

Professional Baseball Players Who Lost Their Lives in World War II

Well, I made it. I finally completed the manuscript for *Professional Baseball Players Who Died in World War II* and sent it to McFarland in North Carolina within their deadline.

I'm pleased with the project and honored to be able to pay homage to the 127 minor league players that made the ultimate sacrifice in military service between 1940 and 1946. Thanks to everyone who has helped along the way - I could not have done it without your support.

Keep an eye on future newsletters for an update on when the book will be available.

With the project now completed, I intend to re-introduce myself to my long-suffering family and get back to working on the website and newsletter. I am hoping to add numerous player biographies plus some service team profiles.

In the meantime, if there's anything you're looking for just let me know.

Gary Bedingfield

garybed@gmail.com

I was sure baseball was part of the Americans 'entertainment

To: Gary Bedingfield - while searching for the location of a WWII Replacement Depot (by train about 3 hours from Greenock) in Scotland I came across your website.

I've been trying to fill in some details of my fathers (Max L. Bedell) history as a B-26 Pilot in WWII for a blog. He was with the Mighty 8th in Antrim, No. Ireland (Sept 43), then transferred (Mar 44) to the 9th Army at Andrews Air Field in England.

He never mentioned much about day to day life on the bases other than riding bicycles at Antrim. I was sure baseball was part of the Americans entertainment but had no idea it was so extensive. Its good to know that baseball was available and there was something to divert the guys attention from the war, use their energy and provide some measure of normalcy to a horrible situation.

Although not a fan myself I found your website fascinating and interesting. Your passion for the sport excites the reader. The personal experiences of the players, the memorials and the historical references of the progress of the war keep things in perspective.

I just wanted to take the time to say that I appreciate what a monumental task this has been for you and send my thanks for your detailed research. I enjoyed it very much. Its so important to have all facets of the history of the war documented and you have contributed a lot.

Barbara Denzer
January 25, 2009

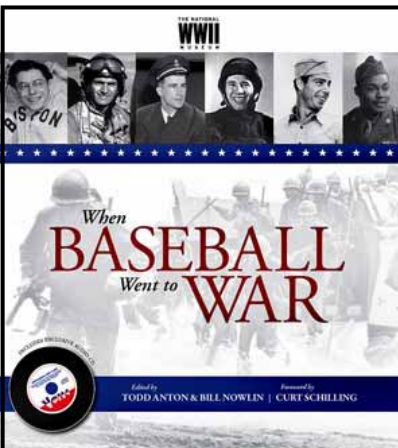
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Eddie Kears

"Three years ago a doctor told me Eddie Kears would never play ball again. In fact, the doc intimated Eddie's condition was so serious the kid might never get out of bed. And look at him, will you! Hitting that ball and moving around as though he never had an injury or an ailment."

New York Yankees' scout, Joe Devine, in March 1947



Edward P. "Eddie" Kears was born in San Francisco, California, on February 23, 1916. He was signed by the New York Yankees and his minor league career

began with the Rogers Lions of the Arkansas-Missouri League in 1936. In 1937 he played with Joplin of the Western Association and spent 1938 with Wenatchee of the Western International League. Kears joined the Fort Worth Cats of the Texas League in 1939 and was with the Seattle Rainiers of the Pacific Coast League in 1940, where he batted .302 in 86 games.

In 1941, he was with the Kansas City Blues of the American Association and was the following year he was called up by the Yankees to work as the bullpen catcher. Bill Dickey and Buddy Rosar were the starting receivers for the Yankees, but when Dickey injured his right foot and Rosar sprained a muscle in his left leg in a game against the Tigers on June 11, Kears got his chance to play. He caught Lefty Gomez for the third inning before the game was halted due to rain. Kears was behind the plate for a further ten games filling in for the injured receivers. He ended the year with a .192 batting average, getting five hits in 26 at-bats.

On December 7, 1942, Kears

joined the Army. He served at Camp Chaffee, Arkansas, where he was behind the plate for Warren Spahn on the post ball team before going overseas in 1944.

Kears served as a sergeant with the 125th Armored Engineers in Europe and was seriously wounded during a mortar barrage in France on November 22, 1944. He underwent several operations that left appalling scars on his back and shoulders. But he was determined to play baseball again and against all odds he did so.

On June 18, 1945, Kears joined the Oakland Oaks as a back-up catcher to Billy Raimondi. The combat veteran was given the night off on August 14 to celebrate the end of the war, and on October 21 he was selected to play in the annual Majors versus Minors game at Oakland. In 1946, Kears played 73 games with the Oaks and batted .273. The following season he appeared in 58 games producing a .252 average.

"You know what got Eddie back into baseball?" Yankees' scout, Joe Devine, told the *Oakland Tribune* in 1947, "Sheer courage, that's what. He wanted to play and he made himself well in spite of any predictions made by a smart doctor. What a guy!"

There is little doubt that Kears had incredible will and determination, in addition to be a tough competitor. "I remember one day," recalled Oaks' owner, Vince Devincenzi in the same *Tribune* article, "when he went after a foul ball and his right hand was practically split open when he misjudged the catch. Did Eddie ask to be taken out of the game? He did not. We held up the contest until the hand had been taped and Eddie went the distance."

Kears joined the San Diego Padres in 1947 and became player-manager with the Ventura Yankees of the California League in 1948. The following year he was player-

manager at Paducah and Grand Forks, before retiring from the professional game. However, he was still playing ball with Eureka VFW in 1954 and played semi-pro baseball in 1958 with the Humboldt Crabs at the age of 42.



Eddie Kears lived the last 17 years of his life in Eureka, California, with his wife, Helena, and worked in the plywood industry for Mutual Plywood in Fairhaven, California. They had three children Edward, Claudia and Kathleen. Kears passed away on July 15, 1968. He was just 52 years old.

"Humboldt County lost one of its most prominent," wrote Don Terbush in the *Eureka Times* on July 18, 1968. "He was understandably proud of his days with the Yankees but chose, instead, to discuss baseball in general rather than his personal career. He was an avid fan of the game from the Midget to the Major League level. He was never too busy to lend a helping hand to the budding player and to the local baseball programs as a whole.

"Only last summer Ed donated an oversized baseball bat which had been presented to him during his playing days in New York to the Eureka Midget League. It is to be awarded annually to the city champion.

"He was a friend indeed to the national pastime and to the multitudes associated with it."

Hank Thompson

Henry C. "Hank" Thompson was born on December 8, 1925 in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma but grew up in Texas. His parents separated when he was very young and he lived with his mother who worked long hours. "My sister Florence was supposed to watch me," he explained. "but I would sneak off and play ball. All I wanted was to play ball. They made me go to school, but I played hooky."

He was arrested twice as a teenager - once for jewelry theft, and later for truancy - and spent six months at Gatesville Reform School, near Dallas, where he played on the first organized baseball team he had ever seen. He got out of Gatesville at age 15, and began drinking but also played baseball for a local black team. In 1943, at 17, he joined the Kansas City Monarchs.

Thompson entered military service in March 1944. He served with the 1695th Combat Engineers, in which all the soldiers were black and most of the officers white Southerners. This often led to racial tension within the unit. Thompson was also drinking more during this time and occasionally ended up in the stockade.

In late 1944, the 1695th were sent to Europe and Thompson manned a machine gun during the Battle of the Bulge.

Thompson was discharged from the Army in June 1946. He rejoined the Monarchs and helped them to the Negro League World Series where they were beaten by the Newark Eagles.

In early 1947, Thompson's contract, along with teammate Willard Brown, was sold to the St. Louis Browns. On July 17, Thompson became the third Negro League player to play in the Major Leagues. Thompson was with St. Louis a little over a month and hit .256 in 78 at bats, playing in 27 games mainly at second base. On August 23, he was released and he

rejoined the Monarchs through the 1948 season.

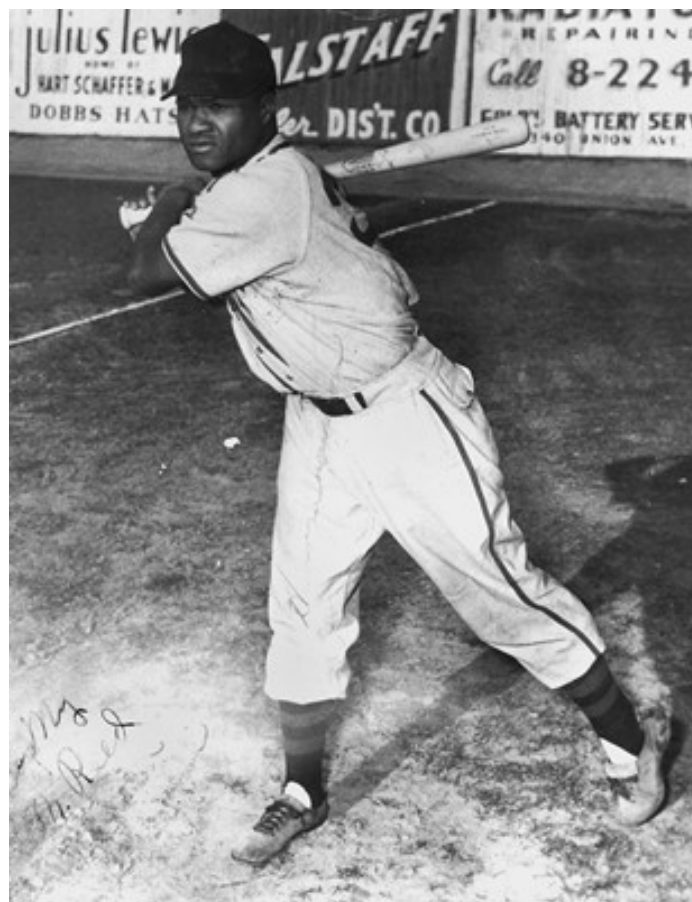
In April 1948, as Thompson was traveling to the Monarchs' spring training camp in San Antonio, he stopped at his sister's in Dallas. On April 3, he shot and killed former sandlot ball-player, Buddy Crow. He turned himself in to the police the next day and was arrested for murder. Thompson pleaded not guilty, was released on bond, and joined the Monarchs. Two years later the case was dismissed.

On February 1, 1949, the New York Giants purchased Hank Thompson from the Monarchs, paying him a \$2,500 signing bonus. On July 4, 1949 the New York Giants called him and Monte Irvin up from the Giants' Jersey City farm club. He made his first appearance with the Giants on July 8 against the Dodgers.

The left-handed hitter enjoyed his best season in 1953 when he hit .302 with 24 home runs. But by July 1956 he was on the bench and at the end of the year the Giants sold him to Minneapolis of the American Association. In 1957 he was plagued by injuries. Batting only .243, Thompson decided retired before the season was out. He was just 31.

After leaving baseball, Thompson met with many difficulties. He was convicted of armed robbery in Texas in 1963 and was sentenced to 10 years in prison. He was paroled after serving four years.

In 1968, Thompson visited his mother in Fresno, California. He decided to stay in the area and got a



job as a playground director. In 1969 he played in the Giants' old-timers game in San Francisco. But on September 30, 1969, Thompson collapsed and died after suffering a seizure at home. He was 43 years old.



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