

# Baseball and D-Day

Welcome to the 36th issue of the Baseball in Wartime newsletter . This issue focuses on the D-Day Normandy Landings. A similar feature appeared in issue 21 back in 2009, commemorating the 65th anniversary. This is a revised version as we look back on the events of 71 years ago.

By the start of the 1944 season, around 340 major league players were in military service, plus more than 3,000 from the minors, and with the vast manpower shortage, just 10 minor leagues were in operation. Every branch of the service had an abundance of former ballplayers helping to fill their ranks and many were in Britain as part of the pre-invasion preparations. Among them were future Hall of Famer Yogi Berra, major leaguers Larry French, Roy Bruner, Paul Campbell, Whitey Hilcher, Earl Johnson, Art Kenney, Ted Kleinhans, Si Rosenthal, Tom Saffell, Lou Thuman, Monte Weaver and Elmer Gedeon; future major leaguers Russ Bauers, Ross Grimsley, Morrie Martin, Eddie Kazak and Bert Shepard; and minor leaguers Lefty Brewer, Syl Sturges, Elmer Wright, Hal Cisgen, John Fessler, Walt Hemperly, Ralph Ifft, Chuck Eisenmann, Joe Rundus, Lloyd Rice, John McNicholas, Joe Marco and Frank Labuda. Six of them would be dead before the end of June.

The following pages provide an historical account of D-Day interwoven with biographical details of the ballplayers who were there. I hope you enjoy this account of baseball's contribution to D-Day. I would love to hear from you and to hear your thoughts on this project, and would especially like to hear of any players that may have been omitted.

**PEOPLE OF WESTERN EUROPE! A LANDING WAS MADE THIS MORNING ON THE COAST OF FRANCE BY TROOPS OF THE ALLIED EXPEDITIONARY FORCE, THIS LANDING IS PART OF THE CONCERTED UNITED NATIONS' PLAN FOR THE LIBERATION OF EUROPE, MADE IN CONJUNCTION WITH YOUR GREAT RUSSIAN ALLIES. ALTHOUGH THE INITIAL ASSAULT MAY NOT HAVE BEEN MADE IN YOUR OWN COUNTRY, THE HOUR OF LIBERATION IS APPROACHING.**

**GENERAL EISENHOWER JUNE 6, 1944**



## The Commanders

### General Dwight D. Eisenhower



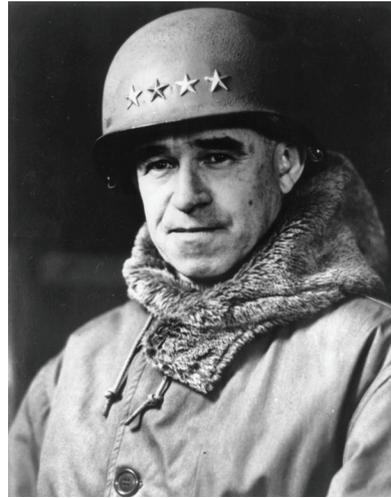
Eisenhower was the Supreme Allied Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force and was charged with planning and carrying out of the invasion.

Eisenhower loved baseball. Historian Bill Swank says that in his senior year at Abilene (Kansas) High School, Eisenhower was the baseball team captain and leading hitter, and he went on to play football for Army during his sophomore year, but a horse riding injury precluded further participation in intercollegiate athletics. However, rumors that he played baseball professionally - under an assumed name - are probably untrue.

During the build-up to D-Day, Eisenhower was based at Strategic Air Force Headquarters in London - also home to the 988th Military Police and their baseball team, the Fliers. Eisenhower frequently inquired about the progress of the Fliers. "I spoke to him on numerous occasions when I was on duty at the main gate," recalled Fliers' first baseman Norbert Kuklinski. "He always asked after the team and even got to see a couple of our games."

### General Omar Bradley

Bradley was in charge of the 1st U.S. Army at Normandy, and during the months



before the invasion, he supervised the refinement of assault plans and troop training.

Bradley had been a star on the baseball team at Moberly High

School in Missouri, captaining both the baseball and football teams. He enrolled at the United States Military Academy at West Point in the fall of 1911 and became an alternate on the freshman baseball team the following spring. He went on to letter three years in baseball and one in football. A power-hitting outfielder, he was noted for having a great arm and even played on a number of semi-pro teams. "It is almost trite to observe," he said, "that in organized team sports one learns the important art of group cooperation in goal achievement. No extracurricular endeavor I know of could better prepare a soldier for the battlefield."

### Colonel Russell "Red" Reeder



Colonel Reeder, commander of the 12th Infantry Regiment of the 4th Infantry Division at Utah Beach, was an exceptional baseball and football player at

## The Commanders

West Point in the 1920s and had a tryout with the New York Giants. He was offered a contract but chose to stay with the army. On June 11, 1944, Reeder was severely wounded when an artillery shell exploded close by, shredding his left leg below the knee. His leg was later amputated at Walter Reed Army Hospital in Washington but he went on to become athletic director at West Point in 1947.

### Major Thomas D. Howie



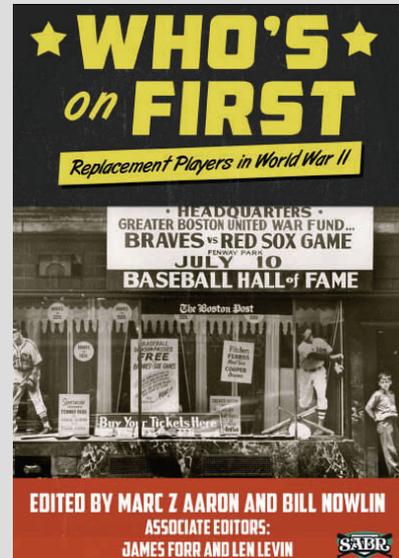
Major Howie landed at Omaha Beach on D-Day with the 116th Infantry Regiment, 29th Infantry Division. Born in Abbeville, South Carolina, he worked at a local

printers through high school, and as an outdoor labourer for the Abbeville mills during the summer, playing baseball for the mill team. He later attended the Citadel military college, where he was president of his class, star halfback on the football team and captain of the baseball team. Following graduation, he taught English and coached at Staunton Military Academy in Virginia.

On July 13, 1944, Major Howie was assigned to command the 3rd Battalion of the 116th Infantry Regiment. He was killed in action during a German mortar attack while trying to capture St-Lo on July 17, 1944.

### Who's on First: Replacement Players in World War II

Edited by Marc Z. Aaron and Bill Nowlin



This highly detailed look at baseball on the home front and the replacement players of the war years has recently been released by SABR. It will make a great addition to any military/baseball fan's library.

## Get in touch!

[gary@baseballinwartime.com](mailto:gary@baseballinwartime.com)

# BIG LEAGUE CHEW SHREDDED BUBBLEGUM



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## Fooling the Germans

On Sunday, May 28, 1944, the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR) Red Devils baseball team played the 505th PIR Panthers before an enthusiastic crowd of 7,000, at the local soccer stadium in Nottingham, England. The Red Devils had been Camp Mackall, North Carolina, champs in 1943, and this was their first chance to play baseball in over nine months. "We had no uniforms," recalled Adolph "Bud" Warnecke of Fayetteville, North Carolina. "We had to wear remnants of military clothing and jump boots, so we didn't look much like a ball team. But I'll always remember the great reception we got from the British people."

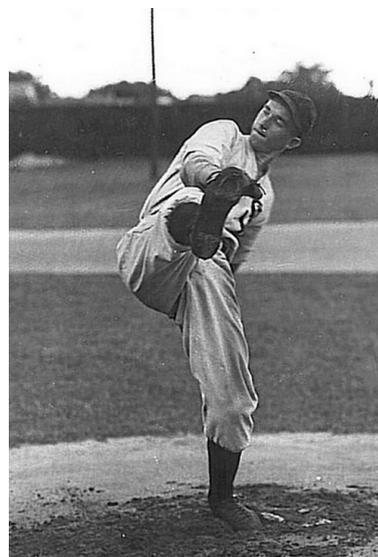
The Panthers proved no match for the Red Devils. "We beat the heck out of the 505th," said Warnecke. "The score at the end was 18 to 0, to our guys."

Okey Mills, a colliery league pitcher from Crab Orchard, West Virginia, started the game on the mound for the Red Devils and was relieved by Forrest "Lefty" Brewer in the fourth inning. Brewer was a minor league pitcher who won 25 games with St. Augustine in 1938. With his deceptive pick-off move, he picked off the first two men that got on base, and the Nottingham Guardian the next day described how the teams "played with extraordinary vigor," and noted there was "spectacular hitting, some magnificent catches and many exciting incidents."

"I think most of the spectators enjoyed the game," remembered Lee Reisenleiter, "but it must have been hard for them to make sense of it all."

"I certainly enjoyed myself," added Warnecke, "but little did I know that eight days later we would jump into Normandy!"

Speculation still hangs over the true reason this baseball game was staged. The "official" story at the time was that the Nottingham Anglo-American Committee requested the Americans to stage a sporting event because the people of Nottingham had for years been void of entertainment. However, because the game was arranged by Brigadier General James M. "Jumpin' Jim" Gavin, commander of the 82nd Airborne Division, many believe the game was designed to fool the Germans. If American paratroopers were playing baseball in England, how could an invasion be imminent? To further publicize the event, photographs were taken of each player and sent back to their hometown newspapers. Probably the most convincing fact that this game was staged to fool the Germans was the noticeable absence of paratroopers in the stands at the game. Having been such a familiar sight in Nottingham for the last few months, only officers and players were on hand. As the crowd cheered each crack of the bat, the rest of the regiment made a 40-mile journey to a local airfield where runways were packed with C-47 transport planes adorned with black and white stripes. Preparations for the invasion had begun.



Lefty Brewer

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The 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment Red Devils pose for a photo before their game at meadow Lane soccer ground in Nottingham, England on May 28, 1944



Meadow Lane soccer ground, home of Notts County FC, also played host to U.S. Military football teams in

## The Airborne Invasion

The airborne assault into Normandy was the largest use of airborne troops up to that time. Paratroopers of the U.S. 82nd and 101st Airborne divisions, the British 6th Airborne Division, and the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion took part in the assault. Numbering more than 13,000 men, the paratroopers were flown from bases in southern England to the Cotentin Peninsula in more than 900 planes. An additional 4,000 men, consisting of glider infantry with supporting weapons and medical and signal units, arrived in 500 gliders later on D-Day to reinforce the paratroopers. The parachute troops were assigned what was probably the most difficult task of the initial operation - a night jump behind enemy lines five hours before the coastal landings.

Airfields all over England were a hive of activity during the days prior to June 6. The runways were packed with Douglas C-47 transport planes adorned with black and white invasion stripes, with groups of paratroopers meticulously studying maps of the drop zones in Normandy. They packed equipment, cleaned rifles, played cards and shot dice in the hangar buildings. They attended movies, wrote letters to loved ones, and learned of their objective: to keep the Germans from reinforcing troops that were defending the beaches.

On June 4, they were ready to take off but the weather forced a delay. The following night - with their faces blackened and hearts racing - men of the 101st and 82nd Airborne Divisions boarded C-47s for the

flight across the English Channel. D-Day had begun and the paratroopers would spearhead the invasion.



Escorting the C-47s in a P-51B Mustang was First Lieutenant **Bob Stephens**, a pitcher with the Fulton Tigers. Stephens had finished the 1941 season with a 5-6 won-loss record and a 3.97 ERA before entering

military service. C-47s were stark inside. A row of hard metal bucket seats lined both sides of the plane and the roar of the engines drowned out any attempt at conversation as they trudged through the dark skies towards the Normandy coast. Once over the mainland of France the sky became illuminated with searchlights, and deadly tracer bullets pierced the wings and fuselage of the unarmed and unarmored planes. At an altitude of just 400 feet, anti-aircraft fire exploded all around as they neared their drop zones. When the red light over the door of the planes flashed on, everybody stood up and clamped themselves onto the cable that ran down ceiling. Amidst yells of "Go! Go! Go!" American paratroopers ascended through the darkness into chaos, panic and confusion.

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The first paratroopers to land in Normandy were the pathfinders who began to drop at 00.15 on June 6, and were assigned to set up landing zones for the main force of airborne troops. Due to low clouds and anti-aircraft fire, their planes were scattered and many never found their assigned landing zones. However, the pathfinders' radar beacons worked effectively and many of the sticks of follow-up paratroopers landed clustered near these beacons. Among the pathfinders was Private **Bill Robbins** of the 507th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR), an outstanding high school athlete from Coldwater, Kansas, who went on to play at Kansas State Teachers College and in the Kansas Ban Johnson League. Robbins was captured by German troops soon after landing in Normandy and remained a prisoner of war until being liberated in April 1945.



Parachuting into Normandy with the 506th PIR of the 101st Airborne Division was Lieutenant **Lyn "Buck" Compton**, who was portrayed in the Band of Brothers television series.

Compton played baseball and football at Los Angeles High School and entered UCLA on a football scholarship in the fall of 1939. A teammate of Jackie Robinson at one point, he played in the Rose Bowl in 1943, and became all-league catcher at UCLA. Six hours after landing in Normandy, Compton led an assault against a four-gun

battery of 105mm cannon that was defended by a platoon of German infantry and was firing on Utah Beach where American troops were coming ashore. Compton was awarded the Silver Star for his part.

Compton was back in England by July, but was badly wounded during Operation Market Garden in Holland in September. He was hospitalized for more than two months but returned to combat in December 1944 - in time for the defense of Bastogne. The 506th suffered heavy losses during the Battle of the Bulge. Weather conditions were treacherous and, in the heavy snow, Compton suffered a severe case of trenchfoot. He was evacuated and his combat days were over.

Compton was back at UCLA after the war and played varsity baseball in the spring of 1946. In June, he tried out with the Los Angeles Angels at Wrigley Field. On June 24, the team bus of the Western International League's Spokane Indians veered off the road and down an embankment before crashing and bursting into flames. Nine men died. Spokane was an Angels' farm team and Compton was signed to join the club as a replacement player but at 24 he and his wife decided he was too old to start a career in pro ball. He went on to spend five years as a detective in the Los Angeles Police Department. In 1952 he began 20 years as a prosecutor for the district attorney's office, and in 1968, he was responsible for the investigation of Robert F. Kennedy's assassin, Sirhan Sirhan. He was later appointed an associate judge in the California Court of Appeals.

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With the 501st PIR of the 101st Airborne Division was **Tom Niland**, and outstanding baseball and basketball player from Tonawanda, New York, who had just enrolled at Canisius College when he was drafted. Niland went on to earn a Silver Star at the Battle of the Bulge but suffered a severe arm wound. After the war he served as a coach and then athletic director for 43 years at LeMoyne College in Syracuse.



Landing in Normandy with the 82nd Airborne Division were 26 members of the 508th PIR Red Devils baseball team - Camp Mackall, NC, champs in 1943. Among them was Private **Forrest "Lefty" Brewer**; Private **Elmer**

**Mertz** was a star infielder on Sheboygan's Gmach softball team; Corporal **William Maloney** was a high school ballplayer from Hartford, Connecticut; Private **Okey Mills** was a semi-pro pitcher who played in the Coalfield League in West Virginia; Sergeant **John Judefind** had been a star infielder with St. James High School in Chester, Pennsylvania; Private **Merle Blethen** was the son of Clarence Blethen who played for the Red Sox and Dodgers in the 1920s; Private **Joe Laky** was a sandlot player from Ottawa, Illinois; Private First Class **Rene "Punchy" Croteau** was a semi-pro player from Holyoke, Massachusetts; Corporal **Frank Labuda** was a star shortstop with the

Chicago Heights Owls in the late 1930s and briefly played minor league baseball with the Ogden Reds; Corporal **Walt Lupton** was a New York sandlotter; and Private First Class **John McNicholas** was a minor league outfielder with the Oneonta Indians in 1942.

Lefty Brewer was involved in the successful assault on German troops entrenched at La Fièrè manor but was killed later the same day during a German counterattack. William Maloney was killed on June 7, John Judefind died on June 8, Elmer Mertz was killed on June 13, and Rene Croteau was killed July 4. Merle Blethen was seriously wounded on July 7, and Joe Laky and Walt Lupton both lost their lives later in the year in Holland. Also with the 82nd Airborne Division, but attached to the 505th PIR was Private First Class **Joe Makuch**, who, using the name Joe Marco, hit .334 as a minor league outfielder with the Paragould



Browns in 1940. Private First Class **Arthur "Dutch" Schultz**, who, after the war played varsity baseball at San Francisco State and had a tryout with the Philadelphia Phillies, was also with the 505th PIR, as was Private **Joe Dunn**, an amateur

first baseman from Troy, New York, who played his last ball game on May 28, 1944, in an exhibition game against the 508th PIR in England. Two days after landing in Normandy, Makuch was wounded and lost

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a finger. He never played baseball again. Dutch Schultz would earn a Bronze Star for his heroics at Normandy. Joe Dunn survived D-Day and went on to successful combat jumps in Holland, but died from wounds he received during the Battle of the Bulge in January 1945.



Staff Sergeant **John Fessler** parachuted into Normandy with the 507th PIR. Fessler was an infielder from Pine Grove, Pennsylvania, who

had played three years of minor league baseball before the war. In 1941, he played 116 games as a shortstop with the Goldsboro Goldbugs and batted .279. He had been an outstanding member of the 507th PIR basketball team since entering military service. Fessler was killed in action on June 10, 1944.

With the 505th PIR was **Cloid Wigle**, a high school ballplayer from Silverton, Oregon. Wigle was wounded the day after D-day and was a prisoner of war for a brief time in Normandy. In his retirement years, Wigle used his wood lathe to produce baseball bats and fungoes which ended up in the hands of many players and coaches across the country including Alex Rodriguez and Sparky Anderson.

Landing by glider with the 101st Airborne Division, was Frank Jobe, a medical staff sergeant, who went on to become an orthopedic surgeon and co-founder of the

Kerlan-Jobe Orthopaedic Clinic. Jobe pioneered both elbow ligament replacement "Tommy John surgery" and major reconstructive shoulder surgery for baseball players.

Among the C-47 pilots that delivered the paratroopers to their drop zones on D-Day was Second Lieutenant **Syl Sturges**, an outfielder who had played three seasons in the minors prior to military service. By 1944, Sturges was in England with the 314th Troop Carrier Group and at 03:25, on June 7, 1944 – the day after the invasion - Sturges was the co-pilot of a C-47 that took off from Saltby Airfield in England, in light rain and ground haze. The plane was heading to Picauville, France, as part of Operation Freeport - a mission to drop supplies to troops on the ground. Shortly after take off, the plane was lost out of formation in the low cloud and not seen again. At 17:00 that evening, the burnt out wreck was discovered about a mile northeast of Sébeville in France. The badly burned bodies of Sturges and pilot, Second Lieutenant George Risley, Jr., were still at the controls.

## ETO Baseball/Battlefield Tour in 2016?

How would you like to stand on the beaches at Normandy and hear how minor league pitcher, Joe Pinder, earned his Medal of Honor? Or see the exact spot where Lefty Brewer, property of the Washington Senators, lost his life following the Battle at La Fiere? Or maybe follow in the footsteps of Cecil Travis during the Battle of the Bulge?

Talks are currently underway to arrange the first ever tour of European battlefields from a baseball perspective. This once-in-a-lifetime opportunity is planned for the summer of 2016. Watch this space for more information.

## The Beaches

During the early hours of June 6, 1944, a thunderous barrage from vessels off the coast of Normandy rocked the German installations along the coastline of Northern France. The amphibious landings began almost as soon as the barrage ended. At 7:45am, Canadian troops landed at Juno beach, where they soon immobilized German opposition with minimal casualties. The British landings at Gold and Sword beaches were similarly met with little resistance. An hour earlier, American troops had landed at Omaha and Utah beaches.

### Omaha Beach

Elements of the U.S. 1st Infantry Division and U.S. 29th Infantry Division faced the veteran German 352nd Infantry Division at Omaha, the most heavily fortified beach, with high bluffs defended by mortars, machine guns, and artillery.

As infantry disembarked from the landing craft, they had to wade through water sometimes neck deep. Those that made it to the shingle did so at a walk, because they were so heavily laden, and had to brave the full weight of enemy gun fire. Within minutes of the ramps being lowered, troops were leaderless and almost incapable of action. It had become a struggle for survival and rescue.

Allied commanders considered abandoning the beachhead, but small units of infantry, often forming ad hoc groups, supported by naval artillery, eventually infiltrated the coastal defenses

by scaling the bluffs between strongpoints. Further infantry landings were able to exploit the initial penetrations and by the end of the day two isolated footholds had been established. American casualties at Omaha on D-Day numbered around 5,000 out of 50,000 men, most in the first few hours.



Frank Draper

Approaching Omaha Beach during the early hours of June 6th were the landing crafts of the 116th Infantry Regiment of the 29th Infantry Division. In 1943, the 116th Infantry Regiment Yankees baseball team had been the winners of the ETO

Little World Series in England. Baseball was now a distant memory. Aboard the landing crafts were **Frank Draper**, a superb, naturally-gifted athlete, who had been the lead-off hitter with the semi-pro Hampton Looms mill team in Bedford, Virginia; **Elmer Wright**, a minor league pitcher in the St. Louis Browns' organization; **Lou Alberigo**, a semi-pro third baseman from Rhode Island; **Hal Baumgarten**, a catcher at New York University; **Robert Marsico**, a catcher with the Piedmont Label team of Bedford, Virginia; **Carl "Chubby" Proffitt**, a semipro first baseman from West Virginia, **Maurice**

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Elmer Wright

**Williams**, a pitcher from Fairfax, Virginia, and **Joe Pellegrini** from Brooklyn, New York.

As they approached the beach the enemy opened fire with artillery, mortar, machine-gun and small arms fire. Draper was on a craft that violently shook with the horrifying impact of an anti-personnel shell that ripped through the metal side and tore off his upper arm. Rapidly losing blood, the young soldier slumped to the floor and died in a pool of blood, seawater and vomit. The landing craft's of the other men made it to the beach but as the ramps dropped they were met with a hail of enemy fire. Many were killed outright. Others lay critically wounded, screaming for help. Those that could jumped in to the six foot of water and desperately tried to make their way to the beach. Elmer Wright, Lou Alberigo and Maurice Williams were killed in the hail of gunfire almost as soon as they hit the beach. Baumgarten had his jaw shattered by a shell that exploded nearby. In shock he gradually moved forward using the bodies of dead GIs as cover eventually making it to the sea wall. "When our ramp went down it was a signal to every machine gun on that beach," Baumgarten said, "and there were a lot of them to open up on our little boat."

Marsico suffered severe wounds to his right arm and leg. He was hospitalized in

England for three months and spent the next year at a rehabilitation center in Norfolk, Virginia. Joe Pellegrini was seriously wounded on the beach. He was evacuated to England and died in a military hospital on June 29. Carl Proffitt miraculously survived D-Day and was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for gallantry.



Joe Pinder

Coming ashore at Omaha Beach with the 1st Infantry Division was Technician Fifth Grade **Joe Pinder**, a stockilybuilt right-hander from McKees Rocks, Pennsylvania. Pinder had played in the

minor leagues since 1935 and was a 17-game winner with Sanford of the Florida State League in 1939.

For Pinder, June 6 was a special day - his birthday. He was 32. As the landing crafts approached the beach an artillery shell exploded close to Pinder's landing craft, tearing holes in the boat and causing carnage among the men inside. For those that survived - Pinder included - panic set-in as the vessel filled with water and began to sink. Still 100 yards from the beach the ramp was dropped and they were instantly met with a hail of deadly machine-gun fire, killing many outright as they struggled to reach the shore. As in baseball, Pinder took his work very seriously, and despite the

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chaos, he was determined to do what he was there for – to ensure vital radio equipment made it to the beach so a line of communication could be established. He grabbed a radio and placed it on his shoulder and amid the deafening sound of gunfire, made his way down the ramp and into the waves.

With the air filled with small arms fire and exploding artillery it was only a matter of time before Pinder was hit. As he desperately waded through the water, a bullet clipped him, causing him to stumble, but he did not stop. Another bullet ripped through the left side of his face and he held the gaping flesh in place as he carried on. Pinder made it to the beach, dropped the radio and returned to the water to retrieve more equipment. Then, instead of looking for somewhere to protect himself from the relentless enemy barrage, he returned a third time to collect essential spare parts and code books. Again he was hit - a burst of machine gun fire tore through his upper body and he fell, then somehow struggled to his feet, and with his last ounce of energy made it to the beach and his radio equipment. Moments later he passed out from loss of blood and died later that morning. Joe Pinder had made the ultimate sacrifice in helping to establish vital radio communication on Omaha Beach.

On January 4, 1945, Pinder was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity above and beyond the call of duty. "The indomitable courage and personal bravery of T/5 Pinder," claimed his citation, "was a

magnificent inspiration to the men with whom he served."



Bill Fennhahn

Landing at Omaha Beach with the 5th Ranger Battalion was Sergeant **Bill Fennhahn**, who had excelled in baseball at Hillsdale High School in Columbia County, New York. Surviving that day unscathed, he was

wounded three separate times as the Allied forces advanced through Europe. The second occasion was a bizarre incident that occurred while the Rangers were involved in capturing the town of L'Hopital in France. Fennhahn, who spoke German, was interrogating a German civilian when an American soldier in another unit heard the German and simply started shooting at close range! On the third occasion he was in Germany when machinegun fire broke both his legs and severed vital nerve fibers. Fennhahn was in hospitals in Europe and the United States for sixteen months.

Despite these severe injuries, Fennhahn's pre-war ambition to play professional baseball remained with him. "He tried out for the Giants in Phoenix, Arizona, and accepted an offer to play with Peekskill," recalled his widow, Terry Fennhahn. Fennhahn made 13 appearances with the Peekskill Highlanders in the North Atlantic League in 1946, and posted a 4-3 record with a 5.18 ERA. The following year - 1947 - he made three

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appearances with the Quebec Alouettes in the Canadian-American League and was 2-0, but recurring leg problems kept him off the mound for most of the season. He was back with Quebec in 1948 and made 20 appearances with a 4-5 record and 4.60 ERA.

"A lot of guts," said his manager Tony Ravish, "I always pitched him in seven-inning ball games because he had shrapnel in the back of his legs ... then his legs would get tired naturally. But for seven innings, boy, he could fire that ball for me!"

"As much as he wanted, he couldn't continue playing professionally," recalled his widow.

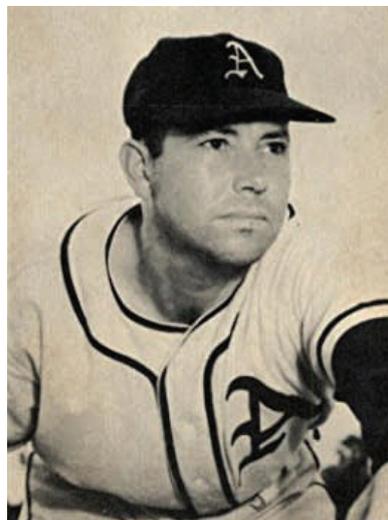
## Utah Beach

Utah Beach was added to the invasion plan toward the end of the planning stages, when more landing craft became available. It was about 3 miles long, and the westernmost of the five landing beaches, located between Pouppeville and the village of La Madeleine.

Despite being substantially off course, the U.S. 4th Infantry Division landed with relatively little resistance in contrast to Omaha Beach. There were approximately 200 casualties.

Coming ashore with the 4th Infantry was Captain **Leonard T. "Max" Schroeder, Jr.**, commanding Company F of the 2nd Battalion, 8th Infantry Regiment. Schroeder had played baseball and soccer at high school in Maryland and attended the

University of Maryland on an athletic scholarship to play soccer. Schroeder was the first American soldier to come ashore from a landing craft in the D-Day invasion.



Morrie Martin

Also coming ashore at Utah was **Morrie Martin** with the 49th Engineer Combat Battalion. "Because we were combat engineers," Morrie Martin told Bill Swank in *When Baseball Went to War*, "we were

the first to land on Utah Beach at H-hour just as dawn was breaking on June 6. Artillery was flying overhead, but we didn't fire a shot because the Germans didn't know we'd come ashore."

Martin was born in Dixon, Missouri, and was signed by the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1941 after scout Wally Schang watched him pitch two shutouts and strike out 43 batters in one afternoon. He was assigned to the Grand Forks Chiefs of the Northern League and was 16-7 with a league-leading 2.05 ERA. He was with the St. Paul Saints of the American Association for 1942 but was in military service by the end of the year.

Martin had been involved in amphibious landings at North Africa and Sicily prior to Normandy. He earned his first Purple Heart at Normandy. "I got hit by shrapnel guarding a crossroads going into Saint-Lô,"

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he recalled. "They patched me up, put in a few stitches."

"I got my second purple heart on March 23, 1945 at a crossroads near Bonn. I was shot in the leg. I don't remember much after that. I woke up once and heard a doctor say, 'That's one sick man.' They wanted to saw off my leg. A nurse from Georgia looked at my records and saw I was a ballplayer. She told me not to let them cut my leg off. They had a new drug - penicillin. She told me I had over 150 shots, one every four hours, and that finally stopped the infection. I wish I knew who she was to thank her.

Martin received his medical discharge in October 1945. He made it to the major leagues as a 26 year-old rookie in 1949. He pitched 10 games for the Dodgers and had a 1-3 record. He was back in the majors in 1951, this time with the Athletics. It was to be his best season with an 11-4 record and 3.78 ERA, beating every American League team at least once. In total, Martin pitched 10 seasons in the majors with the Dodgers, Athletics, White Sox, Orioles, Cardinals, Indians and Cubs. Primarily a relief pitcher, he hurled a career-high 58 games in 1953 with the Athletics, posting a 10-12 record and 4.43 ERA.

Coming ashore at Utah Beach with the 4th Infantry Division was left-handed pitcher, Staff Sergeant **Pete Petropoulos**, who was a batting practice pitcher with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1938. He signed a professional contract in 1939 and was assigned to the Daytona Beach Islanders of the Class D Florida State League, where he posted a 10

-9 won-loss record. In 1940, Petropoulos was with the Fort Lauderdale Tarpons of the Florida East Coast, and had a 7-4 record. On June 7, Petropoulos was badly wounded by an exploding enemy artillery shell. He suffered severe leg wounds and was picked up by German troops the following day and was held prisoner without food or medical aid in Montebourg, France. Eleven days later, on June 19, Petropoulos was repatriated when Allied troops overran Montebourg.



Pete Petropoulos

Petropoulos was shipped back to the United States with a Silver Star and Purple Heart. He was sent to Rhoads General Hospital in Utica, New York, where it was feared he might have to have both legs amputated. Seven major operations followed and the former ball player's legs were saved.

After Petropoulos left hospital he went to work for the New York Giants as a scout, and in 1948 he became a goodwill ambassador to servicemen and veterans, conducting The Sporting News Sports Caravan, which, in conjunction with Liggett & Myers the makers of Chesterfield cigarettes, visited veterans' hospitals in the New York metropolitan area. "I know from my long years of association with Pete Petropoulos," David Woodside told The Sporting News, "that he can talk the

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language of any vet either in or out of a hospital.”

This tour was later expanded to take in veterans' hospitals in southern states, and Petropoulos also managed the Chesterfield -Sporting News (later Chesterfield Satisfiers) baseball team that played at veterans' hospitals for the next 12 years. Also with the 4th Infantry Division was First Lieutenant Ordway "Hal" Cisgen, who had signed with the Yankees' organization in 1939 and was last with Utica in 1942, where he posted a 5-3 record and 2.32 ERA. Cisgen was born in Lorain, Ohio, about 30 miles west of Cleveland, and had attended Lorain High School, where he starred in basketball and baseball. He was killed in action on July 11, 1944.

Other D-Day Casualties Among the 2,500 killed on D-Day was Private First Class **Gordon S. Cochrane, Jr.**, the son of Hall of Fame catcher Gordon "Mickey" Cochrane. Former major league pitcher, Elden Auker, wrote in his autobiography, *Sleeper Cards and Flannel Uniforms*: "The bullet that killed him [Gordon, Jr.] had some kind of range. It traveled all the way across the Atlantic, lodged itself into the spirit of Gordon's father, the great Mickey Cochrane, and slowly killed him. Mickey's gravestone shows he died June 28, 1962, but he started dying June 6, 1944. Consider his another life claimed by World War II."

Coming ashore at Omaha Beach a few hours after Morrie Martin was his cousin Private First Class Ralph Hickey of the 1st Infantry Division. He never made it to the beach and his body was never recovered.

"We were born and raised together," Martin recalled. "He was like a brother."

First Lieutenant **Lloyd Rice** was wounded in the shoulder while coming ashore on D-day. Rice, a minor league outfielder, had batted .363 in 97 games with Federalsburg Athletics in 1940. He returned to the minors in 1946 and played two seasons with the Wilmington Blue Rocks.

Also among the D-Day wounded was **Sam Colacurcio, Jr.**, mascot for the Jersey City Giants from 1931 to 1934 when his father operated the team.

## The Navy

The Invasion Fleet was drawn from eight different navies, comprising 6,939 vessels: 1,213 warships, 4,126 transport vessels (landing ships and landing craft), 736 ancillary craft and 864 merchant vessels. Warships provided supporting fire for the land forces.



Yogi Berra

Aboard one of four LCSS (Landing Craft Support, Small) rocket boats that were attached to the attack transport A P A - 33 USS Bayfield, and positioned 300 yards off shore of Utah Beach on D-

Day was Seaman Second Class **Lawrence P. "Yogi" Berra**. The vessels had rendezvoused with nine others and their six-man crews were firing rockets at targets to try to take

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out machine-gun nests and land mines in support of the troops going ashore. "It was just like a Fourth of July celebration," he later recalled.

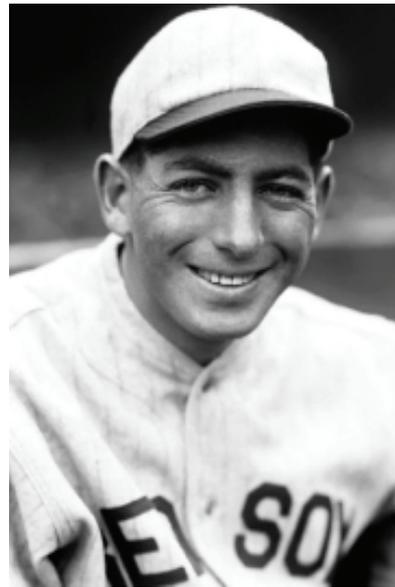
Just 19 years old, Berra had played one season in the minors with the Norfolk Tars before being called to service. "Yogi was very personable," recalled fellow sailor Lou Putnocky. "Of course it always would come up in conversation when you had new people, 'What are you gonna do after the war? What did you do before the war?'

"And [Yogi] said, 'Oh, I played ball, at Norfolk, in the minors.'

"And we looked at him, with his bandy legs. What the hell kind of ballplayer is this; are you pulling our leg? Were you a batboy or something? And we never paid much attention. He didn't elaborate on it too much. It would come up every now and then, and we would kid him about it."

He would be back in baseball in 1946 for the first of 18 years as a catcher in Yankee pinstripes, World Series winning manager and Hall of Famer. On the 70th anniversary of D-Day in 2014, Berra was honored by the Bob Feller Act of Valor Award Foundation.

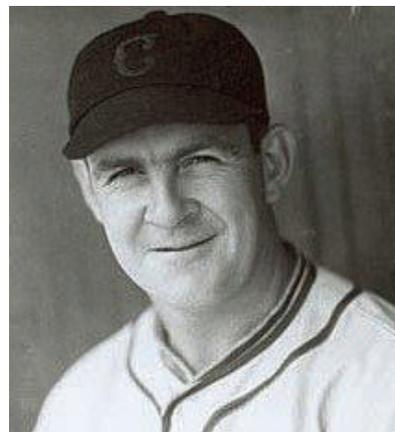
"It is fitting that we gather here to honor an American treasure," said Peter Fertig, president of the Bob Feller award group. "Lawrence Peter Berra, better known as Yogi, served on a rocket boat and was at the tip of the spear at Normandy 70 years ago this morning. Imagine how you would have felt sitting in a boat and seeing so many missiles and rockets soaring over your



Si Rosenthal

head, and yet you and your comrades still have a job to do. What a debt of gratitude we owe to those who gave up their American dream so that we could live ours."

Also off shore during D-Day was former major league outfielder **Si Rosenthal**, who had played over 100 games for the Red Sox in 1926. He was aboard the minelayer USS Miantonomah, which was off Omaha Beach, performing services for the battleship USS Texas.



Larry French

Playing a critical role for the Navy during the build-up to D-Day was Lieutenant **Larry French**, with the U.S. Navy Supply Corps. Based in England, French – who had won 197 games over 14

seasons in the major leagues prior to entering military service in 1942 – was responsible for the provision of spare parts for landing craft. French would later serve in the Pacific Theater aboard the USS New York during the Okinawa invasion. He was recalled to active service during the Korean War and made the Navy a career, retiring in 1969 having attained the rank of captain.

## Beyond D-Day



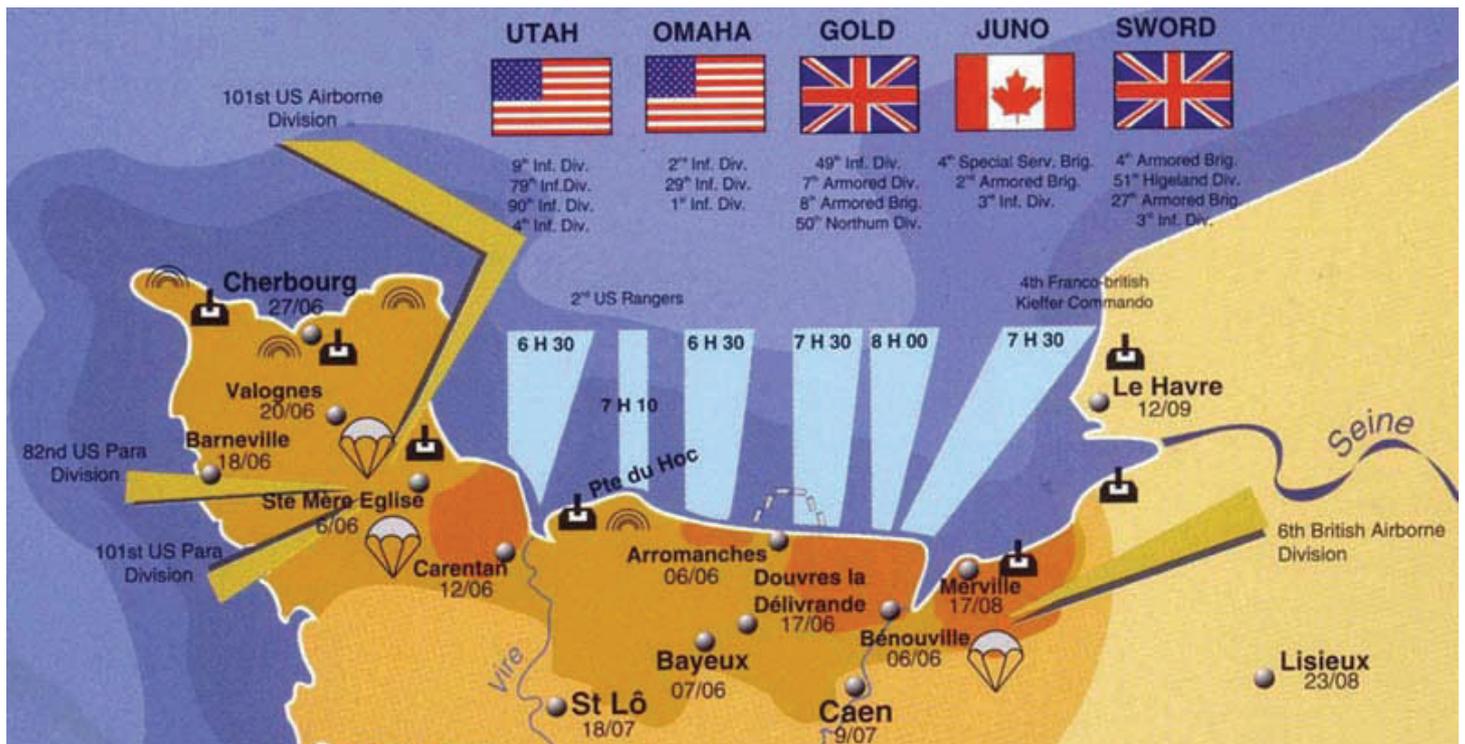
Joe Mocerri

As the Allied forces advanced in to Normandy, further casualties occurred. On June 15, **Emil Potzer**, who had played varsity baseball at Rutgers, was killed in action while serving with the

90th Infantry Division. **Joe Mocerri**, who pitched for Winston-Salem in the Piedmont League in 1942, was killed on June 30, with the 29th Infantry Division. His ball glove was found among the possessions he was carrying. On July 5, **Gene Gabrych** a shortstop in the Wisconsin State League in 1941, was killed with the 90th Infantry Division. July 8, saw the death of North Carolina State League first baseman **Connie Graff**, and on July 12, **Herm Bauer**, older brother of future Yankee great Hank

Bauer, and a catcher in the American Association, was mortally wounded and died the same day. On July 26, minor league catcher **Walt Lake** and minor league pitcher **Kappy Scott** were both killed.

Despite fierce resistance, the advance through France that followed the Normandy landings was a swift one and Paris was liberated on August 25, 1944. The collapse of Germany seemed in sight, but Hitler made one last ditch effort to stall the Allied advance with a surprise attack through the fog and snow at the Ardennes Forest in Belgium in December 1944. Nevertheless, by mid-January 1945, German forces in the Ardennes had been routed. On May 8, 1945, Germany surrendered after more than five years of war.



## What's New at Baseball's Greatest Sacrifice

### Terry Graves



Graves was a catcher on the Miami University, Ohio, varsity team and played for Cooperstown, New York in the Tri-County League. He served with the Marine Corps in Vietnam and was killed in action in February 1968, posthumously receiving the Medal of Honor.

[www.baseballsgreatestssacrifice.com/biographies/graves\\_terry.html](http://www.baseballsgreatestssacrifice.com/biographies/graves_terry.html)

### Tommy Brailsford



Third baseman Brailsford played baseball at Texas A&M and the East Texas League Crockett Volunteers in 1916. He served with the Marine Corps in France and was killed in action in July 1918.

[www.baseballsgreatestssacrifice.com/biographies/brailsford\\_tommy.html](http://www.baseballsgreatestssacrifice.com/biographies/brailsford_tommy.html)

### Fred Valentine, Jr

Valentine, whose father managed the Hudson River League's Peekskill team in 1903, was captain of the Peekskill YMCA ball team. He served with the Marine Corps in France and died from pneumonia in November 1918.

[www.baseballsgreatestssacrifice.com/biographies/valentine\\_fred.html](http://www.baseballsgreatestssacrifice.com/biographies/valentine_fred.html)

### Jock Giacomo

Third baseman Giacomo played minor league ball in the Blue Ridge League in 1917. He served in France with the Army and was killed in action in August 1918.

[www.baseballsgreatestssacrifice.com/biographies/giacomo\\_jock.html](http://www.baseballsgreatestssacrifice.com/biographies/giacomo_jock.html)

### James O'Rourke

Outfielder O'Rourke played minor league ball in the New York-New Jersey League in 1913, and was in the International League the following year. He served with the Army in France and was killed in action in October 1918.

[www.baseballsgreatestssacrifice.com/biographies/orourke\\_james.html](http://www.baseballsgreatestssacrifice.com/biographies/orourke_james.html)

### Ernie Stiteler

Stiteler was an infielder on the Texas A&M varsity baseball team and played minor league ball in the Middle Texas League in 1914 and 1915. He served with the Army and died from pneumonia in May 1918.

[www.baseballsgreatestssacrifice.com/biographies/stiteler\\_ernie.html](http://www.baseballsgreatestssacrifice.com/biographies/stiteler_ernie.html)

### Frank Poteet



Poteet's minor league career as a pitcher began in the Central Texas League in 1914. He also pitched in the Texas League and Western Association before serving with the Army in France. He

was killed in action in November 1918.

[www.baseballsgreatestssacrifice.com/biographies/poteet\\_frank\\_dawson.html](http://www.baseballsgreatestssacrifice.com/biographies/poteet_frank_dawson.html)