**Rank:** Technician 4th Grade  
**Military Unit:** 311th Infantry Regiment,  
 78th Infantry Division US Army  
**Area Served:** European Theater of  
 Operations



Herman P. Rush was born in Long Beach, California on July 20, 1917. A 1935 graduate of Antelope Valley Joint Union High School in Lancaster, California, Rush

signed with the Hollywood Stars of the Pacific Coast League in 1938 and attended spring training at Lake Elsinore before being optioned to the Bellingham Chinooks of the Class B Western International League.

Under the guidance of manager Ken Penner – who had been playing professional baseball since 1913 and pitched for the Cleveland Indians in 1916, making a return to the majors with the Cubs in 1929 – the Chinooks were contenders throughout the summer of 1938. With a pitching staff that included future major leaguers Bill Fleming and Rugger Ardizoia, and a hard-hitting outfield of Wes Schulmerich, Jim Tyack and George Mandish, they finished the year with a 68-65 record, good enough for second place behind the Yakima Pippins. The Chinooks then went on to claim the league championship title by defeating the Pippins, three games to two, in the playoffs. Rush was behind the plate in the opening game as Bill Fleming hurled a 1-0 two-hitter and fanned 12. He was back behind the plate for the fifth and final game that was won, 6-3, with Fleming pitching in relief of Ardizoia.

Rush appeared in 53 games for the Chinooks, sharing catching duties with 18-year-old future major leaguer Cliff Dapper and Joe Annunzio. He batted .198 with 33 hits in 167 at-bats.

Despite the on-field success of the Chinooks in 1938, the team fell on financially hard times in 1939. Fleming, Ardizoia, Schulmerich, Tyack and Dapper were gone and the team struggled to win a game. Former major league infielder Jimmie Reese took over from Penner as manager, and at one point the players were forced to hitch-hike to Spokane in order to keep up with the schedule, using the same method to swing across the state to Tacoma. The league took over the team in August and Orland "Al" Lightner, who in addition to playing first base was also the team's traveling secretary, was appointed manager on August 17. The Chinooks finished with a lowly last-place 40-102 record.

Rush played 35 games with the Chinooks, sharing catching duties with Bill Brenner and Red Farquharson. He batted .160 with 17 hits in 106 at-bats. In an interesting incident on August 14, he took over catching duties from Brenner following the latter's ejection from a game. Playing the Wenatchee Chiefs, the Chinooks had staged a "sit-down strike" when they objected to umpire Don Stewart calling a ball hit along the third base line fair. Stewart settled the "strike" in 15 minutes by banishing manager Reese, pitcher Larry Weldon, catcher Brenner and third baseman Bud Stewart.

The Bellingham franchise moved to Salem in 1940 and Rush was out of professional baseball that year. He entered military service with the Army at Fort MacArthur in San Pedro, California on November 14, 1941. As a technician fourth grade, Rush served with the 311th Infantry Regiment of the 78th Infantry Division in Europe.

On February 28, 1945, the division crossed the Roer River and joined the offensive of the First and Ninth Armies toward the Rhine.

Moving across open ground, dotted with little towns the Germans made every effort to stop the American advance.

On March 2, 1945, T/4 Rush was fatally wounded by a German sniper. He was shipped back to the United States for medical attention but died in hospital in Modesto, California on December 7, 1945. Herman Rush was 28 years old and is buried in Lancaster, California.

A 1939 Chinooks teammate, Alan W. Lightner, who played as Alan Wray and was the brother of first baseman/manager Orland "Al" Lightner, also lost his life in Europe. He was killed in action while serving with the 70th Infantry Division near the German town of Saarbrucken on January 12, 1945.

Also to lose his life in World War II was umpire Don Stewart, who had ejected a handful of Chinook players when they staged the earlier mentioned "sit-down strike" during a game in 1939. Stewart was a Canadian and served with the Calgary Highlanders. He was killed on March 13, 1941, during a German bombing raid on Glasgow, Scotland.

### Rush's Pro Experience

1938—signed with Hollywood Stars of the Class AA Pacific Coast League. Played with Bellingham Chinooks of the Class B Western International League 1939—Bellingham Chinooks.



1938 Bellingham Chinooks (Rush is back row, fourth left)

# Jim Stewart and Joe Vecchio

## James E. Stewart

**Date and Place of Birth:** July 30, 1924  
Hazlehurst, Georgia

**Date and Place of Death:** March 22,  
1945 Iwo Jima, Pacific

**Baseball Experience:** Minor League

**Position:** Pitcher

**Rank:** Private

**Military Unit:** 7th Platoon, Company C,  
34th Replacement Draft, 3rd Marine  
Division, USMC

**Area Served:** Pacific Theater of  
Operations

James E. Stewart was born in Hazlehurst, Georgia. A pitcher, he was signed by the Atlanta Crackers along with Troy Furr (who was killed in action in France in January 1945) during the winter of 1943. Sadly, he never got to play a game in a Crackers uniform as he entered military service with the Marine Corps.

Twenty year old Private Stewart was in the Pacific with 7th Platoon, Company C, 34th Replacement Draft, 3rd Marine Division at Iwo Jima in March 1945. He was killed in action on March 22 - one of 4,500 Marines who lost their lives on the tiny volcanic island. Major leaguers Harry O'Neill and minor leaguers Jim Trimble, Frank Ciaffone, Bob Holmes, Jack Lummus and Jack Nealy also lost their lives on Iwo Jima.

James Stewart is buried at Hazelhurst City Cemetery.

### Stewart's Pro Experience

Late 1943—signed with Atlanta Crackers of the Class A1 Southern Association (did not play).



## Joseph Vecchio

**Date and Place of Birth:** April 4, 1918  
Astoria, New York

**Date and Place of Death:** November 16,  
1944 Dieuze, France

**Baseball Experience:** Minor League

**Position:** Outfielder

**Rank:** Technician Third Grade

**Military Unit:** 46th Medical Battalion,  
10th Armored Infantry Battalion, 4th  
Armored Division US Army

**Area Served:** European Theater of  
Operations

Joseph Vecchio, son of Anthony and Sadie Vecchio, was born on April 4, 1918 in Astoria, a neighborhood in the northwestern corner of Queens on Long Island, New York. He began his professional baseball career when he signed with the Opelousas Indians of the Class D Evangeline League on April 15, 1939. He was released by the club two weeks later but signed with the Abbeville A's of the same league on May 3. The 21-year-old outfielder batted .140 in 13 games before being released by the A's.

Vecchio joined the Army in May 1941 and trained for 16 months with the Fourth Armored Division at Pine Camp, near Great Bend in northwest New York state. During that time he played baseball with the Watertown Collegians, a powerhouse team of college stars coached by future American Baseball Coaches Association inductee Hank Hodge.

From the deep snow of the Canadian border, the Fourth Armored joined the Tennessee maneuvers in the Cumberland Mountains, before moving, in mid-November 1942, to the vast California Desert Training Center. Six months later the division arrived at Camp Bowie, Texas, and on September 25, 1943, Vecchio married Rita Campese of Utica, New York.

The Fourth Armored left the United States for overseas duty in December 1943 and arrived in England in the New Year. After training until July 1944, the division landed at Utah Beach in France on July 11 and entered combat six days later. Serving with the 10th Armored Infantry Battalion as a medic, Technician Third Grade Vecchio was wounded on August 1 as the division helped secure the Brittany Peninsula. He was hit in the

ear and knee while helping to evacuate wounded men from the front lines. In a letter home, he wrote that at one time during the engagement he was only 25 yards from a German machine-gunner, who warned the medic to advance no further.

Vecchio was awarded the Silver Star for gallantry in action and the Purple Heart for wounds received.

In August 1944, the 4th Armored Division moved swiftly across France as part of General Patton's Third Army, defeating several large German armored forces in the Lorraine area. On November 16, 1944, as the division advanced through the French town of Dieuze and approached the Saar River, Joe Vecchio was killed in action. He was 26 years old.

In December 1948, Joe Vecchio's body was returned from Europe to Utica, New York, aboard the U.S. Army transport ship Barney Kirschbaum.

### Vecchio's Pro Experience

1939—Opelousas Indians and Abbeville A's of the Class D Evangeline League.

