

Remembering Baseball Hall of Famers Who Served in the Chemical Corps

By Mr. Richard Gurtowski

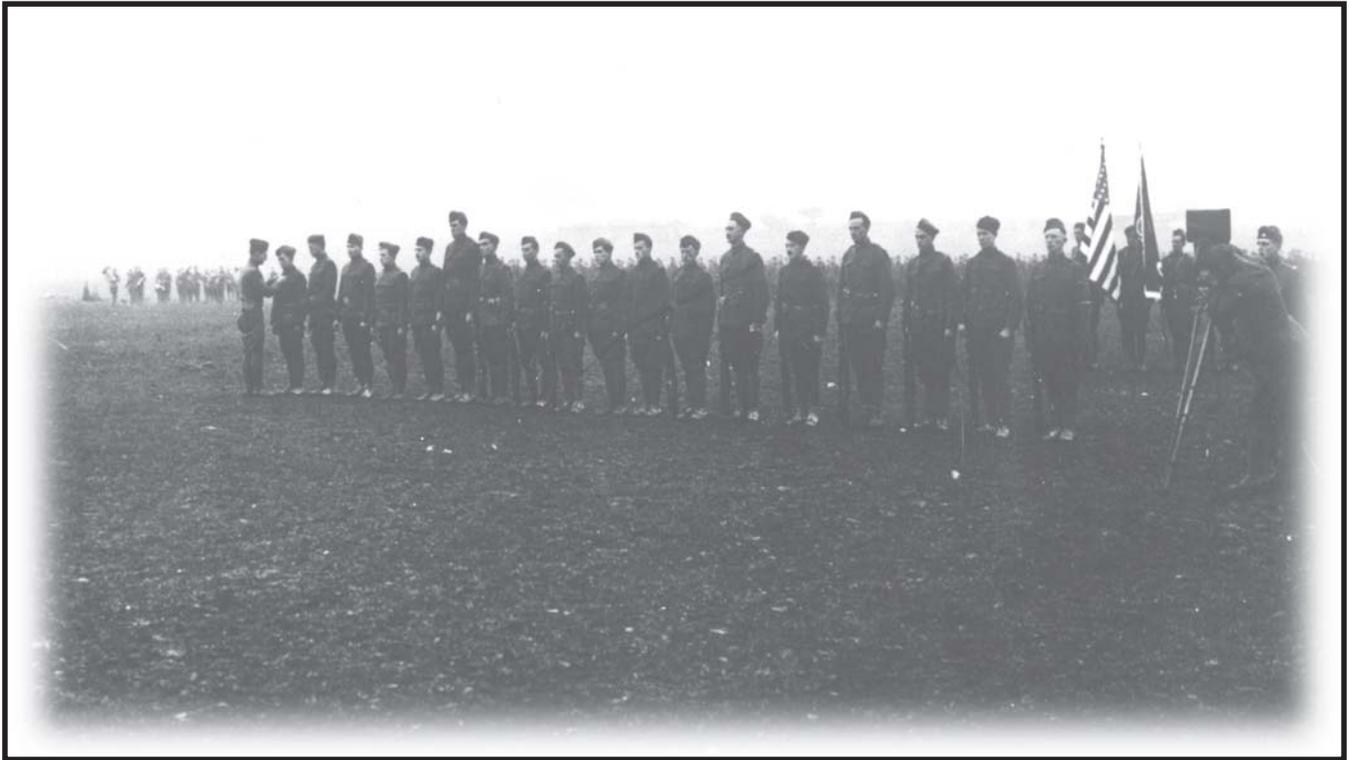


It is widely known throughout the nostalgic baseball world that New York Giants pitcher Christy Mathewson, “the Big Six,” suffered from chlorine gas exposure as a Chemical Corps officer during World War I and later died of tuberculosis. But did you know that other legendary baseball Hall of Fame stars such as Branch Rickey, Ty Cobb, and George Sisler also served in the Chemical Corps (known at that time as the Chemical Warfare Service [CWS]) during World War I? Branch Rickey, the president of the St. Louis Cardinals and the former University of Michigan baseball coach, obtained the rank of major in the CWS and commanded a unit that eventually included Captain Ty Cobb, Captain Christy Mathewson, and Lieutenant George Sisler. Mathewson and Rickey, at 38, were too old for military service; but Rickey was encouraged to join the CWS by Harvard’s former football coach and president of the Boston Braves, Perry Haughton (who was also a member of the CWS). Through the auspices of Major Rickey, St. Louis first baseman George Sisler (a player under Rickey at the University of Michigan) was also enticed to join the CWS.

Ty Cobb requested duty with the CWS. And it is puzzling as to why. With his expert eye for distance and his experience with hunting and guns, he would have been better-suited for the Field Artillery Corps. Many native Georgians urged him to enlist elsewhere. But Cobb, well aware of the risks of chemicals, offered only one explanation: “Christy Mathewson and Branch Rickey are in Chemical—they are guys I like and are friends.” Cobb reported to the CWS in October of 1918 and was sent to the Allied Expeditionary Forces Headquarters in Chaumont, France.

The most accurate and personal information on Cobb’s warfare experience is referenced in his autobiography entitled *My Life in Baseball: The True Record*.¹ In the autobiography, Cobb states, “I saw Christy Mathewson doomed to die. None of us who were with him realized that the rider of the pale horse had passed his way. Nor did Matty, the greatest National League pitcher of them all. . . . We were at Hanlon Field near Chaumont, France, when it happened.”² Cobb goes on to say, “Along with other sports figures, I enlisted in the Chemical Warfare Service in 1918, was given accelerated training in defense against the use of poison gas, and was shipped overseas, pronto. George Sisler, Branch Rickey, Matty, myself, and athletes from the gridiron, polo fields, and race tracks were assigned to the ‘Gas and Flame Division’ as instructors. I wore Captain’s bars. We had hundreds of soldiers to train. We wound up drilling the damndest bunch of culls that World War I ever grouped in one outfit. The doughboys who came our way largely were hard cases and rejects from other services. The theory was that they would listen to well-known sports personalities—and to some extent it was effective. Those that gave us trouble and didn’t heed orders didn’t last long, for we weren’t fooling around with simulated death when we entered the gas chambers. The stuff we turned loose was the McCoy and meant to train a man to be on *qui vive*—or else.”

In April of 1915, the Germans lobbed chlorine gas cylinders into the Ypres Salient (Second Battle of Ypres). The use of the chemical weapons horrified neutral nations and set the United States to seek countermeasures. Chlorine-based mustard gas seared lungs and often asphyxiated victims. Phosgene gas was just as bad (if not



Medal presentation at Hanlon Field, France, on 4 December 1918

worse), causing victims to turn a livid purple in the face before death. And rank did not deter the use of the poisonous gas. Six weeks after Colonel Douglas McArthur reached combat, his eyesight was threatened by gas exposure, forcing him to remain blindfolded for a week.

In his autobiography, Cobb also speaks of the heavy allied casualties: “Then came mustard and sneeze gases, frightfully successful. Protective masks that were rushed into use were a joke at first. They were cumbersome affairs consisting of a mask that was fitted around the face, attached by a tube to a canister suspended around the soldier’s neck and hanging in front of his body. He breathed air through a tube held in his mouth, from which the poison gases were filtered through charcoal and soda lime contained in the canister. A nose clip was supposed to prevent breathing through the nostrils. But men forgot the procedure or panicked. What’s more, all that gear impeded a soldier’s movements, especially his ability to burrow into the ground when under machine gun fire.

“By 1918, we had improved masks and a growing knowledge of the Kaiser’s laboratories. One of our training exercises involved marching men into an airtight chamber in which gas was released almost without warning. At a hand signal, everyone was supposed to snap his mask into position. Alertness and speed were the keys to success. I’ll never be able to forget the day when some of the men—myself included—missed the signal. Men screamed

to be let out when they suddenly got a whiff of the sweet death in the air. They went crazy with fear and in the fight to get out got jammed up in a hopeless tangle.

“As soon as I realized what had happened, but only after inhaling some gas, I fixed my mask, groped my way to the wall, and worked through the thrashing bodies to the door. Trying to lead the men out was hopeless. It was each one of us in there for himself. When I staggered out and gulped in fresh air, I didn’t know how badly my lungs had been damaged. For weeks, a colorless discharge drained from my chest and I had a hacking cough. When the draining stopped, I felt that Divine Providence had touched me. When it was over there were sixteen bodies stretched out on the ground. Eight men died of lung damage within hours, others were crippled in a few days. I remember Mathewson telling me, ‘Ty, I got a good dose of the stuff. I feel terrible.’ He was wheezing and blowing out congested matter.”

Mathewson had not only been in the chamber with Cobb, but had inspected trenches for gas residue earlier. Little did Mathewson know at the time, but he would live only seven more years.

In 1918, George Sisler was commissioned a second lieutenant and assigned to Camp Humphries, Virginia, and Rickey, Cobb, Mathewson, and Haughton were sent to France. Just as George Sisler was preparing to deploy overseas, the armistice was signed on 11 November. Sisler



Captain Christy Mathewson

was subsequently discharged from the CWS. Cobb served approximately 67 days overseas with the CWS before being shipped back stateside. Branch Rickey and Christy Mathewson returned stateside prior to 1919. All four men received honorable discharges and returned to their baseball careers. Perry Haughton was also honorably discharged and returned to his position as president of the Boston Braves.

Following illness and hospitalization, Christy Mathewson returned home to become John McGraw's right-hand man with the New York Giants and, in 1923, president of the Boston Braves. After developing tuberculosis in both lungs, Mathewson was sent to the

Trudeau Sanatorium in Saranac Lake, New York, known worldwide for treatment of the *white plague*. He continued to serve as the team's president, spending the next two years traveling back and forth from Saranac Lake to Boston. On 7 October 1925, Christy Mathewson died at the age of forty-five. That day was also the opening day of the 1925 World Series between the Pittsburgh Pirates and the Washington Senators. On 8 October, during the second game of the series, the players wore black armbands to honor Mathewson, and 44,000 World Series fans stood as the flag was lowered to half-mast at Pittsburgh's Forbes Field and sang Nearer My God to Thee. Ty Cobb attended Christy Mathewson's funeral and later stated that "Big Six looked peaceful in that coffin, that damned gas got him and nearly got me."

As the *war to end all wars* culminated in 1918, future President Warren G. Harding said that it was time for the world to "return to normalcy." And for many Americans, it was a return to the peaceful confines of the ballpark. 🎮🎮

Endnotes:

¹Ty Cobb, with Al Stump, *My Life in Baseball: The True Record*, University of Nebraska, reprint edition, 1 March 1993.

²Hanlon Field was an experimental station and home of the Allied Expeditionary Force Gas School. It was named in honor of the first CWS officer killed in action, Second Lieutenant Joseph T. Hanlon, First Gas Regiment. Hanlon Field was an auxiliary field, not in the combat zone, but extremely vulnerable to night and enemy aircraft attack.

Title photograph: Captain Ty Cobb and Captain Christy Mathewson

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