

## Baseball in Wartime Goes to Cooperstown

I finally made it. After 30 years of dreaming and hoping I finally got to visit the Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Cooperstown, New York.

On a snowy January evening myself and SABR vice-president Bill Nowlin drove into the sleepy little upstate New York community of Cooperstown and spent the next two days in baseball heaven!

As part of a research project for an upcoming book Bill and I were treated to a rare opportunity to go behind the scenes at Cooperstown. Pat Kelly showed us the workings of the Photo Department while Gabriel Schechter, Tim Wiles and Freddy Berowski would have found it impossible to be more helpful.

If you have never been to the Hall of Fame and Museum I suggest you add it to your "to do" list right away. The displays of artefacts are astounding, from 19th century paraphernalia to Negro League uniforms, AAGPBL gloves and modern protective equipment. It really does house something for every baseball fan. And furthermore, the high street is a continuous row of baseball memorabilia stores. My kinda town.

### Reliving the Past on Screen

One of the real joys about Baseball in Wartime is the opportunity to bring people together with events that took place over 60 years ago.

In December 2007 I was contacted by the family of James Hedgecock. He had



pitched for the Third Marine Division in the Pacific during WWII. Sadly, James passed away at a young age and the family were looking for information about his ball playing years in the service. I happily sent them photos of James with the Third Marine team and then contacted a good friend of mine, Jim Roberts of the American Veterans Center in Arlington, Virginia. I knew Jim had an interest in the Third Marine team so I asked him if he had anything to add. Amazingly, Jim had just discovered movie footage of the team. And who was pitching? James Hedgecock!

Jim kindly sent a DVD copy of the footage to Hedgecock's daughter who, not surprisingly, was overjoyed to see her

father on the screen.

"I have really enjoyed seeing the DVD and the pictures you sent," Hedgecock's daughter, Mary Zetterberg, told me recently. "My father died very young and we didn't have time to really get to know him and through you we have gotten to know him a little better."

Recent Passings		
Jim Castiglia	Army	Dec 26, 2007
Gerry Staley	Army	Jan 02, 2008
John McHale	Navy	Jan 17, 2008

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## The Little World Series (1943 ETO World Series)

The 1943 ETO World Series was held in England over a four-day period at the Eighth Air Force Headquarters, Bushy Park, London. Starting on Monday, September 27 and concluding on Thursday, September 30. The event featured 20 teams from all across England and Northern Ireland, and was arranged by Major Donald Martin (ETO Special Service athletic officer). Each team was permitted a roster of 15 enlisted men and one officer.

Favorites to win the tournament were the CBS Clowns, led by Second Lieutenant Charles "Chuck" Eisenmann, formerly of the San Diego Padres.

In the preliminary round on September 27, the games went as anticipated. The CBS Clowns beat the Signal Hounds with Eisenmann striking out 19; Mauro Duca hurled a three-hitter for the Fighter Command Thunderbolts over the Port Ramblers; Fran Hecker of the ASC Angels beat the Yanks, 7-5, and Carl Smith of the Agitators beat the Signal Company Dodgers, 2 to 1, in 10 innings, striking out 21 along the way.



CBS Clowns

There was, however, one surprise. A previously unheard of team called the 116th Infantry Regiment Yankees beat the Bomb Group Moles, 4 to 1, in 11 innings, with Elmer Wright outdueling Joe Rundus. The Moles had been tipped to be semi-finalists at least and were shocked to be out of the tournament at such an early stage.

The second round of preliminary games on September 28, saw the CBS Clowns trounce the Air Support Command Eagles, 7 to 1; the Fighter Command Thunderbolts overcome the Agitators, 2 to 1, and the darkhorse 116th Infantry Regiment Yankees cruise past the Derry Marines, 9 to 1.

In quarter final games on September 29, it took 13 innings for the 901st Engineers to defeat the ASC Angels, 3 to 2, while the 116th Infantry Regiment Yankees disposed of the Service Command Red Devils, 5 to 3.

The 1943 ETO World Series Lineup	
Team	Region
CBS Clowns	US Army (Central Base Section)
Buccaneers	US Army (Eastern Base Section)
116th Infantry Regiment Yankees	US Army (Field Force)
Agitators	US Army (Northern Ireland)
Yanks	US Army (Service of Supply)
American School Center Angels	US Army (Southern Base Section)
General Hospital Medics	US Army (Southern Base Section)
Signal Company Dodgers	US Army (Southern Base Section)
Americans	US Army (Western Base Section)
Military Police Nitesticks	US Army (Western Base Section)
Port Ramblers	US Army (Western Base Section)
Signal Hounds	US Army (Western Base Section)
Derry Marines	US Marine Corps (Northern Ireland)
Creevaghs	US Navy (Northern Ireland)
901st Engineers	USAAF (Eighth Air Force HQ)
Air Support Command Eagles	USAAF (Eighth Air Force)
Bomber Command Moles	USAAF (Eighth Air Force)
Fighter Command Thunderbolts	USAAF (Eighth Air Force)
Service Command Red Devils	USAAF (Eighth Air Force)
Composite Command Mustangs	USAAF (Northern Ireland)

Later the same day, Doug Gillette hurled the 116th Infantry Regiment Yankees into the finals by defeating the 901st Engineers, 7 to 3. But the real upset of the afternoon was the 3-2 defeat of the CBS Clowns by the Fighter Command Thunderbolts. Mauro Duca scattered six hits with nine strike outs while Chuck Eisenmann struck out 15 in a losing cause.

The final on September 30, proved to be a thrilling affair between the 116th Infantry Regiment Yankees and the Fighter Command Thunderbolts. Elmer Wright - formerly with Jackson of the Southeastern League was the starter for the Yankees, while the Thunderbolts went with Mauro Duca, who had previously pitched for Twin Falls of the Pioneer League.

The game was scoreless for three innings. The Thunderbolts managed singles off Wright in the second and third innings, but without success. However, they scored a run in the fourth on a walk, a single and a double and Doug Gillette - who was catching for the 116th and had pitched in the minors for the Greensburg of the Penn State Association in the mid-30s - came to the mound and let in two more runs on wild pitches.

The Yankees were quick to respond in the bottom half of the inning, tying up the game by scoring on two doubles, a single and a base on balls.

With the score tied, 3-3, the Yankees took the lead in the sixth when two men were safe on errors and scored when a batted ball got past the second baseman and went into right field. They tallied again in

the seventh, Frank Draper of Bedford, Virginia, getting his second triple of the game, but was out at the plate trying to score when Joe Gubernot of Shamokin, Pennsylvania, hit to second. In the seventh inning, Gubernot came home on an error at first for the final tally of the game and Gillette pitched shutout ball for five innings to give the Yankees a memorable win and the ETO World Series crown.

### Epilogue

Eight months after the 1943 ETO World Series was played the 116<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment Yankees were in a different kind of battle. They were among the first troops to land at Omaha Beach, Normandy, on June 6, 1944.

Frank Draper, who hit two triples in the series final; Elmer Wright, who pitched so effectively throughout the tournament; and Louis Alberigo, who played third base and had two hits in the final, all lost their lives on the beach.

Catcher Robert Marsico and first baseman Carl Proffitt (who was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for gallantry) were wounded and evacuated to military hospitals in England.



116th Infantry Regiment Yankees

## The Bedford Ballplayers

In the 1930s, Bedford – with a population of 3,200 - was a small, rural town at the heart of rolling hills and lush valleys near Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains. For the young men of this tight-knit community, the Depression years offered little in the way of prospects, and baseball helped wile away the summer hours and conjure up images of playing on major league teams. Baseball was truly the national pastime back then and for two young men – Frank Draper and Elmer Wright - it would weave an integral thread through their tragically short lives.



Frank Draper

"When we were growing up in Bedford," recalls Frank's brother, David Draper, "There wasn't much going on here for young people, so from a young age [Frank] was always playing sports in and around Bedford. That's how he became such a

good athlete."

Frank Draper was tall, lean and fast. He played baseball for Mud Alley - a tough neighborhood team and starred with Bedford High School. After graduation, he went to work at Hampton Looms, the town's largest employer, and became the centerfielder and leadoff hitter with the company's baseball team. Batting two and three for the team were his brothers, David and Gamiel.



Elmer Wright

Meanwhile, Elmer Wright - the son of Bedford's deputy sheriff – was also establishing himself as a standout athlete at Bedford High School. A hard throwing right-handed pitcher, Wright hurled for a number of local semi-pro teams before signing a

professional contract with the St Louis Browns in 1937.

Wright was assigned to the Terre Haute Tots of the Three-I League his rookie year where he won 10, lost 13, and finished the season with the Kitty League's Mayfield Clothiers. He began the 1938 season with the San Antonio Missions in the Texas League, and spent time at Palestine and Johnstown.

Wright was back with San Antonio for 1939, and posted a 10-9 won-loss record that year and was 10-5 in 1940. He was due to attend spring training with the St Louis Browns in 1941.



Robert Marsico

Frank E Brown company treating cowhides, and later helped build the Blue Hills golf course in Roanoke before landing a job with the Piedmont Label Company in Bedford. It wasn't long before Marsico was the starting catcher on the Piedmont Label baseball team.

Like many local youngsters, Draper, Wright and Marsico had joined Company A of the National Guard enticed, perhaps, by the promise of a dollar every Monday night after marching practice at the Bedford Armory. But as the war in Europe took hold and the United States began to expand its fighting forces, it was announced in October 1940, that Bedford's Company A would be mobilized into the Federal Army for a period of one year.

Four months later, on February 3, 1941, the three young ballplayers, along with six officers and 89 other enlisted men of Company A, reported to the Bedford Armory where they were issued new uniforms and took the oath of transfer and allegiance. They were sent to Fort Meade, Maryland, home of the 29<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, and between training, they regularly played for the Fort Meade baseball team.

It was while returning to Fort Meade from military exercises in North Carolina that news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor reached the boys of Company A. For Draper, Wright and Marsico it meant there was no way they would be home in a year. They were now soldiers in Uncle Sam's army for the duration.

In August 1942, the 29<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division left Fort Meade bound for Camp Blanding in Florida. Less than a month later, they were preparing to move out although they had no idea where they were going. It might be the Pacific to fight the Japanese, or Europe to take on the Germans and Italians.

The question was soon answered. The 29<sup>th</sup> boarded a train that took them to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey - staging post to Britain. A staggering 11,000 troops boarded the *Queen Mary* for the Atlantic crossing with an escort of five destroyers and a British cruiser, *HMS Curacao*. As the *Queen Mary* approached Scotland, the *Curacao* guided her to the Forth of Clyde. It was a routine operation but at 2.12pm on October 2, 1942 disaster struck. The *Queen Mary* collided with the *Curacao*. The huge ocean liner suffered minimal damage but the *Curacao* sank almost immediately from the impact. Three hundred and thirty-eight British lives were lost.

Shaken, but safely on dry land in Scotland, the division moved by train to London, England and from there to Tidworth Barracks just ten miles from historic Stonehenge. It was the beginning of an intensive training program that would last until May 1944 - the longest of any US infantrymen in World War II.

Nevertheless, Draper, Wright and Marsico still found a little time for baseball. In September 1943, they played for the 116<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment Yankees in a four-day US services baseball tournament in London. The 116<sup>th</sup> were a dark horse team at the outset - unknown to most of the other teams who were already playing in well-established military leagues around Britain. The Bedford boys were the backbone of the team. Draper's hitting, Wright's pitching and Marsico's defensive work behind the plate guided the Yankees to an unexpected place in the final against the Eighth Air Force Fighter Command Thunderbolts that saw the 116<sup>th</sup> win 6-3 for the ETO championship title.



116th Infantry Regiment Yankees

That was their last chance to play any form of competitive baseball. For the remainder of 1943 and the first five months of 1944 the order of the day was intensive military training in preparation for the invasion of mainland Europe. Wright, however, still found time to keep in touch with the St Louis Browns. "You certainly have spent quite a long stretch in the Army," wrote

## The Bedford Ballplayers (continued)

Browns' Vice-President William O DeWitt in reply to Elmer Wright's letter on March 16, 1944, "and if the newspaper stories are correct, perhaps you will get a chance to return to this country in the not too distant future."

On May 18, 1944, the 29<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division was taken in trucks to containment camps on the southeast coast of England. The countdown to D-Day had begun. Movement outside the camps was strictly forbidden as absolute secrecy regarding invasion details was essential and it was a boring and anxious couple of weeks for the men of Company A. "Whenever we had time, I put on a glove and [Elmer Wright] pitched to me," recalled former college catcher, Hal Baumgarten in Alex Kershaw's *The Bedford Boys*. "Wright was fast. I had to put a double sponge in the glove."

On the morning of June 6, 1944, Technical-Sergeant Frank Draper, Staff-Sergeant Elmer Wright and Private Robert Marsico were on landing crafts heading for Omaha Beach at Normandy. Company A of the 116<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment was to lead

the D-Day assault. As the landing crafts approached the beach, the enemy opened fire with artillery, mortar, machine-gun and small arms fire. Draper's craft shook with the horrifying impact of an anti-personnel shell that ripped through the side of the vessel and tore off his upper arm. Rapidly losing blood, the young soldier slumped to the floor. Bedford's fleet-footed outfielder died soon afterwards in a pool of blood, seawater and vomit.

Wright and Marsico's landing craft made it to the beach. As the ramps dropped down the men of Company A were met with a hail of deadly accurate enemy fire. Many were killed outright; others lay critically wounded, screaming for help. Those that could jumped in to the six-foot of water and desperately tried to make their way to the beach.

Hal Baumgarten, the young receiver who had played catch with Elmer just days before, made it to the beach but an exploding artillery shell shattered his jaw. As he slumped to the ground, he looked to one side and there was the dead body of Elmer Wright. "I was certain it was him because of his nose," he recalled. "It was

just like Dick Tracy's in the cartoon." Marsico suffered injuries to his right arm and leg in the chaos and carnage. He somehow survived the killing zone, but his injuries ensured he would never play baseball again.

The small community of Bedford had suffered badly. It was not until July 16, 1944 that news of the horrendous losses suffered on D-Day reached the townsfolk of Bedford, Virginia. Nineteen of the 34 Bedford boys of Company A died in the first bloody minutes at Omaha Beach. Two more died later in the day. Bedford suffered higher losses per-capita than any other American community in World War II.

In 1947, Frank Draper's body was returned to Bedford and now rests at Greenwood Cemetery. Elmer Wright is buried at the Normandy American Cemetery at Colleville-sur-Mer in France. Robert Marsico went back to work at the Piedmont Label Company, and although he was unable to play baseball he enjoyed a round of golf and won a number of local tournaments. He passed away peacefully at his home in Bedford in August 1986.



Elmer Wright, Robert Marsico, Pride Wingfield (also from Bedford, VA) and Frank Draper

## Joe Gubernot Recalls the 1943 ETO World Series

It was played on makeshift ballfields in far away England more than 60 years ago, but Joe Gubernot - now 88 - still remembers the ETO Word Series of 1943.

Gubernot was born in Newark, New Jersey on January 1, 1920. A shortstop, he played ball on the sandlots of Shamokin, Pennsylvania before joining the Army in February 1942.



Joseph Gubernot

Stationed in England with the 116th Infantry Regiment of the 29th Infantry Division, conditions were not ideal for baseball but the

regiment still put a team together. "We played in Plymouth on a dog race track," recalls Gubernot. "We were training on the moors and playing baseball on the weekend."

The 116th Infantry Regiment Yankees entered the ETO Word Series of 1943 as a dark horse team. They surprised everyone by cruising past their opponents and Gubernot was a key part of the team's success. In addition to his defensive work at shortstop he hit a three-run homer early in the tournament and scored a decisive run in the final game.

But with the championship in the bag it was time to stow away the baseball equipment and concentrate on the job at hand - defeating Nazi Germany.

Private First Class Gubernot was a member of K Company. "We landed at Omaha Beach ( H + 50)," he recalls. "I was on Boat 6. My job was a runner for Lieutenant Ray Hellekson."

Gubernot got through the first couple of months unscathed but was wounded on August 8, 1944 in Vire, France. He was sent to a hospital in England and returned to the front around November 20, 1944, at Koslar, German. From there the 116th Infantry made a push from the Rohr River to the Rhine. He was eventually sent home on the *Queen Elizabeth* on November 14, 1945.

"After the war I went back to playing semi-professional ball," Gubernot says. "I

had a chance to go to spring ball with the Williamsport Greys [a Detroit Tigers' farm team] but turned it down."

Gubernot became something of a legend on Shamokin's baseball diamonds with teams such as Krebs Electric and the Liberty Fire Company. He was later inducted into the local Hall of Fame.

In the spring of 2008, Joseph Gubernot and Carl "Chubby" Proffitt - both former members of the 116th Infantry Regiment Yankees ball team - have been invited to the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York to tell their story.

### US Military All-Stars Get Underway for 2008

Founded in 1990, the US Military All-Stars have created a network of 32 baseball teams worldwide. In the modern era of military baseball (Post Vietnam) over 21,500 active duty and reserve personnel have participated. They have established a reputation as the largest, fastest growing, most successful, and only joint armed forces baseball program in the world. The historic "Red, White and Blue Tour of America" has become the most popular summer exhibition in the world attracting over 25 million people annually. Over 350 appearances provide the absolute finest patriotic atmosphere possible delivering highly competitive, exciting entertainment, and a once-in-a-lifetime experience to their fans and armed forces with the talent to perform on a national stage.

The US Military All-Stars are comprised of Active Duty, Reserve and Veterans who

participate while off-duty and cover their own expenses. They decline government funding to ensure all available resources support the United States' brave men and women overseas. The players are selected among thousands of personnel worldwide and represent some of the most talented athletes in the armed forces and have deployed in direct support of the Global War on Terrorism. In addition, they provide an opportunity for a limited number of former professional and collegiate players each year to participate that have expressed interest in serving in the military or currently enrolled in a Military Service Academy or Armed Forces Delayed Entry Program.

Now in their 19th season, open tryouts are taking place until mid-March. Their 2008 season starts against the Philadelphia Phillies at Clearwater, Florida on March 14. Visit the US Military All-Stars for further information and to offer your support.

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