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WWII and Baseball

One might easily believe World War II and the game of baseball are two completely different subjects. From complete brutality and heroics of a completely different caliber to moments of awe and heartbreak, I too was one of those people. Upon closer examination the two are actually closely interwoven and are an equally significant part of American history and culture. From stars including Bob Feller, Joe DiMaggio, and Ted Williams to the lesser known involving Joe Pinder, Jack Lummus, and Stanford Wolfson. All of these individuals, mentioned and not, shared the same connection, the love of baseball and pride in their nation.

When the United States became involved in World War II after the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1939 the war had already been raging for three years. It is no surprise that the United States wanted to do their best to stay out of it because the Great Depression had just ended that same year. However, it is this moment in time where a resurgence began. A huge number of jobs became available due to the demand of the military as hundreds upon thousands of uniforms, weapons, ammunition, food, and other necessary items were needed. Even though our country seemed to trade one disaster for another, there is no doubt that our involvement in the second world war helped us crawl out of the deep and dark pit we had been stuck in.

In years previous to the war, life was extremely tough as food shortages were common and job opportunities drastically declined. People did what they could in order to find some sort of joy and entertainment. While attendance numbers took a major beating, the game itself endured on. Drastic change did come in the arrival of Babe Ruth, Joe DiMaggio, and Ted Williams. During the beginning of the Great Depression, Ruth possessed an awe inducing

slugging power which immediately attracted viewers. After a few years when he was towards the end of his career, a new Yankees talent and fresh face emerged, Joe DiMaggio. People at the time described his swing as “majestic” and “infallible”. Ted Williams on the other hand helped to transform the Red Sox from one of the most mundane franchises to one of the most exciting.

Following the devastating tragedy at Pearl Harbor, major leaguers Lou Thuman, Joe Gallagher, Oadis Swigart, and Hugh Mulcahy became the first players to enlist. However, the first “star” players to join was Cardinals pitcher Bob Feller followed by the Tigers slugger Hank Greenberg. As one can imagine these weren’t the only baseball players who were involved as those from the minor were also eager to do their part. New information has uncovered that Fred Pierce was actually the first minor league player to sign up as he enlisted on October 30, 1940 followed by Billy Southworth Jr who enlisted on December 12 of that same year.

Bob Feller’s baseball career may be well known to some but many are not aware that his military career was equally as stellar. Following basic training at Norfolk Naval Base in Virginia, he originally tried out for naval aviation but was rejected due to failing the hearing test. Instead he would serve as a physical instructor before he was assigned to the USS Alabama as gun captain having obtained the rank of Chief Petty Officer. He and the USS Alabama would go on to see action in the Gilbert and Marshall Islands as well as the Philippine Sea. In January of 1945 he returned the United States where he served at the Great Lakes Naval Training Station as an instructor. Bob Feller was discharged on August 22, 1945 and two days later was back to pitching professionally.

Similarly, following Fred Pierce's six weeks of basic training, he began his military career at the US Army's Camp Upton where he was assigned to drill recruits in fundamental marching. Unfortunately, his plan for re-installment never came due to Pearl Harbor as he instead experienced 32 months of active combat in the Pacific theatre. By the end of his military career he had obtained the rank of Captain, had won three battle stars, and earned a purple heart for injuries sustained at Bougainville.

Billy Southworth Jr. was eager to fulfill his duty and after the baseball season per his father's advice enlisted into the Army Air Corps. After training and receiving his bomber pilot's wings was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant and assigned to the newly created 303rd Bomb Group. One amusing fact I came across was that Billy wore a Cardinals baseball cap his Dad had given him instead of his military regulation hat because it provided better shade from the sun and allowed him to wear the tight fitting radio ear phones. Upon completion of his tour of duty which was comprised of 25 flying missions, Billy was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and Air Medal with Three Oak Leaf Clusters as there wasn't a single injury to himself or his crew. Soon after Private First Class Green interviewed him. One question consisted of animosity to citizen sports upon which Southworth Jr. said, "Our fighting men are not concerned with the player personnel but still follow their favorite team as fervently as ever. Baseball is something they have in common and the national pastime is doing a tremendous job as a morale factor in deviating their minds from the problems of warfare." On February 15, 1945 Billy Southworth Jr. who had now obtained the rank of Major was flying a Boeing B-29 Superfortress when an engine problem caused them to divert for an emergency landing. Tragically Major Southworth Jr. was killed when the wing of his plane accidentally came into contact with the water.

During my research I came across my fair share of stories and examples that were exemplified by baseball players who weren't so well known. Just a few of those names are those who have already been listed as they include Joe Pinder, Jack Lummus, Stanford Wolfson, as well as the three others that were previously mentioned. To begin, Pinder played in the minors before enlisting into the Army. As a technician attached to the 1st Infantry Division, he was one of the men to storm the beaches of Normandy. Despite being wounded multiple times he made several trips to the surf in order to obtain his much needed radio equipment upon which he was wounded even further. Even though the left side of his face was cut and hanging by a piece of flesh he refused medical treatment. Sadly, after he was able to get all of his equipment together he was killed after being struck in the chest by machine gun fire. Such actions and bravery earned him the Medal of Honor. Jack Lummus was a college football and baseball star when he enlisted into the Army Air Corps. After an incident however he was discharged. He enlisted into the Marine Corps after Pearl Harbor and would eventually go on to see action at Iwo Jima. Even though he was already wounded, he took out three concealed strongholds. These actions would also earn him the Medal of Honor but later on in the day he was killed after stepping on a land mine. Stanford Wolfson was a bomber pilot in the Army Air Force. On his tenth and final mission, he and most of the men were ordered to bail out because the plane had taken severe damage from anti-aircraft. Wolfson was picked up by German authorities who ended up finding out that he was Jewish and was executed on the city outskirts that same day. For his actions that day he would earn the Distinguished Flying Cross, Air Medal, and Purple Heart posthumously.

Back in the United States, another icon was in the making. Before his illustrious career even began, Jackie Robinson was already a political icon. Segregation was prevalent in the South and while at Fort Riley and Fort Texas, Robinson faced intense racial discrimination and torment. In what would later be a historic moment 2nd Lieutenant Robinson was ordered to go to the back of the bus. He however did not abide such orders and was subsequently court martialed. Thankfully in 1944 he was exonerated and received honorable discharge. Such an occurrence proved that acts of courage did not only occur on the beaches or the battlefield. Today we still remember the courage that was shown that day and it fills me with so much joy that we have made great strides since then. Jackie Robinson was surely not one to be messed with when it came to political rights or baseball.

As one can imagine, war takes an immense toll on the soldiers and people involved. In order to combat this America's Past Time popped up in circumstances never seen before. In Hawaii, phenomes Joe DiMaggio and Stan Musial played service ball as a way to entertain and distract troops. In Nazi Germany at Stadion der Hitlerjugend or the Hitler Youth Stadium. Fittingly General George Patton's 71st Division of Third Army or "Red Circles" played and won the championship here. It was then determined that they would play the best out of five against the best team from France to determine the overall champion of the European Theatre of Operations. The 71st consisted of star players Harry "The Hat" Walker who had been with the Cardinals and Ewell "The Whip" Blackwell who had been with the Reds. When the team began coming together, Walker was the one who was put in charge as he recruited other soldiers from other units. He would even go as far as commanding a B-17 bomber named "Bottom's Up" to aid in the transportation of teams around the country.

In the time of war where unimaginable violence is occurring at astounding rates, preserving one's mind becomes almost instinctual. Of course this was easier said than done as opportunities to do so were sparse. Any task or event that offered some form of escape was highly valued by everyone. Not surprisingly baseball once again came to the rescue of many. Once such quote is able to capture the moment of bliss as it reads, "A brilliant sun warmed the faces of the G.I.s. Vendors sold beer and Coke and peanuts, just like back home. The Stars and Stripes flew over the field, and a bugle corps played the national anthem before the cry of "Play ball!"

War and baseball are very psychological but in extremely different ways. Today we are thankfully more aware of the mental trauma our veterans have suffered. However, during the 1940's it was often called "combat exhaustion". My Mom had told me a story of my Grandpa when I was in middle or high school. He was drafted into the war fairly late because he was older than the typical recruit. He found himself on the front lines in Germany around the same time when the US began to cross the Rhine. He had slightly veered off from the others and was shot multiple time and then bayoneted in the back. Thankfully he survived his injuries but my Mom used to tell me he never forgot the face of the young German soldier. He was just a teenager. Because of his service in the European theatre he came back with PTSD. People had to wake him up in a very particular way because he had once tried to kill a family member by choking him because he had gone over and touched him when he was sleeping. My Mother's Uncle also fought in the Battle of the Budge. Before he left he loved talking and engaging with people. He was extremely friendly and my Mom said he was like a teddy bear. When he came back however he isolated himself from everyone. When he did talk he would only speak short

to the point sentences. His amazing sense of humor and charming personality had completely disappeared.

Obviously the game of baseball cannot prevent such things from happening, but I do believe it holds its fair share of therapeutic value when it comes to situations like these. When I was sick for five years and in and out of the hospital constantly there were many times where I'd be mentally, physically, and emotionally drained. Finding some sort of normalcy and learning to appreciate the little things are what kept me from spiraling downwards. At the time I'd always be super annoyed any time someone other than my nurse would come into my room because they were always trying to get me involved in something whether that be walking down the hall or painting. One of the simplest and yet most important memories is when a volunteer came into my room during the day. He asked me if I wanted to read anything or play a game. I was a bit hesitant but I eventually told him I really liked sports and cars and that I'd like to play a game later on in the day with my Dad. He left and around 15 minutes later came back a stack of magazines and Battleship. In the end my Dad and I played right after we left and continued doing so for the next couple of hours. For people who were in the military at this time as well as now, I can imagine playing or listening to baseball brings you back and offers that much needed mental break.

While this personal experience does not involve the game of baseball, the premise is still the same. There is such importance about finding distraction when times are tough. To be honest I thought playing a game in the hospital would sound just like it is which is why I never really tried it. However, I can attest that something happens to your brain and before you know it you forget why you're there. My experience was different but I can imagine soldiers would

feel and benefit in the exact same way. The root of such feelings and emotions can certainly be huge but temporary relief from that can be found in the smallest of things

The tragedy at Pearl Harbor and the resulting decision emphasized this point even further as people wondered if baseball would cease to exist. Thankfully President Roosevelt wrote to Commissioner Landis stating that, "I honestly feel that it would be best for the country to keep baseball going..." However, due to the fact that many major and minor league players were involved in the war, many teams were left in a shambles. This left the door wide open for teenagers and players who probably wouldn't have gotten a chance to play. One such person to benefit from this was Joe Nuxhall who made his major league pitching debut at the age of only 15 against the St. Louis Cardinals. In addition, there was also Carl Scheib who was a 16-year-old who pitched for the Philadelphia A's. Obscure players such as Pete Gray who was a one armed outfielder for the 1945 St. Louis Browns hit .218 and drove in 13. Eddie Gaedel who only stood at three foot seven, was recruited by the controversial Bill Veeck. After being smuggled into the team's hotel, Gaedel was then given a uniform belonging to the club's vice president. Instead of the regular number 18, Veeck instead changed it to one eighth.

World War II was also the reason why there were players who were debuting at a much later age. One of these players included future Hall of Famer Hoyt Wilhelm who served in the Army. Unlike some of the other pitchers during this time who threw knee bending curveballs or streaking fastballs, the 29-year-old Wilhelm relied on his knuckleball. Brooks Robinson described his pitch as, "the best knuckleball you'd ever want to see," as "He knew where it was going when he threw it, but when he got two strikes on you, he'd break out one that even he didn't know where it was going." Such a pitch earned him a no hitter versus the Yankees on

September 20th and the 1959 American League ERA Title. With a career that spanned from 1952 to 1972 and nine teams Wilhelm's career remains one of the longest in baseball history.

Since the middle to late 1800's when American baseball was still in its infancy to now, the sport has proved it's always been a winner and still is a winner. Aside from some small changes here and there we are still able to witness and enjoy a game that has endured far more revolts, scandals, and hardships than what we actually give credit to. I have heard of the saying "America's Pastime" ever since I was young but I never took the time to investigate as to why or how that came to be. As I've been taking this course and conducting researching for this paper, it is ironic to me that baseball has had such a major impact on every American conflict. This is because I am also an avid lover of military history. There is something about World War II that has always made it stand out. In a sense war and baseball are two completely different words but they are also equally important as the events that have happened have helped to shape our future. Proudly I can say that my love for the game and history itself have combined even further, if that's even possible.

In conclusion, there is no doubt that baseball and World War II were important as they were related and intertwined. The war itself was such a monumental event and time in history and it is not surprising that we want to solely focus on an event that happened strictly within those parameters. That being said it is important to realize and appreciate what each have done for each other. We will obviously not know what might have happened if something was to be changed, but I know for sure we benefited greatly and my respect and love for baseball has grown even more.

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