

A TALE OF TWO CITY VISITS . . .

. . . & THE DEADLY WATERS OFF RIKERS ISLAND

This is a tale of two city visits by Billy Southworth (nearly 20 years apart) . . . and the deadly waters off Rikers Island.

Southworth made other visits to NYC during those two decades, as well as before and after. But for the purposes of our retelling the father-and-son Southworth story, these two particular visits are chosen because both take place during Major League Baseball seasons.

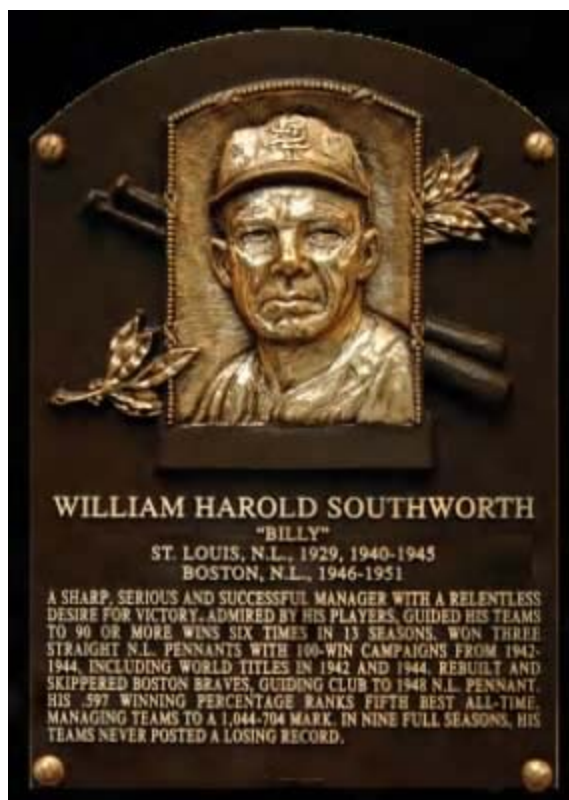
While the Billy Southworth name is probably not familiar to you, it was once quite well known among fans of “America’s pastime.” His plaque is on display in the National Baseball Hall of Fame at Cooperstown, N.Y.

1926 Visit: In Beginning of October

During the first of the two visits cited here, Billy plays right field for the Cardinals against the Yankees in the 1926 World Series.

As son “Billy Junior,” 10, watches with some 60,000+ others at Yankee Stadium, Senior delivers the game-deciding three-run HR in the second game Sunday, Oct. 3rd.

Acquired from the NY Giants three months earlier, Billy Sr. and his .317 batting prowess had helped the St. Louis team win its first National League



At the end of this presentation there appears a link to access the Hall of Fame extensively detailed, full exposition of Billy Southworth’s very long, zigzag career as a player, player-manager and just manager. If you want to interrupt our retelling of the Billy Sr. and Jr. story to read that museum’s exclusively baseball-focused Billy Sr. bio immediately, click the above image. Please, use your browser “back” option to return.

pennant. Indeed, his game-winning home run against his former teammates at the Polo Grounds in the Bronx Sept. 24 clinched the league title.

Now at another stadium in the Bronx, his play at the plate and in the outfield helps advance the Cards to their first World Championship. St. Louis prevailed, 4 games to 3, over the New York team that included the famed (or infamous, depending on whom you root for) “Murderers Row:” Gerhrig, Ruth, Lazzeri and Meusel. Southworth batted .345 in the seven games; his 10 hits made a difference.

No LaGuardia Airport Then

In that era, baseball teams traveled between league cities via trains, not planes. NYC had no real major airport then. LaGuardia Airport was likely not yet even a gleam in Fiorello’s eye. Nor in 1926 was he in a position to make it happen, even if he had such a gleam. Eight years would transpire before this



Congressman Fiorello LaGuardia took unpaid leave to serve as a WWI pilot and U.S. military aviation chief in allied Italy.

progressive Republican, representing East Harlem in Congress, would become NYC’s 99th mayor.



Glenn Curtiss acquired from NY Air Terminals the site which became eventually, after much expansion, New York Municipal Airport. – LaGuardia Field

His service as a bomber pilot leading U.S. military aviation activity in Italy during WWI had made the Little Flower (“Fiorello” translated) susceptible to the notion that, as mayor, he could bring about construction of an airport worthy of America’s most populous municipality.

But back in 1926 only a small part of the area currently occupied by LaGuardia Airport was put to aviation use. A private company, NY Air Terminals, provided land aircraft and boat planes with, respectively, shore runways and the waters between Rikers Island, Bronx, and then North Beach, Queens, to use for their arrivals and departures. In 1927, air flight pioneer Glenn Curtiss bought the land and water rights as a base for his light

aircraft company. Two years later it was renamed Glenn H. Curtiss Airport, North Beach.

During that decade (the 1920s), the waters off Rikers Island teemed with activity:

- Tugboats and barges brought garbage, trash, incinerator ash, and debris from construction sites to create landfill for the isle, expanding it from fewer than 100 acres to more than 400.
- Specially-equipped water craft and their crews created underwater “cribs” to hold landfill.
- Seaplanes arrived and departed at the North Beach marine air terminal.



Foreground: Small seaplane hauled onto a North Beach Airport ramp in 1929. *Background:* Steam engine-powered equipment proceeds with landfill operations at Rikers Island.

Rikers Island Penitentiary construction had not yet begun. But construction of the island itself was going forward, full steam ahead (quite literally). Steam shovels of various kinds lifted the “fill” from barges pushed or “tugged” by steam boats. Steam locomotives moved the container railcars into which the fill was deposited. Some landfill hills generated their own smoke plumes from compacted mixed combustibles spontaneously igniting.



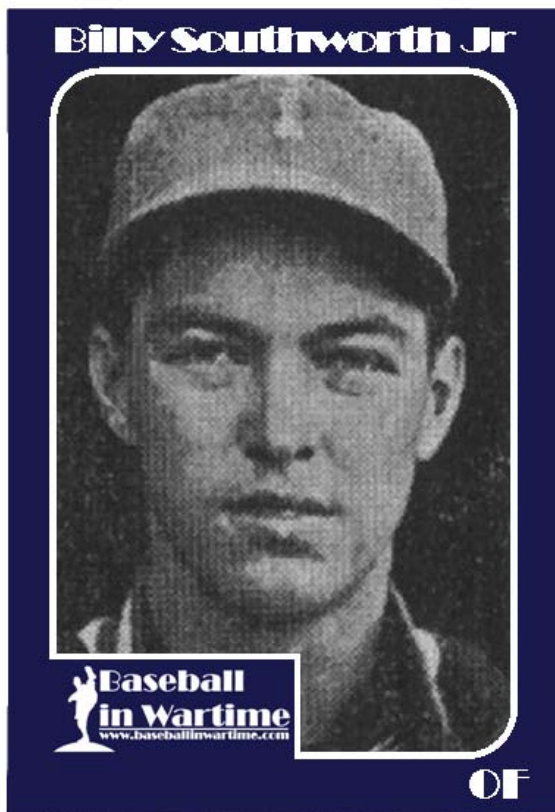
Late 1920s photo: Rikers Farm Colony inmates pause to have their picture taken on landfill hill.

Rikers Island Farm Colony inmate crews, under supervision of their prison keepers, took time away from crops, chickens, and pigs and participated in what DOC back then euphemistically called “land reclamation.” For

some of those inmates battling narcotics addiction, the work seriously figured as an element in the Rikers Island's "cure."

Two years after experiencing the high-point in the player phase of his long baseball career, Southworth and his son went through trauma together in their personal life. In 1928, then player-manager of the Cards' Rochester club in the Independent League, Senior interrupted spring training to rush home as his wife went into difficult labor with twins who died during the birthing process. A preacher's daughter whom Billy had met singing in her dad's church choir, Lida Brooks Southworth never fully regained her health.

In October that same year, Billy Sr. found himself again rushing home in response to a family emergency: Billy Jr., now 12, had been shot accidentally



by another boy as they hunted small game together. A big button on young Billy's coat took the brunt of bullet's force. The lad's wound was not critical. But his dad – aware a half-inch difference in any direction would have meant a different outcome for his son – was profoundly upset and remained so long afterwards. The bond between Sr. and Jr., always strong, became even more so. They were father and son, yes; but also, as Senior put it, "best friends." That bond stayed firm despite Lida and Billy Sr.'s divorce and her later death from a cerebral hemorrhage, both in Junior's teen period (1930s). The buddies bond between the two Billys enabled them to come together and give support to each other.

Jr.'s Passions: Baseball & Planes

Junior had two passions: baseball and aviation. His earliest memory as a child was that of being in a ball park during a game and sitting with the players, one of whom was his dad. Later, during Billy Senior's "off-season," he informally but regularly coached his son, a star player on school and college baseball

teams. During academic breaks, the younger Billy often accompanied his father to league cities and their ball parks. A professional baseball field became as familiar an environment to Jr. as a classroom. When he regularly attended classes and dad was away managing teams, Jr. spent his non-baseball time making model airplanes and devouring aviation magazines.

Not surprisingly, as a young man he embarked upon a baseball career of his own, signing with Cardinals' organization. Senior at the time was manager of one of its farm clubs. Junior's play in the outfield and at the plate during his handful of seasons (he was voted MVP twice) showed great promise.

But with military conflict raging in Europe and war with Japan appearing on America's foreseeable horizon, Billy Jr. decided to enlist in U.S. Army Air Corps. He did so about a year before the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.

Dad had tried to talk him out of it. But once the enlistment papers were signed, Senior supported his son. Baseball historians note Southworth Jr. was the first U.S. professional baseball player to enlist prior to December 1941.

In late 1942, with his training completed to pilot and command a bomber crew, Captain Southworth visited his father in Chicago where the team was playing the Cubs. The young officer then headed to Europe and actual warfare.



Southworths smile for photo during Jr.'s pilot training period. Army Air Corps (later "Force") used their celebrity to encourage enlistments.

On July 17, 1943, the captain completed his tour of duty – 25 combat missions, mostly daylight bombing flights – over Germany and occupied France without a single injury to any crew member. The same could not be said of his planes.

For example, on one bombing run against a German U-boat pen in Brest, his B-17 Flying Fortress took numerous hits from enemy fighter planes and ground defenses. Despite a starboard engine being disabled by the counterattack, Capt. Southworth managed to guide the damaged aircraft back over the English Channel and to a safe landing at the first available British airfield.

Four days later (Jan. 27, 1943) he and his team, manning a different B-17, were part of an airborne armada that attacked another German naval base, but not in France. It was the first all-American bombing run into Germany – U.S. bombs, U.S. planes and U.S. crews.

Awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and Air Medal, with three oak leaf clusters, Southworth Jr. returned to the states in January 1944, was promoted to Major and at first assigned to training bomber crews but later named a deputy commanding officer in the “new” Army Air Force.



Above: B-17 piloted by Captain Southworth during WWII displayed Cardinals logo and a baseball term for the deciding run scored in a baseball game.

Below: Billy Sr.'s manager cap worn during Cardinals' winning 1942 World Series over the Yankees and given to son heading overseas to combat. It was worn by Billy Jr. during his 25 successful bombing runs. He modified it so pilot gear could be attached..

Airman Never Really Left Baseball Behind Him

When asked if being away from baseball was hard for him, seeing how he had grown up inside it, Major Southworth could point to a photo with his crew members next to their bombing run B-17 nicknamed “Winning Run.” Or he’d take out his Cardinals cap, given him by his dad and worn on missions. The airman hadn’t really been completely away from baseball at all. It was part of him



wherever he went, a language for his thinking, a lens through which to perceive and cope with the world.

To someone who had praised his leadership as a commander in combat, he said: "I was just another Joe, occupying a lucky seat with a fine crew. I tried to manage 'em like Dad manages his Cardinals."



Two pilots before a World Series game – one who led his team to victories on the baseball field; the other who led his plane crews to victories in the field of air warfare. The addition of a thin mustache gave Billy Jr. "Clark Gable" kind of looks that prompted Academy Award-winning producer Hunt Stromberg, after seeing Major Southworth introduced at a 1944 sports event, to sign him to a Hollywood contract for after the war.

To a reporter's question on whether baseball should be suspended for the duration of the war, he responded: "Baseball is the universal language of our troops overseas and should be continued in the face of all obstacles. Baseball is something they have in common They still follow their favorite team as fervently as ever. The national pastime is doing a tremendous job as a morale factor," helping to provide needed diversion of their minds from the problems of war.

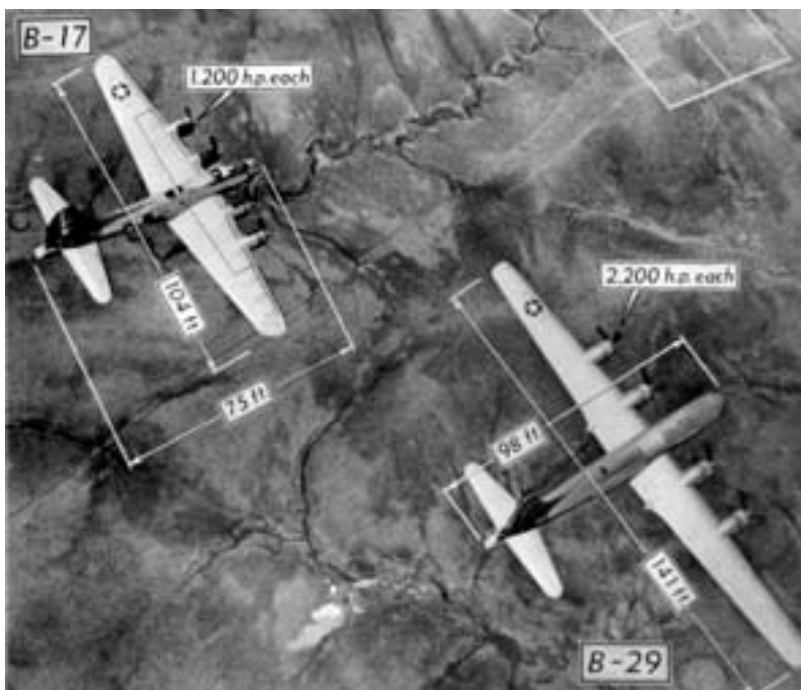
His high echelon Army Air Force state-side post sent him to various sections of the country. When an assignment placed him within range, Junior would make sure to visit Dad. When the father could, he would initiate the get-together. The Major was the Manager's guest at the October 1944 World Series won by the Cards over the Browns in six games. The following month Junior visited home in Sunbury, Ohio, to be with his dad, step-mom and half sister. It was their last time together.

His being accidentally shot when he was a boy hunting and his B-17s being repeatedly shot during combat were as foreshadows of what was to happen,

without a single shot being fired, in unthreatened skies over LaGuardia Field and Rikers Island.

B-29 Superfortress Roar Cuts the Air Overhead at Rikers

Approximately three months before the surrender of German forces in Europe, the roar of a B-29 Superfortress cut through the chilly late-afternoon air Thursday, February 15, 1945, at Rikers Island. Penitentiary inmates and officers working outside -- the prisoners tending the farm or leveling landfill and the custodial staffers supervising -- looked up.



Above: Official Boeing circa late 1944 photo that compares B-17 Flying Fortress to its successor: the wider, longer and more powerful B-29 Superfortress.

Convicts and custodians alike, all eyed the sky. None could recall ever seeing such a huge military aircraft, with weaponry protruding seemingly from every angle, so near their mostly man-made island.

The penitentiary complex had opened to inmate occupancy about decade earlier. Across Rikers Island Channel and Bowery Bay, the NYC Municipal Airport-LaGuardia Field opened in late 1939.

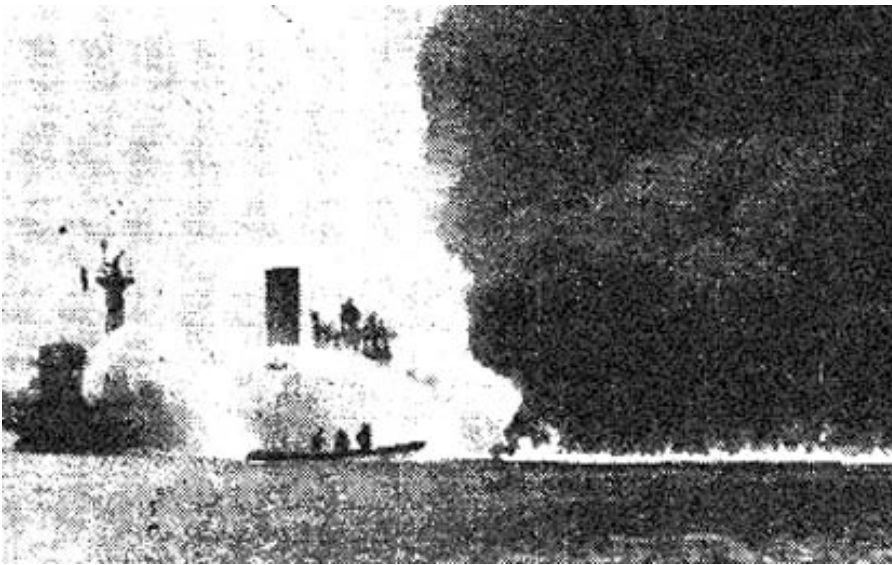
During four years since U.S. entry into WWII, few if any military aircraft had used that airport. Servicemen being trained at the airport as aircraft and aviation technicians constituted the only continuing military presence at the airport.

Soon the Rikers onlookers noticed that smoke trailed from the left wing's outboard engine and that its propeller seemed to have stalled. A terrible sinking feeling froze the island's spectators in place as they watched, without means of

helping the military aircraft which was attempting an emergency landing on a runway of the nearby civilian airport.

On the other side of the channel and bay, airport authorities, already alerted by Major Southworth to prepare for the emergency landing attempt, rushed the appropriate equipment into position, activated relevant personnel and provided the pilot and crew with necessary information to guide them hopefully to safety.

As Billy Junior grappled with the controls, the not fully-functioning plane failed to complete the touch-down on assigned Runway 9, forcing him to try to climb for another pass at landing. But the left wing dipped into the water, causing the Superfortress to flip over into waters off Rikers Island, split in two, and explode into flames.



Fire boat hose guns aim their stream to contain burning fuel from the B-29 that crashed into Rikers Island Channel and split apart. (A film grain sketch based on an AP photo.)

Bound for Florida, the giant aircraft had come just come from Mitchel Field, Hempstead, with 10 aboard. Five in the tail section, which remained afloat longer, were rescued by police and airline boat crews. The five in the front section, including pilot Southworth, were trapped by flames which totally enveloped it. The NYT reported (2/16/45):

To mark the spot for the searching parties, four lighted red and green buoys were placed about the areas where the plane exploded and sank. The Army Transport Command said one section had sunk in the east end of the Rikers Island channel and the other had drifted with the current and is believed to be at the westerly end of the channel.

When Southworth Senior arrived next day by plane from Columbus, Ohio, after having been notified by the Army Air Force, he encountered reporters at LaGuardia Field. In a voice that cracked with emotion, he asked them to point where the big plane had plunged into the water. The news people indicated the section of Rikers Island Channel marked off by the four green and red buoys. The father, clearly overcome with grief, could say nothing for a long time but just stared silently at the on-going search scene.

Slowly he revived sufficiently to ask about the well-being of the rescued five and appeared greatly relieved to hear they seemed recovering. He and wife, Mabel, Junior's stepmother, stayed nearby for weeks, visiting Rikers Island Channel almost daily, often aboard the barges from which the divers entered the frigid waters. The wreckage early on had been located 30 feet below the surface, but tides, currents, and cold temperatures hindered the search for the five missing men's bodies.

Southworth Senior praised the "heroic work" being performed by the search team: "Their loyalty to lost comrades is present in their every act." Inevitably the Southworths eventually had to return home to Sunbury, Ohio, and wait word.

**1945 Visit:
As Baseball Season
Enters Final Weeks**

The second visit singled out in this tale of two NYC visits by Billy Southworth Senior, like the first mentioned, also occurs during the baseball season. But whereas the



Simple flat grave stone marks the resting place of Billy Jr's remains in Green Lawn Cemetery, Columbus, Ohio

one 20 years earlier involved Billy Jr. accompanying his dad to the World Series, this one involves Billy Sr. accompanying his son's body back home to Ohio for funeral and burial services six months after the fatal airplane crash.

On August 4th, 1945, the Cards had just edged out the Pirates, 6-to-5, in Pittsburgh, thanks to a two-run base hit by rookie infielder Red Scheondienst. Then for Manager Southworth, the phone rings with the long awaited, yet still dreaded call. A body, believed to be his son's, has washed ashore at Silver Beach, the Bronx, not far from SUNY Maritime College at Fort Schuyler and the Throgs Neck Bridge. Dental records appeared to confirm it. Senior later identified a body scar on the torso as the one caused by the accidental shooting when Jr. was a boy.

Major Southworth was laid to rest Aug, 7th, 1945, in Green Lawn Cemetery, Columbus, Ohio. But for Manager Southworth, there was no rest. For the rest of his life, there would be a vast gaping emptiness in the world where once had been his son, his buddy, his best friend.

The fine essayist and sports writer Arthur Daley summed up the situation well when he noted every father yearns to be his son's companion, confidant, and buddy, but very few ever attain that role. "But one of those rare and beautiful relationships existed between Billy Southworth and Billy Jr. The father worshiped the son. The son idolized the father."

Son's Postscript for Dad That Senior Never Knew About

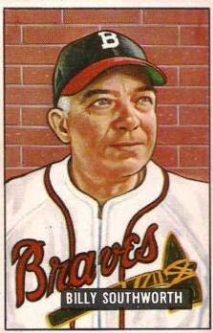
In the years that followed Junior's death, Senior sought to carry on but it was hard, especially off-season when the distractions of his team manager duties were missing. Then he'd often go outdoors by himself to chop wood for long hours, even though the supply he already had was more than enough. One can imagine how he would have loved to hear his son's voice again, if only through a letter like those Junior had written to him during the war.

Unbeknownst to the grieving father, Billy Jr. had, in effect, done just that – kept a diary, from which he intended to share parts with his dad after the war so Senior would know what it had been like.

There's little doubt Southworth would have treasured his son's diary. Just his having it could have helped, even if reading it might have proved too painful at times. But he never got the chance, because he never knew about it.

Junior had loaned it to his European combat zone navigator, who asked to borrow it because he was planning to write a book about his own war experiences. More avant-garde artist than writer, Jon Schueler wanted to use the diary to make a timeline and other notes about the missions and between-mission matters. Once back in the U.S., their different assignments, as the war continued, apparently never put them in uninitiated contact with each other. Whether they were ever in communication about the return of the diary is not known (or at least not reported).

Whatever the case may have been that might explain the fact, the painter-and-wannabe-writer had the diary at the time of Major Southworth's death in 1945.



In 1951, Southworth Senior retired from managing the Boston Braves which he joined in 1946. He continued in the Braves organization as a scout until retiring a half dozen years later from any role in professional baseball. He pursued hunting and fishing which he had often enjoyed with his son.

Senior, who had given up smoking in the late 1940s, battled emphysema at the end. He died Nov. 15, 1969. His remains were buried in Green Lawn Cemetery, Columbus, where his son's body was interred 24 years earlier.

Schueler, who gained some degree of post WWII fame as a painter, died in 1992 without publishing the book for which the Southworth diary had borrowed as a help. It was not returned. But the artist's wife, Magda Salvesen, edited her husband's memoir manuscript into a book published in 1999.

Jr's sister, Carole, only a grade schooler during the war, was an avid reader of all printed materials about the Eighth Air Force in which her big brother served. Some years ago one of those writings made her aware of the existence of her deceased brother's diary, prompting her to track down Schueler's widow. Thus, at last, surviving Southworth kin had opportunity to become acquainted with what he had written for himself and for his best friend: Dad.

In 2005, NYT sports writer Michael Shapiro wrote about the belated surfacing of the Southworth diary. The article was titled: *Father-Son Bond Remains Alive in Wartime Diary*.

However, I believe that this Father-Son bond quite possibly remains alive, not only for today but forever, well beyond and independent of the wartime diary.

<https://baseballhall.org/hof/southworth-billy>

<http://www.correctionhistory.org/>

<http://www.correctionhistory.org/pdf/Southworth-Story-Notes-Links-Sources.pdf>