

## Common patriot meets genuine American icon

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With the arrival of spring comes the start of a new baseball season. It seems that everyone loves America's favorite pastime, even the stereotypically staid historical community. The literature produced by these unique sports fan includes fascinating discussions of baseball at war.

Authors ponder how civilians and military personnel alike perceived professional civilian ball during wartime. Was it appropriate to "play ball" while worldwide tragedy unfolded? They ask how the war impacted professional baseball. Did career stats suffer while players served? And they debate the morale-boosting power following or playing baseball might have had on servicemen

But, consider a more unique perspective: how did professional baseball players and the average GI interact on military teams? Because as difficult as it might be to imagine A-Rod in the Army Combat Uniform, athletes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century often answered Uncle Sam's call.

During WWI, Secretary of War Newton D. Baker ruled that baseball was not considered an essential occupation and that all players of draft age were subject to the "work-in-essential-industries-or-fight" rule. Baseball players were fair game during WWII as well. *USA Today's* Jeff Zillgitt states that more than 500 major leaguers and 4,000 minor leaguers served in the U.S. military during WWII. And Army Gen. Henry H. Shelton, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, noted in 2000 that baseball players served in Korea "not as privileged celebrities befitting their status as genuine American icons, but as common patriots befitting their status as genuine Americans."

It just so happens that the Fort Monmouth Signaleers baseball team featured some of these "genuine American icons" in the past. So, how did professional baseball players and the average GI interact on military teams? Did the average GI resent the attention his big league teammates received? Put them up on pedestals? Did the professionals act like prima donnas? Mike Scivoletti, a veteran of the Signaleers team from 1949-1951, recently answered some of these questions when he relayed his experiences with coach Mule Haas and, particularly, teammate Whitey Ford.

Scivoletti beat both of these legends to the Signaleers. After high school, the patriotic Brooklyn native turned his back on a potential NYU baseball scholarship and convinced four friends to enlist in the Army with him. The friends expected to serve together, but the recruiter noticed their matching baseball jackets and separated them. After basic training at Fort Dix, Scivoletti spent the Christmas 1948 holiday at home before landing at Fort Monmouth.

Tryouts for the 1949 Signaleer team came soon thereafter. Scivoletti recalled some 150-200 men trying out that season. He still managed to impress the coach, a former Phillies player. Scivoletti became the team's second-baseman. He called his team a tremendously talented group. They were so talented, in fact, that they won the 1<sup>st</sup> Army Tournament and wound up third in the All Army Tournament that year.

Things went well for Scivoletti the next season, too. The Command Group favored players, but Scivoletti was a particular favorite of both his superiors and the fans due to his small stature.

He lived in a tarpaper shack in the Charles Wood Area and worked a self-described cushy job at the post radio station when not playing baseball. He received many visitors at the station, as he was not particularly busy. Baseball players received liberal leave, and he and his teammates often ventured off-post. Their superiors may or may not have known for certain about the burlesque shows attended in Newark... "What a racket I had," Scivoletti recalled with a grin as he relayed all this in a March 2009 oral history interview. At one point, a resentful First Sergeant attempted unsuccessfully to get the easy living Scivoletti KP duty.

But the 1951 Signaleer team was in for some big changes with the introduction of Haas and Ford. Or was it?

George "Mule" Haas was a major leaguer with the Pittsburgh Pirates (1925), the Philadelphia Athletics (1928-32, 1938) and the Chicago White Sox (1933-37). Haas' lifetime fielding average of .983 was better than such baseball legends as Ty Cobb, Babe Ruth, Joe DiMaggio, and Ted Williams. After his playing career, Haas coached for the Chicago White Sox and managed in the minor leagues. Then, in 1951, he signed on as Athletic Consultant at Fort Monmouth and managed the Fort Monmouth Signaleers.

Hall of Fame pitcher Edward Charles "Whitey" Ford had a .690 winning percentage and is among the best pitchers in the twentieth century. He set the record for most World Series wins and chalked up more career franchise victories than anyone in New York Yankees history. But before much of his professional career, Ford served in the U.S. Army at Fort Monmouth. He spent the 1951 and 1952 seasons in the service during the Korean War.



Mule Haas is shown here in his Fort Monmouth uniform shaking hands with the coach of the Philadelphia A's. Scivoletti said that Haas never made his players feel less important than Yankee Whitey Ford. Photo courtesy of Mike Scivoletti.

Scivoletti recalled being TDY at Fort Meade as the 1951 season approached. He feared that the team would forget about him. But, he was summoned back up to Fort

Monmouth. How did he feel about his new manager, 47-year old Haas? Well, Haas called Scivoletti “the worst bunter I’ve ever seen.” 20-year old Scivoletti would interact much more with 22-year old Whitey Ford. How did that first meeting go? Scivoletti, a Brooklyn Dodgers fan, told Ford right off that bat, “I hate the Yankees. I won’t ask for your autograph.”

That cleared up, the two became fast friends. Scivoletti called Ford a “funny, funny man.” There were some inevitable distinctions between Ford and the average player, though. The Cub scouts asked Ford to sign autographs at their meeting in May 1952 because he was a Yankee, not a Signaleer. (Ford agreed).

The commander of Fort Monmouth reportedly wanted Ford to pitch every game because the Yankee drew such a big crowd. The one-dollar admission fee made Ford a big money-maker. Ford once noted, “We sometimes had 4,000 people at our [Signaleer] games.”

Ford often drove his own car to away games, but he insisted that Scivoletti go with him instead of on the team bus. They drove to one game at Sing Sing prison, where, during the course of the game, Whitey told him “don’t worry about Haas. Listen to me.”

So, Ford might have gotten some special treatment because he was a Yankee. He might have asked for some, like on that day at Sing Sing. But it does not seem to have inspired resentment amongst his teammates. Scivoletti’s experience as a Signaleer changed little with the introduction of Ford (or Haas, for that matter).

The 1951 Signaleers won the 1<sup>st</sup> Army Tournament, just like the 1949 team had sans professional influence. The 1951 team wound up third in the All Army Tournament again. Ford might have been a money-maker, but in this case he was not a game changer.

And when the team recognized a player with a game night in his honor in the summer of 1951, it was Scivoletti- not Ford- whom they feted. On August 9, 1951, Fort Monmouth commander Brig. Gen. Harry Reichelderfer presented Scivoletti an inscribed trophy for his fine record as a Soldier and his stellar baseball achievements during three seasons with the Monmouth team. Practically all of Scivoletti’s company, the 501<sup>st</sup> Signal Service Company, turned out for the occasion. Its commanding officer also presented several gifts to the second-baseman. Scivoletti’s mother, father, friends from home, and future wife surprised him by attending the game and festivities. “Mike Scivoletti Night”



Whitey Ford reportedly interacted easily with his fellow Soldiers. Here, he is shown with post convalescents. Photo courtesy of Mike Scivoletti, who, you'll note, eventually DID get Ford's autograph.

might have recognized Scivoletti's service, but it also proved that the average GI could get recognition with Whitey Ford around!



Scivoletti and his wife pose with the trophy he received on "Mike Scivoletti Night," here, in 1951.

Scivoletti went on to play in the minor leagues for two years after his discharge. He kept in touch with other teammates, but not with Ford. He worked on Wall Street for 43 years in various jobs, and retired to Jackson, NJ. Memorabilia from his baseball years decorates his home.

Even after leading such a full life, Scivoletti declares, "I will never forget Fort Monmouth...I couldn't have asked for better." His love of baseball has not diminished, and he has seats at Port St. Lucie for the Mets spring training. (It seems Whitey Ford may have been a pal, but he never converted his old teammate to a Yankees fan).