

On the Death of Eddie Waitkus
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In June of 1949, Eddie Waitkus was a 29-year-old veteran of the Pacific war and an all-star caliber first baseman for the Philadelphia Phillies major league baseball team. The Phillies were in town to play the Chicago Cubs. The team was staying at the Edgewater Beach hotel. A note on hotel stationary had been left for Eddie in his mailbox at the front desk:

June 14, 1949

Mr. Waitkus—

It's extremely important that I see you as soon as possible. We're not acquainted but I have something of importance to speak to you about. I think it would be to your advantage to let me explain it to you.

As I am leaving the hotel the day after tomorrow, I'd appreciate it greatly if you could see me as soon as possible.

My name is Ruth Anne Burns, and I am in 1297-A.

I realize that this is a little out of the ordinary, but as I said, it's rather important.

Please come soon. I won't take up much of your time.

There was no signature.

The elevator doors opened on the twelfth floor. Eddie stepped out onto the plush carpet and tried to figure out the most direct path to room 1297-A. He walked the length of two hallways before arriving at a small vestibule that led to the room. He knocked twice before the door swung open.

Before the bullet tore through his chest and he slumped to the floor, Eddie was able to see her—young, tall, attractive, a white lace blouse, long curling black hair held back in place by two studded combs.

Ruth Ann Steinhagen knelt by Eddie's side and held his hand in her lap.

Eddie recovered and returned to baseball and was fairly successful until he was released by the Phillies in 1955. He married and had a daughter and then a son. The marriage didn't last.

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In the summer of 1972, life was catching up with Eddie Waitkus. His eyes were sunken and he had little energy. He looked far older than his fifty-two years. He lived in a rented room on the second floor of Belle Power's modest home in Cambridge, Massachusetts. "Eddie was such a pleasant person," Powers said later. "He'd stay in his room at night and read his books and have his drinks. I don't think he had any close friends."

Work hadn't gone well for Eddie since his baseball playing days ended, but he had finally been able to catch on in the summers as a coach and counselor at Ted Williams' baseball camp. "The kids loved him," Williams said about Eddie. "He was magnificent with them, and we were truly lucky to have him. I always knew Eddie was a great ballplayer, but he was a hell of a man, too."

But there was a deep and pervasive sadness about Eddie, or was it depression? Something was wrong. There was speculation that the horror of war had damaged Eddie's mind, and perhaps there were lingering effects from the shooting. Or was it that Eddie just didn't fit in his world? "Eddie wasn't the regular, normal ballplayer," noted former Phillies teammate Richie Ashburn. "He wasn't a rough guy. He wasn't a nasty guy. He didn't go in with his spikes high, and he didn't fight. He was almost an aberration. He read Latin, loved poetry and classical music, and was an expert in ballroom dancing. Sometimes, looking back on his other talents and interests, I used to think it was a shame he had to play baseball."

On September 16, 1972, twelve days before his fifty-third birthday, Eddie Waitkus died from esophageal cancer. After his death, his daughter Ronni said about him: "Dad was a philosophical man, always dreaming about what he was going to do some day that he never did. He once told me he didn't get out of life what he wanted. But what was it?"

Source: John Theodore, *Baseball's Natural: The Story of Eddie Waitkus* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).