

## Earl in the Sky With Diamonds

Long-time friend of the Guernsey Softball Association, Earl Hicks, sadly passed away on Tuesday, 13<sup>th</sup> October, aged 75. Earl, who had recently been suffering from heart problems, died peacefully at home in Ipswich.

Following the tragic news, tributes to the well-known and loved retired USAF Master Sergeant, Fastpitch Pitcher & Coach quickly came to the fore from softball communities on both sides of the Atlantic and from as far as New Zealand. This is a testament to the popularity of the man, who will be remembered for his cool, calm and collected manner, both on and off the diamond.

Earl first visited Guernsey in August 1984 following a trip to USAF occupied, RAF Bentwaters earlier that year by the local Centrals team. Earl brought with him, what proved to be one of the most impressive Fastpitch outfit's that the Island has ever witnessed, the USAF Bentwaters Phantoms. This was to be the beginning of a relationship spanning 23 years, during which time friendships were born, and not only with Earl, but also with the ball-players who he brought with him. Many of those friendships remain to this day.

Earl was a "young" 50 year old in 1984 and leading the Phantoms out onto our diamond, they were to take a 4 – 0 series victory over the Guernsey Island Squad and even at 50 years of age, Earl himself pitched no less than two of their wins. It would seem that following his inaugural visit, Earl was impressed with our standard of play and vowed to return. He was also able to encourage more USAF teams to follow in his carefully taken footsteps and so it was, that a new annual tournament was created and a gild-edged chapter was to be written into the GSA's history book.

The 1985 event took place with the first USAF team to follow the Phantoms over and was hailed as, "The best-ever tournament" by the Guernsey Press sports reporter, Rex Bennet, and he was probably right. Even the mighty Phantoms were de-caped, losing 6 – 3 in the championship game against the USAF Lakenheath Eagles. In this year the field also included a team made from players of the South of England Softball Association (SESA) and the GSA's top club sides. This was to be a turning point in local softball. Guernsey was no stranger to USAF Softball and had been hosting opposition since 1949, however, it was always with an "Island" team, but in 1985, thanks to the efforts of Earl Hicks and the multiple USAF teams who were encouraged to make the trip over, the GSA was able to expand from a series format into a tournament format and witness its "Club" sides playing against these previously unseen superior teams. This opened up the doors for an increased number of local players and allowed them to experience a higher level of 'ball. The bar had been raised and the challenge to reach it had now been expanded beyond Island Squad selection. For many more players than before, the next August bank Holiday Tournament couldn't come around quick enough, especially for those young aspiring ones who were just breaking into the senior ranks. It was a new and exciting time for the GSA.

Earl continued to return to the GSA's, "Blue ribbon" event with the Bentwaters Phantoms through to 1992. This year was to mark the last time the Phantoms would compete at the event, due to the "winding down" of the USAF presence in the UK. RAF Bentwaters, the primary home of the 81<sup>st</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing was to be scheduled for closure in July 1993. Between 1985 and 1992 the USAF Bentwaters Phantoms were to win the event a total of six times and were the trophy holders for the last five tournaments up to that point. Earl at the age of 57 was still able to add plenty of sparkle to the diamond, and notably pitched a shutout win

in the 1991 Tournament Final against local champions, Colts, at more than twice the age of the opposing teams' pitcher. During those first eight years, in addition to the Lakenheath Eagles, the event also witnessed competition from the USAF base teams of Alconbury (Spartans), Upper Heyford (Sky Kings) and Mildenhall (Marauders).

There was an uncertainty surrounding Earl returning to Guernsey for the 1993 event, following the closure of RAF Bentwaters, but in true Earl style he returned, this time with the USAF Mildenhall Marauders and a team, which included five former Phantoms. The 1993 title, however, was won by the, London Rebels and proved to be the first time in the events' nine-year history that a USAF team would not be crowned champions. 1994 would follow suit with the title this time going to the, London Meteors. Once again though, Earl could be seen leading out the Marauders from the pitching rubber in the Tournament Final. Unfortunately, however, the 60 year old was to succumb to a leg injury in the second inning and had to be escorted from the diamond to an ambulance. At this point, any lesser person would have maybe thought that it was time to hang up their glove? Not Earl Hicks! You could remove Earl from the diamond, but you couldn't remove the diamond from Earl. This fact was bolstered when in 1995, USAF Mildenhall returned to claim the title of Open Tournament Champions.

August 1996 was to see a local club team win the Open Tournament for the first time since its inception. USAF Mildenhall were to finish runners up to St Jacques and this would also sadly be the exit point for the Marauders, as further reshuffles meant that the last stand in British-based USAF Fastpitch was to now be re-stationed at RAF Lakenheath. Earl was undeterred and by the time of the 2006 Open Tournament, Earl and the Lakenheath Eagles would have visited on no less than seven occasions. By that time, Earl would also have endured multiple hip operations, but even this didn't deter the seemingly invincible man from venturing out onto the diamond. During those years, Earl would occasionally stroll past or stop short of the 3<sup>rd</sup> base coaches box and hold his position in the pitchers circle. It was plain to see that he was in his element out there and it was always a pleasure to see the No.15 doing what he loved. Even in his mid-sixties Earl had the ability to trouble and frustrate experienced batters. Earl was a true ambassador to the sport of Fastpitch and his fearless attitude only fuelled the amount of respect that he was already rightfully afforded.

Undoubtedly Earl would have been disappointed to observe the dissolution of the region's USAF Fastpitch consortium, witnessing first-hand the closure of RAF Bentwaters and then the handing back of RAF Upper Heyford to the British MoD on September 30<sup>th</sup>, 1994, which was followed by RAF Alconbury exactly one year later. However, despite the continued downsizing of the USAF presence in Britain, Earl was always able to muster a team. British-based US Military personnel numbers had received massive cuts, but there were always players willing to join Earl's ranks and such was the draw of the man, that often those players would come from as far as, the Netherlands, Denmark or Belgium and all it would take was a phone call. The reputation that Earl had carved-out whilst attending European tournaments, such as the Bill E. Jeffrey and Zeisterslot in the Netherlands, would prove to serve him well.

Earl was also no stranger to organising tournaments himself, and many players will fondly remember the "4<sup>th</sup> of July Tournament", which Earl initially established at RAF Bentwaters, but which also continued through to Earl's re-stationing at RAF Lakenheath. The tournament proved popular with many local and European mainland club sides along with other USAF teams and even attracted the Canadian Air Force, who were based in Germany at the time. Not only did the "Independence Day" tournament effectively allow some of our club sides to double their annual participation in a higher quality of fastpitch, but it also served as an eye-

opener to life on an United States Air Force facility, which of course were high security areas and that experience in itself was a privilege.

Earl last visited Guernsey in 2007 when he accompanied the Belgian club team, Brasschaat Braves to the Open Tournament and coached them to a place in the Final. Although the Braves were to finish runners up to the London Meteors, Earl would not have been disappointed with their result. After an illustrious softball career that goes back many years beyond his first visit to our shores, there's probably nothing that Earl hadn't experienced or seen on a softball diamond. At 73 years of age, you don't continue to put yourself through the highs and lows of the sport if you're only in it for the winning. Earl quite simply loved fastpitch and he loved to be around it and amongst the many friends that he'd made through it over the years.

Looking back, the blue's and yellow colour of the Bentwaters Phantoms uniform are arguably the most recognisable of any visiting team that attended the GSA's August Bank Holiday Tournament, however, whether it was with the Phantoms, the Marauders or the Eagles, without a doubt, Earl will be the most recognisable character who has ever visited. Earl loved Guernsey and he was someone who you came to know would always be here during that tournament weekend in August. Guernsey loved Earl too and he accepted our invitations to attend as a special guest at official GSA functions on several occasions.

Earl was small in stature, but was always looked up to and he always made a big impression on people. He spoke quietly and softly, but was always heard. He was a man of few words, but when Earl had something to say, people listened. His experience and knowledge were well respected and if advice were offered, you'd be a fool not to take it and would often be left feeling humbled by his words of wisdom. Such was Earl's persona, that when he was around, it felt like you were in the company of softball royalty. It wasn't just here in Guernsey either. There was an air of respect for Earl, which could easily be recognised at any of the tournaments that he attended. The name, Earl Hicks and our memories of the man himself will live on for generations. He meant much to many people and those who were fortunate enough to have known him will not forget him.

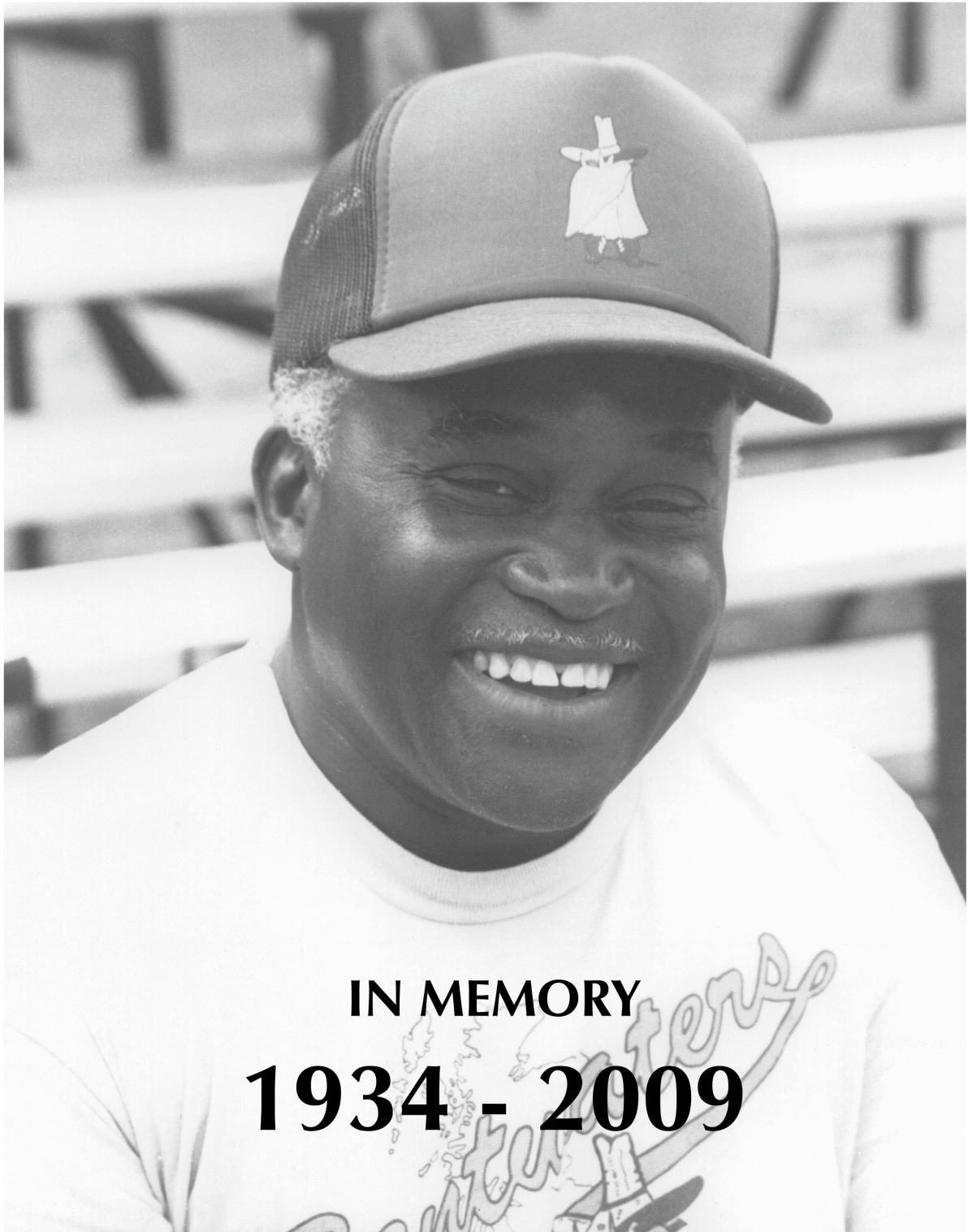
To the man who's smile could light up the diamond... we're going to miss you Earl!

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If you have a story about Earl that you would like to share or a personal tribute that you would like to be heard, then please feel free to send them to me at [curtt21@hotmail.com](mailto:curtt21@hotmail.com) and they will be posted on the GSA website, and at their expressed wishes, also be forwarded to Earl's family.

A Memorial Service for Earl was held at the RAF Lakenheath Elementary School on October 21<sup>st</sup>. The Association President, Curt Taylor, represented the GSA and Joan Harwood also attended.

Earl's funeral will take place on October 30<sup>th</sup> at Hillcrest Memorial Park, Augusta, Georgia, where he will be buried.



**IN MEMORY**  
**1934 - 2009**

The Guernsey Softball Association extends its condolences to Earl's family.

Earl is survived by his wife of 55 years, Kathleen; daughter, Kathleen (son-in-law, Willie), sons, Maurice (daughter-in-law, Eileen), Malcolm (daughter-in-law, Melissa) and Clyde (daughter-in-law, Michelle); grandchildren, Keeia, Joshua, Dionne, Evan, Phoebe, Maddy and Eamon; great grandson, Max; brothers, Ernest (sister-in-law, Bernice), Elbert and several nieces and nephews.