

## Marshall Sneed - Western Desert Hero

Welcome to the July 2009 edition of the Baseball in Wartime Newsletter. In this issue, I have decided to feature one of the 127 minor league players who lost their lives during World War II. Marshall Sneed was team captain at the University of Missouri in 1939 and played two seasons in the St. Louis Browns' organization before entering military service with the Army Air Corps in 1941. Sneed was among the first American pilots to arrive in the Western Desert in 1942 and helped drive Rommel's Afrika Korps off the continent. His life tragically ended in February 1943—shot down while attacking enemy troop concentrations in Tunisia. Sneed's biography is one of 127 featured in my forthcoming book entitled *Baseball's Dead of World War II: A Roster of Professional Players Who Died* and is being published by McFarland.



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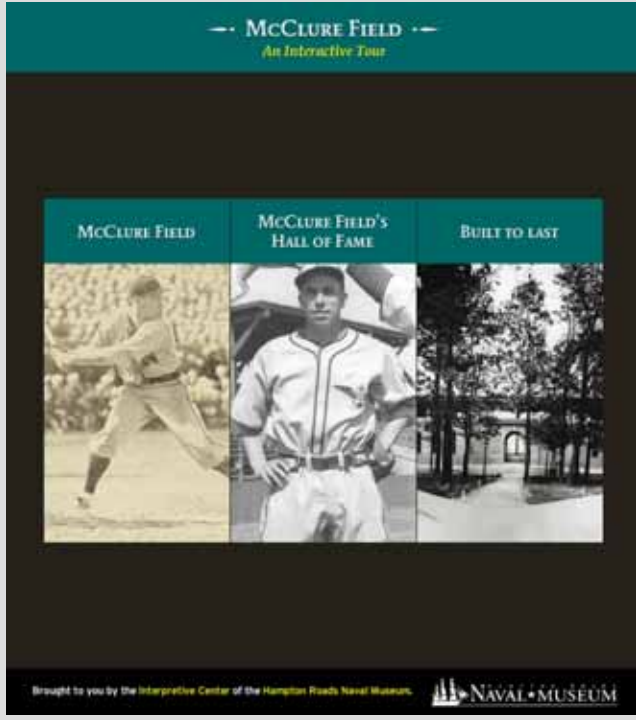
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# Marshall Sneed - Air Ace in North Africa



As Marshall Sneed tried in vain to swipe away the flies with his ball glove, and watched the scorpions scurrying from rock to rock as fighter planes roared through the clear blue Egyptian sky, he realized he could never be further away from his beloved Arkansas.

Army Air Force Captain Sneed was a fighter pilot and among the first of the Americans to arrive in North Africa to help the British Commonwealth forces battle Field Marshal Rommel's Afrika Korps in the summer of 1942. But before entering military service in 1941, Sneed had played baseball in the St. Louis Browns organization.

On this September morning in 1942, however, he was playing in a ballgame that in no way resembled the games he played back home. His teammates and opponents were a mixed bunch; fellow American pilots, together with British and South African veteran pilots of the Desert Air Force. Only Lieutenant Bobby Byrne, Jr., really knew how to play ball. Byrne, a fellow American pilot with the 57<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group, had played second base with the Ashland Colonels of the Mountain State League in 1941.

Marshall M. Sneed, the son of an attorney, was born on July 22, 1915, and grew up in Piggott, Arkansas. He attended Piggott High School where he excelled at sports and captained the baseball, track, football and basketball teams. Sneed enrolled at University of Missouri in the fall of 1936, and played baseball and football. He dropped football as a junior but lettered in baseball as an outfielder and captained the Tigers his senior year, 1939. Carl Miles, who briefly pitched for the Philadelphia Athletics in



1940, was a teammate on the Missouri team that won Big-Six championships under coach John Simmons in 1937 and 1938. Other teammates included third baseman Harlan Keirsey who played for the Ohio State League Lima Pandas, shortstop Joel Carr who played for the Cardinals' organization, and pitcher Charley Mason who played for the Yankees' organization.



## 65<sup>TH</sup> FS FIGHTING COCKS

Sneed received a Bachelor of Science degree in agriculture in 1939, and signed a professional baseball contract with the St. Louis Browns in July of the same year. The Browns assigned him to the Topeka Owls of the Class C Western Association, but he hit just .131 in 20 games and was sent to the Paragould Browns of the Class D Northeast Arkansas League. Back in Arkansas and just 30 from his home town, Sneed batted .283 in 52 games and drove in 25 runs.

He was back with the Paragould club in 1940 where he patrolled the outfield with 18-year-old Ray Brown who made it to the parent St. Louis club in 1947. Sneed batted .239 over 63 games, but that was where his career ended. On February 8, 1941, he entered military service and trained as a fighter pilot with the Army Air Corps. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, First Lieutenant Sneed was assigned to the 65<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron at Trumbull Airport in Groton, Connecticut, flying a Curtis P-40 Warhawk as part of the Boston Air Defense Region.

The squadron had something of a reputation largely thanks to its commanding officer, Captain Philip G. "Flip" Cochran. Not only had Cochran been immortalized in Milton Caniff's *Terry and the Pirates* comic strip as the daredevil pilot Flip Corkin, he had instilled an aggressive gung-ho attitude among his men. Caniff also designed the squadron's "Fighting Cock" emblem based on their feisty rooster mascot.

Marshall Sneed, or Mortimer Snerd as he was affectionately named by his fellow pilots after ventriloquist Edgar Bergen's slow-witted character, was responsible for the naming of the squadron's rooster mascot. Sneed could often be found at the officer's mess singing a traditional folk song entitled, "Uncle Bud." Gradually the words were altered to fit the part and it became the unofficial fighting



A P-40 at Gorton, where Sneed was stationed in 1941



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The USS Ranger

song of the squadron as well as the name of the beloved rooster. The following verse was written by Sneed about his P-40 fighter plane:

She was a honey, one of the best  
The night I put her to the test.  
She looked so sweet, so pretty and slim,  
The night was dark, the moon was dim.  
I was excited, my heart missed a beat,  
For I knew I was in for a hell of a treat.  
I saw her stripped, I saw her bare,  
I felt her over everywhere.  
I got inside her, she screamed with joy.  
That was her first night, Boy! Oh Boy!



I got up as quickly as I could,  
I handled her gently, for I knew she was good.  
I rolled her over and then on her side,  
And on her back I also tried.  
She was one high thrill, the best in the land,  
The P-40 of Fighter Command.

In June 1942, as part of the 57th Fighter Group, the 65th Fighter Squadron received orders to prepare for overseas duty. The destination was unknown, but a clue lay in the 72 brand new P-40Fs that arrived at the airfield, painted in camouflage desert pink. Unusually, and without explanation, the pilots were instructed to practice short take-offs for a couple of days before flying the planes to Naval Air Station Quonset Point, Rhode Island, where they were hoisted onto the aircraft carrier *USS Ranger* on July 1. The *Ranger* set sail across the Atlantic and arrived, two weeks later, at the Gold Coast (now Ghana) in West Africa. From 100 miles offshore, the pilots climbed into their fighter planes, revved to full throttle, released the brakes and hurtled down the deck as fast as possible, briefly dropping out of sight off the end of the carrier before emerging safely and climbing into the African sky. All 72 pilots safely reached land at Accra on the Gold Coast and then began the 3,000-mile cross-country journey to Muqebila in Palestine (now in Israel). While in Muqebila during their off-duty days many of the men made trips to some of the famous towns in the Holy Land – Jerusalem, Haifa and Tel Aviv. Shortly afterwards, the group was split up and Sneed's 65th Fighter Squadron was posted to Cyprus for acclimatization and training.

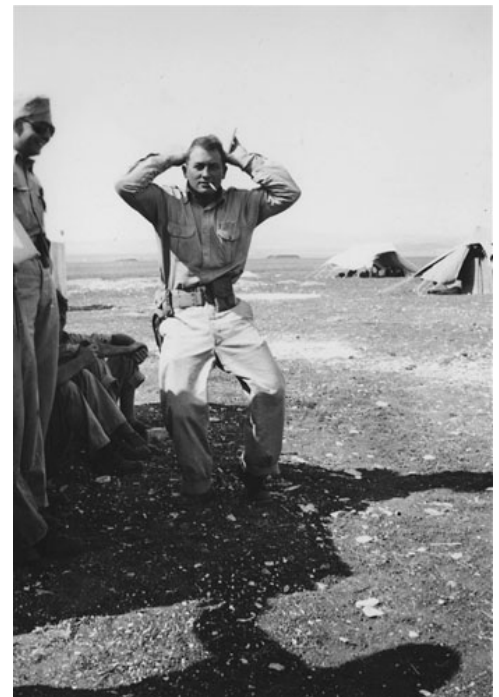
In August 1942, Sneed was among several pilots assigned to British Commonwealth squadrons at Landing Ground 97 on the Desert Road in Egypt near Alexandria. Sneed

and his fellow pilots were introducing the combat-hardened British and South Africans to the new P-40F Warhawk with which they were being re-equipped. Sneed was fiercely proud of his home state and would fly into a mock rage if any of the South Africans tried to pronounce 'Arkansas' as if it sounded like 'Kansas'. "You can piss on the steps of the White House," Sneed would insist, "you can shit on the Stars and Stripes, but you can never, never defile the sacred name of *Arkensaw*."

The P-40F was a vast improvement on the earlier version the British had been using. The latest model had a powerful Rolls-Royce Merlin engine made under license in the United States. This meant they could now operate at 20,000 feet and get above the German Messerschmitts for a change. It also carried a 500-pound bomb, twice the load of the previous model.

American pilots were highly skilled, and had undergone flying training of a type which war-harassed Britain had not been able to offer. As flyers they were experts in handling their machines but had little knowledge of war conditions. In exchange for showing them how to fly the P-40F, the Desert Air Force pilots taught the Americans the basics of desert combat flying. "If all the Yanks are as good as these, we'll have some fun," remarked one British officer.

Alexandria was only a short drive from the airfield and on evenings when the pilots were not at readiness they would pile into jeeps and follow the coastal road there. Alexandria was chic, like a fashionable French resort, with a smart sea front, it seemed to belong in a different world from the desert a few miles



Sneed impersonating the local dancing girls in North Africa

## Marshall Sneed - Western Desert Hero



P-40s of the 65th Fighter Squadron in North Africa



A P-40 of 65th Fighter Squadron being prepared for combat



Sneed has fun on a motorbike in North Africa

away. The pilots would drink in the bar of the Cecil Hotel and eat opposite in the square at the Petit Coin de France, and walk along the esplanade looking out over Aboukir Bay. They might also visit Mary's House, several sophisticated steps up from the sailors' brothels in Sister Street. Mary's House had a restaurant and a bar, a dance floor with a band and young ladies from Egypt, France and Turkey. For the price of a drink they would dance with the pilots and for a further Egyptian pound the young flyers were given soap and a towel and directed discreetly to an upstairs bedroom with the girl of their

choice.

The P-40, which first flew in 1938, played a significant role as a fighter, bomber escort and fighter-bomber in the North African campaign and first saw combat with the Desert Air Force in June 1941. Whilst its performance was inferior to that of many of its enemies, notably the Messerschmitt ME109s of the Luftwaffe, this shortcoming was partly compensated for by its maneuverability and its sturdiness which enabled it to withstand a considerable amount of punishment.

On September 16, 1942, the three squadrons of the 57th Fighter Group were reunited and posted to their first combat base – known simply as LG 174 and situated near El Alamein in Egypt. Airfields in Egypt were different from anything Sneed had experienced in the United States. A flat, firm area of the desert was simply marked off by gasoline drums at four corners, a wind sock was erected and the field was ready for business.

In October 1942, the squadron became operational and supported the British Eighth Army's drive across Egypt and Libya, escorting bombers and flying strafing and dive-bombing missions against enemy airfields, communications and troop concentrations. Sneed, as a flight commander, was flying missions almost everyday, often more than once a day. After being briefed on a mission, Sneed would head for his airplane where the ground crew checked his parachute and strapped him in. After going through familiar cockpit checks, Sneed would signal for engine start up and call "chocks away." With a thumbs up to his crew chief, John Seeman, Sneed would taxi through the dispersal area, a fitter directing him to his place in the take-off line. Minutes later, amid vast clouds of dust, the twelve planes of 65<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group would take to the air.

A typical ground attack mission would involve locating an enemy target, diving from 9,000 feet, dropping the 500-pound bomb and coming back around to shoot up everything they could. Amid anti-aircraft fire that was determined to blow him out of the sky, Sneed would see trucks and armored vehicles exploding as the noise of his machineguns burned in his ears, his engine straining in the tight turns as he twisted through the air. Returning to the airfield in high spirits, Sneed and his fellow pilots would head for the bar of the officer's mess or maybe a trip into Alexandria.

During the occasional lull in missions, Sneed would break out his ball glove and play catch with his buddies. Bobby Byrne was with the 64<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron - an aerial ace with six enemy kills to his name – and the two



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enjoyed getting together to talk about their days in the bush leagues. In late 1942, the Americans staged a ballgame against 112 Squadron of the Desert Air Force. Surprisingly, reports claim the British won the game against the American flyers, and while detailed accounts have been lost over time, it is fascinating to picture the two teams in the dust-blown wasteland of North Africa with Marshall Sneed patrolling centerfield and Bobby Byrne at second base.

On January 20, 1943, Sneed – recently promoted to captain - shot down his first enemy plane over the North African desert. "[Sneed] was a fine flight commander," wrote Major General Arthur G. Salisbury, "a daring leader, and one who did as much as anyone else in the organization to keep the morale at a very high level."



Captain, you did not return today  
From your flight, hell bent into the blue.  
We missed your buzz of the accustomed way  
I can but think how we will miss you.

We remember the day you joined us at  
Groton on the Thames.

We'll never forget your racing cars, or your  
baseball games

And always, we'll remember the stories that  
you could tell.

A thousand other things of you, that we knew  
and loved so well.

You named our squadron mascot, that name  
shall live for aye,

"Uncle Bud" shall be our song, you'll hear it  
sung we pray.

Captain, you did not return today  
From your flight, hell bent into the blue.  
And though you hear not, this we say . . .  
Captain Sneed . . . God's grace to you!

Sneed was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, Air Medal, Silver Star and Purple Heart. He has a head stone in the Piggott Cemetery in Arkansas, next to his mother and father. "I can only remember seeing Marshall one time," recalls his nephew, Thomas Sneed. "It was in April 1942, when he was home on leave just prior to going overseas. I was six years old at the time. I am proud of his service and regret that I really never knew him."

*I am grateful to Thomas Sneed, Gary Cox at the University Archives, University of Missouri-Columbia and Mark O'Boyle of the 57<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group Association for help with this biography.*

Marshall Sneed's biography, along with the biographies of 126 other minor league players who lost their lives during WWII, are featured in the forthcoming book by Gary Bedingfield entitled *Baseball's Dead of World War II: A Roster of Professional Players Who Died* and published by McFarland.

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On February 22, 1943, after seven months of overseas duty and having advanced 1,200 miles west from Alexandria deep into Tunisia, Sneed was shot down in the Bay of Gabes, while attacking German forces in their flight to escape from Africa. His body was never recovered and he is memorialized at the North African American Cemetery in Carthage, Tunisia. Sneed had been one of the original 72 American pilots to serve in North Africa, and news of his death came as a terrible blow to the squadron. Five days later, his crew chief John Seeman, wrote the following epitaph:



Gabes Bay as it appears today

# San Antonio Service Baseball League 1945

## July 1945

### Thursday July 5th

The Cadet Center Warhawks keep their Service Baseball league title hopes alive with a 9-8 win in 15 innings over Randolph Field.

### Sunday July 8th

Late rallies spell the difference in all three of the Service Baseball League's games as the league-leading Randolph Field Ramblers tame the Hondo Comets, 8-0, Cadet Center outslug Fort Sam Houston, 14-10, and Kelly Field score seven runs in its last chance at bat to beat Brooks Field, 12-6.

### Thursday July 12th

The Randolph ramblers virtually put the clincher on the Service Baseball League flag at Tech Field, when they trim the fort Sam Houston Rangers, 6-2, on Marty Errante's three-hit pitching, to move four and a half games in front of the faltering Cadet Center Warhawks.

### Sunday July 15th

The Randolph Field Ramblers get some timely hitting to go with their superior pitching, and strengthen their hold on first place in the Service Baseball League with a 2-0

win over Kelly Field.

### Tuesday July 17th

The Hondo Comets and San Marcos Navigators gain important ground in the league race, San Marcos moving back into undisputed possession of third place with a 3-2 win over the Cadet Center Warhawks while Kelly Field lose, 7-2, to Fort Sam Houston. Hondo move up on Kelly, the team it has to beat out to gain a place in the Shaughnessy playoff, by nipping the Brooks Field Ganders, 2-1.

### Sunday July 22nd

The Randolph Field Ramblers knock off their chief tormentors, the AAF Personnel Distribution Command (formerly Cadet Center) Warhawks, 9-7, at Tech field to move six games in front of the pack. With only 14 to play, the Ramblers appear good bets to finish as far in front as they did in 1943.

### Sunday July 29th

The Randolph Field Ramblers moved even nearer to the league title with a 20-0 win over Fort Sam Houston on Walt Nothe's one-hitter.



**RAMBLER STARS SHIP OUT**—Three important cogs in the Randolph Field baseball machine were transferred this week. Pictured here, with shouldered barracks bags, are (left to right): Sgt. Leslie "Tex" Aulds, center field speed merchant and hitter; Sgt. Elbert Young, who held down the hot corner for the league leaders, and Sgt. Marty Errante, leading Service League moundsman, with eight victories against one loss.

## San Antonio Service Baseball League 1945

### Standings at July 30th

	W	L	Pct	GB
Randolph Field Ramblers	9	8	.784	-
AAF PDC Warhawks	22	15	.595	7.0
San Marcos Navigators	21	15	.583	7.5
Kelly Field Fliers	19	17	.528	9.5
Fort Sam Houston Rangers	17	20	.450	12.0
Hondo Comets	16	20	.444	12.5
Brooks Field Ganders	4	33	.108	25





# The Corporal Was a Pitcher

You have probably never heard of Lou Brissie, and the fact that you have never heard of him is a tragedy of 20th Century history. Brissie, a powerful southpaw from South Carolina, should be in professional baseball's hall of fame. He should be as well known as Lefty Grove, Walter Johnson, Bob Feller, and Warren Spahn. That was Lou Brissie's birthright.

Sadly, Brissie who dreamed not of greatness but of merely being able to play the game that he loved so much, had his life, like so many other lives, interrupted by the Second World War. By the end of the War, Brissie's body, and his dreams, would be shattered by German artillery in Northern Italy. In *The Corporal was a Pitcher* (Triumph Books 2009, 253 pages), Pulitzer Prize-winning author Ira Berkow brings us the story of Leland Victor ("Lou") Brissie, Jr. and the courage of one man who overcame tremendous odds to reclaim his dreams despite horrific adversity, and become a beacon of hope for a multitude of wounded and maimed veterans and children throughout America.

Lou Brissie was born in 1924 in Anderson, South Carolina. A child of the Great Depression, Brissie grew up in the mill town of Ware Shoals, South Carolina. It was there that he learned to play baseball. As a child, his first catcher was his uncle Robert, only five years his senior. (Robert would die in the North African campaign of 1943.) By the time Brissie was 14, he would be a dominant pitcher in a very competitive men's mill league, and was known for striking out the league's best hitters.

Brissie's success in the mill league brought him to the attention of baseball's iconic Connie Mack, the manager and owner of the Philadelphia A's. Mack believed that Brissie would eventually be a Hall of Fame pitcher and agreed with Brissie that he would pay for Brissie to attend college, so that he could learn the finer points of being a ball player and that Brissie would then have a chance to try out with the A's.

His future seemingly set, in late 1941 the inevitable entry of the USA into World War II radically changed Brissie's path. He joined the army after he turned 18 and was eventually promoted to corporal. On December 7, 1944, Corporal Leland Victor Brissie, an infantry squad leader in G Company, 351st Infantry Regiment, 88th Infantry Division, Fifth Army, was riding in a seven truck convoy in the Apennines Mountains of Northern Italy. Brissie's convoy suffered under a devastating artillery barrage that killed most of Brissie's squad. He was horrifically wounded with shrapnel tearing into most of his body. He crawled away from the area of the artillery barrage and blacked out, the lower half of his body submerged in a small stream. Eight hours later, medical corpsmen found him and his odyssey to recovery began.

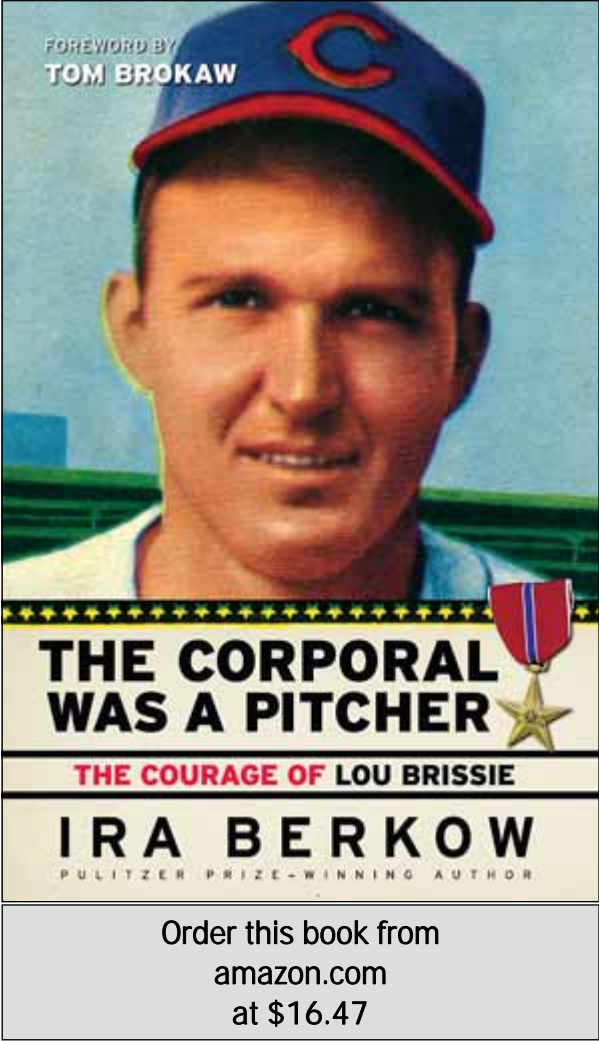
Doctor's initially wanted to amputate Brissie's left leg. It was shattered beyond almost all hope of repair but Brissie objected, "You can't take my leg off. I'm a ballplayer. I can't play on one leg." When his doctor told him that he would die without the amputation, Brissie responded, "Doc. I'll take my chances." Fortunately for Brissie, gangrene never took hold in his wound and he did not have to have it amputated because he found a doctor who was willing to treat him without amputating. Even more fortunately, the use of penicillin to fight infection was finally becoming standard medical procedure and Brissie was the first man in the Italian theater to be administered the new wonder drug. That, plus dozens of operations, painful rehabilitation and Brissie's own unflinching desire to someday play baseball again, allowed Brissie to keep his left leg.

Throughout his two year convalescence, Brissie stayed in close touch with Connie Mack and Mack, true to his word encouraged Brissie to try out for the team in 1947. No one thought Brissie could ever make it to the team, probably including Mack. Brissie's left leg was barely more than a toothpick and constantly suffered from recurring infections, his skin cracking and oozing pus when he put too much pressure on the leg. Indeed, the only way Brissie could stand on his leg at all was by wearing a bulky brace that would help support his frame – he was over six feet four inches tall and weighed 200 pounds. Brissie, however, surprised them all. In 1947 he was a phenomenon in the minor leagues and in 1948 he was in the major leagues for the beginning of a seven year career.

Despite appalling injury, Lou Brissie had achieved his dream of playing professional baseball and, in doing so, he became the hope for thousands of horrifically wounded GI's and disabled children throughout America. Following his playing career, he would go on to work in youth baseball and was a major force in establishing pitch count standards for youth baseball players so that they could preserve their arms. He spent two years teaching baseball in Australia as part of a US-government sponsored program. Indeed, he did many things, but none was as great as the simple task of learning to walk again in the years after artillery forced him out of the war.

*The Corporal was a Pitcher* is a not a war story. Nor is it a baseball story. It is the story of one man who, despite all the odds against him, refused to give up his dream. More than that, it is the story of one man who learned that by living out his own dream, he gave thousands of maimed veterans the ability to dream again. Whether you are interested in military history, baseball history or simply the story of one man who conquered great odds to achieve more than could reasonably be expected of him, you must read this book.

*This review was written by David G. Mitchell and originally appeared at [www.wv2f.com](http://www.wv2f.com)*



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