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From the Dugouts to the Trenches

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FROM THE DUGOUTS TO THE TRENCHES

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From the Dugouts to the Trenches

Baseball during the Great War

JIM LEEKE

University of Nebraska Press

LINCOLN & LONDON

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In memory of
Harry and Vada Beebe
and Leonard Koppett

dug'out': A shelter dug out of a hillside; specif., a cave, the side of a trench, etc., often roofed with logs and sod, for storage, protection, etc. Baseball. A low shelter containing a players' bench and facing upon the diamond.

—*Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 1942

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INTRODUCTION

America wasn't prepared for war in the late winter and early spring of 1917, but it certainly was ready for baseball. The Boston Red Sox were the reigning world champions, the best of sixteen Major League clubs scattered through the Northeast and out to the Midwest as far as the left bank of the Mississippi River. Below the big leagues, twenty-two Minor League clubs were set to play ball in parks across the country, from the biggest in Class AA to the smallest in Class D. Together, these many leagues comprised Organized Baseball—the national pastime, the summer game, employment for thousands, entertainment for millions, a hardscrabble business of sharp elbows, big egos, promise, failure, and reward. What would happen if war came?

Capt. T. L. Huston, co-owner of the New York Yankees, thought he knew. “Perhaps before any teams go to their training camps we will have a chance to see whether the players are as loyal to their country as to their [players] fraternity,” Huston said.¹

Harry Frazee, who owned the Boston Red Sox, thought he knew, too. “People want to get away from the war topics, and almost any kind of diversion to take their minds from the situation is welcome,” Frazee said. “What can fit this need better than baseball?”²

Both men were right, if not at the same time. America entered the war that April and nothing much changed right away, as Frazee expected. Flags flew, rhetoric soared, and the baseball season

Introduction

began as usual in the Major and Minor Leagues. Then as America armed and readied for battle, Organized Baseball increasingly felt the strain of the vast European war, as Huston expected. So much changed that within eighteen months the Major Leagues were scarcely recognizable. Every Minor League but one had shut down, and the World Series was a shambles. How and why did this occur? What happened to the ballplayers? Does it all still matter, a hundred years on?

In quieter times, the first two questions might have been answered a quarter century or so after the events, when ballplayers and historians naturally looked back on their lives and times. But by then, America was fighting the Second World War, and no definitive history of baseball during the previous war was written. Any history produced today has a different, less personal perspective. Details come not from participants' living memory but largely from newspaper microfilm and digital archives, from old front pages and sports sections, and from many hundreds of columns and game stories and dispatches from France. The endeavor to find these pieces is itself entertaining and enlightening. Along the way, answers to the third question begin to emerge. Let's begin with spring training.

FROM THE DUGOUTS TO THE TRENCHES

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Sergeants

In March 1917, with his country on the verge of entering the war in Europe, Sgt. Smith Gibson unexpectedly became one of the most famous soldiers in the U.S. Army. Gibson ran the recruiting office in Macon, Georgia, the spring-training home of the American League New York Yankees. Macon was only about 125 miles from Gibson's hometown of Opelika, to the west across the muddy Chattahoochee River in Alabama. During seventeen years in uniform, the sergeant had never received orders quite like those that had just arrived. He was to become the Yankees' new military drill instructor—among the first, so far as anyone knew, ever in the history of Organized Baseball. Soon all eight teams in the American League, plus two in the National, would have drillmasters, too.

A country boy who knew little about big cities, Sergeant Gibson could thank a prominent New Yorker for his new job in baseball. Capt. T. L. "Til" Huston, the Yankees' co-owner, was energetically pushing what newspapers up north called his pet scheme for military preparedness in baseball. In late February Huston and the sergeant had sat down for a chat in Macon. Gibson had said he was willing to drill the Yankees, if and when Huston could get him permission from the War Department. The magnate had promptly fired off a telegram to Maj. Halstead Dorey, a baseball fan serving on the staff of Maj. Gen. Leonard Wood at Governors Island in New York. Dorey had been the guest of honor at a dinner Hus-

ton had given for baseball writers and officials at the Hotel Belmont in New York City on Washington's Birthday. The major had then traveled down to Washington, DC, and "unraveled between seventeen to one hundred miles of government red tape" to support Huston's plan.¹

Although lengthy, the red tape was only a minor hindrance. Regulations prohibited the army from assigning drill sergeants to outside organizations, but nothing prevented a commanding officer from granting furloughs of six weeks to three months to any sergeants whom the league needed. Likewise, the War Department couldn't issue arms to civilian groups, but clubs could buy condemned rifles for drilling. Major Dorey also puckishly warned the Yankees' co-owner about an ailment he called "rifle arm," which a few sportswriters apparently took seriously. This post-drill stiffness, Dorey said, was likely to appeal to tired pitchers looking for an alibi to avoid work. "I would rather have them suffering from rifle arm than from slacker's knee," Huston retorted.² On February 27 Huston wired Dorey from Macon:

Sergeant Gibson on recruiting duty here says he has an efficient force which will readily permit him to give two hours or so each day to drilling our baseball club, and he is anxious to do the work for us. If you can have him made available to drill us it will quickly start the movement here and will make it easier for other clubs to get started. Your prompt action will be appreciated. Kindly answer [at] my expense.³

Wires flew for several days between Macon, Governors Island, and American League headquarters in Chicago. "How about Nationals?" Dorey wired to Georgia, meaning the National League under former Pennsylvania governor John Tener. "The National League has not taken up military training," Huston replied. "Gov. Tener, its president, is a high class patriotic gentleman and is very strongly in favor of the movement. Am wiring him on the subject."⁴

Huston kept up his campaign, and the army soon realized the tremendous recruiting benefits of cooperating with Major League Baseball. Dorey wired him March 4 that recruiting sergeants in Macon, Augusta, and Jacksonville had been assigned to the Yankees,

Senators, and Athletics, training in those respective cities. Every American League club soon had its own drill sergeant, although it took a couple of days for the army's Department of the South, headquartered at San Antonio, to assign men from Dallas to the St. Louis Browns at Palestine, Texas, and the Detroit Tigers at Waxahachie. The army declined American League president Ban Johnson's offer to have the league pay the sergeants' traveling expenses. Instead, the league would reimburse them for their services.

As opening day of training camp neared, Huston wondered how his Yankees would react:

Captain Huston has been somewhat apprehensive as to the ball players' view of the military plan, and he was greatly gratified to find that every one of the 18 men in camp are enthusiastically in favor of it. He was still more gratified by the news that Macon will add 50 sons of Georgia in addition to the company. In addition to that the City Council of Macon has agreed to provide suitable drill grounds.⁵

The Yankees held their first drill on March 6. "Despite numerous disappointments . . . Huston persisted in his efforts to obtain a regular army officer to drill his ball team, and now his work is crowned with success," *New York Sun* sportswriter Frederick G. Lieb wrote from Macon, under a headline that called the club "Huston's Regiment."⁶ The *New York Herald* reported the same day, "Preparedness, so far as the baseball players of the New York American League Club can contribute to it, began this morning."⁷

Sergeant Gibson's tiny regiment comprised thirty-two ballplayers, Huston, manager "Wild Bill" Donovan, business manager Harry Sparrow, a coach, a scout, a groundskeeper, eight newspapermen, and J. McKay, a Macon businessman. Fortunately, Captain Huston wasn't the only former soldier in Gibson's command. Two of the writers had served during the Philippine Insurrection (1899–1902), and outfielder Tim Hendryx, catcher Les Nuna-maker, and McKay all had been in the National Guard. Gibson appointed the six old hands as his corporals. A newspaperman who didn't drill with them was promptly labeled a slacker and threatened with a court-martial.

Gibson started his troops with the basics: how to stand, right and left dress, right and left face, and right about face. He gave them a little speech, saying he hoped to make the Yankees the best-drilled team in the American League, then set them to marching. “The squad was formed in two lines and then counted off into fours,” the *New York World* reported. “This arithmetical progression safely attended to, the squad marched across the field in columns of four until Harry Sparrow hollered for mercy. Harry’s feet were tiring under his 250 pounds of flesh.” Huston, in contrast, was “as enthusiastic as a little boy playing with his first toy. The owner of the Yankees praised the boys for their fine showing and is looking forward to a good team of soldiers as well as a good team of ball players.”⁸

The New York scribes later gathered around the sergeant for his take on the proceedings. Gibson told them he was pleased by what he had seen that morning. Most of the Yankees were green, but they had followed his instructions well, and he thought they would make “corking good soldiers.” The noncommissioned officer added, “Capt. Huston should be complimented for his good work in this movement.”⁹

Capt. Tillinghast L’Hommedieu Huston had bought the Yankees in January 1915 with partner Jacob Ruppert, a brewery baron, sportsman, and former congressman. Both men had military experience. An army engineer during the 1898 war with Spain, Huston had stayed in Cuba afterward to make his fortune in construction. Yankees historians Steve Steinberg and Lyle Spatz describe him as “informal, familiar, rumped, self-made.”¹⁰ Ruppert was his exact opposite, a fastidious and formal man who had taken over the family business. He was also a former colonel in the New York National Guard. Naturally he and Huston took an interest in military matters and in the war that had raged in Europe for more than two years. Huston even declared that he was “willing to pull out the old army uniform again if Uncle Sam should need his services.”¹¹ What might have seemed an idle boast by an out-of-shape, middle-aged baseball magnate was both sincere and prescient.

Huston first floated his grand plan for drilling ballplayers in February 1917—not for his Yankees alone but for all Major Leaguers. He received the immediate backing of Byron Bancroft “Ban” Johnson, the American League founder and president, which seems surprising. Steinberg and Spatz write that Huston and Johnson had “a mutual hostility that went back many years, though its source remains unclear.”¹² The league president had supported Huston and Ruppert in purchasing the Yankees, but the owners would clash repeatedly with him for years afterward. Nonetheless, in the momentous early spring of 1917, Huston and Johnson cooperated on the baseball preparedness movement. Some in the National League poked fun at the American League players as “Ban’s and Till’s ‘tin soldiers.’”¹³

“We have no way of knowing what may eventuate in the United States during the next few months,” Huston said, “and it would be a source of great satisfaction to the ball players and their followers to know that they were prepared to lay aside the spiked shoe and the glove and take up the rifle if their country needed them.”¹⁴

The movement generated a good deal of ink on the nation’s sports pages, especially in New York City. Huston “is working on a scheme whereby he hopes to make the influence of organized baseball deeply felt as a power to patriotism and action in case Uncle Sam comes to grips with the Central Powers,” columnist W. J. “Bill” Macbeth wrote in the *New York Tribune*. Huston wouldn’t release details, but “has been working with his colleagues for some weeks now.”¹⁵

Johnson sounded rather martial, too. In another article in the same edition of the *Tribune*, the American League’s powerful leader said that if the country entered the war, his circuit not only would release any players who wanted to enlist but also would look after their families while they were gone. “I approve of the suggestion made by Captain Huston, of the New York club, in regard to military training for ball players,” Johnson added. “Captain Huston would have certain hours set aside during training season for military drill. It would set a good example for others in military preparedness.”¹⁶

Huston had aggressively pushed the plan during the winter of 1916–17 as America edged steadily closer to war with Imperial Germany. He offered details in a letter to Johnson, reprinted in numerous newspapers February 10. Huston outlined three main points:

First, make a military school of spring-training camps. The Yankees themselves, Huston wrote, planned an hour of drill in the mornings and another hour in the afternoons, not to interfere with regular baseball work. Success depended on obtaining the services of “a good regular army sergeant to drill the company.”

Second, continue the drills during the regular season for two hours in the mornings and a shorter period in the afternoons. By combining the players and officials of the home and visiting teams (about 60 men) with 140 or so local fans, a city would have enough men for two companies. “Do this on all of our eight [American League] parks,” Huston recommended, “and also offer our parks for military drill purposes.”

Third, open a training camp in the fall, immediately after the World Series. Huston suggested locating it in the South and opening it to all professional ballplayers, umpires, sportswriters, and anyone else connected with baseball.

“Of course, the whole scheme must have the support of the regular army, and we must have expert instruction, and the players must realize that the movement is a great one and must be approached not with levity but in a seriousness and unalloyed patriotism,” Huston wrote to Johnson.¹⁷ The Yankees co-owner had already contacted Leonard Wood, the army commander in the East, and Gen. William Black, chief of engineers, and believed he could get War Department backing.

New York World sportswriter Bozeman Bulger wrote that many Major Leaguers were looking forward to the military drills while snow still covered the Northeast. He added that several American League managers expected to field well-drilled teams in time for the 1917 season opener. Bulger also offered the view of an unnamed army officer: “It will be a wonderful help if professional baseball can have 400 men in shape for service in case they are needed. If the minor leagues should fall in line we could almost

count upon another regiment.” New York Giants manager John McGraw also weighed in. “If the drill exercise was too long or too severe it might be a little hard on the older players, but if all the clubs do it there will be no advantage, or disadvantage, to any one during the season,” McGraw said. “You must remember that the players will have to do their hard work of practice on the diamond in addition to having military instruction. That, though, could be worked out satisfactorily later on.”¹⁸

American League club owners expressed no reservations at all. President Frazee of the Boston club later said that the system “might with profit be followed by the great employers of this country—the great railway and transportation corporations, steel works, wholesale houses, automobile manufactories and the like.”¹⁹ The AL owners immediately backed Johnson, publicly endorsed the Huston plan, and empowered their president “to consult with Major General Leonard Wood concerning the detailed working out of this project.”²⁰

The rival National League, however, stayed silent. Everyone, in fact, was fairly quiet until the end of February, when Huston dispatched his telegram to Governors Island requesting the services of Sergeant Gibson. Then things happened quickly.

Out in Illinois, in the snowy Middle West, Sgt. Walter Smiley attracted the same phenomenal interest as Sergeant Gibson. Smiley’s suitors were Charles Comiskey and his Chicago White Sox.

Like Gibson, Smiley was an army recruiter. He worked from Chicago, looking for able-bodied men to fill out the service’s meager ranks. His job wasn’t easy. A year earlier, he had recruited in several towns in southern Wisconsin and come back largely disappointed. Only six of twenty-four young men in Racine passed the army’s preliminary examination. A local newspaper said Smiley found the army’s strict regulations a hindrance to recruitment.

“He said that out of 3,500 applications at the Chicago office during the Mexican scare only 200 men were accepted,” the paper reported. “From ten to fifteen men a week, he said, were turned down, because of inability to read and write and speak the English

language. These were men, too, who had been born and raised in Chicago.” Even worse was Smiley’s astonishment at “how many men are walking the streets with diseases of one kind or another which would keep them out of the army, and who do not know there is anything the matter with them.”²¹ Now, in the spring of 1917, Sergeant Smiley was preparing to take charge of a team of Major League ballplayers, among the healthiest young fellows in the country.

Smiley’s name first appeared in the Chicago newspapers on the same day that the New York papers had noted Sergeant Gibson. Smiley “will probably go on the spring training trip with the White Sox to teach them military drill,” *Day Book* reported. “Smiley was formerly a star player in the Manila army league and should be popular with the athletes, even though he forces them to work.”²²

Either the army had assigned him or the White Sox had selected him—perhaps both—precisely because Smiley was a good army ballplayer. He had hit .372 in Manila and won a medal as his team’s most valuable player. Later he had captained an army nine in Japan and China. Now twenty-three, the Philadelphia native had first enlisted in 1911. A photo showing him wearing U.S. Army baseball flannels would soon appear in papers across America. Unlike Gibson, already on duty near the Yankees’ spring-training camp, Smiley was working up north in Chicago.

White Sox owner Charles Comiskey understood public relations and quickly latched onto the athletic sergeant. “Commie” was also a longtime friend and compatriot of Ban Johnson—although their relationship, too, would soon grow troubled. Johnson no doubt kept Comiskey apprised of Huston’s scheme. “Sergt. Smiley’s services were offered Comiskey by Adj. Gen. McCain, and Comiskey immediately accepted,” the *Chicago Tribune* reported March 2. “The sergeant will be on board in full uniform when the Sox special pulls out for Mineral Wells [Texas] Sunday night.”²³

Johnson made it clear that he hoped to secure other army ballplayers like Smiley from the War Department. “The army by assigning drill officers who know the game of baseball will in turn be benefited, and they can then teach the regulars the scientific end of

the game when they return to the ranks,” Johnson said. “The ball players, on the other hand, will more readily adapt themselves to military discipline under an officer who not only knows the arts of war but is acquainted with sport itself.”²⁴ The army got the message.

The big-city sportswriters parochially disagreed on whether the Yankees or the White Sox were the first to adopt Huston’s military-training program. It was likely a tie, New York and Chicago simultaneously welcoming their sergeants. Like Fred Lieb in Macon, *Chicago Tribune* sportswriter I. E. Sanborn in Mineral Wells had fun reporting on Smiley and his baseball soldiers.

“Privates Clarence Rowland, Edward Collins, James Scott, Ray Schalk, and Albert Russell were promoted to the rank of corporal this morning by Sergt. Walter Smiley, U. S. A., in command of the White Sox company, B. B. N. G. (base ball National Guard),” Sanborn wrote. After the team drilled together in company formation, each corporal took charge of a squad. “The new ‘noncoms’ started out bravely and got by in great shape until the order to ‘assemble’ was given, then some difficulty was experienced by the corporals in getting their squads back into their original places in line. Scott came closest to it by the about face methods, but found he had the rear in front, that’s all.”²⁵

Still, like the Yankees, the White Sox responded well to the instruction. “It was hard for the boys to keep from telling each other how their feet failed to track and how everybody else was out of line,” second baseman Eddie Collins wrote in the *Chicago Tribune*. “It took the sergeant a couple of days to suppress this wordy mutiny, but once it has been accomplished the drill went like clockwork. Not that we are letter perfect, but there was that spirit present where every one tried to excel.”²⁶ Smiley had earlier said, “Ballplayers learn military drill faster than any recruits I ever handled.”²⁷

Two weeks into spring training, Smiley received a letter from Capt. Franklin Kenney, who commanded recruiting in the army’s Central Department. Kenney suggested that the sergeant add hand grenades to his drills. White Sox manager Clarence “Pants” Rowland agreed and said the sooner the better. “In order to make it

realistic some of the players want to dig a trench and hurl the grenades at silhouette targets. Baseballs will be used for grenades.”²⁸

Army drill instructors reported to seven of the eight American League clubs while spring training was still in progress; the Red Sox would greet theirs later, a week into the regular season. With Gibson in New York and Smiley in Chicago, the rest of the army lineup looked like this: Sgt. A. B. Hoffman, Boston; Sgt. D. W. Dennis, Cleveland; Sgt. H. G. Thorne, Detroit; Sgt. W. E. Smart, Philadelphia; Sgt. Winfred B. Wisener, St. Louis; and Cpl. (soon to be Sgt.) John Dean, Washington.

Two National League teams also joined the Huston movement. Brooklyn owner Charles Ebbets found Sgt. Maj. Jess Trontgla while the Dodgers were training at Hot Springs, Arkansas. Once the season began, the Boston Braves would secure the services of Sgt. Perry S. Schofield. The movement also filtered down to the Minor Leagues. The Milwaukee and Indianapolis clubs in the Class AA American Association soon landed drillmasters, as did several clubs in lower leagues, although a few of these men were national guardsmen or retired soldiers. Captain Kenney again had charge of the regular army sergeants. He assigned the Milwaukee team a man with nine years’ service, Sgt. Jack Waidley, who had played on all-army ball teams in Honolulu and Chicago. Kenney sent him to Wichita Falls, Texas, with instructions to teach the Brewers first aid, cooking, and how to make up a pack, pitch a tent, and take care of their bodies, especially their feet.

Fans cheered the military drills during spring training, and Sergeant Smiley believed they saw a difference in the players. “Civilians have also remarked to me on the martial bearing of the men,” he wrote in *Sporting News*. “Whether this is actually noticeable to the average person or whether it is imagination I do not know, but it is nonetheless true that the men do carry themselves different from what they did at the start.”²⁹ Huston noticed the same effect in Macon, writing to sportswriter Bulger, “In a week, it seems, the greenest and most awkward of our recruits have been cured of a slouchiness, which, as you know, has been one of the banes of the baseball manager’s existence when trying to put together a club.”³⁰

Smiley thought his White Sox charges also displayed a military attentiveness in carrying out baseball orders on the diamond. “I do not know how long this will last or if it will ever be noticed in the heat of battle during the regular season,” the sergeant wrote, “but it is certainly noticeable at the present time.”³¹ Second baseman Eddie Collins likewise saw a change in the Sox. “They early came to recognize that the military drill was serious business and that it might come in good stead sooner than expected. Then, again, I think that the drilling has had an influence for good on the public in general,” he wrote. “The seriousness of the situation has been brought home to thousands who have seen us drill and we have been greeted with enthusiasm everywhere.”³²

The army drill sergeants were a sportswriter’s dream, but some ballplayers were unhappy about having to drill under them. The National League never officially endorsed the Huston scheme, and six of its eight teams never participated. Every American League club was on board, but many of the players weren’t enthusiastic, especially among the Tigers.

“Several Detroit players have claimed that the drills have caused severe strain upon muscles not brought into play on the baseball diamond and that the work has hindered more than it has helped their playing,” read a widely published wire report from Waxahachie. “The local players have been drilling with bats instead of guns and it is understood this has been unpopular with them.”³³

Detroit manager Hugh Jennings believed in compulsory military training for the country overall, but said ballplayers should drill only if they wanted to. Tigers trainer Harry Tuthill, however, publicly supported the Huston plan. “The players do not get enough of the exercises to tire their muscles,” said Tuthill, formerly an athletic trainer for the U.S. Military Academy. “The setting up exercises are excellent. It is my hope that we have them every spring.”³⁴

The Cleveland Indians were no fonder of the drills than the Tigers, although Tris Speaker was said to favor them. Word of clubhouse grumbling reached the league office, prompting Ban Johnson to fire off a sharply worded telegram to Cleveland manager Lee Fohl. “From reports there is a lack of interest shown by

you and your players in military drill. This must not continue.” Outraged, Fohl promptly wired back: “No truth in report. Some one is a liar, and that goes.”³⁵ The Tigers and Indians drilled along with everyone else.

Lastly there was a strange Red Sox–Dodgers dust-up. Brooklyn wasn’t even a member of the American League, but Boston’s outspoken owner nonetheless criticized the club for a late start at drilling—if only to deflect criticism from his own reluctant players. “Sure, we are going to drill,” Harry Frazee told writers March 21. “We start today and would have done so sooner, only we had to wait for an army officer to take us in hand. What are they doing over in the Brooklyn camp?”

Dodgers owner Ebbets retorted that his club had asked for a drill instructor weeks earlier, but the local army commander hadn’t been able to provide one until Sergeant Major Trontgla stepped forward while on furlough. The Brooklyn players had then balked, Ebbets explained, at receiving only verbal instructions.

“If Mr. Ebbets wants us to drill every morning at Ebbets Field [in Brooklyn], we are willing,” manager Wilbert Robinson insisted. “Uncle Robbie” then returned fire at Boston. “I don’t think the Red Sox are keen on the drill. Why, [player-manager] Jack Barry told me they weren’t going to take it up. They’ve got to show me.”³⁶

The Dodgers, in fact, had voted overwhelmingly against the Huston plan. They thought drills got in the way of preparing for baseball, believed that the army training had “proved a fizzle in other camps,” and claimed that Trontgla had told them “the time was all too short for them to familiarize themselves with even the rudiments of field manoeuvres.”³⁷ Perhaps to soften public perception, the players did tender a vote of thanks to Trontgla “for his offer to drill the Dodgers.”³⁸

Brooklyn Eagle sportswriter Thomas Rice couldn’t believe “the players on the Brooklyn team are so utterly stupid that they cannot see that they are working for their own benefit by offering to show their willingness to prepare themselves to do their bit for their country”—or to see that aroused fans would drive them out of the game if they didn’t. “It is reasonable to suppose that the Brooklyn and other

ball players will not be utterly blind to their own selfish interests,” Rice wrote, “regardless of the opinion some of them might entertain about the bitter hardship imposed by ordering them to do an hour or so of useful athletic exercises for their country every day.”³⁹

Still, the Brooklyn club wasn’t a member of the American League, and so not officially committed to the drill scheme in the first place. No other National League club except Boston expressed any real interest, either. “What’s the use of military training for ball players?” asked business manager Frank Bancroft of the Cincinnati Reds. “If it took them as long to enlist as it does to sign their contracts the war would be all over before they could start for the front.”⁴⁰

Grumbling continued periodically in both circuits during the regular season, but pressured by Johnson and facing little sympathy from fans or the press, no American League team ever publicly abandoned the drills. Likely influenced by Huston, the Yankees voted unanimously in Macon to *continue* their drills—a fact that Ban Johnson immediately shared with reporters.

To maintain momentum for the scheme, the league president also announced a \$500 prize (equivalent to nearly \$10,000 today) for the league’s best-drilled team, plus \$100 in gold for that team’s drill sergeant. A competition was slated in July—which would later be pushed to August—with a board of army officers to review the players’ performance and make the award. Captain Huston matched the \$500 prize, and the president of the Illinois-Indiana-Iowa (Three-I) Minor League pledged another \$100.

Comiskey, never a wallflower, chipped in another \$200 for his players plus a \$100 bonus for Sergeant Smiley if the White Sox marched off with top honors. No matter who won, the prize money would be “distributed as the players decide,” a Boston paper reported, “but it is probable that the fund will be used to purchase a pennant emblematic of the honor.”⁴¹

As they trained in their southern camps, American Leaguers routinely saw their drills reported along with the usual baseball items and scores. Panoramic photos of ballplayers performing company drills—with baseball bats across their broad shoulders instead of model 1903 Springfield rifles—appeared on sports pages across the

country. A *Sporting Life* editorial later noted that the scribes had a good deal of sport early on, writing about the players and their drills.

But, as a matter of fact the players in Captain Huston's awkward squad, under the direction of a regular sergeant, took to the scheme at once with such seriousness and determination to learn that the newspaper humorists hitting the trail with the ball club were somewhat abashed and seriously impressed, and it is fair to presume that as are the Yankees so will be the other teams in the American League.⁴²

The New York writers especially sat up when Col. E. V. Smith watched a Yankees drill in late March. The officer in charge of the army's southern division, Smith offered high praise for the Yankees:

You men have no idea of the wonderful showing you have made, compared to most recruits. And you can have no idea of the great good you are doing and will do later on. You have picked up drill in a most amazing fashion, which is but further proof that the average ball player is among the most intelligent of our citizens. This can only remain a big league country if it gets ready in a big league way. Otherwise it is back to the bushes for a nation, just as it will be for the individual who hasn't trained when the show-down comes.⁴³

No club could buy better publicity. By the time the eight American League teams headed north to begin the regular season, Huston's scheme had become both a serious-minded boost to military preparedness and a wildly successful public relations ploy by owners and magnates. The army and the league mutually benefited, as Tom Rice noted in the *Eagle*.

Will the New York Club lose money by paying Sergeant Gibson's expenses on the road in these troublous times? It most distinctly will not. Make a bet on that. The drilling by the Yankees is going to prove one of the best and most legitimate advertising schemes in the history of baseball. The same goes for the Chicago White Sox, who have been as industrious as the Yankees in their drilling. You could not imagine Charley Comiskey, the greatest advertiser the sport ever knew, missing a chance like that.⁴⁴

Cornelius McGillicuddy, the magisterial owner and manager of the Philadelphia Athletics, universally known to fans as Connie Mack, knew a bit about Major League baseball, too. Mack wanted the Huston preparedness scheme to benefit fans as well as players, and he made sure to say so publicly. “We have entertained the American people and now we will do all in our power to protect them,” Mack said the first week of April. “I realize that our small band of athletes could do nothing if they were to take their places on the firing line, where numbers count more than anything else, but I believe we can set an example for others to follow.” Mack said that Shibe Park would serve as both a baseball park and a drill ground during the season, and he invited Philadelphians to join his Mackmen there. “Every morning the men who wish to train for military service are invited to come out to the park, where they will be drilled by Sergeant Smart and the ball players themselves.” Mack’s stance was “another reason why he is so popular in our city,” the *Philadelphia Public Ledger* applauded. “He sees a chance to use his men for something else besides playing ball, and without waiting to be asked he turned his equipment over to the public. Connie is the first big league magnate to take this stand.”⁴⁵

The Athletics’ leader had the exquisite timing of an old baseball man. The United States declared war on imperial Germany just two days after his comments appeared in the newspaper. President Woodrow Wilson and Vice President Thomas Marshall signed the resolution of Congress at 1:11 p.m. on Friday, April 6, 1917. The baseball season opened the following week, amid cold weather and general gloom, the first Major League campaign ever to begin with the country at war. Captain Huston’s Yankees were at home against Harry Frazee’s Red Sox.

“Holding aloft a banner ‘Death to Autocracy,’ Uncle Sam to-day is prepared to bow to the only monarch to whom he ever swore fealty, a monarch typifying the very spirit of the nation, old King Baseball,” Fred Lieb wrote. “Even with the stern business of preparing for war uppermost the nation is unable to forgo interest in its leading outdoor diversion.”⁴⁶ Play ball!