

# Gary Bedingfield's BASEBALL IN WARTIME

Volume 1, Issue 3

November 2007

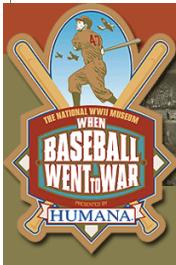
**WWW.BASEBALLINWARTIME.CO.UK**

## Duty, Honor, Country: When Baseball Went To War

A Special Conference and Exhibition On America's Pastime in WWII - November 9-11, 2007 - New Orleans, Louisiana

Welcome to this special edition of the Baseball in Wartime newsletter which celebrates the huge success of the "When Baseball Went to War" conference that was held in New Orleans, Louisiana in November.

This extended issue is very much focused on New Orleans and features exclusive biographies on local ballplayers who served with the armed forces in WWII.



"This has been the most extraordinary three days of my life," declared major league pitcher and WWII hero Lou Brissie on the closing day of the *When Baseball Went to War* conference. I think Lou summed things up

perfectly for everyone who attended the sell-out event that was the brainchild of Todd Anton (author and historian) and many years in the making.

Former major league players Bob Feller, Lou Brissie, Morrie Martin, Johnny Pesky and Jerry Coleman talked openly and frankly about their years in the military during the dark days of WWII.



Over three days, six panels discussed such diverse topics as Baseball on the Home Front, Baseball on the Battlefront, Baseball the Morale Builder and Civil Rights. Along with the former major league players were historians including Bill Swank, S Derby Gisclair, Kerry Nakagawa, Arthur Schott and myself, and former minor league players Lenny Yochim and Herb Simpson. Also contributing to the event were authors Gary W Moore and Bill Nowlin, founding curator of the CIA museum Linda McCarthy, Hall of Fame vice-president Ted Spencer, former AAGPBL player Dolly Brumfield-White, major league pitcher Curt Schilling and Hall of Fame legend Tommy Lasorda.

Bob Feller talked about his 34 months service aboard the USS Alabama. When referred to as a hero, he categorically responded "I'm not a hero. Heroes don't come back."

Morrie Martin talked about how he almost lost his leg in combat, and had it not been for a nurse from Georgia - who told Morrie to refuse the amputation because there was a new wonder drug available called penicillin - Morrie would never have gone on to pitch for the Brooklyn Dodgers.

Lou Brissie talked about his combat experiences in Italy and said the "best friends I've had in my life were made right there, under those conditions."

For me, it is impossible to name one single highlight from the event - the whole thing was incredible. But I'd like to share a few personal moments. On Saturday morning I did a radio talk show (WWL AM870 with Don Dubuc)



with Todd Anton and Clem Goldberger (Associate VP of Marketing and Communications at the museum). It was a great opportunity for us to discuss what we were doing at the museum even though the event was sold out. Later that day a gentleman came to the museum. He didn't have a ticket for the event, he just wanted to shake my hand and say thank you for what we were doing in remembering the ballplayers who served in WWII.

*Continued on Page 5*

### Annual Georgia-Florida-Alabama Minor Leagues Baseball Reunion

August 9 and 10, 2008

A reunion for men who played in the old Georgia-Alabama, Georgia-Florida, Georgia State, Alabama-Florida, Alabama State, Florida State and Florida East Coast Leagues. For more information contact:

Clint Chafin  
Program Chairman  
4789 Tallowas Rd  
Moultrie, Ga. 31788

Check out [www.alabama-florida-league.com](http://www.alabama-florida-league.com) and see photos of past reunions and keep up with reunion info.

Ebbets Field Flannels is the finest manufacturer of vintage historically-inspired athletic clothing.  
[www.ebbets.com](http://www.ebbets.com)

### The Professional Baseball Player Database

The Professional Baseball Player Database software program includes the 1922-2004 seasons, containing all leagues, teams, and players listed in the Official Baseball Guides for those seasons.

For further information visit [www.baseball-almanac.com/minor-league](http://www.baseball-almanac.com/minor-league)



## Baseball in New Orleans by S Derby Gisclair

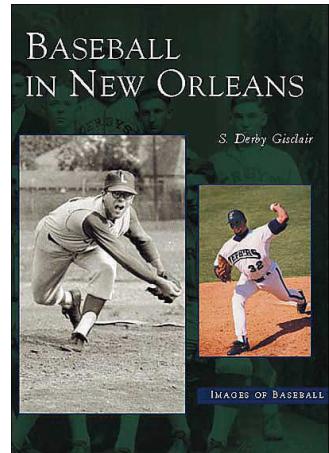
In July of 1859, seventy-five young New Orleanians came together to form the seven teams that comprised the Louisiana Base Ball Club. They played their games in the fields of the de la Chaise estate on the outskirts of New Orleans near present-day Louisiana Avenue. As America's population grew through immigration, so did the popularity of what the largest newspaper in New Orleans, the Daily Picayune, called in November of 1860 "the National Game." Baseball quickly replaced

cricket as the city's most popular participant sport.

In 1887, local businessmen and promoters secured a minor league franchise for the city of New Orleans in the newly formed Southern League, beginning the city's 73-year love affair with the New Orleans Pelicans. From Shoeless Joe Jackson, to Hall of Famers Dazzy Vance, Joe Sewell, Bob Lemon, and Earl Weaver, to today's stars such as Jeff Cirillo and Lance Berkman, the road to the majors brought many notable

players through New Orleans. From these early beginnings to the present-day New Orleans Zephyrs of the AAA Pacific Coast League, local fans have continued the tradition of baseball in New Orleans.

A lifelong resident of New Orleans, S Derby Gisclair is a member of the Society of American Baseball Research (SABR) and its Oral History Committee. He is a Sustaining Member of the National Baseball Hall of Fame.



**Baseball in New Orleans**  
S Derby Gisclair  
Arcadia Publishing \$19.99

## New Orleans Ballplayers in the Armed Forces in WWII

### Zeke Bonura



Zeke began his pro career with the Pelicans in 1929. He joined the Chicago White Sox in 1934 and batted .302 with 27 home runs and 110 RBIs, but became known mostly for his poor defensive work.

By 1941, Bonura was back in the minors and was leading the American Association in hitting while playing for Minneapolis. In September he entered military service with the Army at Camp Shelby, Mississippi. For three months he served as a physical instructor until, on December 5, 1941, he was honorably discharged after Congress released men aged 28 years and older from service.

On January 8, 1942, following the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor, he was instructed to report to Camp

Shelby. During the winter months at Camp Shelby, Bonura organized wrestling, boxing and basketball events. In the spring he contacted his hometown Pelicans and acquired their old uniforms for his players. By the summer he had four leagues running at Camp Shelby.

In the spring of 1943, Bonura was sent to Oran in Algeria, where he continued to organize baseball leagues as well as softball leagues for male and female service personnel. By the end of the summer Bonura had set-up 20 baseball diamonds with salvaged materials and supervised 150 teams in six leagues, involving nearly 1,000 players.

For his contributions to the morale of the armed forces in North Africa, General Dwight D Eisenhower presented Bonura with a Legion of Merit Award on October 26, 1943.

Bonura followed the advancing Allied forces into Europe and he continued to organize and promote baseball events for the benefit of the troops.

Bonura returned to professional baseball in 1946. At the age of 37, he

played briefly with Minneapolis and then with the Thibodaux Giants in the Evangeline League. He continued to play in the minors until 1952 when he was 43 years old.

Zeke Bonura passed away in New Orleans on March 9, 1987. He was 78.

### Mel Brookey



Mel played high school baseball in Oklahoma before the war but refused to sign with a professional club anticipating the draft and wanting to go to college.

Brookey was drafted and served with the Marine Corps in Hawaii where he caught for the Marine ball team.

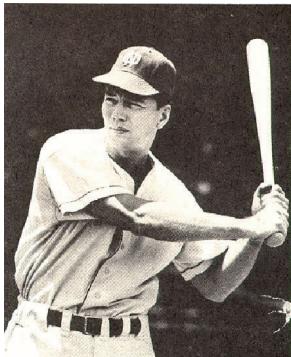
Brookey signed with Salina of the Western Association in

1946 and batted .294. He was a league all-star the following season and then played two years with Terre Haute.

Brookey joined the Pelicans in 1950 and remained with the team through 1953. He ended his career with Denver in 1954.

Mel Brookey lives in Kenner, Louisiana.

### Al Flair



The 6-foot-4, left-handed hitting LSU graduate began his pro career with Moultrie in 1937. He batted .345 for the team in 1938 and joined the Red Sox in 1941. He played ten games at first base in what was to be his only season in the major leagues.

Flair entered military

## New Orleans Ballplayers in the Armed Forces in WWII

service with the Army in January 1942 and was based at Camp Shelby, Mississippi and Camp Sutton, North Carolina with the 166<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Regiment that year. He was honored with an Al Flair Day at Franklin Stadium, New Orleans on May 10, 1942, while visiting his parents on furlough from the Army.

In 1944 he was with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army Headquarters in Memphis, and played on the 8th Army Headquarters team managed by Hugh Mulcahy that barnstormed around Southwest Pacific bases in late 1944. He was later stationed in the Philippines and Japan.

Flair returned to professional baseball in 1946. He was with the Pelicans in 1947 and batted .308 with 24 home runs and 128 RBIs. He retired from the game after playing with Fort Worth in 1951.



### Charlie Gilbert

Charlie came from an outstanding baseball-playing family. His father, Larry, had played for the Boston Braves and managed the Pelicans. His older brother, Larry Jr., played for the Pelicans in 1938 but fell ill and tragically died in 1941. His

younger brother Harold (also known as Tookie), would play for the Giants in the 1950s.

Charlie played four years of high school ball at Jesuit High and four years of American Legion. He was on the 1936 Legion team that was beaten by Chicago in finals.

He started his pro career Nashville in 1939, where his dad was managing and batted .317 with 67 RBIs. Brooklyn purchased his contract but he suffered a leg injury with Dodgers in 1940 and was sent to Montreal.

Charlie was traded to the Cubs in May 1941 and remained with the big league team until entering military service with the Navy in 1944. He was stationed at the US Naval Air Technical Training Center in Norman, Oklahoma, and later served at the Pearl Harbor Submarine Base in Hawaii.

Gilbert returned to the Cubs in 1946 and was traded to the Phillies in June. His last season in the majors was with Philadelphia in 1947 when he batted .237.

Gilbert finished his professional career in style in 1948 by returning to Nashville and batting .362 with 42 home runs and 110 RBIs.

Charlie Gilbert passed away in New Orleans on August 13, 1983.

### Connie Graff

Connie began his minor league career with the Waycross Bears of the Georgia-Florida League in 1939. The Bears released the first baseman shortly afterwards but he signed

with Gastonia of the Tar Heel League in 1940 and batted .274 for the season. He played for the Cooleemee Cards of the North Carolina State League and batted .308 before entering military service on June 13, 1942.

Staff Sergeant Graff served with the Army in Europe. He was killed in action on July 8, 1944 at St Lo, France.

In New Orleans, his sacrifice was recognized by service veterans who chartered a VFW post in his name - Connie W Graff Post 7322.

In 1948, Connie Graff's body was returned to New Orleans. Services were held at the Sacred Heart of Jesus Church and he was laid to rest at Greenwood Cemetery.

### Fran Hecker

Fran began his pro career with Dothan in 1940 and also pitched for Daytona Beach that year. He entered military service as an athletic instructor on March 20, 1941, and was stationed at the American School in England from 1943 to 1945. During that time he regularly pitched for the ASC Angels.

Hecker returned to the game in 1946 and had a great comeback season with New Iberia, posting an 18-15 record with a 3.18 ERA. He had, however, missed five seasons of organised baseball and was now 27 years old.

Hecker pitched for the Pelicans in 1947 and was 15-10 with Lafayette in the Evangeline League in 1948. He ended his playing days with Baton Rouge in the same league in 1949 where he was 11-13 with a

2.45 ERA.

Fran Hecker passed away in New Orleans on October 8, 1989. He was 70.

### Al Jurisich



Al was with the Pelicans from 1939 to 1942. He entered military service with the Coast Guard in August 1942 and was stationed in New Orleans.

Discharged from service in 1944, he joined the St Louis Cardinals primarily as a relief pitcher. He was purchased by the Phillies in 1946 and joined the San Diego Padres in the Pacific Coast League in 1948.

Jurisich enjoyed four seasons with the Padres and retired from baseball after the 1951 season.

Al Jurisich passed away in New Orleans on November 3, 1981. He was 60.

### Lou Klein



Lou began his pro career with Daytona Beach of the

## New Orleans Ballplayers in the Armed Forces in WWII

Florida State League in 1940, batting .348 with 81 RBIs. He joined the Cardinals in 1943 and batted .287 in his rookie season.

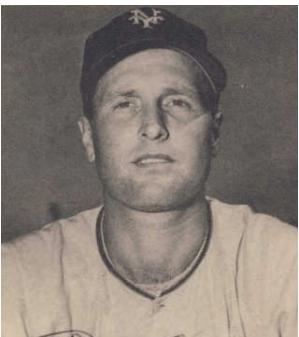
The following year, Klein joined the Coast Guard and served at Curtis Bay, Maryland, where he also played baseball.

Klein was back with the Cardinals in 1946 but jumped to the outlaw Mexican League and was banned by Commissioner Happy Chandler. He returned to the Cardinals in 1949 and later played for the Indians and Athletics.

He played for his hometown Pelicans in 1953 and later coached the Chicago Cubs, enjoying a brief stint as manager.

Lou Klein passed away in Metairie, Louisiana on June 20, 1976. He was 77.

### Jack Kramer



Jack began his pro career with Lafayette of the Evangeline League in 1936. He won 20 games with San Antonio in 1938 and joined the Browns the following year.

Kramer sat out the 1942 season to take a war plant job and later joined the Seabees but received a medical discharge because he suffered from asthma.

Back in baseball, the

Browns sent him to Toledo in 1943 where he won eight straight games and hurled a no-hitter. He rejoined the Browns and was 17-13 during the American League pennant-winning 1944 campaign.

Kramer remained in the majors until 1951. He had a career high 18 wins with the Red Sox in 1948.

Jack Kramer passed away in Metairie, Louisiana on May 18, 1995. He was 77.

### Mel Parnell



Mel began his pro career with Centreville in 1941. He was 16-9 with Canton in 1942 and entered military service with the Army Air Force in 1943.

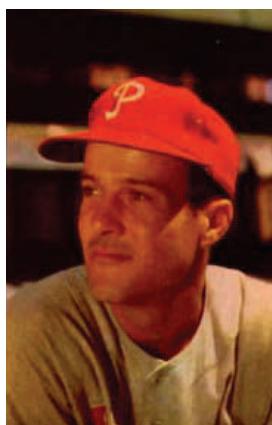
Parnell was stationed at Blytheville Army Air Field in Arkansas and Maxwell Field, Alabama, where he played baseball for the Bombers.

Parnell returned to Scranton in 1946 and joined the Boston Red Sox in 1947. He spent his entire 10-year career with Boston and compiled a 123-75 record. In 1949 he was 25-7, leading the American League in wins, ERA (2.77), complete games (27) and innings pitched (295.1). He pitched a no-hitter against the White Sox on July 14, 1956.

Parnell later managed the Pelicans and various Boston farm clubs. He was a member of Boston's radio and television announcing crew from 1965 to 1968.

Mel Parnell lives in New Orleans.

### Connie Ryan



Connie, a former LSU graduate, batted .316 with 73 RBIs in his rookie season with Savannah in 1940. By 1942 he was with the Giants and was traded to the Braves the following year, making the all-star team in 1944.

He entered military service in July 1944 and served with the Navy in the Pacific. He was part of the 5th Fleet ball team during the Western Pacific tour of 1945.

Ryan returned to the Braves in 1946 and remained in the majors until 1954. He was a coach and minor league manager with Milwaukee during the late 1950s, and served as a scout and minor league manager with Houston during the 1960s. He went on to manage Atlanta in 1975 and also managed the Texas Rangers in 1977.

Connie Ryan passed away in Metairie, Louisiana on January 3, 1996. He was 75.

### Herb Simpson

Herb grew up in New Orleans and played baseball at a playground in Gretna. He was spotted by the Homestead Grays of the Negro National League but was drafted by the Army before he could report to the team.

Simpson was inducted in the Army at Camp Beauregard, Louisiana in November 1942 and took infantry training at Cheyenne, Wyoming. He was assigned to a quartermaster company and arrived in Scotland in 1944, where he was the first man off the ship and was required to kneel down and kiss the ground!

While stationed in England, Simpson was the only African-American on an all white baseball team that played in the Battle League.

He later served as a dispatcher for his company in mainland Europe, which ran a "Red Ball Express" operation.

Simpson returned home and was discharged in February 1946. He signed a pro contract with the Negro League Birmingham Black Barons and also played for the Seattle Steelheads in the short-lived Negro Pacific Coast League.

In 1947, he joined the Harlem Globetrotters baseball team and also played for the Chicago American Giants. He played minor league

## New Orleans Ballplayers in the Armed Forces in WWII

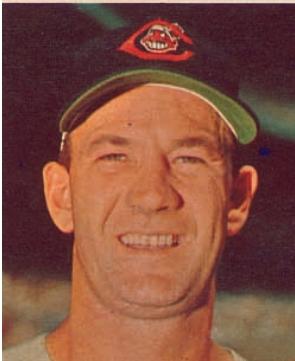
baseball with Albuquerque in the West Texas-New Mexico League in 1952 and also joined the Spokane Indians after many of their players lost their lives in a tragic bus accident.

Simpson returned to Albuquerque in 1953 where he batted .372 with 59 RBIs and retired from the professional game after the 1954 season.

Simpson returned to New Orleans where he played semi-pro baseball with the New Orleans Creoles.

Herb Simpson lives in New Orleans.

### George Strickland



George was a high school and American Legion star in New Orleans and made his pro debut at third base with the Pelicans on September 5, 1943, collecting two hits but committing four errors. He entered military service the following season and served with the Navy in the Pacific through 1945.

Strickland returned to the Pelicans in 1946 (one of eight local players on that team), and continued to play in the minors until his contract was purchased by the Pirates in 1950. The talented infield glove man

went on to enjoy ten seasons in the majors - ending his playing days with the Indians in 1960.

Strickland later coached the Twins, Indians and Royals, and managed the Indians in 1964 and again in 1966.

George Strickland lives in New Orleans.

### Ray Yochim



Ray was a top high school and American Legion pitcher in New Orleans before the war. In 1941, Branch Rickey invited him, along with Mel Parnell (who later pitched for the Red Sox), to pitch batting practice for the Pelicans. At that time, New Orleans was part of the Cardinals' farm system and the sessions led to a chance for Yochim to pitch professionally.

His pro career began in 1941 with Fresno in the California League and by 1942 he was hurling for the Pelicans.

Yochim entered military service with the Marine Corps early in 1943. He never completed boot camp as the Marine Corps

baseball team in San Diego needed a pitcher!

He quickly established himself as one of the best servicemen pitchers on the West Coast. In 1944, the San Diego Marine Corps Base clinched the 11<sup>th</sup> Naval District championship in a three-game playoff with the Naval Training Center. Yochim won 22 games against just five losses.

In 1945, Corporal Yochim was with the Fleet Marines baseball team in Hawaii, where he continued to enjoy success.

Yochim returned to the Cardinals' organization in 1946 and pitched for Rochester in the International League. In 1947 he was 14-15 with the Red Wings and made his major league debut with the Cardinals on May 2, 1948, pitching the last inning and allowing no runs in a 14-3 loss against the Cubs. He made a further three appearances for the Cardinals in 1949.

Yochim was 15-10 with Birmingham of the Southern Association in 1950 and ended his playing career with the Pelicans in 1958.

Following a lengthy illness, Ray Yochim passed away in Metairie, Louisiana on January 26, 2002. He was 79.

### Duty, Honor, Country: When Baseball Went To War

**Continued from Page 1**

I had the honor of giving a keynote presentation on Saturday. I talked about ballplayers who lost their lives in WWII and suggested that the audience give a round of applause in memory of these players. The thunderous standing ovation that followed will be etched in my memory for as long as I live.

It was a thrill to moderate the Baseball the Morale Builder panel. Talking with Lenny Yochim - whose brother Ray served with the Marines in WWII - it was discovered that *The Sporting News* had falsely claimed in 1945 that Ray had been killed in action at Iwo Jima. Lenny had never seen the press clipping and by some miracle I had brought a copy with me from my archives back in Scotland. It was a thrill to present it to Lenny - the first time he had seen it 60 years after it was printed!

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank Bill Detweiler, Todd Anton and Bill Swank for making this conference happen for me. And on behalf of my wife Lainy and myself I'd like to thank the great city of New Orleans for the wonderful welcome we received. We both hope to be back very soon.

*The Duty, Honor, Country: When Baseball Went to War* exhibition runs until March 30, 2008.  
 National WWII Museum  
 945 Magazine Street  
 New Orleans, LA 70130  
 Phone: 504 527 6012  
 info@nationalww2museum.org

If you would like to advertise in the **Baseball in Wartime** newsletter or have a book reviewed please email details to [garybed@gmail.com](mailto:garybed@gmail.com)

© Gary Bedingfield 2007  
[www.baseballinwartime.co.uk](http://www.baseballinwartime.co.uk)  
[garybed@gmail.com](mailto:garybed@gmail.com)