

Merry Christmas from Baseball in Wartime



Greetings to you all!

Yes, it's that time of year again and I really can't believe how we got here so quickly. I also can't believe that this is the 27th issue of the Baseball in Wartime Newsletter.

It was in September 2007 that I put together the first two-page edition of this newsletter as a way of sharing information that did generally fit within the scope of the Baseball in Wartime website. Things have certainly grown since those humble beginnings and in October I launched the Baseball in Wartime Blog.

The issue I am now pondering over is whether there is still a need for the newsletter in light of the existence of the blog?

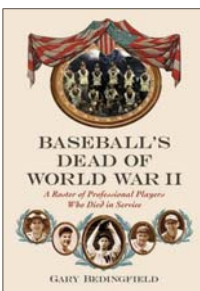
Do the newsletter and blog serve the same purpose?

The advantage of the blog is that it is updated daily, providing you with a constant update on WWII baseball news together with regular features. The newsletter on the other hand, is a monthly release but has the advantage of being printable and is delivered right to your email inbox.

I guess, at this stage, I'm looking for feedback. If I get enough positive response for the newsletter then I'll gladly keep producing it on a monthly basis. If, however, you would rather access this type of information via the blog, then I'll phase out the newsletter over the next few months. Let me know what you think.

In the meantime, I wish you all a Very Merry Christmas and Happy New Year, and please take a moment during the holiday period to remember all those who made the ultimate sacrifice for their country during World War II and all other conflicts.

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November 2009
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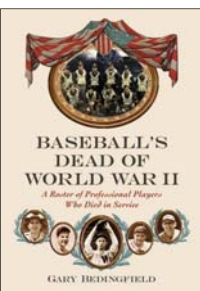


Baseball's Dead of World War II

by Gary Bedingfield

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Sinking of the SS Leopoldville

One of the most tragic and little-known events of World War II occurred on Christmas Eve 1944. The sinking, by a German submarine, of the troopship *Leopoldville* in the English Channel off Cherbourg, France, when 763 American soldiers of the 66th Infantry Division were killed.

On December 24, 1944, 2,235 men from the division embarked on board the Belgian troopship SS *Leopoldville* at Southampton, England for the journey across the English Channel to Cherbourg, France. A few minutes before 6:00PM, a German submarine, *U-486*, fired one torpedo that struck the *Leopoldville* on her starboard side. Even though the ship was only five nautical miles from Cherbourg, the Captain of the *Leopoldville* anchored his ship rather than try to make port. Her crew began to abandon ship while the servicemen remained in the troop compartments not knowing that the ship was sinking.

At 8:30PM, the *Leopoldville* sank by the stern to the bottom of the English Channel. Seven hundred and sixty-three Americans lost their lives, including two minor league ballplayers Howard DeMartini (a pitcher in the Giants' organization) and Leonard Berry (a pitcher with Charleston in the South Atlantic League), and a semi-pro player from Wichita, Kansas, named Gilbert Carrell.

The loss of the *Leopoldville* was an embarrassment to the American and British governments and kept secret for many years. Even the families who lost

loved ones that night were never told the truth and documents related to the sinking were not declassified until 1996.

Also aboard the *Leopoldville* was Harvey Riebe, who had caught 11 games for the Detroit Tigers in 1942. Riebe spent 45 minutes in the icy waters before being fished out by an English boat.

He rejoined his unit after recovering from this traumatic ordeal and in early 1945, the 66th Infantry Division was assigned to do mop-up work against pockets of German resistance around St Nazaire. During that time he was awarded the Bronze Star and took a piece of shrapnel in the right shoulder, but walked to a field hospital where it was removed.

After the war ended, Riebe caught for his unit's team, they defeated several service teams in southern France and later won the championship of the 16th Corps. He listened to the Tigers win the 1945 World Series on Armed Forces Radio. "Listening on the radio from a tent in France," Harvey recollected, "I heard my Tigers win that World Series. It was great!"

Returning from the battlefields of Europe in 1946, Riebe spent the season with Dallas (Texas League) and was back with the Tigers in 1947 where he served as a backup to Bob Swift and Aaron Robinson.

Riebe stayed with the Tigers until 1949. He retired from professional baseball after spending the 1950 season with Toledo in the American Association.

In 1951, Riebe became a purchasing agent for the Cleveland Brass and Copper Company and worked there until 1977.

Harvey Riebe - major league catcher, disaster survivor, Bronze Star and Purple Heart recipient - passed away on April 16, 2001 in Euclid, Ohio. He was 79.



Harvey Riebe



Howard DeMartini



SS Leopoldville



Leonard Berry

Frank and Larry Ciaffone

Frank Ciaffone was little short of sensational as a high school pitcher in Brooklyn, New York, in the 1940s. But it was his cousin, Larry Ciaffone, who would enjoy a long career in the minors and even a brief stint in the big leagues. Despite an apparent destiny with fame, World War II ensured that Frank Ciaffone would not become a household name for baseball fans across America.



Frank Ciaffone

Frank and Larry Ciaffone were born in Brooklyn, New York. Larry in 1924, while cousin Frank was born the following year. In 1940, while Larry was at Lafayette High School and catching for the varsity baseball team, Frank was at Coney Island's Abraham Lincoln High School, where coach Abe Plaut was rebuilding his Brooklyn PSAL championship team following the graduation of many of its star players. Frank Ciaffone was an untested 15-year-old sophomore during the pre-season tryouts, battling for a place on the pitching staff alongside future minor league hurler Irving Feinberg, but he soon claimed top laurels, winning eight games.

Although he barely defeated New Utrecht High, 6-4, to claim Lincoln High's third straight Brooklyn PSAL title on June 7, he went on to deliver an iron man performance, winning four play-off games in 11 days. This included his June 15 win over James Monroe High that clinched Lincoln's first ever New York PSAL title. "It was the stout-hearted pitching of 15-year-old Frank Ciaffone," announced the *New York Times*, "that helped no little in bringing the Brooklynites the crown ... Ciaffone bore down and shut out the Bronx nine in the last four frames."

Five days later, Ciaffone was chosen as the top pitcher on the Brooklyn Eagle's 1940 PSAL All-Brooklyn team. The line-up included future minor leaguers Hal Levine, Chris Hayden, Joe Trotta and Joe Caputo, as well

as future major leaguer and Lincoln teammate Saul Rogovin. "Frank Ciaffone . . . gets the No. 1 mound spot," declared the Brooklyn Eagle. "His effectiveness when the pressure was on, in spite of his lack of experience, made him the top choice."

In 1941, Coach Plaut worked with Frank Ciaffone on his hitting, allowing him to be used in the outfield when not on the mound. Frank developed into a powerful hitter and among the league's top hitters. On April 15, in a game against Curtis High, Frank hit a triple, two doubles and a single while playing the outfield. While not as dominating on the mound as in the previous year, Frank was still highly effective. On April 26, he struck out 10 and yielded just four hits in beating George Washington High, 3-1. On May 16, he limited Manual to five hits, fanned 12 and hit two home runs with none aboard to aid his own cause. And the best performance of his high school career so far - a one hitter - came four days later.

"Sixteen-year-old Frank Ciaffone, little right-hander, who came along just in time to pitch Lincoln to the city PSAL title in last year's campaign, again provided the heroics yesterday as the Honest Abes met the first of a series of crucial tests in their title defense," it was declared in the Brooklyn Eagle the day after the win,.

"Ciaffone has had his troubles this season, and although he did rack up two wins before yesterday, he was hit hard in all of four appearances on the hill. But yesterday it was a different story as the slim veteran put the Honest Abes back in the title race with a 1-0 win over Brooklyn Tech at Lincoln Field.

"The curve-ball artist just missed pitching a perfect game, but as it was faced only the regulation 21 batters for seven innings. He gave up only one single, a blow by Tech's Ray Miller with none out in the second. Miller got as far as second on a steal, but was out at third on another attempted theft. After that it was smooth sailing for Ciaffone. He retired

the side on strikeouts in the third and sixth and fanned a total of 14, seven in order, and gave up no walks."

Although Lincoln missed out on a fourth successive Brooklyn PSAL title in 1941, Frank was named to the Brooklyn Eagle's PSAL All-Brooklyn team as a left fielder. He was joined by future minor leaguer Joe Sticco in right and future Dodger Cal Abrams in center. Also on the 1941 all-star team was Frank's cousin Larry Ciaffone, who the paper described as "an up-and-coming lad who had a great year."

It was also announced that Larry would transfer to Lincoln High School for 1942 to catch Frank. "Larry has a strong throwing arm," said the Brooklyn Eagle, "and his reputation as a catcher will make base stealers think twice."

Frank Ciaffone played his summer baseball in 1941 with the Industrial Container Corporation team in the Brooklyn Amateur League. Playing at the Parade Grounds where Brooklynites would flock in their thousands to watch baseball's future stars, Frank beat Maple Court, 7-0, on July 27, allowing just one hit and adding a home run.

For the 1942 season, Frank Ciaffone was named co-captain of the Lincoln High baseball team along with centerfielder Howie Extract. With batterymate cousin Larry, Frank picked up where he left off. On April 6, he made a relief appearance against Bishop Loughlin High and struck out 11 of 13 batters he faced in the 10-0 win. On April 18, he beat Tilden, 4-0, on a 2-hitter with 11 strike outs. On May 1, he hurled a 6-0 two-hitter over Manual Training, and followed that on May 12 with a 6-0 win over Madison in which he faced just 22 batters and struck out 15. He then produced an outstanding performance on May 22 - a three-hitter to clinch the Brooklyn PSAL title.

"It could be," pondered the Brooklyn Eagle the following day, "that Frank Ciaffone,



Baseball at the Parade Ground, Brooklyn

Frank and Larry Ciaffone

sterling 17-year-old right-handed pitcher of the Abraham Lincoln baseball nine, read up on the career of Joe Gordon of the Yankees. Although they play different positions, the pair have much in common in that they always manage to deliver when the chips are down or the stakes high. When the chance to win the PSAL title of Brooklyn came up yesterday, Frank turned in one of the best efforts of his brief but interesting career in blanking Brooklyn Tech at Boys High Field, 6-0. He handcuffed the Engineers with three scattered hits and sent 15 back to the bench on strikes. The outcome was never in doubt as the Coney Islanders clinched matters with three in the first."

On June 4, Frank Ciaffone – aided by Larry Ciaffone, produced the masterpiece of his career – a no-hitter in the New York PSAL semi-finals. "The name of one Frank Ciaffone will be recorded in the interscholastic mythical Hall of Fame," said the Brooklyn Eagle. "Frank earned that exalted spot by virtue of tossing Abraham Lincoln, Brooklyn titlist, to a no-hit, no-run victory over Curtis, Richmond County ruler, in a PSAL city semi-final yesterday on the defeated nine's field. The final score was 10-0.

"Ciaffone accomplished something that has never been done before, as far as a number of old-timers present could recall, in hurling that no-hitter in the city title series. The cunning right-hander, who is regarded as one of the best schoolboy pitchers since the days when Waite Hoyt was making history at Erasmus Hall, and who has a number of major league scouts already on his trail, was never better in his three years of high school chucking. His fastball hopper and his curves broke sharply and as a result he sat 14 down via the strike-out route. Each member of the Staten Island nine whiffed at least once. Frank did such an effective job that only 31 faced him. One got as far as third base and a lone ball was hit to the outfield."

Larry Ciaffone scored the first run in the game after reaching on an error, and then doubled with the bases loaded in the second to score three more. The sterling semi-final performance, however, gave Frank a lame shoulder and he had to play the outfield the following week as Lincoln clinched the New York PSAL title behind the two-hit pitching of Allie Feldman, who beat George Washington High, 8-1. Feldman would later pitch in the Dodger organization.

Frank Ciaffone was 8-1 for the season and six of his wins were shutouts. Over three years he had won 23 of 26 games and both he and Larry were named to the Brooklyn Eagle's PSAL All-Brooklyn team. During the summer months the cousins played for the Dodger Rookies – a team of Dodger hopeful that included future Dodger outfielder Cal Abrams. The Dodger Rookies played at the

Celtic Oval in Sheepshead Bay. It was a strange park with an asphalt right field because a 200-pound movable fence was pushed out half an hour before game time every Sunday afternoon, to close off Homecrest Avenue. After the game, Homecrest Avenue ceased to be right field and resumed its original identity.

In July, Frank Ciaffone was chosen as the PSAL's most valuable player and was given the opportunity to make a road trip with one of three major league clubs. Surprisingly, he chose the Yankees. "I went with the Yankees," the youngster explained sheepishly to the Brooklyn Eagle, "because the road trip lasted a couple of days longer."

Nevertheless, he was back with the Dodger Rookies as soon as he returned and both Frank and Larry prepared to join Larry MacPhail's organization for the 1943 season. They were expected to play for the Newport News Dodgers of the Class B Piedmont League. Frank also married his high school sweetheart, Rita, that summer.

Meanwhile, war raged across Europe, North Africa and the Pacific. Perhaps Frank Ciaffone was caught up in the moment because he postponed his chance to play professional baseball by enlisting with the Marines in April 1943. And while he was pitching for the Marine Corps Recruit Depot team at Parris Island, South Carolina, during the spring months of that year, Larry entered service with the Army.

During 1944, Larry Ciaffone was stationed at Camp Shelby in southeast Mississippi. Playing for the 288th Field Artillery Observation Battalion team in the 219th Field Artillery Group baseball league, he ably demonstrated his worth as a multi-position player throughout the season. In addition to his defensive skills behind the plate, he hurled a three-hitter and played superb defense in left field. He was also a menace at the plate. Over two games he collected nine hits in 10 at-bats and hit for the cycle in another game.

Later in the year, Larry was sent to Europe with the 288th. The battalion's mission was to locate enemy gun positions by direct observation, sound or by observing the flash of enemy gunfire. The battalion joined General George Patton's 3rd Army in late 1944 near Bastogne, where, on December

16, the Battle of the Bulge was just beginning. This was Hitler's last desperate roll of the dice, with the optimistic aim to reach the port of Antwerp on the North Sea, trap four allied armies, and force a negotiated peace on the Western front. Thinking the Ardennes was the least likely spot for a German offensive, the line was held by just three U.S. divisions and part of a fourth. The German offensive, aided by thick fog, achieved total surprise.

Within three weeks, however, the determined Allied stand and the arrival of powerful reinforcements insured that the ambitious German goal was beyond reach. The Germans failed to meet their objective and all that they accomplished was to create a bulge in the Allied line, hence the name "The Battle of the Bulge." The Germans lost irreplaceable men, tanks and equipment, and on January 25, 1945, after heavy losses on both sides, the Bulge ceased to exist. The Ardennes Offensive was the most bloody of the battles American forces experienced in Europe in World War II, with 81,000 casualties, including 23,554 captured and 19,000 killed. Thankfully, Larry Ciaffone was not among the casualties.

Meanwhile, Private First Class Frank Ciaffone was with the 9th Marines of the 3rd Marine Division in the Pacific. On February 25, 1945, the 9th Marines went ashore at Iwo Jima, where they faced well-organized and determined enemy resistance. Just 750 miles south of Tokyo, the tiny island had great tactical importance. There were two airfields on the island from which Japanese fighter planes had been menacing American B-29 bombers on their way to bomb Japan. If Iwo Jima could be taken, the airfields would serve as emergency landing strips for crippled bombers, and as bases for fighter planes to escort the bombers to the Japanese mainland. The island, however, was about as inhospitable as could possibly be imagined. Five miles long with Mount



Freezing weather during the Battle of the Bulge

Frank and Larry Ciaffone

Suribachi at the southern tip, the sulfur-reeking chunk of rock was scattered with steep and broken gullies that cut across the surface and were covered by scraggy vegetation and a fine layer of black volcanic ash.

The Japanese had no doubt about the importance of Iwo Jima, one of their last outer defenses shielding the home islands, and were determined to keep control. With a garrison of around 22,000 under the control of Lieutenant General Tadamichi Kuribayashi, the Japanese took advantage of the island's natural features and turned it into a fortress of underground tunnels and defensive bunkers, riddled with concrete pillboxes, machinegun pits, trenches and mortar sites.

The Marine's faced fanatical resistance from the moment they hit the beach. Progress was slow and casualties were heavy. On March 3, 1945, under heavy fire from small arms and mortars, the 9th Marines advanced no more than 400 yards, and Ciaffone lost his life. He was 19 years old.

By the time the Japanese capitulated on March 16, a staggering 4,500 Marines were dead including Second Lieutenant Bob Holmes, a pitcher with Joplin of the Western Association in 1942; Private Jimmy Trimble, a promising young pitcher who had been signed by the Washington Senators; Private Jack Nealy, a first baseman with Birmingham of the Southern Association in 1943; First Lieutenant Harry O'Neill, who had caught one game for the Philadelphia Athletics in 1939, and First Lieutenant Jack Lummus, an outfielder with Wichita Falls of the West Texas-New Mexico League in 1941, who also played football with the New York Giants, and was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.



Raising the flag on Mount Suribachi at Iwo Jima



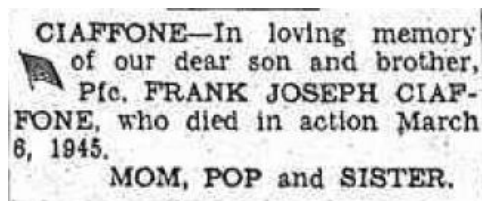
Larry Ciaffone (right) with Bill Dickey (left) and Joe Garagiola (center)

It was almost a month before news of Frank's death reached home. Larry was serving in Germany at the time and Frank's loss came as a terrible shock to everyone. "Ciaffone, Dodger Farm Hand, Killed," announced the Brooklyn Eagle on May 4, 1945.

In March 1946, an anniversary mass was held for Frank at Our Lady of Grace Roman Catholic Church in New York. Among those in attendance were his widow, Rita, his parents Domenic and Kate Ciaffone and sister Lucille. At about the same time, Larry Ciaffone was discharged from military service and reported to the Newport News club for spring training.

Larry, 21, had a strong season with Newport News. In 136 games as an outfielder he batted .281 with six home runs. The Dodgers assigned him to the Mobile Bears of the Class AA Southern Association for 1947, but before he could report he was claimed by the St. Louis Cardinals in the draft and joined the Rochester Red Wings of the Triple-A International League. Also playing in the International League that year was Saul Rogovin, a teammate of cousin Frank at Lincoln High. Rogovin had been a first baseman in high school and at the beginning of his minor league career back in 1941. He was now developing into an effective relief pitcher with the Buffalo Bisons, a Tigers farm club.

Larry Ciaffone, who married Lucy D'Ambrosio the same year, appeared in 54 games with the Red Wings in 1947; he batted a disappointing .231 and was assigned to the Allentown Cardinals of the Class B Interstate League in 1948. This was the season Larry came into his own. He tore up the league with his hitting and was batting an incredible .434 by mid-June. Under first-year manager and former major league pitcher Al Hollingsworth, Larry played 122 games, belted 14 home runs, drove in 92 and batted .373 to earn league MVP honors. He also made six appearances for Rochester and played against Montreal in the Shaughnessy play-offs.



Larry's hopes of playing in the major leagues appeared to be heading in the right direction but on December 23, 1948, thoughts were turned to cousin Frank who had left those hopes and dreams on the battlefields of World War II. The remains of Private First Class Frank Ciaffone, having made the more than 7,000 mile journey from the military cemetery in Iwo Jima, was finally laid to rest with full military honors at Holy Cross Cemetery, Brooklyn, following a solemn requiem mass at Our Lady of Grace Roman Catholic Church.

At the beginning of 1949, Larry Ciaffone was being heralded as a top prospect to take over

Frank and Larry Ciaffone

catching duties for the St. Louis Cardinals. "Ciaffone was rated as one of the best all-around receivers in the minors last season," declared the Brooklyn Eagle, "and stands an excellent chance of taking over the first string job with the Cardinals, according to a number of scouts who saw him operate. Larry is a master at holding up pitchers, paces them nicely and calls his pitches almost letter perfect. In addition he has a strong throwing arm and prevents base occupants from taking liberties with him. His heady work is what caused the Cardinal scouts to recommend that the Brooklyn boy be brought up to the parent body."

Having played a number of games for St. Louis in spring training it was somewhat surprising that he was back with Allentown for the 1949 season. Nevertheless, he responded well and in 117 games he hit .327 - third best in the league - with 15 home runs and 96 RBIs, helping Allentown take the Interstate League pennant. In October he played a number of games with the World Series Stars against the Brooklyn Bushwicks, batting third in a line-up that included Cal Abrams, Phil Rizzuto and Gene Hermanski.

Larry joined the Triple-A Rochester Red Wings for the 1950 season where his bat remained as hot as it had in Class B ball. In 97 games he hit .324 - third best in the league - with 10 home runs and an 18-game hitting streak to help the Red Wings to the pennant. He also proved that he was no pushover on the field. On June 14, as the pennant race really began to heat up. Larry was involved in an on-field fracas with Jersey City Giants pitcher Roger Bowman that had to be broken up by the police. "The Red Wings' Ciaffone didn't like what he thought was a 'dust off' pitch by Bowman," wrote the Amsterdam Evening

Recorder the following day. "Ciaffone grounded out but ran toward the pitcher's box instead of first and began slugging it out with [Bowman]. Players from both teams rushed into the melee and police were forced to restore order."

In October 1950, it was announced that Larry was one of 11 minor leaguers that had been purchased by the St. Louis Cardinals. It looked like the beginning of his major league career was just around the corner. And at about the same time it was announced that Frank Ciaffone's name would appear on the Brooklyn War Memorial that was being built at Cadman Plaza. The dedication was to take place the following November.

Larry Ciaffone had a good spring training with the Cardinals in 1951 and found himself with the club on opening day April 17. With snow in the air, he made his major league debut - aged 26 - before 25,894 fans at Pittsburgh's Forbes Field, as a substitute left fielder and was hitless in two at-bats. He was to make a further four appearances as a pinch hitter for the Cardinals, his last on May 3 against the Phillies, before rejoining the Rochester Red Wings for the remainder of the season. With Del Rice doing the catching and Stan Musial, Peanuts Lowrey and Enos Slaughter in the outfield there was little room for Larry. In a major league career that spanned just 17 days, he was 0-for-5 with a walk and two strike outs.

The disappointment of not succeeding as a major league player also affected his season with Rochester. In 53 games he batted .240 - 84 points below his previous season mark. Nevertheless, he was recalled by the Cardinals on September 7 and although he did not make an appearance he hoped to stick with the club in 1952.

Larry spent spring training with the Cardinals in 1952, a period that was marked by the death of Frank Ciaffone's father on March 25. Domenic Ciaffone, a plumbing contractor, had spent all his life in Brooklyn and was a veteran of World War I. His dream would have been to see his son, Frank, play for the Brooklyn Dodgers. That dream ended in 1945, but he did get to see his nephew, Larry, make it to the big leagues with the Cardinals.

Larry was on option to Rochester for the regular season - his third year with the club - and although he failed to find the hitting stride he had enjoyed in previous years he still helped the club to the Governor's Cup with a .279 batting average and solid defense in the outfield.

In 1953, 28-year-old Larry Ciaffone joined the Houston Buffaloes - the Cardinals affiliate in the Class AA Texas League. The new surroundings revitalized his batting and he hit .304 in 141 games but it was his last season with the Cardinals. In 1954, he joined the Washington Senators organization and played for the Chattanooga Lookouts of the Southern Association, where he hit .309 in 91 games. With former Brooklyn Dodgers manager Chuck Dressen at the helm of the Washington Senators in 1955, Larry was given a spring trial by the capital city club but was unable to earn a place and was back with Chattanooga for the regular season. On April 5, in an exhibition game for Chattanooga against the New York Yankees, Larry drove in five runs with three singles, but he appeared in just 21 regular season games for the Lookouts, batting .353 to end his professional playing career on a high.

Larry Ciaffone played 10 seasons in the minor leagues. He had appeared in 978 games, collected 1030 base hits and 65 home runs for a career batting average of .304. He later worked as a New York area scout and passed away in Brooklyn on December 14, 1991, aged 67.



The Brooklyn War Memorial



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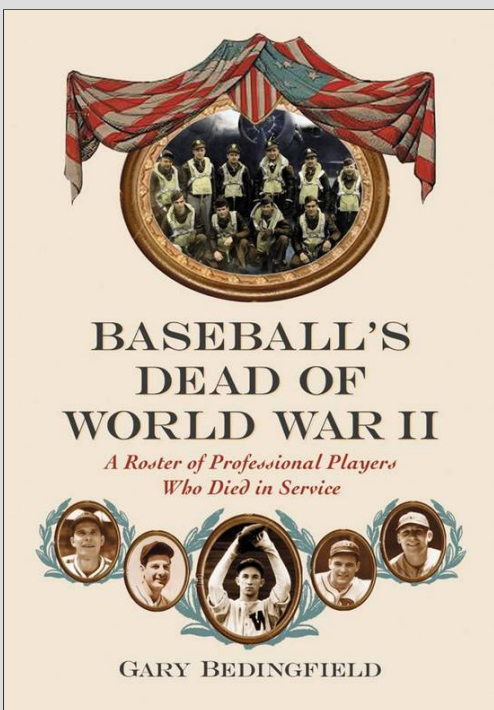
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Baseball's Dead of World War II
A Roster of Professional Players Who Died in Service

Gary Bedingfield

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While most fans know that baseball stars Ted Williams, Hank Greenberg, and Bob Feller served in the military during World War II, few can name the two major leaguers who died in action (they were catcher Harry O'Neill and outfielder Elmer Gedeon). Far fewer still are aware that at least another 125 minor league players also lost their lives during the war. *Baseball's Dead of World War II* draws on many years of extensive research and interviews with surviving family members to give the first published insight into the personal lives, baseball careers and tragic sacrifices made by all these men.

Some players, like pitcher Joe Pinder and shortstop Ed Schohl, had enjoyed long careers in the minor leagues; others like second baseman Chuck Bowers and pitcher Elmer Wachtler, were starting their steady climb through the lower leagues; while some like catcher Harlan Larsen and pitcher Jim Trimble, had signed contracts but had not yet thrown a ball in a professional game. Whatever their background in professional baseball they all shared one thing in common . . . they made the ultimate sacrifice for their country and their stories are in *Baseball's Dead of World War II*. I urge you to read about these heroes of our game and not let their sacrifice be forgotten by this and future generations. *Baseball's Dead of World War II* by Baseball in Wartime founder Gary Bedingfield is published by McFarland - leading publishers of scholarly and reference books in the United States.

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