

1917

When America went to war in April of 1917, baseball did not know how to react. The governing National Commission organized a "drilling contest" in which teams staged pre-game exhibitions of marching movements, offered Sunday exhibition games, and made patriotic announcements urging people to enlist for service. Soldiers and sailors were admitted to the parks free on certain days. Club owners also faced concerns regarding attendance. Given the sobering temperament of the times, crowds slackened during most of 1917. (Overall, attendance fell by more than 1.25 million from 1916 levels.) But the larger question related to the players themselves, most of whom were of prime fighting age. The new draft law required all men between the ages of 21 and 30 to register by June 5; the first drawing to be made July 20. Players who did not volunteer, or who appeared to be avoiding service, ran the risk of being labeled as "slackers." One who wore that label was Shoeless Joe Jackson, who received a recurrent verbal scorching from fans after taking a job in a shipyard in order to continue playing for the Chicago White Sox during the war. Most waited for a draft call, but a few stepped forward. The first was Hank Gowdy, catcher for the Boston Braves, who left his team June 1 to sign up. "I had no excuse as far as I could see for not offering my services," Gowdy told a reporter. "I was of the proper age, well and strong, with no physical disabilities that I know of." Eventually, 227 major leaguers join one of the services. Three present or former professionals die, although none are active major leaguers. Gowdy fought in the trenches in France, then resumed his baseball career in 1919. ELSEWHERE IN BASEBALL Cincinnati's Fred Toney and Chicago's Jim Vaughn pitch a nine-inning double no-hitter May 2 that is won by the Reds 1-0 in 10 innings. Red Sox pitcher Babe Ruth walks the leadoff batter, slugs umpire Brick Owen, and is ejected June 23. His replacement, Ernie Shore, watches as the runner is thrown out trying to steal, then retires the next 27 hitters to complete the strangest "perfect game" in major league history.

IN THE WORLD Congress declares war on Germany April 2.
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