

When the United States declared war against Japan, Germany and Italy in 1941, aviation was still in its infancy. It had been less than 40 years earlier that the Wright Brothers had made the first heavier-than-air powered flight, but as young men began to leave the ranks of professional baseball to serve their country, many chose to learn to fly, whether it be with the Army Air Corps, the Navy or the Marines. This month's newsletter takes a look at those pioneering aviators who swapped ball gloves for flying goggles and piloted fighters, bombers, transport planes and flying boats around the world.

# Baseball's World War II Aviators

## The Hall of Famers

### Ted Williams



One of the greatest names in baseball had initially been classified 3-A in the military draft due to the dependency of his mother, but following the 1942 season he joined the U.S. Navy's V-5 program (aviation cadet training). Williams took primary training at NAS Bunker Hill, Indiana. He then went to

NAS Pensacola in Florida for intermediate training where he set records in aerial gunnery. He received his pilot's wings and commission as a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps on May 2, 1944. The 26-year-old attended gunnery training at Jacksonville, then returned to Pensacola where he served as an instructor at Bronson Field. From June to August 1945, Second Lieutenant Williams went through the Corsair Operational Training Unit at Jacksonville, and was in Hawaii awaiting orders as a replacement pilot when the war ended. Williams returned to the United States in December and was discharged from the Marine Corps on January 28, 1946. In 1952, at the age of 34, Williams was recalled

to active duty for service in the Korean War. After learning to fly the new F9F Panther jet fighter, he flew 39 combat missions.

### Ralph Kiner



Kiner, the National League's leading home run hitter from 1946 to 1952, was inducted in the Navy during the spring of 1943. As a cadet, he attended St. Mary's Pre-Flight School in California and earned his pilot's wings and commission at Corpus Christi, Texas, in December

1944. Kiner flew PBM Mariner flying boats on submarine patrols from Kaneohe Bay Naval Air Station in Hawaii, accumulating 1,200 flying hours.

## Big Leaguers

### Bill Atwood

The Phillies catcher was a keen civilian aviator and when he entered military service in October 1942, he already had 1,400 hours of flying time. Atwood initially served as an instructor at Kelly Field and Randolph Field in Texas, before becoming a C-46 Commando transport plane flight officer at

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Sookertang in India, where he flew "The Hump" with Ferry Command.

## Sam Chapman



For Athletics outfielder Sam Chapman, military service beckoned in November 1941. He initially served with the Navy as a chief specialist in athletics at Norfolk Naval Training Station, but made an application for flight training and took preliminary flight instruction at Anacostia NAS

in Washington, DC. In September 1942, he was transferred to Corpus Christi NAS for advanced instruction as a torpedo bomber pilot, receiving his wings and being commissioned an ensign in March 1943. Chapman then served at NAAS Waldron Field, Texas as a flight instructor.

## Jerry Coleman



The Yankees second baseman entered military service in 1942 and earned his pilot's wings with the Navy before transferring to the Marines. As a dive-bomber pilot flying the SBD

Dauntless, First Lieutenant Coleman flew 57 missions against the Japanese. He returned to the United States with a Distinguished Flying Cross in July 1945 to join a carrier squadron. When the war ended, he was at Cherry Point, NC, learning to fly the SB2C Helldiver. In May 1953, Coleman was recalled to service during the Korean War. Holding the rank of captain, he flew 63 missions between January and May 1953, piloting a Corsair ground attack fighter.

## Elmer Gedeon



Gedeon played just five games for the Washington Senators and was one of only two major league players to lose their lives during World War II. Gedeon entered military service in March 1941. He earned his pilot's wings

and a commission as a second lieutenant at Williams Field near Phoenix, Arizona, in May 1942, and was almost killed when his B-25 Mitchell bomber crashed during take-off from Raleigh Airport, North Carolina. Despite suffering three broken ribs, Gedeon managed to free himself from the burning wreckage, but returned to rescue a crewmate. He was awarded the Soldiers' Medal for this heroic act. By February 1943, First Lieutenant Gedeon was stationed in England with the 394th Bomb Group. On April 20, 1944, he piloted a B-26B Marauder, one of 30 Marauders that left Boreham Field that afternoon to bomb a German V1 site being constructed at Bois d'Esquerdes, France. Gedeon's bomber dropped its bombs and had just passed over the target when the plane took a direct hit under the cockpit. The flame-engulfed airplane spiraled out of control, carrying Gedeon and five others to their death.

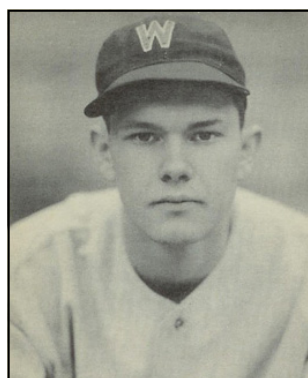
## Jake Jones



White Sox first baseman Jake Jones entered military service in 1942 as an aviation cadet with the Navy. He earned his wings as a fighter pilot and served in the Pacific Theater flying the F6F Hellcat on the carrier USS Yorktown. Flying campaigns in the Philippines, Formosa, China, Iwo Jima, Okinawa

and Japan, Lieutenant Jones shot down seven Japanese planes, the highest total in his group. He was also responsible for the sinking of at least four Japanese ships.

## Buddy Lewis



Senators third baseman/right fielder Buddy Lewis attended flight school in Texas and Georgia before going overseas. A C-47 Skytrain transport pilot, Captain Lewis served in the China-Burma-India Theater and flew over the Burma jungle amassing 1,799 flying

hours of which 611 were in combat during 392

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missions. He returned home in 1945 with the Distinguished Flying Cross and Air Medal.

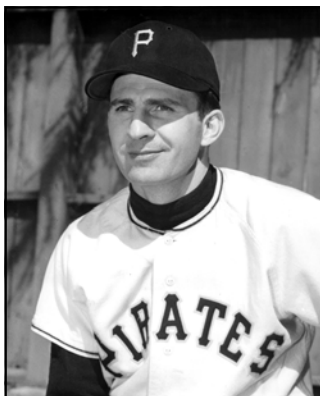
## Bob Neighbors



Neighbors played just seven games as a shortstop and pinch runner for the St. Louis Browns in 1939. He entered military service with the Army Air Force at Tulsa, Oklahoma in May 1942 and was later stationed in Wichita Falls, Texas, Montgomery, Alabama

and California. Neighbors didn't return to professional baseball after the war. He chose, instead, to remain in military service and had attained the rank of major by the time he saw combat duty during the Korean War. Piloting a B-26B Invader on August 8, 1952, Neighbors reported that his plane had been hit by enemy fire and that he and his crew were bailing out. They were never seen or heard from again.

## Tom Saffell



Pirates outfielder Tom Saffell enlisted in May 1942. He trained as a fighter pilot and served in Europe with the 405th Fighter Squadron of the 371st Fighter Group. As a P-47D Thunderbolt pilot, he flew 61 combat missions from bases in France and Germany between April 1944 and May 1945.

## Bert Shepard



Senators pitcher Bert Shepard - the only person to appear in a major league game with an artificial leg - entered military service in May 1942. He earned his pilot's wings in 1943 and crossed the Atlantic to

England to join the 55th Fighter Group. By May 1944, Shepard had flown 33 missions in his P-38J Lightning twin boom fighter plane, and on May 21, he

volunteered for his 34th. While attacking an airfield near Ludwigslust, east of Hamburg, Germany, his plane was hit by enemy flak. With shells tearing through his right leg and foot, Shepard was knocked unconscious and at 380mph the fighter plane crashed into the ground. Shepard's damaged right leg had to be amputated 11 inches below the knee. After a long period of recovery, he was transferred to a prison camp until returning to the United States as part of a prisoner exchange in February 1945. He made his only major league appearance on August 4, 1945.

## From the Minors



## Gus Bebas

Bebas, who pitched in the Tar Heel League in 1939, was a SBD-3 Dauntless dive-bomber pilot with the Navy. Flying from the deck of the USS Hornet, he participated in attacks on Japanese military ships in June 1942. While on a routine training flight the following month, Ensign

Bebas put his Dauntless into a dive to attack a target boat off the coast of Hawaii. He failed to recover from the dive and was killed upon impact with the sea.



## Keith Bissonnette

Bissonnette had played in the American Association in 1942 and entered military service the following February. He earned his pilot's wings by the end of the year and served with the 80th Fighter Group in Burma. First Lieutenant

Bissonnette flew over 200 missions as a P-47 Thunderbolt pilot, and received the Distinguished Flying Cross and Air Medal. On March 28, 1945, he was killed when his plane crashed while attacking Japanese troop concentrations.

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## Bill Brenner

Catcher Bill Brenner played in the Western International League in 1941 and flew 29 missions as a B-17 Flying Fortress pilot and squadron leader. Attaining the rank of captain, he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and Air Medal.

## Bobby Byrne, Jr.



Outfielder Bobby Byrne, Jr., was playing in the Kitty League before entering military service in 1941. He received his pilot's wings at Luke Field, Arizona in March 1942, and served in Egypt with the 57th Fighter Group. Piloting a P-40 Warhawk fighter plane, Byrne shot down six enemy planes and was one of the leading Army Air Force aces at the time. He returned to the

United States during the summer of 1943 with the Distinguished Flying Cross and Air Medal. Attaining the rank of major, he served as an instructor and test pilot for the remainder of the war.

## George Gamble



Outfielder George Gamble had played in the Canadian-American League in 1938, and entered military service in September 1942. He earned his pilot's wings as a fighter pilot and served overseas flying a P-51B Mustang out of Kunming, China, with the

51st Fighter Group. On December 4, 1944, flying his 29th mission, Second Lieutenant Gamble attacked a Japanese troop train. He made a direct hit on the train but was caught in the explosion and killed when his plane crashed.

## Gordon Houston

Gordon Houston was an outfielder in the East Texas League in 1940. He enlisted in the Army Air Corps in November of that year and served as a fighter pilot with the 55th Pursuit Group in Tacoma, Washington.

Second Lieutenant Houston flew a P-43 Lancer up and down the coast, looking for Japanese submarines or aircraft carriers that might be targeting manufacturing plants in that region. On February 10, 1942, Houston landed at McChord Field after an uneventful sortie but hit at ditch at the end of the runway while taxiing. The plane flipped over and his death was instantaneous.

## Lou Janicek

Janicek had pitched in the Pacific Coast League in 1941 and entered military service immediately after that season. He served in Europe as a P-61 Black Widow night fighter pilot and completed 30 strafing and radar-controlled interception patrols over Germany.

## Felix Little



Felix Little had pitched in the Tar Heel League in 1940 and entered military service with the Navy the following year. He graduated as a bomber pilot at Jacksonville, Florida, and flew PV-1 Ventura twin-engine bombers in Brazil. On December 18, 1944, Lieutenant Little was

among nine crew and passengers aboard a PV-1 being flown by Lt. Charles G. Wolfe. As the plane left the runway, the port engine exploded and the airplane crashed, killing all on board.

## Joe Loadholtes

A pitcher in the Florida East Coast League in 1942, Joe Loadholtes entered military service with the Army Air Force in August 1942. He trained as a bomber pilot and served with the 389th Bomb Group in England, piloting B-24 Liberator four-engined bombers. First Lieutenant Loadholtes participated in 35 missions and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and Air Medal.

## Jack McKinney

Jack McKinney pitched in the Piedmont League in 1942 and entered military service at the end of the season. He served with the Army Air Force in Europe as a B-17 Flying Fortress pilot with the 350th Bomb

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Squadron of the 100th Bomb Group. Second Lieutenant McKinney flew 35 missions.

## Lou Miller



Lou Miller, a third baseman in the Northeast Arkansas League in 1940, entered military service in November 1941 and earned his pilot's wings at Lubbock, Texas, the following year. He served in the Pacific with the 43rd Bomb Group, flying missions as a B-17F Flying Fortress pilot from New Guinea. On March 3, 1943,

Second Lieutenant Miller was co-piloting a mission against a Japanese shipping convoy when the bomber was attacked by enemy fighter planes. Still able to complete the low-level bombing run, the crippled plane headed for home at an altitude of just 300 feet and was never seen again. Miller was posthumously awarded the Silver Star.

## Frank Schulz



Frank Schulz, an Eastern League pitcher in 1942, piloted B-24 Liberator bombers with the 5th Bomb Group in the Pacific. On June 17, 1945, Second Lieutenant Schulz was at the controls of a B-24 that left Samar Island on a bombing run to Borneo. The plane with its crew of nine

was never seen again. Schulz was posthumously awarded the Air Medal.



## Walt Schmisser

Walt Schmisser was a PONY League catcher during 1942. He entered military service with the Navy at the end of the season and trained as a fighter pilot. Flying F6F-5 Hellcats from the deck of the USS Lexington, Ensign Schmisser embarked on a

mission on February 19, 1945, to attack Japanese positions at Chichi Jima in the Bonin Islands. Forced to bail out when his plane was hit by enemy anti-aircraft fire, Schmisser was never seen again.

## Walt Shinn



Outfielder Walt Shinn had played in the International League in 1940 and enlisted in the Navy the following spring. He earned his pilot's wings in 1942 and after spending time as an instructor, he was assigned combat duty in the Pacific. Piloting PBV Catalina flying boats, Lieutenant Shinn was awarded the Distinguished

Service Medal for damaging a Japanese cruiser in the Solomon Sea, and later received the Distinguished Flying Cross.

## Jack Siens



Jack Siens was an outfielder in the Mountain State League in 1940 and entered military service with the Navy the following year. He trained as a bomber pilot and was stationed in England, flying anti-submarine patrols over the English Channel in a PB4Y-1 Liberator. On September 10,

1943, Lieutenant Siens was co-pilot during a simulated fighter attack with friendly aircraft. The pilot began the planned evasive action but lost control of the bomber and crashed into the sea. Siens body was never recovered.

## Marshall Sneed



An outfielder in the Northeast Arkansas League in 1940, Marshall Sneed entered military service in February 1941 and trained as a fighter pilot. He was assigned to the 57th Fighter Group and flew a P-40F Warhawk in North Africa. On

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February 22, 1943, after seven months of overseas duty, Sneed was shot down in the Bay of Gabes, Tunisia, while attacking German forces. His body was never recovered.

## Billy Southworth, Jr.



Billy Southworth, Jr., was the son of the St. Louis Cardinals' manager and an outfielder in the International League in 1940. He enlisted in the Army Air Corps in December 1940 and received his bomber pilot's wings in August 1941.

Assigned to the 303rd Bomb Group in England, Captain

Southworth flew 25 missions as a B-17F Flying Fortress pilot. He returned to the United States in January 1944, was promoted to the rank of major and served as a bomber crew instructor. On February 15, 1945, he was piloting a B-29 Superfortress that left Mitchel Field in New York, bound for Florida. The plane developed engine trouble on the way and attempted an emergency landing at La Guardia. Struggling at the controls of the crippled plane, he overshot the runway, a wing clipped the water and the bomber somersaulted and burst into flames. Major Southworth's body was recovered 24 weeks later.

## Bob Stephens



Bob Stephens pitched in the Kitty League in 1941 and entered military service in February 1942. He earned his pilot's wings and served in England with the 354th Fighter Group. Piloting the P-51 Mustang, Stephens flew 122 missions and was a squadron ace with 13 kills.

Stephens remained in the Air Force after the war and was tragically killed on April 6, 1960, in an F-100F Super Sabre two-seater jet fighter at Cannon Air Force Base in New Mexico.

## Syl Sturges

Syl Sturges was an outfielder in the Coastal Plain League in 1941. He entered military service in October of that year, and trained as a pilot at Yuma, Arizona. Stationed in England with the 314th Troop Carrier Group, Second Lieutenant Sturges piloted the C-47 Skytrain and dropped paratroopers of the 82nd Airborne Division on Normandy on June 6, 1944. The following day, as co-pilot, he was heading back to France to drop supplies to troops on the ground. Shortly after takeoff, the plane was lost out of formation in the low cloud and not seen again. Later that evening, the burnt out wreck was discovered about a mile northeast of Sebeville in France. All four crew members were killed.

## Arnold Traxler

Arnold Traxler was a Texas League outfielder before being called to military service midway through the 1942 season. He trained as a pilot with the Navy, earned his commission in January 1943, and flew TBM Avenger torpedo bombers from the deck of the USS Hornet in the Pacific. Lieutenant Traxler completed 33 missions including the first carrier strike against Tokyo in February 1945. He was awarded the Navy Cross and Distinguished Flying Cross.

## Stan Wolfson



Stan Wolfson was an outfielder in the Appalachian League in 1942. He entered military service in October of that year and trained as a bomber pilot. In December 1943, he was assigned to the 95th Bomb Group in England, piloting the B-17 Flying Fortress. On

November 5, 1944, his plane was badly damaged by anti-aircraft fire after dropping its bomb load on the German city of Ludwigshafen. The crew bailed out and Second Lieutenant Wolfson surrendered to local civilians. He was picked up by members of the German Criminal Police from Kaiserslautern, and executed in a wooded area on the outskirts of the city. Presumably because they had discovered he was Jewish.

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Tom Woodruff



Tom Woodruff was a Michigan State League shortstop in 1941. He earned his wings as a fighter pilot with the Navy in June 1942 and flew F6F Hellcats from the deck of the USS Enterprise in the Pacific. On November 14, 1944, Lieutenant Woodruff flew a mission against Japanese-held Clark Field

in the Philippines. His plane was hit by anti-aircraft fire and his body was never recovered.



306th Bomb Group enjoy a ballgame in England, 1943



Billy Southworth, Jr., with Bob Hope in England, 1943.

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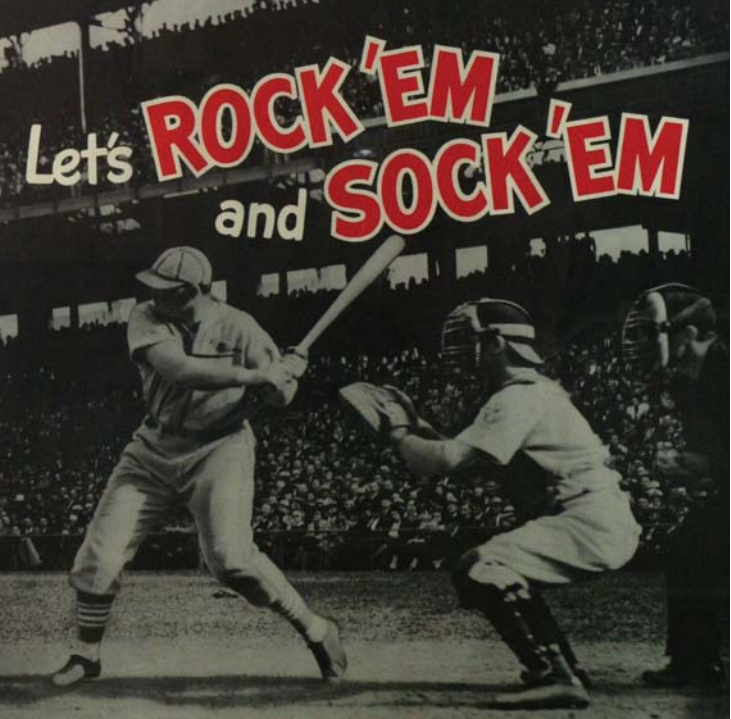


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Ted Williams during the Korean War

*Got a comment or something to contribute?*

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*Where what happened yesterday  
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