



***Working-Joe players answered their country's call along with the stars-
The Babe Meers Story - 1st Cub to enlist in WWII***

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As we celebrate another Veterans' Day, it's heartwarming to see how Major League Baseball – and all other sports, for that matter – honor young and old veterans during the course of each game.

Adm. Michael Mullen, the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was buoyed by these ceremonies, often televised overseas to service personnel in combat zones in Iraq and Afghanistan, when he visited U.S. Cellular Field in 2010. The nationwide respect for members of the Armed Forces is light years distant than what Mullen experienced while just commissioned out of Annapolis in 1968, during the height of the Vietnam War. Then, Mullen recalled, it was dicey to even be seen in public in uniform, given the raw feelings of opposition to the war.

There was no such negativity about World War II. And in baseball, those who served on active duty, even at the cost of prime years of their career, were admired.

In contrast, almost no major-leaguers served in the regular Armed Forces in Vietnam. Teams pulled strings and called in favors get them slots in the reserves or National Guard to prevent them from being lost for two to three years active duty, and certainly to keep them out of combat. A player might have to leave the team for several months at most summer duty, but most often a weekend here or there.

None of the Guardsmen or reservists were called up to the regular Army. The most hazardous National Guard assignments were the Tigers Mickey Lolich patrolling empty Detroit streets during the 1967 riots and the Cubs' Ken Holtzman called up for the violence-marred 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago.

The stars who served in “the last good war” and their stories are well-known: Ted Williams, Hank Greenberg, Joe DiMaggio, Bob Feller, etc. Williams' story continued into the next conflict in Korea, where he was recalled to active Marine aviation service and did some heroic flying as wingman to future astronaut John Glenn. Williams was good, if not a perfectionist, at everything he did in life, including belly-landing his crippled jet fighter and walking away unscathed.

In many cases, the stars were assigned by a sympathetic command structure to service teams rather than combat, for morale purposes. Their skills were so good they could simply pick up where they left off after their discharges.

Service interrupted momentum to spots in majors

But baseball's working class might not have been so lucky. In an era of hundreds of minor-league teams, of levels starting at Class D going upward, they needed an uninterrupted journey to fight their way to the majors. Still, they felt they had to serve, too, either volunteering for their choice of service branch or waiting for the draft.

So a "doff of the chapeau," to quote the famed writer Jerome Holtzman -- a World War II Marine vet himself -- to the late Russ "Babe" Meers, a Cubs lefty. A Tilton, Ill. (outside of Danville) native born in 1918, the lefty pitcher Meers was part of that working class of players who put duty before baseball.

Meers had led the Southern League in strikeouts with 161 at Nashville in 1941 when he was purchased by the Cubs on Aug. 1. In the season finale at Wrigley Field on Sept. 28, Meers allowed just five hits over eight innings while walking none, but the Cardinals won 3-1 via two unearned runs, tagging Meers with the loss.

While pitching for the minor-league Milwaukee Brewers in June 1942 then owed by future baseball maverick Bill Veeck, the 23-year-old Meers opted to leave baseball to join the Navy. He was the first active-roster Cub to enter the service and 48th in the club's organization to serve the military.

He wasn't a combat hero, as the Navy put him on service teams at both Great Lakes Training Center and Norfolk Training Station. But he was on active duty, and in the scheme of things, that's what counted.

Under the guidance of manager Mickey Cochrane, Meers played alongside such major league stars as Johnny Rigney, Joe Grace, Frankie Pytlak and Benny McCoy. In 1942, the Great lakes Blue Jackets played 77 games and won 63 of them.

During 1944 and 1945, Meers was at Norfolk Naval Training Station.

Meers spent the latter part of 1945 in Hawaii at Kaneohe Bay Naval Air Station and was discharged from the Navy on October 29, 1945 at Great Lakes.

Cubs Manager Charlie Grimm was expecting great things of Meers in 1946, but the left-hander had been in military service for over three years and had missed three and a half seasons of organized baseball.

Like others, his upward momentum was interrupted by service. Not a superstar, Meers could not really re-capture the magic. Discharged from the Navy just after the Cubs' last World Series appearance in 1945, Meers was just 3-2 in 42 games, all but three in relief, for Chicago in 1946-47.

The Cubs sold Meers to Shreveport of the Texas League in September 1947. Just 30 in 1948, he ended his career at Triple-A Buffalo.

After his baseball career ended, Meers worked for the Ford Motor Company for 31 years, retiring in July 1981 as manager of the parts distribution center in Atlanta, Georgia. Living in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, he was a member of the nearby Duck, North Carolina, United Methodist Church and taught Sunday School in various churches over the years as well as coaching Little League baseball.

He died in November 1994 two weeks shy of his 76th birthday in Lancaster, PA right after his wife Dorothy of 49 years had died.



Niece Debbie Blinn, who now works at Cannon Cochran Management Services in Danville, Ill. near Babe Meers' hometown of Tilton, knows all about his story and how her uncle lost the potentially best years of his baseball career to the war effort.

In Chicago baseball, the biggest names who served their country in World War II toiled for the White Sox.

Sox's Kolloway won the Bronze Star

Second baseman Don Kolloway entered the Army in mid-1943 and saw combat in Europe, earning the Bronze Star. His double-play partner, all-time South Side short-stop Luke Appling, won the American League batting title with .328 in 1943, then went into the Army for two years in 1944. Outfielder-third baseman Bob Kennedy, a Chicago native, served as Ted Williams' flight instructor as a Marine. Kennedy later would have traces of his Marine background as Cubs manager from 1963-65, and general manager from 1976 to 1981.

Perhaps the most patriotic move was the great Ted Lyons' decision to enlist in the Marines. The winningest Sox pitcher with 260 victories, Lyons was over-age, almost 41 when Pearl Harbor took place, and could have comfortably sat out the war with no eyebrows raised. But after his amazing 14-6 season in 1942, in which he completed all 20 of his starts and led the AL with a 2.10 ERA as exclusively a "Sunday pitcher," Lyons went into service in 1943. He would pitch in just five more games after returning in 1946.

In contrast, the top Cubs mainstays somehow were deferred from service for various reasons. Bill "Swish" Nicholson, Phil Cavarretta and Andy Pafko kept the heart of the batting order intact from 1943 forward. Right-handers Claude Passeau and Hank Wyse stayed civilians. Hank Borowy, who clinched the 1945 pennant with his 11-2 record after coming over in a mid-season deal from the Yankees, did not serve in the military. The Cubs lost the fewest key players to the military, the break they needed to win the '45 pennant. That was the only season the Cardinals' Stan Musial was in military ser-

vice, in the Navy. Had Musial played in '45, his bat alone could have made up the three-game deficit behind the Cubs at season's end.

But three Cubs catchers – Bob Scheffing (later Cubs manager), Mickey Livingston and Clyde McCullough; three lefty pitchers in Johnny Schmitz, Vern Olsen and Hi Bithorn; middle infielders Lou Stringer and Bobby Sturgeon, and first baseman Eddie Waitkus all served. Like Babe Meers, Reems, the promise of a pitching career was deferred or ended. Bithorn won 18 games in 1943, but never regained his form after returning from the Navy. Schmitz was the most effectively post-1945 southpaw, including an 18-victory season for the last-place 1948 Cubs, but could have achieved those numbers earlier if not for service. Waitkus later was renowned for getting shot by a obsessed female fan at Chicago's Edgewater Beach Hotel in 1949.

On both sides of town, the lists are long of playing members of “The Greatest Generation” as their fast-dwindling members pass into history.

CBM Founder Footnote:

Above and beyond the daily in-game honors for veterans, the Chicago Baseball Museum is urging that Chicago teams should set aside a modest space at their ballparks and during the games to remember fallen Cubs and Sox, wore their teams' uniforms, but sacrificed a lot in the game donning another more recognizable “uni. Babe Meers and others like him who sacrificed so much for our freedom should never be forgotten. The CBM will never forget them that served our country.

CBM Founder Dr David J Fletcher, was a 10 year Army veteran honorably discharged in June 1986.