

1945 April 23-29

Clarence Raith: Softball to Sailor

Softball has a long history in La Crosse. It was originally played in the city about 1908, but it was not on a grass ball field under a warm summer sun. The first softball games were played indoors at the Y.M.C.A.¹ In fact, one of the early names for the game was "indoor baseball."²

The game flourished in our city after it moved outside. Early newspaper articles refer to the game as "D-ball," which was short for "Diamondball" or "Diamond Ball."³ Various business establishments sponsored teams in leagues as one way of advertising. The Bodega Lunch Club was one of those sponsors.

For La Crosse softball fans before World War II, the Bodega team of the 1930s was the local equivalent of the New York Yankees. The 1931 team amassed a record of 38 wins, four losses, and one tie before advancing to the national softball tournament at Minneapolis.⁴

Although they did not win the tournament in 1931, Manager Erwin "Petsy" Voss and the Bodega team came back for another try in 1932. Members of that team were: Paul "Pip" Wuest, Erwin "Petsy" Voss, George "Yip" Christopher, Benjamin "Mooney" Vondrashek, Emil "Punts" Temp, Fritz Raith, George Mekvold, Zig Wateski, **Claire Raith** (catcher), Clarence "Swish" Beranek (pitcher), Johnny Nekola, Frankie Smith, Clarence "Batch" Christopher, and Joe Frisch.⁵



(La Crosse Tribune, 1932 September 6, page 7)

In front of a crowd of 10,000 at Wausau, the Bodegas edged out Sather of Minneapolis despite only getting three hits off the Minneapolis pitcher. They put together a single, a walk, a passed ball, a fielder's choice, and another single to score two runs in the top of the first inning. Sather managed a run in the bottom of the 6th inning to make the final score 2-1 in favor of the team from La Crosse. Although he was hitless in the championship game, Claire Raith had two hits and scored a run in their semi-final win over Hammond, Indiana.⁶

La Crosse put on a celebration for the championship team that "started at 10:30 p.m. and lasted until far into the night." The team bus was met at the State Street entrance to the La Crosse Interstate Fairgrounds (now part of the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse campus) by cars that formed a parade on both sides of the bus. The procession of several hundred fans proceeded downtown to the Bodega Lunch Club where Mayor Verchota welcomed them. Every member of the team, who had each received a trophy after the game, said a few words about the successful tournament. Their trophies and a huge banner were to be displayed in the Bodega.⁷

Most of that Bodega team stayed together through the years, sponsored at different times by the Bodega, Peerless, Cavalier Inn, and Heileman Brewing, to win eight straight city championships.⁸

Claire Raith continued to play and manage in the city softball leagues into the late 1930s and early 1940s. Raith was working for the softball team's sponsor, Heileman Brewing Company, when he had to register for the draft in 1940.

SERIAL NUMBER		1. NAME (Print)		ORDER NUMBER	
542		Clarence William Raith		1875	
		(First) (Middle) (Last)			
2. ADDRESS (Print)					
518 S. 10th St. La Crosse La Crosse Wis.					
(Number and street or R. F. D. number) (Town) (County) (State)					
3. TELEPHONE		4. AGE IN YEARS		5. PLACE OF BIRTH	
La Crosse		30		La Crosse	
		DATE OF BIRTH		(Town or county)	
1388-R		4-16-10		Wisconsin	
(Exchange) (Number)		(Mo.) (Day) (Yr.)		(State or country)	
7. NAME OF PERSON WHO WILL ALWAYS KNOW YOUR ADDRESS				8. RELATIONSHIP OF THAT PERSON	
Mrs. Clarence W. Raith				Wife	
(Mr., Mrs., Miss) (First) (Middle) (Last)					
9. ADDRESS OF THAT PERSON					
518 S. 10th St. La Crosse La Crosse Wis.					
(Number and street or R. F. D. number) (Town) (County) (State)					
10. EMPLOYER'S NAME					
G. Heileman Brewing Co.					
11. PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT OR BUSINESS					
3rd and Mississippi La Crosse La Crosse Wis.					
(Number and street or R. F. D. number) (Town) (County) (State)					
I AFFIRM THAT I HAVE VERIFIED ABOVE ANSWERS AND THAT THEY ARE TRUE.					
REGISTRATION CARD					
D. S. S. Form 1					
(over)		16-17105			
		C. W. Raith			
		(Registrant's signature)			

Clarence Raith's draft registration card
(Ancestry.com)

The back of his form shows that the 30-year-old Raith was 5 feet, 11 inches tall, and weighed 165 pounds.⁹

Clarence Raith entered the United States Navy on May 23, 1943. After basic training at the [Great Lakes](#) naval training center in Chicago, he had further training in Washington D.C.; Norfolk, Virginia; and California before going to sea in February 1944 on a [destroyer escort](#).¹⁰



We Salute Our 129 Fellow Heileman Men in Service

Probably the most appreciated salute we can give to these men is news that our post war plans are directed at providing jobs for them when they return.

First the war must be won... nothing must be done to interfere with today's number one task. Heileman's are backing America's fighting forces with Bonds... we were one of the first in this area to fly the Minute Man Flag and are today, one of the organizations which continues to support a full bond payroll deduction program. The company itself is one of the largest owners of war securities in this area. To this support might be added an annual tax payment of almost \$4,000,000.00.

Stripped of all fancy terms, post war planning means to us, the providing of jobs. Our post war planning efforts are di-

rected at "V" Day. Every sales move... every plan is geared to the post war period.

More sales mean more jobs... more jobs for our service men when they return and continued employment for our present workers.

We've spread our limited production over our broad and distant markets. Our policy of maintaining our position in these shipping markets will benefit La Crosse later by a better employment of our townspeople after the war. A job for our returning service men is Heileman's Number One post war job.

We salute our men in the country's service and pledge that we will diligently apply our efforts to the task of providing jobs for these men when the war is won.

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★ ★ ★ ★ ★

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A Salute Also to 101 Sons and Sons-in-Law of Heileman's Employees Who Are Serving Uncle Sam

EDWARD SMUTNY
ROY SMUTNY
DEWEY PATRICK
ROBT. E. SCHNEIDER
CLARENCE M. NEUBURG
PAUL G. CLEMENTS
ACE JOHNSON
ROBERT JUAN
WALTER A. REICHMEL
ROBERT MEHREN
ARTHUR MEHREN
JAMES KARRULA
DONALD BUCKLE
CALVIN G. MITCHELL
LAVENNE W. MITCHELL
PAUL GMEINER
DONALD GMEINER

EDWARD J. OLSON
JOSEPH W. ZANTER
WILLIAM PATRICK
ROBERT A. SCHONEN
ROBERT A. PAYNE
WILLIAM NETZER
JOSEPH NETZER
P. M. O. BURNS
ROBERT WOLFE
LEONARD SCHUMMERHORN
GEORGE R. SMITH
FRANK O. MAIN
WILLIAM HALLER
WILLIAM LEHRKE

BRUCE H. OLSON
MILTON BULLOW
WILLIAM BULLOW
GERALD J. BELL
SPENCER J. SCHANHOFFER
ROGER KRUGGAR
DONALD BAKER
LANSING BAKER
STEPHEN SPACKER JR.
THOMAS SPACKER
HARVEY H. HUSTON
HOWARD E. KELLEY
NEIL MCGUIRE
ARNOLD MILLER
ARTHUR MILLER, JR.
CLARENCE LEHRKE

OSCAR ERNEST
RICHARD LEROY JOHNSTON
JEROME F. KANAT
HAROLD ARMSTRONG
ROBERT J. BUCHMANN
P. R. CAVERNE
IRVING R. OTTO
MICHAEL E. NOWAK
JOHN J. MATTHEW
ROY L. CLEARY
JACK GERRIG
CURTIS SWITZBERG
FRANK B. BECKER
WILLIAM LUENNE
BEVER G. HOFFT
WILLIAM GAUTSCH

MARTIN ALBITZ
CLAYTON SHELTONDENE
DONALD L. MILLER
VERNON W. DILLINGHAM
KENNETH C. WHITMER
WILLIAM W. O'LEARY
MICHAEL J. POENHLE
CHARLES L. SPRESTER
RICHARD C. GILBERTSON
R. H. LOSCHING JR.
DONALD J. ALBITZ
CURTIS C. SMITH
WILLIAM A. GAUTSCH
L. T. KENNETH B. GAUTSCH
MARLIN WEHRENBURG

E. N. LUNDSTY
DONALD J. FUCHS
CARL REHMAN
FRED SCHUMMANN
ROGER BENSON
RICHARD HOFER
HARVEY G. LARSON
EARL G. BISHOPSKY
WILTON LODDEN
HOWARD L. AIREN
RAYMOND NICKLAS
HARVEY WEHRENBURG
GABE CHRISTOPHER
JACK CHRISTOPHER
GEORGE LUEDKE

G. HEILEMAN BREWING CO. — LA CROSSE, WISCONSIN

(La Crosse Tribune, 1944 September 4, page 10)

Destroyers and destroyer escorts were versatile warships that performed a variety of duties, but they were especially needed to escort convoys and protect larger ships. Built to destroy shore targets, other ships, aircraft, and submarines, their weaponry included smaller naval guns, anti-aircraft guns, torpedoes, and depth charges. There were several categories:

DD = Destroyer

DDE = Destroyers converted to destroyer escorts

DE = Destroyer escort (antisubmarine)

DER = Destroyer escort picket

DL = Destroyer leader (large)

They were all named after dead Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard personnel.¹¹

Sailors called destroyers "tin cans." The smaller, slower, and more lightly-armed destroyer escorts could have aptly been called "tuna cans."

With the necessity to ship men and supplies all over the world through waters infested with German and Japanese submarines, there was a great need for a large number of armed escorts to protect the cargo ships and troop carriers. Over 480 [destroyer escorts](#) were built during World War II by the United States. They required a crew of 170 to 200 men.¹² There were six classes of prefabricated, mass-produced destroyer escorts that ranged from 289 feet to 306 feet long and featured different combinations of machinery and armaments. Although smaller and slower than full-size destroyers, their maneuverability made them well-suited for anti-submarine operations. Some of them also transported raiding parties and underwater demolition teams.¹³



USS SLATER DE766 Sea Trials 29 May - 25 Jun 1944

An example of a Destroyer Escort
(Destroyer Escort Historical Museum, Albany NY)

When American forces invaded Okinawa on April 1, 1945, it was with the largest invasion fleet ever assembled in the Pacific Theater. One of the 1,300 warships in that fleet, supporting 180,000 combat troops, was Clarence Raith's destroyer escort. Because Okinawa was considered by Japan to be part of its homeland, it was heavily defended and conquering the island was expected to be very costly. The Americans saw it as the last stepping stone to the eventual invasion of Japan itself.¹⁴ Because of waves of Japanese kamikaze aircraft that crashed into U.S. ships, the Navy suffered some of its most severe losses of the war.

One of those losses was a well-known softball player from La Crosse, Wisconsin.

Clarence Raith Dies In Action

**Former D-Ball Player
Killed In Pacific**

Clarence William Raith, 35, one of La Crosse's outstanding d-ball players as catcher with championship teams, has been killed in action in the Pacific.



RAITH

Quartermaster, first class, on a destroyer escort, the former battery mate of Clarence (Swish) Beranek with the Bodegas, Peerless and Heileman teams, was a recognized strategist for teams on which he played and managed. Beranek is in the army at Fort Riley, Kansas.

The brothers, Clarence and Fred Raith were teammates for years, the latter being an outfielder who is now a railway employee. Another brother, Walter, is a private at Fort Riley. Clarence's wife, the former Helen Baume, resides on R. 1, State Road. His parents are Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Raith.

Before entering service Clarence was employed at Heilemans. He entered service May 23, 1943, and was trained at Great Lakes, Washington, D. C., Norfolk, Va., in California and went to sea in February, 1944. His 35th birthday was April 16.

News of his death was received by his wife from Vice-Admiral Randall Jacobs, chief of naval personnel.

(La Crosse Tribune, 1945 April 27, page 1)

In the late summer of 1951, an old-timers softball game featured most of the national championship Bodega team playing against a group of old-timers from Winona. The names of the Bodega old-timers brought back memories for area softball fans: Mooney Vondrashek, Cully Johnson, Yip Christopher,

Petsy Voss, Fritz Raith, Punts Temp, Pip Wuest, and Sig Wateski. Swish Beranek was on the mound, but Batch Christopherson was behind the plate instead of the national championship catcher from 1932, Claire Raith, who had been killed while serving in World War II. During a special ceremony on that Saturday night, Mrs. Joseph Raith presented the Claire Raith Memorial Trophy to a current softball player who best exemplified the athletic ability and character of her son.¹⁵

The Claire Raith Memorial award was presented annually in the La Crosse city softball league for many years after that. We hope the young men who were so honored took the time to learn about the man who was its namesake.

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Sources & Notes:

¹ "Bodegas Grabbed National Title," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1938 July 21, page 11.

² "History of Softball," *Athnet*, accessed 2020 May 1, <https://www.athleticscholarships.net/history-of-softball.htm>.

³ *Athnet*, accessed 2020 May 1.

⁴ "Bodegas Play In National D-Ball Meet," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1931 September 4, page 7.

⁵ *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, 1938 July 21. Beranek presumably acquired his nickname from the sound of the batter swinging and missing one of his pitches.

⁶ "Bodega Ten Captures National Diamondball Championship," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1932 September 6, page 7.

⁷ "Bodegas Are Feted After Return Home," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1932 September 6, page 7.

⁸ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1938 July 21.

⁹ The National Archives in St. Louis, Missouri; St. Louis, Missouri; *Draft Registration Cards for Wisconsin*, 10/16/1940-03/31/1947; Record Group: *Records of the Selective Service System*, 147; Box: 583.

¹⁰ "Clarence Raith Dies in Action," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 April 27, page 1.

¹¹ Don McCombs and Fred L. Worth, *World War II Super Facts* (New York: Warner Books, 1983), 142.

¹² John Ellis, *World War II A Statistical Survey: The Essential Facts and Figures for All the Combatants* (New York: Facts on File, 1993), 300.

¹³ Thomas Parrish, ed., *The Simon and Schuster Encyclopedia of World War II* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 155. The USS Slater is just one example of a destroyer escort. We do not know the name of Raith's ship.

¹⁴ Louis L. Snyder, *Louis L. Snyder's Historical Guide to World War II* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982), 496-497.

¹⁵ "National Champ Bodegas Return To Action Face Winona Old-Timers Saturday Night," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1951 August 1, page 17.