

Well, it's been over three years since the Baseball in Wartime Newsletter last made an appearance and many of you might think I've given up on my World War II baseball research. The last few years I've been concentrating on my other venture, Baseball's Greatest Sacrifice, a biographical record of all ballplayers who lost their lives in military service. Baseball's Greatest Sacrifice now includes almost 500 biographies and, while I'm sure there are other players who should be included, my resources are no longer yielding names that haven't been included. So, it's time to get back to Baseball in Wartime!

This newsletter is dedicated to a team that played in Europe from 1943 to 1945, clinching the 1944 ETO championship against all odds. I had the pleasure of interviewing many of the players on this team back in the 1990s. Sadly, they are no longer with us but I was determined to ensure their achievements would remain. Here is the story of the 988th Military Police, Aviation Fliers.

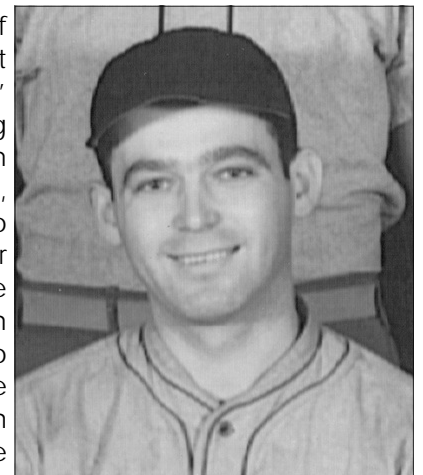
988th MP Fliers ETO Champions of 1944

Seventy years ago, on a cool and damp afternoon in London, two United States military baseball teams met on a makeshift diamond to decide the European Theater championship of 1944. One team, coming into the game with a 23-game winning streak, represented a vast US Army general depot. The other team was a little-known company of MPs who were about to make a name for themselves as ETO champions.

The 988th Military Police Company, Aviation, was activated at Camp Ripley, Minnesota in September 1942, and softball games quickly became a part of the daily routine. The company later moved to Lockbourne Army Air Base at Columbus, Ohio, before moving on to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey for overseas deployment.

With a company strength of just 100 men, the 988th arrived in England in January 1943, and had to adjust to blackouts, rationing and fog in the war torn capital city of London. Bushy Park, southwest of London (codenamed Widewing and later known officially as Camp Griffiss), was a large US military base that served as the European Headquarters for the USAAF, and would be the home of the 988th for the next two years. To highlight the significance of the place, General Dwight Eisenhower used Bushy Park as the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEP) center for planning Operation Overlord, the codename for the Allied invasion of north-west Europe that began with the D-Day landings in June 1944.

In the early spring of 1943, Private First Class Andrew "Dee" Dzuris - a young shortstop from Dunmore, Pennsylvania, who had played minor league ball in the Canadian-American League and Ohio State League before the war - began rounding up some fellow MPs to play catch in an area



Andrew "Dee" Dzuris

known as the Warren Plantation at Bushy Park. British people often stopped to watch the young Americans, amazed at their gloves and narrow bats, which were nothing like the much wider cricket bats they were more accustomed to seeing and using. Also watching, was the company commander, Captain William H. Morrison, who himself had organized a ball team from his machine gun company during the First World War. In March 1943, recognizing the morale-boosting qualities of baseball, Captain Morrison announced the formation of the 988th Military Police Fliers.

Among the original players who joined Dee Dzuris and turned out for the team that spring were Elwood Hoffman from Scranton, Pennsylvania; Norbert Kuklinski, Ed Krull, Jim Cleary and Frank Mucci from

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The 988th MP Fliers with their 1943 silverware.

Chicago; Bob Froelich from Defiance, Ohio; Ed Hawkins from Seneca, South Carolina; Ed Gatlin from Hammond, Louisiana; John Conter from Brooklyn, New York; and Rufus Bell from Weldon, Arkansas. Also joining the team were three players from the 1665th Ordnance Company, also stationed at Bushy Park. They were Bill Brech from Secaucus, New Jersey; Art Lamb from Harrison, New York; and Floyd "Lanny" Lancaster from Lafayette, Indiana. The team was managed by Bill Moore of Greenville, South Carolina, former co-owner of the South Atlantic League's Greenville Spinners.

Baseball teams were popping up all across Britain as the US military build-up got into full steam during 1943, and there was no shortage of competition for the Fliers. Their first official game took place on April 26. A pre-season warm-up against the 901st Engineers - also stationed at Bushy Park - in which the Fliers were triumphant, 4-3.

On Sunday May 3, 1943, the regular season began with a trip to the Eighth Fighter Command Headquarters at Watford. With Brech on the mound, Gatlin behind the plate, Hawkins at first, Kuklinski at second, Lamb at third, Dzuris at shortstop, and

Hoffman, Conter and Krull in the outfield, the Fliers had an easy 9 to 5 victory, with Hawkins going 4-for-4 with a home run (he opened the season with seven straight hits). That victory began a nine game winning streak that included a 4-1 win against former Bi-State League pitcher Lew Tabor and the Eighth Air Force Service Command team, and a 2-0 win over Chuck Eisenmann's CBS Clowns, probably the best team in the country at the time. Eisenmann had pitched for the Pacific Coast League San Diego Padres before entering military service in April 1942, but a two-run single by John Conter (scoring Kuklinski and Dzuris) made the difference in that game as Bill Brech held the Clowns to just one hit.

The Fliers' winning streak was finally halted by Ross Grimsley of the Eighth Air Force Bomber Command. Grimsley, who went on to a 16-year career in the minors and pitched for the Chicago White Sox in 1951, held the MPs to one hit and struck out 15.

In addition to league competition the Fliers played nine benefit games during 1943, six of these were "Wings for Victory" games, a National Savings (War Bonds) campaign designed to raise money to build warplanes. "Wings for Victory" events were staged in

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The Eighth Air Force All-Stars in 1943. Fliers on the team are Larry Toth (front row, third left), Floyd Lancaster (front row, far right), Dee Dzuris (middle row, third left), Ed Hawkins (back row, second left), Bill Brech (back row, third left) and Ed Gatlin (back row, fifth left). Former Senators pitcher Montie Weaver is on the far left, back row, Red Sox first baseman Paul Campbell is front row, fourth left, and White Sox pitcher Ross Grimsley is middle row, fifth left.

almost every city, town and village in Britain and baseball was often adopted as an integral part of the proceedings. Playing against Canadian service teams and other US military teams, the Fliers were victorious in eight of nine and came away with a lot of silverware for their trophy cabinet. "We enjoyed being a part of these events," recalled Norb Kuklinski. "We got to meet the local people and the youngsters were a real delight, always full of questions and wanting to check out the gloves, bats and balls."

Many of the local games ended with a trip to the pub in Kingston-upon-Thames. The Ram public house was run by "Pop" Pither, a former British Army sergeant-major, who kept cold beer in his refrigerator for his American buddies. Pither developed a keen interest in baseball and not only watched most of the home field games but also travelled with the team. Another British connection to the club was teenager Larry Palmer, who became the team mascot. Like Pither, Palmer learned a lot about before leaving for Naval Cadet School during the 1944 season.

Eisenhower was a renowned sports enthusiast and frequently enquired about the progress of the Fliers on his daily visits to Bushy Park. "I spoke to him on



Starting pitchers Ralph Ifft (left) and Bill Brech, shake hands before the Air Force-Ground Forces games at Wembley Stadium in August 1943.



The 988th MP Fliers

Front row, left to right: Heinz Roller, Cal Tripp, Rufus Bell, Lanny Lancaster, Ed Krull and Bill Brech. Middle row, left to right: Bob Froelich, Norb Kuklinski, Ed Hawkins, Dee Dzuris, Elwood Hoffman and Chuck Reynolds. Back row, left to right: Lionel Ross, Pop Pither (British fan), Frank Mucci and Larry palmer (bat boy).

numerous occasions when I was on duty at the main gate," recalled Kuklinski. "He always asked after the team and even got to see a couple of our games."

Eighteen-year-old right-hander Calvin Tripp – an American Legion player from Greenwood, South Carolina – and catcher Heinz Roller from Brooklyn, New York, joined the team in July. They were also joined by second baseman Larry Toth, who had played in the Ohio State League before the war. Toth was attached to the 89th Station Complement Squadron and played for the Fliers in their non-league games. Outfielder Bob Froelich went on a hitting streak during the summer, hitting safely in the last eleven games but the Fliers were beaten in a 3-2 heartbreaker to the 901st Engineers to lose out on a chance to tie for the post league title and take part in the ETO World Series. This was followed by another tough loss after a 150-mile road trip to Norwich to

play the 93rd Bomb Group (known as Ted's Flying Circus, due to the popularity of the group's commander, General Edward J. Timberlake). Bill Brech was at the wrong end of a 10-4 score line – the Fliers' biggest defeat of the season.

Nevertheless, the Fliers bounced back with a 13-5 win against the 423rd Signal Corps to give them a 15 -6 won-loss record before the season came to an end in late July following the organization of an Eighth Air Force All-Star team.

Coached by former Washington Senators pitcher Montie Weaver, the Eighth Air Force All-Stars were scheduled to play the US Ground Forces All-Stars at London's Wembley Stadium on August 7. Selected from the Fliers were their leading hitter Ed Gatlin, along with Dee Dzuris, Bill Brech, Larry Toth, Floyd Lancaster and Ed Hawkins. Before a crowd of 21,500

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cheering fans, Bill Brech hurled the game of his life as he no-hit a Ground Forces line-up that included minor leaguers Walt Hemperly, Maurice Jacobs, Pete Pavich and Walt Novick. Pitching against Brech was minor league veteran Ralph Ifft, who lasted four innings and yielded the game's only run in the second inning. Ifft was replaced by former Senators right-hander Lou Thuman.

Following the Wembley Stadium victory, the Eighth Air Force All-Stars embarked on a 30-day, 29-game tour of Britain, losing just one game along the way. Toth played 22 games and batted .400 (30 for 75) with two home runs. Hawkins hit .333 in 11 games, Lancaster hit .317 in 16 games and Dzuris hit .316 in 18 games with two home runs. Gatlin made an appearance in just one game, while Bill Brech won six games without a loss.

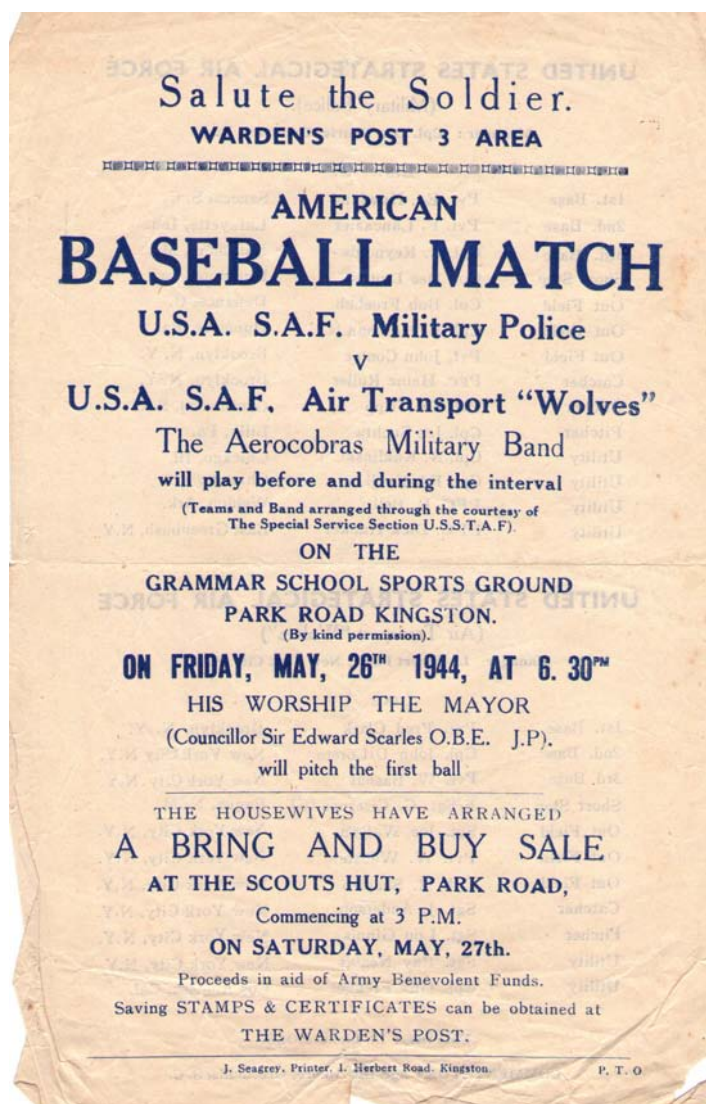
Eighth Air Force commander, Lieutenant-General Ira C. Eaker - who watched the team in action with great joy - personally wrote to each player after the tour. In his letter, he stated the team was, "the best baseball team I have ever seen ... and I have seen all of the big league teams in action."

1944

In 1944, the Fliers moved their home field to Chestnut Avenue in Bushy Park. Dzuris, the previous season's captain, took on the role of team manager, while Lieutenant Lionel Ross of Warrensburg, New York, served as team officer, organising games, pitching batting practice and umpiring as needed. Ed Hawkins became the team captain and third baseman Chuck Reynolds from Baltimore, Maryland, joined the Fliers from the 1109th MP Company.

The season opener was a benefit game at Brighton, on England's south coast, and Hawkins defeated the USSTAF Service Command, 3-2, thanks to a perfect throw from Floyd Lancaster, back of second base, to cut off the tying run in the last inning. The Fliers won their first seven games of the season, including a 3-2 win by Cal Tripp against former Pioneer League pitcher Mauro Ducca of the 78th Fighter Group Thunderbolts. The streak was halted when they faced their nemesis, Ross Grimsley, losing 1-0 on an error in the ninth. Catcher Heinz Roller broke his finger in that game and Tripp had to spend some time behind the plate until the services of Ed Gatlin - who had been playing for the 423rd Signal Battalion - were reacquired.

By mid-season, the Fliers held an uninspiring 13-6 record, although this included four wins in "Salute the Soldier" war-relief games and a second win



against Ducca's Thunderbolts. Their biggest loss was an 11-5 setback to the Ninth Air Force All-Stars.

A combination of bad weather and the threat of German V-1 buzz bombs, put an end to the season for three weeks. When play returned in mid-July, the Fliers were in fine form with a 1-0 one-hitter from Bill Brech against the Ordnance team, and when they clinched the post league championship with a 4-3 win over the 901st Engineers, the Fliers had nine wins against four losses. Just before the Air Service Command Tournament at Warrington, Lancashire in September, outfielder Ed Hawkins and infielder Norb Kuklinski, were sent to France. The team added Frank Berger (outfield), John Kilroy (first base) and Rogers (catcher) from the Engineers; Niergartner (outfield) from the 89th Station Complement Squadron; and Cole (first base) from the Truckers to boost the line-up and defeated the Ordnance Mules, 15-2, to advance to the Air Force Championships. On September 9, Brech faced the mighty Burtonwood Bearcats and hurled his second ETO no-hitter to win 3-0. The following day, Cal Tripp beat Burtonwood, 1-0, defeating Rod Sooter*, who had spent spring



The 988th MP Fliers in France, 1945

Front row, left to right: Bill Brech, Paul Chase, Frank Mucci and Joe Rizzo. Middle row, left to right: Lanny Lancaster, Dick Peterson, Ed Krull, Bob Froelich, Dee Dzuris and Heinz Roller. Back row, left to right: Elwood Hoffman, Steve Fowdy, Cal Tripp, Lionel Ross, Norb Kuklinski, Ed Hawkins, Dick Hacker and John Conter.

training in 1943 with the Pacific Coast League Seattle Rainiers. The Fliers were USAAF champions. Next step was the ETO championship.

*Rod Sooter was tragically killed in a plane crash in Germany in February 1946.

On October 1, 1944, the Fliers played a one game ETO championship decider against the ground force champions, G-45, a major US Army supply depot at Thatcham, Berkshire. G-45 was on a 23-game winning streak and led by shortstop Sam Cozzi, who would play Florida State League and Evangeline League baseball after the war. Cal Tripp toed the rubber for the Fliers and hurled them to victory, holding the Army champs to a measly four hits as Dee Dzuris contributed three hits in the 5-1 win. The 988th Military Police, Aviation – a company of just 100 men – had put together a ball team that defeated everything that was thrown at them and rightfully owned the title of 1944 baseball champions of the European Theater of Operations.

1945

The story of the Fliers didn't end there. Nineteen-forty-five saw the 988th MPs stationed at Camp des Loges, near Paris, France, where they set about building three ball fields. They also dyed their uniforms black and wore them with gold socks for a completely new look. Added to the French-based roster were third baseman Steve Fowdy from Whiting, Indiana, shortstop Dick Peterson from Joliet, Illinois, Casper Bartle from Warminster, Pennsylvania, outfielder Joe Rizzo from Brooklyn, New York and outfielder Paul Chase from Aurora, Indiana.

The season opened on April 8, 1945, with a win against 1665th Ordnance and the Fliers went on an 18-game winning streak to add to their last nine in 1944 to make 27 straight victories. The streak was finally halted by 1st TADA, Germany, 4-1, but the Fliers then went back to England to play the Eighth Air Force and were triumphant with an 8-4 score line. Whilst in England they also played the Canadian

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champions and lost 2-0, falling victim to a Canuck triple play.

Early in the season, the Fliers lost the services of Dee Dzuris who returned to the United States due to illness, and Bill Brech who received an early discharge, but they won the post championship with 15 wins. Back in England, the Fliers were up against the Burtonwood Bearcats again, and were defeated, 4-0.

On Sunday September 2, 1945, the 988th MP Fliers made their final European appearance with Calvin Tripp hurling a 3-0 shutout against the 9th RCDs. They finished the year with 32 wins and just four defeats.

Reflecting on the success of the Fliers, many years later, Norb Kuklinski said, "Our team had great pitching and defense, plus timely hitting. We played a lot of strong teams from big air bases with professional talent that we could not compare with, but pitching carried us most of the time."

Dee Dzuris remembered that "the British people did not understand the game at first, but interest grew and crowds became larger and more knowledgeable, especially for the charity games."

Rosters

1943 Squad

Rufus Bell, OF
Bill Brech, P
Jim Cleary
John Conter, OF
Dee Dzuris, SS (captain)
Bob Froelich, OF
Ed Gatlin, C
Ed Hawkins, OF
Elwood Hoffman, OF
Ed Krull, OF
Norb Kuklinski, 2B/1B
Art Lamb, 3B
Floyd Lancaster, 2B/3B
Frank Mucci, 2B
Chuck Reynolds, 3B
Heinz Roller, C
Larry Toth, 2B
Cal Tripp, P

Bill Moore, manager
Russell Morgan, team officer

Season Record: 15 wins, 6 losses
League Record: 5 wins, 2 losses
Benefit games: 5 wins, 2 losses

1944 Squad

Rufus Bell, OF
Bill Brech, P
Frank Berger, OF
Cole, 1B
John Conter, OF
Dickhout
Dee Dzuris, SS (manager)
Bob Froelich, OF
Ed Gatlin, 2B
Ed Hawkins, OF/P (captain)
Elwood Hoffman, OF
John Kilroy, 1B
Ed Krull, OF
Norb Kuklinski, 1B
Floyd Lancaster, 2B/3B
Frank Mucci, 2B
Niergartner, OF
Chuck Reynolds, 3B
Rogers, C
Heinz Roller, 2B
St. Charles
Larry Toth, 2B
Cal Tripp, P

Lionel Ross, team officer

Season Record: 28 wins, 10 losses, 2 ties
League Record: 14 wins, 3 losses
Benefit games: 4 wins, 1 losses

USSTAF HQ Post League Champions
Air Service Command Champions
ETO Champions

1945 Squad

Casper Bartle
Bill Brech, P
Paul Chase, OF
John Conter, OF
Dee Dzuris, SS (manager)
Steve Fowdy, 3B
Bob Froelich, OF
Ed Hawkins, OF
Elwood Hoffman, OF
Ed Krull, OF
Norb Kuklinski, 1B (manager after Dzuris returned to United States)
Floyd Lancaster, 2B/3B
Frank Mucci, 2B
Dick Peterson, SS
Joe Rizzo, OF
Heinz Roller, C

Lionel Ross, team officer
Richard Hacker, scorekeeper

Season Record: 32 wins, 4 losses

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Biographies

Casper A. Bartle, Jr.

Bartle passed away on August 7, 1992 in Warminster, PA

William C. "Bill" Brech

He signed with Harrisburg of the Class B Interstate League for the 1946 season, but did not play. Instead, Brech worked for the shipping department of the Inland Steel Container Company and continued to play semi-pro baseball with the Otto Mack team, which toured the northeast coast of the United States for several years. Brech was just 56 when he passed away in June 1978.



Bill Brech in France in 1944

Andrew J. "Dee" Dzuris

Dzuris worked for the Veterans Administration after the war and played semi-pro baseball with the Scranton Red Sox. He was the 1949 batting champion with a .429 average. He later served as manager for the Sherwood baseball team and the Bucktown Twilight League team. Dzuris was later employed as a clerk for the US Postal Service and retired after 23 years. He then held the position of attendance officer for the Dunmore School District

for 10 years. Dzuris passed away on June 15, 2008 in Scranton, PA, aged 90.

Edward L. Gatlin

Gatlin worked as a salesman in farm produce after the war. He passed away on August 15, 2000 in Hammond, LA, aged 84.

Edward F. Krull, Jr.

Krull was employed as an asbestos worker after the war. He died of lung cancer in 1985.

Sympharian Norbert "Norb" Kuklinski

Kuklinski worked for Veteran's Administration and passed away on April 10, 2009 Chicago, IL, aged 88.

Floyd "Lanny" Lancaster

After the war he attended Indiana Business College and was a family counselor at Tippecanoe Memory Gardens, retiring in 1991. He passed away on October 2, 1996, in Lafayette, IN, aged 76.

Frank Mucci

Mucci worked as a machine maintenance mechanic after the war. He died of a heart attack in 1966.

Charles "Chuck" Reynolds

Reynolds didn't play baseball after the war due to a knee injury. He worked as a salesman for Luzianne Coffee and Lipton Tea, and also owned a grocery business. He later became an investigator for the state of Maryland.

Lionel E. Ross

A pre-war Cornell University graduate, Ross attended the University of Florida at Gainesville, receiving a Masters Degree in 1951. For many years he worked for the New York State Dept. of Environmental Conservation. He passed away on February 14, 2007 in Warrensburg, NY, aged 91.

Calvin T. Tripp

Tripp passed away on May 11, 1987 in Raleigh, NC, aged 62.

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