Baseball, the nation’s official pastime, was at its height of popularity when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The next day, star Major League pitcher Bob Feller enlisted in the Navy. He was the first of 500 Major League and 4,000 Minor League players to enlist or be drafted into the military during World War II. Although many Minor Leaguers were sent into combat, few Major League players served in harm’s way and only two were killed. Top players were assigned to military baseball teams that played exhibition games to entertain soldiers before they headed off to war.
American soldiers also played informal games of baseball on makeshift diamonds at military bases throughout the world. The games attracted crowds of curious townspeople, and baseball slowly caught on in many countries including Italy and Germany. World War II soldiers introduced baseball to the people of the Northern Mariana Islands, and it grew to become the most popular sport in the country.

After the Germans surrendered in May 1945, the military formed a baseball league so that American military units could compete against one another. The games entertained the hundreds of thousands of troops who were stationed in Europe and waiting for their discharges. Some of the games were played in Germany’s Hitler Youth Stadium, the site of many Nazi wartime rallies. The stadium was converted into a baseball stadium and renamed Soldiers Field.

On September 3, 1945 (the day after Japan’s surrender ended the war), two of the top American military teams — the German-based Red Circlers and the France-based OISE (Overseas Invasion Service Expedition) — competed in the European Theater of Operations World Series. The heavily favored Red Circlers team was stacked with nine former Major League players. The OISE team was filled with a hodge-podge of Minor League players, one former Major League pitcher, and two star black players from the Negro Leagues.

More than 50,000 American troops showed up at Soldiers Field to watch the Red Circlers win game one of the series. Vendors sold beer, soda, and peanuts, and
the game was broadcast on Armed Forces Radio. In game two, African Americans Leon Day and Willard Brown led the OISE to an unexpected victory. Day pitched and gave up only four hits, and Brown drove in the winning run.

Going into the fifth and final game, the series was tied at two games each. The Red Circlers were ahead 1-0 in the seventh inning when Day was sent into the game as a pinch runner. He stole two bases before scoring the tying run. Brown hit a double in the eighth inning to drive in the winning run.

Day and Brown returned to the Negro Leagues after the war. It didn’t matter that they had led the OISE team to victory over a team of Major League players. It also didn’t matter that they had faithfully served their country. Jackie Robinson had yet to integrate the major leagues, so there was no place for them there.

**FAST FACT**
Leon Day and Willard Brown were among the 35 Negro League players to be inducted into the Major League Baseball Hall of Fame.