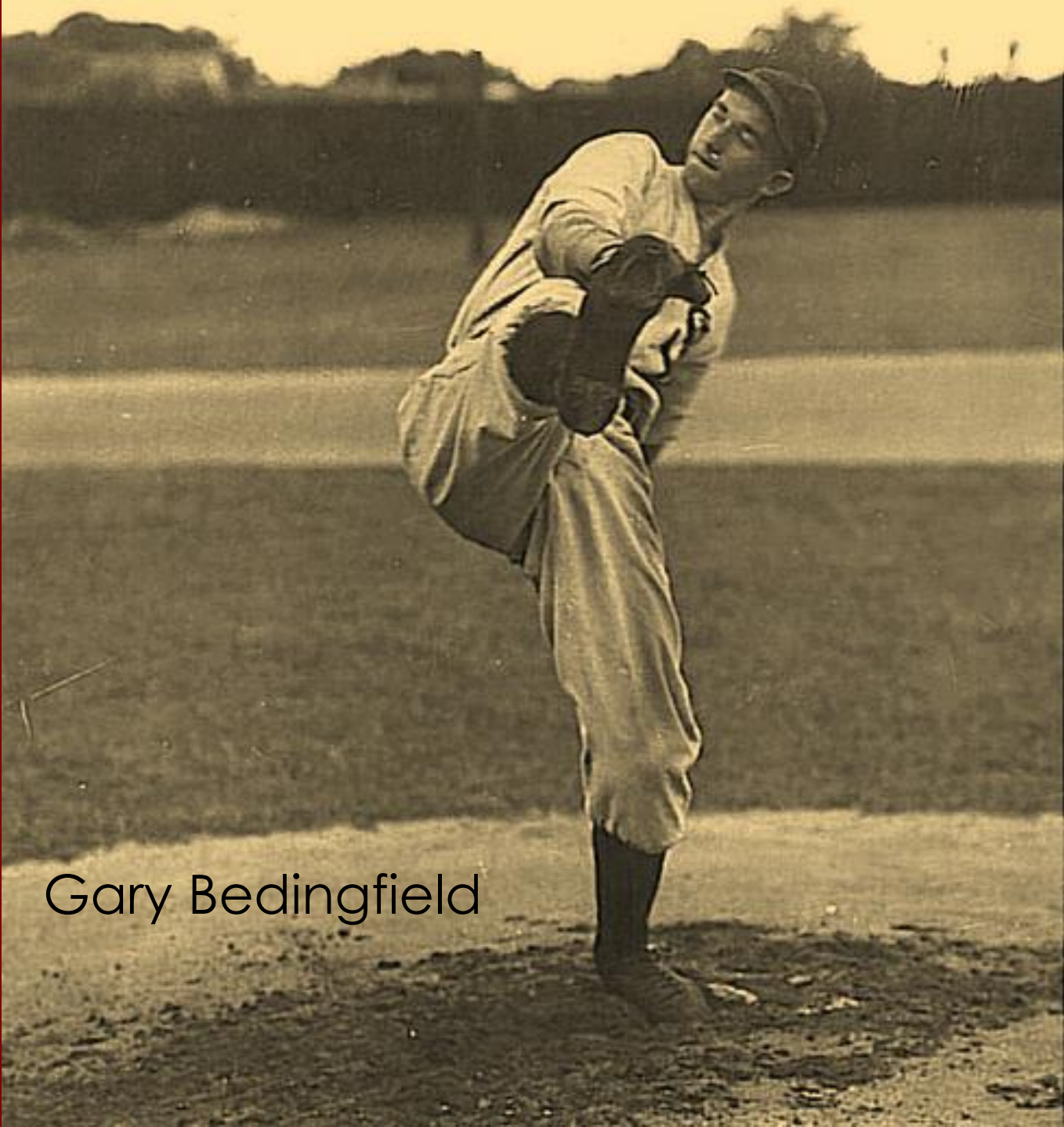


# One Last Pitch Before I Die



Gary Bedingfield

# One Last Pitch Before I Die

Baseball had been a way of life for many of those who served in the military during World War II, but for most, it was a distant memory – a fading recollection of summers long since passed – as the rigors of army life and the instinct for survival became all encompassing.

So, had baseball figured in the lives of men shortly before they went into combat or even lost their lives in service? Was the grip of horsehide, the scent of glove leather and the perfect balance of a wood bat still fresh in their minds? The answer is yes, and "One Last Pitch Before I Die" recounts those events. From game-day tragedies to week-later combat in Normandy, baseball was not always such a distant memory.

## On the Home Front

### Major Serventi

*Baseball had been Serventi's life. He'd had a taste of pitching in the Pacific Coast League and was proudly serving his country in the uniform of the United States Army while still playing baseball at the weekends.*



Growing up in Oakland, California, was all about baseball for Marcello L. "Major" Serventi. At the age of 16, he was pitching for Technical High School, the O.K. Batteries sandlot team, the St. Columba team of the Catholic Youth Organization league, and Post 5, the Bay Area American Legion junior baseball champions. It's not surprising that in the summer of 1934, it was announced that he'd signed with the Oakland Oaks for 1935. Serventi made some strong appearances for the Oaks during spring training but was farmed out to the Vancouver Senior A League where he played for the Athletics and won 12 games, returning to the Oaks in September to make three appearances. Back with Oakland in 1936, Serventi made eight appearances for the team for a 1-0 record, and made 17 early-season appearances for the Oaks in 1937, before being given his release in June. He immediately signed with the Seattle Rainiers

who farmed him to the Wenatchee Chiefs of the Class B Western International League, where he was 10-11 with a 4.08 ERA and an all-star selection.

Serventi spent 1938 with the Rainiers in the Pacific Coast League, making 26 appearances and was 2-4 with a 4.55 ERA. In 1939, the club sent him to the Spokane Hawks of the Western International League, where he established himself as an excellent starting pitcher. His 17-13 record - which included five wins in eight days -

was to be a career best and he led the league with 266 innings pitched, while his 194 strikeouts was second best in the circuit. Serventi must have hoped for a spot on the Rainiers' pitching staff for 1940, but found himself back at Spokane where he put in another sterling performance and was 16-10 despite an inflated 6.09 ERA.

On February 1, 1941, Serventi entered military service with the army. He was stationed at Fort Ord, on the Monterey Bay Peninsula, about 100 miles south of Oakland, and traveled each Sunday to Oakland to play ball with the semi-pro Ben's Golden Glow team. Serventi had the makings of an excellent soldier. He was 24 years old, quickly rose to the rank of private first class, and was well on his way to becoming a corporal. But on July 4, 1941, Serventi was returning to Fort Ord after a game in Oakland when his car smashed into a power pole. He suffered severe injuries and died the following day.

"The story of Serventi's death rated only a couple paragraphs on the bottom of a sports page," eulogized Oakland Tribune sports editor Art Cohn. "But to us, his friends, we want to think of him as a champion who didn't quite make the grade, a swell fellow who if he didn't make a name in baseball left one as a soldier."

## Pete Rehkamp

*Pete Rehkamp was a promising young minor league pitcher with a no-hitter under his belt. But a catastrophic accident brought an abrupt end to the young airman's life.*



Charles J. "Pete" Rehkamp was a well-known semi-pro pitcher in Covington, Kentucky. He signed with the Toronto Maple Leafs of the Class AA International League in 1938, and spent most of the season with the Goldsboro Goldbugs of the Class D Coastal Plain League for the remainder of the season.

Rehkamp had a 6-13 won-loss record with the Goldbugs and struck out 84 in 151 innings. In 1939 and 1940, he pitched for the Lenoir Indians of the Class D Tar Heel League, posting a 10-6 record for the second-place team with a 3.55 ERA in '39, and an 8-6 record along with a no-hitter in '40. The Tar Heel League folded following the 1940 season and Rehkamp pitched for the

Landis Senators and the Lexington Indians of the Class D North Carolina State League in 1941. He had a combined 6-15 won-loss record and 5.50 ERA in 29 appearances.

In September 1941, Rehkamp entered military service with the Army Air Force and served as a private with the 859th Signal Corps at Selfridge Field in Michigan. Pitching for the Selfridge Field Flyers in 1942, Rehkamp had a superb record, winning 16 of his 19 starts. On August 16, he put in a particularly fine performance, hurling the Flyers to a 9-1 win against the Northern Kentucky All-Stars, and helped the team to a 7-5 win over the semi-pro East Side Coals of Detroit on September 5.

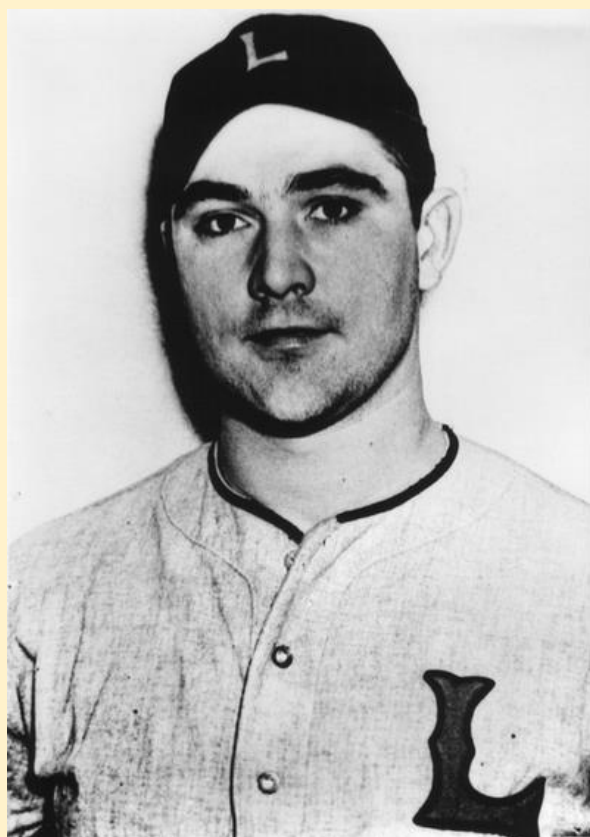
The following day - September 6, 1942 - Rehkamp, John White (captain of the Flyers' baseball team) and Wayne Brown (who had only enlisted two days earlier) took a three-day furlough to visit Brown's parents in Atlanta, Michigan. Rehkamp drove the

250 miles, and he and White both played in a ball game on Tuesday while in Atlanta. The three men began the journey back to Selfridge Field on the evening of Tuesday, September 8. At around 4:50 A.M., Wednesday morning, Rehkamp was driving along Hall Road, north of Mount Clemens, Michigan, just three miles from Selfridge Field, when their vehicle collided with an 80-car Grand Trunk Railroad freight train at the railroad intersection. Two box cars carrying lumber were derailed and ran for 300 feet before turning over in a ditch. The automobile was demolished. Rehkamp was dead on admittance to the base hospital at Selfridge Field, Brown was seriously injured and, miraculously, White suffered only minor injuries. Railroad workmen labored until 11:30 A.M. to clear the tracks of wreckage and Sheriff Jacob F. Theut termed the crossing, "one of the most dangerous in the state." He pointed out that no warning lights protected motorists and that the accident was one of a series in recent years at the crossing.

Rehkamp's funeral took place on Friday, September 11, 1942. Requiem High Mass was sung at St. Augustine Church in his hometown of Covington, and he was buried at the Mother of God Cemetery.

## Gene Stack

*Stack was the pitching ace for the Fort Custer Reception Center baseball team, but a sub-par mound performance in June 1942 was followed by tragedy.*



Gene Stack (born Eugene F. Stachowiak) signed a professional contract with the Chicago White Sox in 1940, and was assigned to the Lubbock Hubbers of the Class D West Texas-New Mexico League, where he had a sensational rookie season. In 31 games, he had a 19-11 record and 3.84 ERA, and his 238 strikeouts were second highest in the league. "I was 13 that summer," recalled Bill Cope of Lubbock. "We had a sandlot baseball league of four or five teams and played on a field across from the old Texas Tech gymnasium. Somehow, Gene Stack and another Hubber, Steve Sakas, learned about the games and started coming there some afternoons when they were in town and watched and encouraged us and gave us some pointers. We thought this was great because these were real professionals and our idols and we were at the

ballpark for just about every Hubbers' game."

Chicago White Sox manager, Jimmy Dykes, was singing Stack's praises at the end of the season and announced in December 1940 that he was inviting the 22-year-old to join the White Sox at their 1941 Pasadena, California, training camp. In the

meantime, however, Stack received his military draft notice and was ordered to report for duty at Fort Custer in Battle Creek, Michigan, on January 7, 1941, making him technically the first player from a major league roster to be drafted by the military.

To the professional baseball world, it may have seemed that the young hurler had swapped flannels for khakis, but Stack still found plenty of time for baseball. He became a mainstay of the Fort Custer Reception Center team. With a line-up that included the Tigers' Hank Greenberg, and minor leaguers Bob Ogle, Truman Connell and Jack Egan, the team was coached by Captain George Zegolis, former Wayne University player, and won the national amateur championship of the American Baseball Congress on September 29, 1941, with a 3-2 win over Charlotte, North Carolina.

Stack continued to hurl for the Fort Custer team during his second year in military service. On Friday, June 26, 1942, the team traveled to Michigan City, Indiana, for an evening game against the semi-pro Michigan City Cubs who, earlier that year, had unsuccessfully bid for a place in Organized Baseball's Michigan State League. Stack had an unusual off night, allowing eight hits in a 5-2 loss. On the way back to camp late that night, the team stopped for something to eat at the Gingham Inn on Highway 12, four miles west of Michigan City. Stack got up from his table, walked over to the jukebox and inserted a couple of coins before returning to his seat, where he promptly slumped to the floor. The 24-year-old pitcher was dead.

At the time, it was believed Stack had suffered a heart attack, but it was later revealed by Lieutenant-Colonel Harry R. Brown, executive officer at Fort Custer, that an autopsy disclosed he had actually died from pneumonia.

## Victorville Bombers

*The Victorville Bombers baseball team got off to a good start in 1943, winning their first four games. On a Sunday afternoon in May, the team was scheduled to play a game in Las Vegas. It was a short flight that ended in tragedy.*



Victorville Army Air Field opened in 1941 as a training base for pilots and bombardiers. Located 75 miles northeast of Los Angeles, in the High Mojave Desert, it made the most of the area's 360-days per year of sunny weather and abundance of wide-open spaces. The Bombers were Victorville AAF's

baseball team and during 1943, the team featured Hal Dobson, a pitcher with the

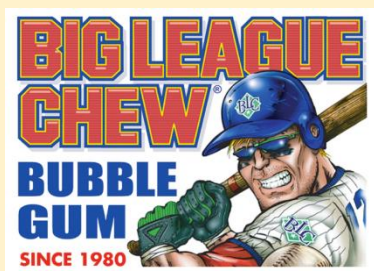
Sacramento Solons of the Pacific Coast League, Milt Ruyle, who played with the Palatka Azaleas of the Florida State League, left-handed pitcher Gary Carbone of the Coastal Plain League's Tarboro Orioles, Bill Thomas and John Lowry, who both played semi-pro ball in and around Pittsburgh, Ed Stelmach, who would later be inducted into the Greater St. Louis Amateur Baseball Hall of Fame, and Cliff Papik, who would later coach baseball at Black Hills State College and was inducted in the NAIA Baseball Hall of Fame in 1980.

On Sunday, May 23, 1943, the Bombers were scheduled to play a game in Las Vegas, and three players boarded a Beechcraft AT-11 Kansan to make the 200-mile flight. They were Second-Lieutenant Hal Dobson, Sergeant John Lowry and Sergeant William Thomas. Piloted by Second-Lieutenant William S. Barnes, the AT-11 flew in the company of two other AT-11s and disaster struck halfway through the flight.

The official story released by the military claimed the AT-11 was struck by one of the other planes while on a bombardier training exercise. In truth, the pilots were playing games with each other on the way to Las Vegas when one plane cut the tail off the other. The plane piloted by Barnes, carrying Dobson, Lowry and Thomas, crashed 12 miles southwest of Silver Lake, a dry lake near Baker, California, killing all on board, while the other plane, though heavily damaged, managed to make an emergency landing north of Baker.

## Victorville Bombers – 1943

2/Lt. Harold B. Dobson (P)  
Sgt. John A. Lowry  
Sgt. William E. Thomas  
Dougherty (P)  
Stock (C)  
Porter (P)  
S/Sgt. Anson Gaston (C)  
Charles Crum  
Sgt. Gary Carbone (P)  
Capt. Clifford Papik  
Sgt. Edward Stelmach  
Corp. Milton Ruyle



## Foster Field Falcons



*Les Clotiaux*

Foster Army Air Field was an advanced single-engine flying school for fighter pilots located six miles northeast of Victoria, Texas. The Foster Field Falcons baseball team boasted a 1945 line-up that included big league pitcher Dick Mulligan, Appalachian League outfielder Pete Zarrilla, Evangeline League catcher Lester Clotiaux, pro basketball player Al Cervi, who had captained the baseball and basketball squads at East High School in Buffalo, and three amateur ballplayers - Harold Phillips from Georgia, and Duard Lawson and Chester Seipp from Texas.

On August 9, 1945, the Falcons were playing in the State semi-pro tournament at Katy Park in Waco, Texas, where they eliminated Childress Army Air Field, 3-1, behind the 3-hit pitching of Mike Mistrovich, with Harold Phillips behind the plate. That night, five of the players flew back to Foster Army Air Field in a twin-engine Beechcraft AT-7C airplane from

Blackland Army Air Field in Waco. At the controls of the plane for the 200-mile journey was Second-Lieutenant Peter R. Davis (a veteran transport pilot with 1,500 hours to his credit). His passengers were ballplayers Corporal Pete Zarrilla, Sergeant Duard Lawson, First-Lieutenant Harold Phillips, Staff-Sergeant Chester Seipp and Corporal Lester Clotiaux.

Somehow the AT-7C veered off course. Flying low over a wooded area near Smiley, Texas, at around 3:30AM, the plane clipped the tops of mesquite trees, then hit the ground and traveled 200 yards before exploding. There were no survivors.

### Foster Field Falcons – 1945

Cpl. Peter J. Zarrilla (OF)  
Sgt. H. Duard Lawson (1B)  
1/Lt. Harold G. Phillips (C)  
S/Sgt. Chester V. Seipp (SS)  
Cpl. Lester O. Clotiaux (C)  
Reeves (P)  
Dick Mulligan (P)  
Alfred N. "Al" Cervi  
Mike Mistrovich (P)

# Somewhere in England

## Bert Shepard



As Lieutenant Bert Shepard climbed into the cockpit of his single-seater Lockheed P-38J Lightning his thoughts were about baseball. That day, May 21, 1944, was opening day for the 55<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group ball team. They had arrived at Wormingford Airfield in England in April and leveled off a field for practice in early May. Shepard was a former minor league pitcher and he was looking forward to a summer of baseball as the team's player/manager in between his flying duties.

Shepard had already flown 33 combat missions and volunteered for his 34<sup>th</sup> on May 21, because he knew he'd be back in time for the afternoon

ball game. Waving to the ground crew over the roar of the two Allison engines, Shepard piloted the P-38 along the runway to begin the 500-mile flight to Ludwigslust, Germany, where he would take part in an exciting new type of ground attack against the Nazis.

Shepard had grown up in Clinton, Indiana, and was pitching for a team in California when he was signed by the Chicago White Sox. His professional career began in 1940 with the Class D Wisconsin State League's Wisconsin Rapids White Sox, where the 20-year-old left-hander was 3-2 with a 6.07 ERA. Control had been his biggest problem throughout the season (he walked 48 batters in 43 innings) and the White Sox released him at the end of the year. In late 1941, Shepard was signed by the St. Louis Cardinals and finished the summer with the Class C California League Anaheim Aces. In 1942, the Cardinals sent him to the La Crosse Blackhawks in the Wisconsin State League where he was 9-13 in 23 games with a 4.45 ERA.

Shepard's pursuit of a major league career was put on hold in March 1943, when he entered military service with the Army Air Force. Stationed at Daniel Field, Georgia, Shepard trained to be a fighter pilot, earning his pilot's wings and a commission later that year. In early 1944, Shepard arrived in England and joined the 38<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron of the 55<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group, flying long-range escort missions for bombers flying over occupied Europe. May 21, 1944, saw the first so-called "Chattanooga" mission to attack rail stock in Germany. Lieutenant Shepard was among the first to volunteer.



The P-38 Lightning was an unusual fighter plane. Nicknamed the “fork-tailed devil” by the Germans, it had a twin boom design and was powered by two engines. It had four front-facing machine guns as well as a 20mm canon, and could carry up to a 4,000-pound bomb load. More than 10,000 P-38s were built during the war. Flying at low-level, Shepard had successfully attacked and destroyed a locomotive near Ludwigslust, before he was hit by enemy flak. One shell tore through his right leg and foot. Another clipped his chin, knocking him unconscious and at 380mph the fighter plane crashed into the ground. First on the scene were German farmers who were determined to kill the pilot. Fortunately, for Shepard, Ladislaus Loidl, a Luftwaffe physician, and two armed soldiers arrived at the scene and forced the farmers away at gunpoint.



*A P-38 Lightning. The type of airplane flown by Bert Shepard.*

"He [Shepard] was unconscious, his right leg being smashed, and he bled from a deep wound on his head," recalled Loidl in 1993. "I recognized that the man could be saved only with an urgent operation. My emergency hospital was not equipped for that. So I drove the wounded man to the local hospital that was headed by a colonel. When he refused to admit the “terrorflieger” [terror flyer] as he called him, I telephoned the general on duty at the Reich's Air Ministry in Berlin and reported the case. Whereupon the general called the colonel and settled the matter. Lieutenant Shepard was admitted and operated on. A few days later I inquired about his condition and was told that he was doing fine."

The damage to Shepard's right leg was so severe that Dr. Loidl had to amputate it 11 inches below the knee. After a long period of recovery, he was transferred to the

Stalag IX-C prison camp at Meiningen, in central Germany, and with the assistance of Doug Errey - a Canadian medic and fellow prisoner, who crafted a makeshift artificial leg - Shepard was soon playing catch.

After eight months in confinement, Shepard returned to the United States in a prisoner exchange in February 1945, as determined as ever to continue with his baseball career. Whilst at the Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, DC, Shepard met with Under Secretary of War, Robert Patterson. When Patterson asked about his plans for the future, Shepard explained that he wanted to play baseball. Skeptical but impressed with his attitude, Patterson contacted Senators' owner, Clark Griffith, and asked him to take a look at the young pitcher.



Shepard arrived at the Senators' camp in College Park, Maryland, on March 14. On March 29, he was signed as a pitching coach and pitched four innings against the Dodgers in a War Relief Fund game on July 10. On August 5, 1945, the one-legged hurler made his only major league appearance. With the Senators down 14-2 to the Red Sox, Shepard came in in the fourth inning and struck out the first batter he faced, George "Catfish" Metkovich. He pitched the remainder of the game and allowed just three hits, one walk and one run.

With so many former major league players returning from military service in 1946, the Senators released Shepard. He spent the next 10 years in and out of baseball playing for minor league and semi-pro teams, before moving to southern California and taking a job as a safety engineer with Hughes Aircraft.

In May 1993, Shepard had an emotional reunion with Dr. Loidl, the man who had rescued him from the plane wreckage after he was shot down. Following a stroke, Bert Shepard passed away on June 16, 2008, at a nursing home in Highland, California. He was 87.

## 505<sup>th</sup> and 508<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment

Sunday May 28, 1944, was a beautiful day in the English town of Nottingham. More than 7,000 fans were in the stands at Meadow Lane stadium, most of whom were more used to cheering for the local soccer team – Notts County – than the two American baseball teams that were on the field on this day. Wearing jump boots, combat fatigues and vests, the players were obviously unprepared, but for one, minor league pitcher Forrest “Lefty” Brewer, it was a welcome return to the game that had been his life before military service and had brought him so close to the major leagues.

The official story of this game was that the Nottingham Anglo-American Committee requested the Americans to stage a sporting event because the people of Nottingham had for years been void of entertainment. However, speculation still remains as to the true purpose. The game was arranged by Brigadier General James M. “Jumpin’ Jim” Gavin - no less than commander of the 82nd Airborne Division – and many believe the game was designed to fool the Germans. If American paratroopers were playing baseball in England, how could an invasion be imminent?

The 508<sup>th</sup> and 505<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiments were both billeted in the vicinity of Nottingham and were asked to put together a ball team to play for the English crowd. For the 508<sup>th</sup> Red Devils, this was an easy request. During the previous summer the team had played at Camp Mackall, North Carolina, and Lefty Brewer had been the team’s pitching ace. Starting his minor league career in 1938, Brewer won 25 games for the Class D Florida State League’s St. Augustine Saints. Clark Griffith, owner of the American League’s Washington Senators, purchased Brewer’s contract and invited him to the capital city for the final weeks of the 1938 season. He pitched in the Piedmont, Florida State and Tar Heel Leagues over the coming seasons and was back with the Senators at the tail-end of 1940. On March 4, 1941 — one week before reporting to the Senators’ spring training camp — Brewer entered military service. At Camp Mackall, he shared pitching duties with Okey Mills, a colliery league pitcher from West Virginia, and the Red Devils played all through the long, hot summer during off-duty hours. With a 26–4 won-loss record, the Red Devils clinched the Camp Mackall championship by defeating the 135th Quartermaster Company in the league playoffs.

Beneath the clear blue late-May skies of England, Okey Mills started the game on the mound for the Red Devils and was relieved by Brewer in the fourth inning. With his deceptive pick-off move, Brewer picked off the first two men that got on base. Despite the help of former minor league outfielder Joseph Makuch, who played ball under the name of Joe Marco and batted .334 in the Class D Northeast Arkansas League in 1940, the 505<sup>th</sup> Panthers were no match for the Red Devils, losing 18–0, and the Nottingham Guardian the next day described how the teams “played with extraordinary vigor,” and noted there was “spectacular hitting, some magnificent catches and many exciting incidents.”



*Members of the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment Red Devils at Meadow Lane soccer stadium in Nottingham, England on May 28, 1944. Back row, left to right: Gene Matuszewski, Walter Lupon, Jack Bonvillian, Frank Labuda and Bud Warnecke. Front row: Lefty Brewer, Ralph Busson, Ray Brown, Lem Parrish and Rene Croteau.*

Nevertheless, there had been a noticeable absence of paratroopers in the stands at the game. Having been such a familiar sight in Nottingham for the last couple of months, only officers and players were on hand. As the crowd cheered each crack of the bat, the rest of the regiments made their way to nearby airfields where they were sealed in amidst tight security. Preparations for the invasion of mainland Europe had begun. These airfields around England at the time, were hives of activity. The runways were packed with Douglas C-47 transport planes adorned with black and white invasion stripes, and groups of paratroopers meticulously studied maps of the drop zones in Normandy. Filled with nervous energy, they packed equipment, cleaned rifles, played cards and shot dice in the hangar buildings, attended movies, wrote letters to loved ones, and learned of their objective: to keep the Germans from reinforcing troops that were defending the beaches.

In his last letter home to his parents, Brewer reassured his family: "Don't any of you worry about me, just keep your fingers crossed for me as you did at the ball games and I will be all right."

On June 4, they were ready to take off but the weather forced a delay of the invasion. The following night, just eight days after the game at Nottingham, the 505<sup>th</sup> and 508<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiments boarded their planes for the flight across the English Channel. D-Day had begun and the paratroopers would spearhead the invasion.

C-47s were stark inside. A row of hard metal bucket seats lined both sides of the plane and the roar of the engines drowned out any attempt at conversation as they trudged through the dark skies towards the Normandy coast. Once over the mainland of France the sky became illuminated with searchlights and deadly tracer bullets pierced the wings and fuselage of the unarmed and unarmored planes. Anti-aircraft fire exploded all around as they neared their drop zones at an altitude of 400 feet. When the red light over the door of the plane flashed on, everybody stood up and clamped themselves onto the cable that ran down ceiling of the plane. Amidst yells of "Go! Go! Go!" 24,000 Allied paratroopers descended through the darkness into chaos and confusion.

Lefty Brewer was part of a successful assault against heavy German resistance at La Fière manor in Normandy, but was killed in action when the paratroopers were counterattacked by an overwhelming German force of tanks and heavily armed infantry. George Berish, who had played at Nottingham with the 505<sup>th</sup> Panthers, was taken prisoner by German soldiers that day. On June 7, the Red Devils' Bill Maloney was killed in action. Teammate John Judefind was killed the following day, and the Panthers' Francis Dunn was killed on June 10. On June 13, Red Devils' infielder Elmer Mertz was killed in action, and Rene Croteau was killed trying to save the life of a French boy on July 4.

Of the men who had played baseball on that late May afternoon to entertain the British and fool the Germans, six were dead within two months. Three others – Joe Laky and Walt Lupton of the Red Devils, and Joe Dunn of the Panthers – would be dead by the beginning of 1945.

## 508<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment Red Devils – 1944

Pvt. Elmer A. Mertz  
Pvt. Daniel L. Peskin  
Pvt. Leo Hoynowski  
Cpl. William F. Maloney  
Pvt. Paul Pavlick  
Pvt. Harry L. Reisenleiter  
Pvt. Henry McLean  
Pfc. William Sauer  
Cpl. William M. Dagon  
Cpl. Okey A. Mills  
Sgt. John J. Judefind  
Pfc. George A. Shenkle  
Pvt. Merle W. "Mike" Blethen  
Cpl. Kenneth H. Hook  
Pfc. John T. M. Barry  
Pvt. Joseph L. Laky  
Pvt. Lemuel B. Parrish  
T/5. Ray Brown  
Sgt. Ralph Busson  
Pvt. Forrest V. "Lefty" Brewer  
Sgt. Adolph F. "Bud" Warnecke

Cpl. Frank Labuda  
Pfc. Joseph "Jack" Bonvillian  
Pvt. Walter R. Lupton  
Sgt. Thomas D. MacBlane  
Pvt. Gene Matuszewski  
Pfc. Rene A. Croteau

## 505<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment Panthers – 1944

Pfc. Joseph P. Makuch  
Pfc. Clement B. Gudziunas  
Pvt. Burnes. L. Garvin, Jr.  
Pfc. Cloid B. Wigle  
Cpl. George Berrish  
Pvt. Joseph L. Dunn  
Cpl. Michael A. Claus  
Pvt. William J. Mitchell  
Sgt. Jack J. Haerter  
Pvt. Walter A. Epp  
Pvt. Joseph M. Novak  
Pvt. Benjamin J. Farda  
Cpl. Francis J. Dunn  
Pfc. B. Williams  
Sgt. Ralph Warwick  
Walter J. Morgan

## With the Marines in the Pacific

### Second and Third Marine Division

The fighting on the Pacific island of Bougainville was intense and costly. Fanatical Japanese resistance had cost the lives of many brave Marines, but when the victorious Third Marine Division departed for respite and further training to Guadalcanal in early 1944, the island was securely held in American hands.

Whilst most of the time on Guadalcanal was spent training for the next amphibious assault, baseball found its way into the spare time of many Marines. "We started with company teams, went to battalion teams, regimental teams, and finally a division team," recalled Hank Meyer, a Pfc with the 9<sup>th</sup> Marines, who'd played six years of minor league baseball before the war.

The strongest of the battalion teams proved to be the Headquarters Battalion which clinched the Separate Battalion championship with the help of minor league pitcher Jim Hedgecock, minor league outfielder Art Manush and semi-pro third baseman Ray Champagne. Forming a division team, the Third then went on to play a U.S. Army all-star team for the 1944 Central Pacific World Series and were narrowly defeated, 4-3, in 12 innings.

In July 1944, the Third Marine Division landed on the beaches of Guam. After 20 days of savage fighting the island was declared secure and became the new home of

the Division until February 1945. Baseball soon resumed on Guam and in addition to Hedgecock, Manush and Champagne, the Division team featured the talents of future major league pitcher Bill Connelly, Senators' protégé Jim Trimble and minor league hurler Ed "Lefty" Beaumier. The squad also included minor leaguers Ed Burgess (first base), Robert Schang (catcher and nephew of former major league catcher Wally Schang), Stan Bazan (catcher), Hank Meyer (outfield), George Cooper (outfield), and Steve Johnson (outfield). Playing centerfield for the division team was Billy Parrish, a 22-year-old from Texas, who had been signed by the Chicago Cubs just before entering military service. Parrish, a corpsman, had been among the first troops to land on Guam. One night in the face of enemy gunfire, he dragged the wounded Captain Thomas W. Brown to safety. For his heroics he was awarded the Bronze Star.



*Ray Champagne at the plate for the Third Marine Division on Guam in 1944.*

In January 1945, the "Little World Series" was played between the Third Marine Division and the Second Marine Division, which was stationed at Saipan. The Second Division team featured Indians right-hander Cal Dorsett, Phillies right-hander Jim Bivin and minor leaguers Marcus Koenig (second base), Milford Wildenhauer (third base) and Melvin Durdil (pitcher). To get the series underway, the Third Division flew by DC-3 to Saipan and then traveled in an old Japanese bus to the Second Division's ballfield. With Second Marine Division's assistant commander, Brigadier-General LeRoy Hunt, throwing out the first ball, the Third Division took the first game by a score of 8-6. Meyer hit a two-run homer in the sixth that put the Third Division back in the game after the Second Division had scored five runs over the second and third innings. Singles by Burgess, Schang and Cooper, plus a bunt from winning pitcher Trimble, provided the go ahead runs to clinch the game in the eighth.

The Second Division took the second game, 4-1, with Cal Dorsett claiming the victory over Bill Connelly. With one game apiece under their belts, the teams headed to the Third Division's home on Guam, Baza Garden Baseball Field, to complete the series. In the third game of the series Vice Admiral John H. Hoover, commander, forward area, Central Pacific, threw out the first ball, and the Second Division beat out the Third, 2-0, scoring both runs in the first inning. The fourth game saw the Third tie the series at two games each, with an 8-7 win. Hedgecock started the game for the Third, getting relief help from Connelly in the seventh. Durdil, Dorsett, Harrison and Haskins pitched for the Second.



*Third Marine Division All-Stars at Guam in early 1945. Back row, left to right: Unknown, Arthur Manush, Jim Turner, Edwin Burgess, Billy Parrish, Hank Meyer, Col. Lyman Passmore, Gen. Graves Erskine, unknown officer, George Cooper, Jim Hedgecock, Jim Trimble and Stan Bazan. Front row: Cptn. Gorman, Edward Ellavsky, Lefty Beaumier, Ray Champagne, Robert Schang, Lou Griener, Bill Connelly and Steve Johnson. Seated at front: Modica*

The series remained tied at two game each. A decider was never played and a month later the Third Marine Division was in combat again, storming the beaches of Iwo Jima. "Yes, Mom, I am going into combat, but don't let that worry you," Jim Trimble told his mother in a letter dated February 18, 1945. "I know everything is going to be all right, so promise not to worry - just pray as I know you have been doing." Trimble had been a high school pitching star at St. Albans in Washington, D.C. His mound heroics caught the attention of Senators owner Clark Griffith, who invited him to a tryout on May 29, 1943. Manager Ossie Bluege was impressed with the youngster, and on June 4, Griffith gave him a \$5,000 signing bonus and agreed to pay for a four-year scholarship to Duke University, where he would be under the direction of Jack Coombs, baseball coach and former major league pitcher who won 31 games for the Athletics in 1910.





*Army Air Force lieutenant and fellow big leaguer Tom Winsett (center) chats with Second Marine Division pitchers Jim Bivin and Cal Dorsett.*

Little opposition faced the Marines as they came ashore at Iwo Jima on February 19, 1945, but as they moved inland in the deathly silence, the Japanese opened fire from cleverly concealed bunkers and killed row upon row of Marines with machine gun and heavy artillery.

Trimble was part of an eight-man squad that set up a command post area for General Erskine, commanding general of the Third Marine Division. For the next three days he was assigned to guard duty at the command post. Meanwhile, the division was suffering heavy casualties from concealed Japanese spigot mortars and on February 27, the platoon commander, Lieutenant John Staak, asked for eight volunteers to go out on patrol and find out where the mortars were located. Private Trimble was among the first to volunteer.

The following day, Trimble was part of the eight-man reconnaissance team that set out towards the front line, passing weary-eyed, battle-fatigued Marines returning to the rear for a brief respite. As darkness began to fall the team dug in for the night. There was an eerie quietness to the place. Craters sporadically released foul-smelling wisps of sulfur and everywhere was covered with volcanic ash. The whole place resembled the surface of the moon.

Trimble and another Marine were in the third foxhole from the top of a ridge and while his buddy slept, Trimble took the first four-hour watch. Just after midnight on March 1, a flare unexpectedly lit up the area. The eight-man squad had been overrun by the Japanese and in the chaos was stabbed with a bayonet in the right shoulder. Amid the yelling and screaming, he fired his rifle in the direction of any movement. Seconds later, two grenades dropped into the foxhole. One exploding alongside Trimble. The young pitcher caught the full blast of both grenades. His back, upper arms and the back of his head were a mass of wounds. Moments later, a Japanese soldier, with a mine strapped to his body, jumped in the hole, wrapped his arms around the severely wounded Marine and detonated the mine, killing them both.

Two months after Trimble's death, Baza Garden Baseball Field on Guam, was renamed Trimble Field. "Private Trimble was an outstanding member of the Third Marine Division All-Star baseball team," announced Major General Graves Erskine, Division commander. "His name will not be forgotten and his brave spirit will continue to inspire us in the tough battles that lie ahead."



*The opening of Trimble Field on Guam.*

## Third Marine Division All-Stars – 1944/1945

Cpl. Raymond H. Champagne (3B)  
Sgt. Edward Ellavsky (SS)  
Cpl. George B. Cooper (LF)  
Cpl. Henry C. Meyer (RF)  
Cpl. Louis J. Griener (2B)  
PhM2c. Billy R. Parish (CF)  
GySgt. Edwin Burgess (1B)  
Pfc. Robert J. Schang (C)  
Pfc. Edmond J. "Lefty" Beaumier (P)  
Cpl. Chester Pietras (SS)  
Pfc. Stanley R. Bazan (C)  
Sgt. Steve Johnson (CF)  
Sgt. Pat Mason (OF)  
Pvt. James Trimble (P)  
Cpl. James E. Hedgecock (P)  
HA1c. William W. Connelly (P)  
Cptn. Edward Gorman (Coach)  
Cptn. Arthur Manush (Coach)  
Pfc. James Turner (Coach)  
Cpl. Edmond J. Tofil (Coach)  
Col. Lyman Passmore (Manager)  
MT/Sgt. Modica (Bat boy)

## Second Marine Division All-Stars – 1944/1945

Marcus Koenig (2B)  
Milford Wildenhauer (3B)  
Stubbs (CF)  
Hitt (SS)  
Manning (LF)  
Snyder (1B)  
Bridenhagen (C)  
Jarzabek (RF)  
Haskins (P)  
Buffa  
Calvin L. Dorsett (P)  
Melvin E. Durdil (P)  
Harrison (P)  
Pfc. James N. Bivin (P)  
Lt. Egan (Manager)

## Little World Series Scores

### Game 1 at Saipan

Third Marine Div.           000 104 030 - 8  
Second Marine Div.       032 000 100 - 7  
*Trimble WP*

### Game 2 at Saipan

Third Marine Div.           010 000 000 - 1  
Second Marine Div.       000 300 100 - 4  
*Dorsett WP, Connelly LP*

### Game 3 at Guam

Second Marine Div.       200 000 000 - 2  
Third Marine Div.         000 000 000 - 0

### Game 4 at Guam

Second Marine Div.       000 100 510 - 7  
Third Marine Div.         022 100 30x - 8  
*Hedgecock, Connelly (7) WP*  
*Durdil, Dorsett (2), Harrison (5) LP, Haskins (7)*

## Baseball Almanac

[www.baseball-almanac.com](http://www.baseball-almanac.com)



Some websites hold a special place in my heart, as does Baseball Almanac, run by my good friend Sean Holtz. With more than 500,000 pages of baseball history, over 1,500,000 fast facts, original research from recognized experts and material not

found or seen on any other web site in the world, Baseball Almanac is my go-to source for all information relating to major league baseball. If you haven't visited this plethora of historical nuggets, then I suggest you take a look today...and tell Sean I sent you!

Here are a few sections worth checking out:

The Ballplayers [www.baseball-almanac.com/players/ballplayer.shtml](http://www.baseball-almanac.com/players/ballplayer.shtml)

Team Histories [www.baseball-almanac.com/teammenu.shtml](http://www.baseball-almanac.com/teammenu.shtml)

Year-by-Year [www.baseball-almanac.com/yearmenu.shtml](http://www.baseball-almanac.com/yearmenu.shtml)

World Series History [www.baseball-almanac.com/ws/wsmenu.shtml](http://www.baseball-almanac.com/ws/wsmenu.shtml)

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All information contained in this newsletter is accurate to the best of my knowledge. However, the majority of this information has been obtained from first-hand recollections of events that happened more than 70 years ago, family memories and contemporary published articles. If you can correct any information, I'd be very pleased to hear from you [gary@baseballinwartime.com](mailto:gary@baseballinwartime.com)

# What's New at Baseball's Greatest Sacrifice?

[www.baseballsgreatestssacrifice.com](http://www.baseballsgreatestssacrifice.com)

With the help of my dear friend, Davis O. Barker, another four former minor leaguers have been identified as having lost their lives in military service during World War II, bringing the total to 153.

Lee Allen

From Fort Worth, Texas, Allen played in the Texas Valley and West Texas-New Mexico League as a shortstop in 1938. In December 1943, he piloted a Boeing B-24H Liberator that went missing during a raid over France.

[www.baseballsgreatestssacrifice.com/biographies/allen\\_lee.html](http://www.baseballsgreatestssacrifice.com/biographies/allen_lee.html)

Clarence Peters

Peters was an infielder from Louisiana and played in the East Texas, Texas Valley, Evangeline and Cotton States Leagues between 1938 and 1941. He lost his life on the battlefield following the Normandy invasion in July 1944.

[www.baseballsgreatestssacrifice.com/biographies/peters\\_clarence.html](http://www.baseballsgreatestssacrifice.com/biographies/peters_clarence.html)

Errol Stoner

Stoner was from California and went to spring training with the Pittsburgh Pirates in 1933. He had numerous trials with Pacific Coast League teams and played in the Middle-Atlantic, Alabama-Florida and East Texas Leagues. Stoner lost his life in the Philippines in December 1941.

[www.baseballsgreatestssacrifice.com/biographies/stoner\\_errol.html](http://www.baseballsgreatestssacrifice.com/biographies/stoner_errol.html)

Bob Williams

Williams was a first baseman from Texas and played in the East Texas, Appalachian and Arizona-Texas Leagues between 1939 and 1941. Williams died of illness while serving with the Army in January 1943.

[www.baseballsgreatestssacrifice.com/biographies/williams\\_bob.html](http://www.baseballsgreatestssacrifice.com/biographies/williams_bob.html)

