

# Wartime Baseball in Hawaii

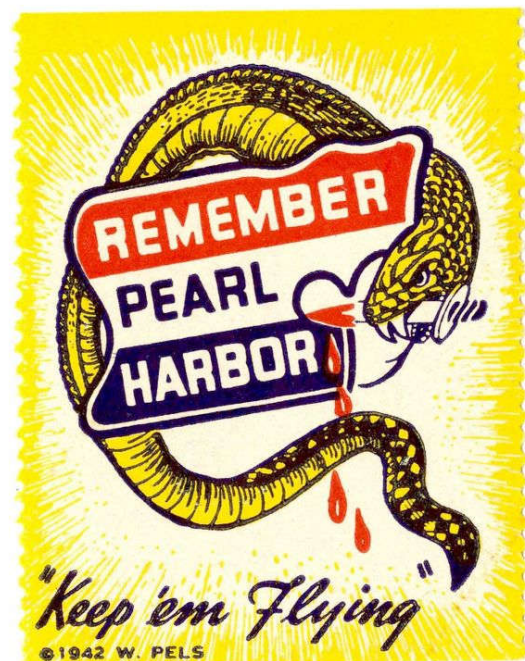
1942: The Year of Unpredictability



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Trying to tell the story of baseball in Hawaii during World War II was always going to be a challenge. Apart from it being over 70 years ago, there are no official records to delve into. Instead, I've had to rely on newspapers, books, published articles and personal recollections of those who were there. Putting this together in a cohesive and entertaining format, as any historian will tell you, is never easy.

I chose to tell this story in a chronological order, starting with 1941 as a way of setting the scene. And so, with this issue of the Baseball in Wartime Newsletter we move on to 1942 – a somewhat in-between year of uncertainties in every sense. Military baseball in Hawaii took a backseat in the spring and early summer of 1942. There was little to cheer about as far as the war was concerned and the efforts of military personnel were focused on training for war, not perfecting the squeeze play. But baseball did rear its head as the year progressed. It seems you can't stop Americans playing the game no matter what. So, 1942 is a slow burner – a transition from pre-war baseball to the



organized game the military actively encouraged and welcomed in 1943.

I was grateful to receive some very complimentary emails regarding the 1941 issue of this Hawaiian adventure. I hope you enjoy this one as much.

*Gary Bedingfield*

Don't forget to visit my websites!  
[www.baseballinwartime.com](http://www.baseballinwartime.com)  
[www.baseballsgreatestsacrifice.com](http://www.baseballsgreatestsacrifice.com)

"Think of these men who now play, but soon will fight, and remember that they will take baseball with them, in their hearts."

*J. G. Taylor Spink, editor, The Sporting News, 1942*

# Wartime Baseball in Hawaii

## 1942: The Year of Unpredictability

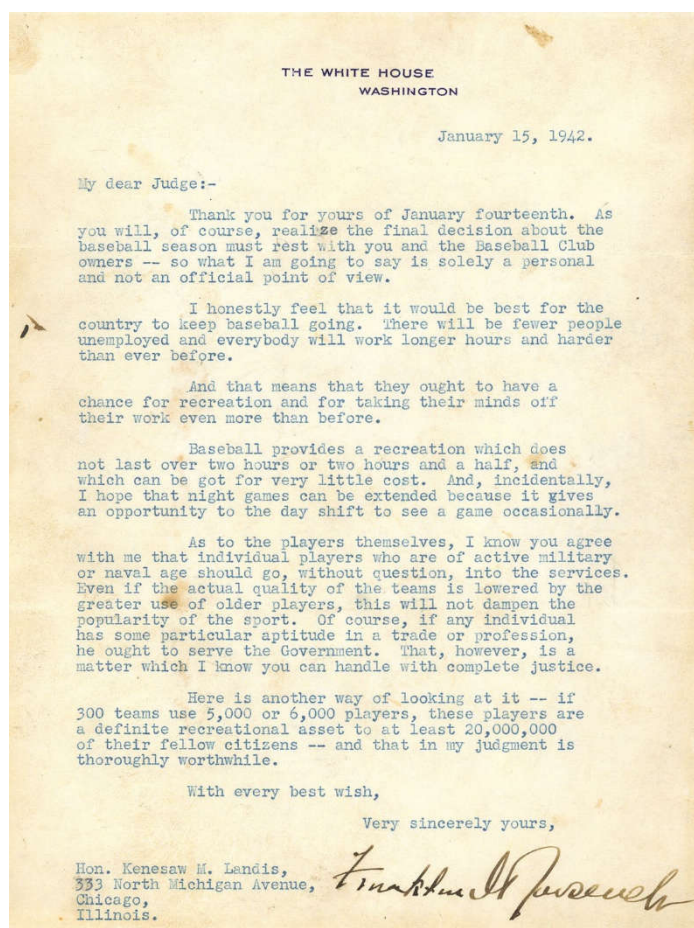
"'Baseball for 1942 is still unpredictable,' says a sportswriter. Will someone name something that is predictable for 1942?"

*St. Louis Star-Times*

The question on everybody's mind at the start of the year was would baseball survive the war? America's entry into World War I had prematurely ended the 1918 season on September 2, after a "Work or Fight" order forced all able-bodied Americans of draft age out of non-essential employment and into the Army or war work. Fears that the war would jeopardize baseball again in 1942, however, were quashed when President Roosevelt, in response to a direct plea from baseball's ruling head, Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis, sent his now famous January 15 "Green Light" letter. Roosevelt wrote, "I honestly feel that it would be best for the country to keep baseball going," and added that he would like to

see more night games that hard-working people could attend. Roosevelt also noted that baseball could provide entertainment for at least 20 million people, and that although the quality of the teams might be lowered by the greater use of older players, this would not dampen the popularity of the sport.

But, although players were enlisting or being drafted into the armed forces from the beginning, there existed throughout the war an undertone of displeasure towards seemingly fit men participating in sports and apparently evading military duties. Some thought baseball squandered manpower and should shut down for the duration. In hindsight, this attitude is understandable, but there is little doubt baseball was a major morale booster throughout the war years. In response to the negative undertones, the Sporting News took it upon themselves, in April 1942, to ask servicemen for their view on the situation – should baseball continue while they fight and perhaps die for democracy and freedom? An abundance of replies besieged the offices of the Sporting News in St. Louis strongly backing the President's directive to keep baseball



going. Private John E. Stevenson, based at Fort Dix, New Jersey, wrote, "Baseball is a part of the American way of life. Remove it and you remove something from the lives of American citizens, soldiers and sailors." Private Clifford P. Mansfield at Fort Knox, Kentucky, added, "For the morale of the soldier and the morale of America itself, 'keep 'em playing'."

Baseball responded with enthusiasm. Major league teams with lighting systems were permitted to play 14 night contests during the season, double what they had been allowed in the past. Players and officials took 10 per cent of their pay in War Bonds, and dozens of benefit games were staged by major and minor league teams to raise money for War Bonds, the USO, the Red Cross, and the Army and Navy Fund. The game made every effort to play its part. Furthermore, in terms of manpower, by March 1942, it was revealed that 581 minor league players were in military service. And some of them were on their way to Hawaii.

However, the war situation was not viewed upon with such optimism. Following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, they had attacked British, Dutch and American territories in Asia and the Pacific. By June 1942, Japanese conquests encompassed a vast area of south-east Asia and the western Pacific. There was little to shout about although the Battle of the Coral Sea in May, one of the first naval battles fought in the Pacific during World War II, stopped the Japanese from invading Port Moresby and threatening Australia, while at the Battle of Midway in June, the United States Navy defeated a Japanese attack. Among the aviation heroes of Midway was Ensign Constantine G. "Gus" Bebas. In 1942, Bebas was the pilot of a Douglas SBD-3 Dauntless dive-bomber on the aircraft carrier USS Hornet, but in 1939, he'd pitched for the Hickory Rebels of the Class D Tar Heel League.



*Gus Bebas*

On June 5, 1942, Bebas was piloting one of 20 dive-bombers that were launched from the Hornet to attack a small Japanese force of cruisers and destroyers. When the fast-moving Japanese destroyer Tanikaze was spotted, Bebas put his plane into a vertical dive, selected his point of aim, and raced towards the destroyer amidst flak bursts from anti-aircraft guns. Frighteningly close to the huge destroyer, Bebas pressed the bomb release button, pulled out of his dive and closed the dive brakes. Bebas's bomb fell just 100 feet from the Tanikaze's port quarter. The following afternoon, he participated in a strike against the heavy cruisers Mikuma and Mogami, scoring a damaging near miss on the latter ship. Following the Battle of Midway, the Hornet returned to Pearl Harbor.

While on a routine training flight leading three planes on a dive-bombing practice off Oahu on the morning of July 19, 1942, Bebas put his Dauntless into a dive to attack a target boat maneuvering off Barber's Point. He released his practice bomb at 2,000 feet, but instead of immediately recovering and gaining altitude he entered a steep right turn. Whether he blacked out or was unable to overcome the heavy stick-force

present in the dive is unknown, but his plane crashed into the ocean, killing himself and the observer/rear gunner, Ensign William M. Stevens. Gus Bebas was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his involvement in the Battle of Midway.



Military baseball in Oahu was on hold when spring came around in 1942. For decades, Army and Navy teams had looked forward to competitive exploits on the ball field during the summer months, but now Hawaii – like the rest of the United States – was at war.

“We are not to have organized baseball in the Hawaiian Department this year,” declared Lt. K. S. Vandergrift in the Honolulu Advertiser in April 1942. “Continuous operation for 30 years has been set aside for the duration. But already we note men in their exercise periods turning out to toss the ball around. First the boys were just going out with a bat and . . . ball. Next, they were out with gloves to handle a few hot ones. Next came spiked shoes to speed it up. Now we see soldiers with baseball caps on and full teams playing hardball. It won’t be long until the supply sergeants dig down and find the company baseball uniforms.”

Military baseball may have been on hold on Oahu but it was thriving on another of the Hawaiian Islands. Two teams – the Derrick Dynamiters and the Coast Artillery Blue Devils – were both building impressive records and reputations on the island of Hawaii, commonly known as the Big Island. The Derrick Dynamiters, named for their coach, Captain Derrick, had 28 wins and just five losses on the year. They clinched the Big Island Athletic Union (BIAU) championship by defeating civilian team Naalehu (winners for three previous seasons), 6-1, in the semi-final and beating the Army Engineers, 5-0, in the finals on September 6. The Blue Devils – representing the 96th Coast Artillery (AA) Regiment and led by Captain McCreary - had amassed a record of 45 wins and three losses, and faced the Dynamiters in the Coconut Country World Series. On October 16, the Blue Devils beat the Dynamiters, 2-1, with Wilfred “Bill” Willetts, former Georgetown athlete, on the mound, then clinched the title on October 23, with a thrilling 5-3 win, after being 3-0 down in the fifth.

It seemed that no matter what you couldn't stop servicemen playing baseball in Oahu, either, albeit under limited circumstances, and inter-regiment leagues as well as individual teams began to take the field. The Navy team in the Hawaii League dropped out after losing its first eight contests, but the Navy was able to field the Navy Cantonment Messing Club team for much of the summer. With full backing of Lt. R. C. Sutton, in charge of the Navy Cantonment, they would play all comers whenever they could and had a record of 34 wins and 10 losses by late July.



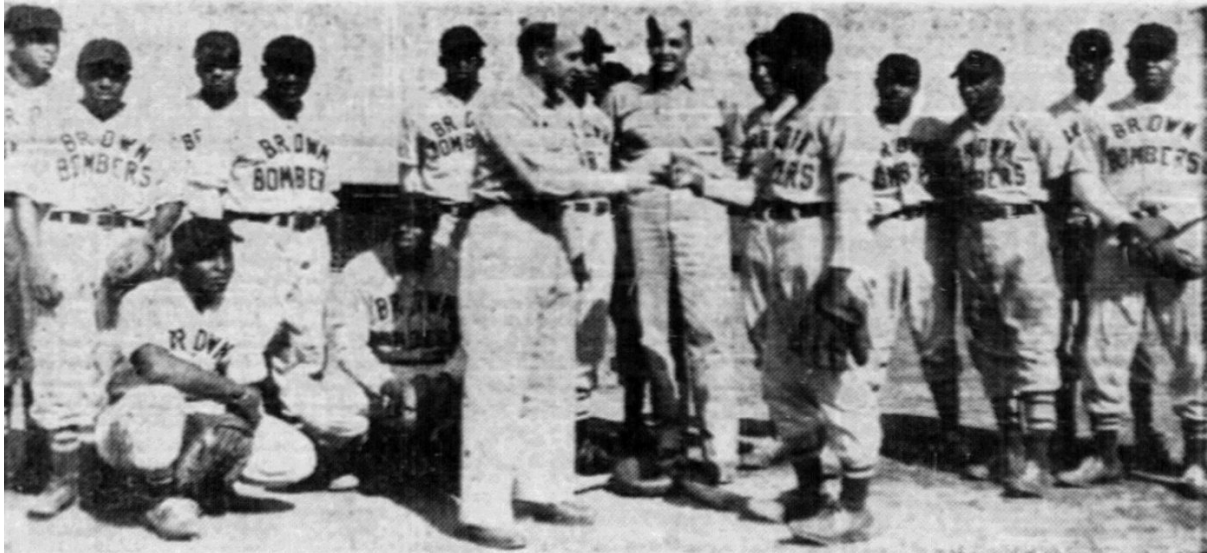
The Navy Cantonment Messing Club. Back row, left to right: CPO James Carstens (Business Manager), Lt(jg) R. C. Sutton (in charge of the Navy Cantonment), Doug Ballard (C/Coach), R. Johnson (OF), Frank Gange (OF), Bernard Stoltz (Manager), Ray Kline (1B), J. Graham (P) and Don Touhy (C). Middle row: Charles Sanders (sponsor), Al DeSantis (2B), W. F. Primo (SS), Charlie Bray (P), William Miltmore, Jack Leickle (C), Robert Gobright (OF) and R. J. Rusnak (3B). Front row: H. Moss, P. Carlson (P), C. W. Hoke, Jr. (IF), J. Silva (batboy), D. Jepson (P), Ray Duvall (3B), B. Lane (SS)

Newly arrived in Hawaii from New Orleans in 1942 was a detachment of African-American troops. In addition to being one of the “snappiest close order drill outfits seen in the southern United States,” and putting on a special drill that “stole the show” at the New Orleans Army Day Parade, their baseball team – the Brown Bombers – had also competed favorably in the local military league. On arrival in Oahu in the spring of 1942, the Brown Bombers were entered into the Fort Armstrong League – the only black unit competing against white teams with such colorful names as the Fightin’ Irish and the Jersey Bouncers.



The Brown Bombers. Back row, left to right: A. Younger, J. Gaskins, J. Rice, Joe Shepard (P), R. White (P), Bill Maddox (2B), F. Russell (OF) and R. Campbell. Front row: C. Johnson, M. Wells, Buford Rankin (P), A. Thomas (C), J. Goodwin, B. Jefferson and I. Perry.

The Brown Bombers line-up included former Homestead Grays pitcher Sonny Boy Jeffries, Lincoln University second baseman Bill Maddox, St. Louis Stars first baseman Leo "Ace" Young and future Negro West Coast League infielder Eddie Kinnon. "The Brown Bombers won . . . with such ease and flashing play they made the spectators and opponents gasp with surprise," declared the Honolulu Star-Bulletin after they clinched the first half pennant.



Captain Henry F. Owsley, Jr., hands Buford Rankin a new ball before the opening game of the Fort Armstrong League.

It was August before anything beyond inter-regiment Army baseball was played in Hawaii. Two all-star teams were formed – the Schofield Barracks All-Stars (who were also known as the North Sector All-Stars) and the Fort Armstrong All-Stars (who were also known as the South Sector All-Stars). Both teams pooled the baseball talent that had arrived in Oahu during the summer, but more importantly, both teams used black and white players making them among the first Army integrated teams of the war years.

By the 1940s, Major League baseball had been racially segregated for decades. The black press and some of their white colleagues had long campaigned for the integration of baseball, but for the most part black America had been forced to create a sporting world of its own, although professional baseball wasn't segregated in Cuba, Mexico and other parts of Latin America.

Commissioner Landis was a stubborn opponent of integrating the white Major Leagues, and he'd blocked all attempts at integrating the game since coming to power in 1920, but World War II experiences prompted more people to question segregation practices. The American and National Negro Leagues were enjoying a resurgence as millions of black Americans, working in war industries were flocking to Negro League games in every city, prompting the revival of the Negro League World Series in 1942 for the first time since 1927.

In July 1942, the Pittsburgh Pirates announced they would offer try-outs to three black players. "Negroes are American citizens with American rights," said Pirates president William K. Benswanger. "I know there are many problems connected with the question but after all, somebody has to make the first move." Nothing came of the try-outs, however. Major League baseball was still five years away from integration but that didn't stop military baseball leading the way.



Eddie Kinnon



Leo "Ace" Young

The South Sector All-Stars of Fort Armstrong featured Sonny Boy Jeffries, Joe Shepard, Eddie Kinnon and Buford Rankin of the Brown Bombers, along with Mel Malanga and Orlando Grande of the Jersey Bouncers, and Ed Krage and Dick Malberg of the Fightin' Irish. When the Brown Bombers were relocated to Fort Hase (allowing them to play for the North Sector All-Stars), the South added second baseman Al Kisko, catcher Johnny Jurasits, pitchers Wally Cyr and Lee Balser, and outfielder Phil Simone.

The North Sector All-Stars with the full backing of Colonel Otto E. Sandman, Post commander of Schofield Barracks and former ball player at the University of California at Berkeley, included minor league pitchers Walt Navie\* and Tracey Hitchner, first baseman Ed Lewinski, shortstop Felix Michaeliski and third baseman Ed Jabb; with the later addition of Ace Young and Eddie Kinnon of the Brown Bombers when they relocated to Fort Hase.

"Baseball is back at Schofield with a bang," announced the Honolulu Advertiser. "It's the kind of team that a coach dreams about," Lieutenant Tommy Kaulukukui told the Honolulu Advertiser. "We will all play for the fun of the game but are out to win."



Three members of the North Sector All-Stars

Ed Jabb

From Chicago, he played minor league ball in the Cubs organization until entering military service in 1941

Walt Stimac

From Cleveland, Ohio, he played in the minors in 1941 shortly before being drafted for military service

Bill Fansler

From South Bend, Indiana, he was a multi-sport high school star at Mishawaka High School



Both teams played against all-comers throughout the late summer months, culminating in the two-game Oahu Army Baseball Championship Series in October.

On Sunday October 18 at Fort Armstrong, South Sector right-hander Leon Balsler scattered four hits and struck out 10 to beat North Sector, 5-1. The following Sunday, North Sector had their revenge at their home ground at Schofield Barracks, with Ray Vanlandingham allowing just three hits over ten innings. In the bottom of the tenth, John Sloey hit a single up the middle to score Ed Jabb from third after fouling off two bunt attempts, to clinch the game for North Sector, 1-0, and fittingly ending the Oahu Army Baseball Championship Series in a tie.

"Yesterday's game was fast, well played and a fitting end to the National Pastime for a while," proclaimed the Honolulu Advertiser, while the Honolulu Star-Bulletin called it "one of the best games ever seen" on Chickamauga Park.

1942 had proved a difficult year for baseball. "Considering the difficulties for players in getting time off from war duty, Army teams this year produced exceptionally fine baseball," noted the Honolulu Advertiser. Minor leagues like the California League failed to complete the season and a further 22 wouldn't be seen in 1943 with more than a thousand players in service by August. Big names in Hawaiian military baseball in 1941, were hardly seen in 1942. Stan Zalegowski, the standout pitcher at Schofield Barracks since the late 1930s, had little time for baseball due to military training. Al Duarte, All-Schofield third baseman with the 3rd Engineer Battalion Beavers was in charge of heavy construction building Oahu's defenses, although he did find time to play for the Hawaii League's Braves.

Angelo DeLucia of the Staff Tigers played a handful of games at the start of the season before serving with a bomber crew during the Solomon Islands campaign. He was back in the newspapers in August, but not for baseball. He was part of a B-17 crew that shot down four Japanese fighters. Delmas "Bud" Bise, outfielder with the 11th Bomb Group Gray Geese in 1941, who had earned a Purple Heart after being buried alive at Hickam Field during the Japanese attack was now on the offensive as a gunner with a B-17 crew, bombing Japanese ships and hitting targets on Wake Island, as well as shooting down a formidable four-engine



*Angelo DeLucia is back row, first left*

Kawanishi "Emily" flying boat. He would earn a second Purple Heart in the New Hebrides. Sadly, Bise's luck ran out in October 1949 when the B-50 bomber he was aboard crashed in England killing all 11 crew members.

In appreciation of the efforts made by the North Sector baseball team, Schofield base commander, Colonel Sandman, wrote the following letter:

I wish to express the sincere appreciation of the personnel of Schofield and of myself for the splendid sportsmanship shown by every member of the North Sector Baseball Squad. The coaches, players, manager, property men and grounds keepers have all given of their own recreation time to provide exceptionally fine entertainment and high-class baseball for the thousands of members of this post and many patients at the hospital. All of the games were well attended and every game showed the fans a good grade of baseball. It is this type of extra push and endeavor by our American soldiers that provides the will to win any battle. I have no fear but that every member of the North Sector Baseball Squad, when called to face the pitches of the enemy hurlers, will be able to pick his time and rap out the best they have for home runs.

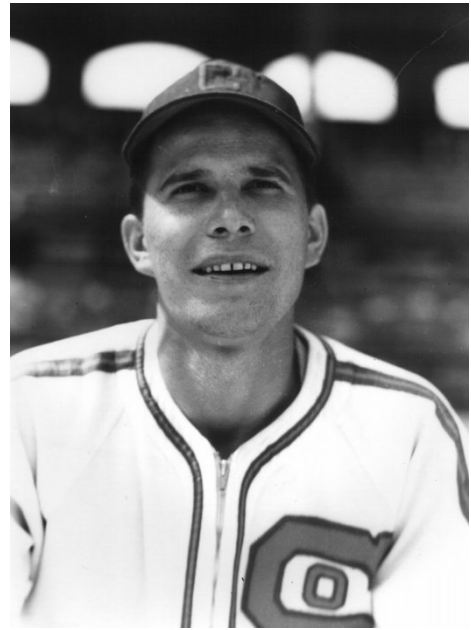
Otto E. Sandman. Colonel, Field Artillery, Commanding

1942 had been a year of unpredictability. Hopefully, things would get better in 1943.



The somewhat dishevelled looking Fort Hase team of 1942. Kneeling at front: Joe Klinec (Coach), Sitting, left to right: John Argyropoulos, Wille Dawson, William Goodwin, Donald Bartley (C), Steve Riggio (Manager), Albert Dyno (OF), Dominick Martello, Paul Rogan and Charles Shanks. Back row: Lt. Col. A. C. Adair, Ed Als (OF), John Predovich, Vrbanc (1B), Ed Hurley, Cecil Goforth (OF) and Harvey Stoner.

\*Walt Navie's story is a tragic one. Before the war he'd pitched for seven seasons in the minors and was a 20-game winner with the Rayne Rice Birds in 1939. He was with the Chicago White Sox during spring training in 1940 and entered military service in February 1942. After his brief stint in Hawaii he was with the military police in Guadalcanal where he suffered from recurring attacks of malaria.



In October 1945, with the war over, the 28-year-old was stationed at El Paso, Texas, where he had gotten married in the spring. On Friday, October 5, 1945, Navie was on duty at the Union Depot Railway Station before returning to the Hotel Oasis at 711 North Oregon Street, where he was living with his wife, Maxine.

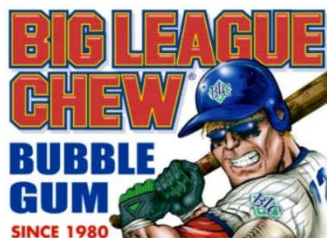
Although fellow MPs said he had been in good spirits recently, Walt and Maxine had been having marital problems. Walt had threatened to kill himself several times and Maxine had filed for divorce the previous day. At around 1 pm, Maxine left the hotel to go shopping and when she returned at 5 pm she found her husband lying on the floor in a pool of blood; a .45 caliber Army revolver beneath his dead body.

On October 10, Justice of the Peace Charles Windberg, Jr., returned a verdict of suicide. Navie had shot himself through the left side of his head at around 2pm. He had left two notes. One note said:

"Dearest Darling Mommie: Dear, I'm sorry you're not home. I really wanted to talk to you for the last time. Goodbye Mommie, I love you always. Daddy."

You can read the full Walt Navie story hear

[http://www.baseballsgreatest sacrifice.com/biographies/navie\\_walt.html](http://www.baseballsgreatest sacrifice.com/biographies/navie_walt.html)



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