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Inter-Allied Games Entertain Soldiers Awaiting to Return Home

(Pennsylvania Military Museum, J. Gleim, Museum Curator)



Lt. Tali Esen Waters of Nanticoke, PA wore this badge while serving as a medical assistant at the Inter-Allied Games in 1919.

The Inter-Allied Games were held June 22, 1919 to July 6, 1919 in hastily (and poorly) constructed Pershing Stadium near Paris, France. Funded in part by the YMCA, the games were devised as a means of entertainment to keep soldiers occupied as they awaited transport home following the end of World War I.

The infusion of American men and materiel into the western front in 1918 had swiftly tipped the war in the Allies' favor and forced Germany's surrender that November. Having expected the war to carry on much longer and caught in the midst of the 1918 influenza epidemic, the United States lacked a plan for getting its soldiers home. Thousands of soldiers had been shipped to "debarkation camps" in port cities like Brest, France where they quickly became bored and unruly waiting for ships to transport them back to the United States.

U.S. military officials, in cooperation with the YMCA, quickly devised a plan for the fifteen-day event that welcomed military athletes from the US, Great Britain, and eleven other Allied nations. More than 1500 men competed at the 20,000-seat stadium in a variety of events including baseball, wrestling, golf, fencing, boxing, rowing, shooting, and track and field. There were also "mass games": unscored competitions designed solely for amusement. These included relay races, chicken fights, arm wrestling, and leapfrog.

The Games also featured hand grenade tossing. Soldiers from all nations had used such weapons extensively; nearly 2.5% of all casualties during World War I were the result of hand grenade injuries. Former baseball player F.C. Thompson achieved victory for the U.S. when he tossed a hand grenade 246 feet.

Despite a checkered track record of racial integration, the United States took the opportunity at the Inter-Allied Games to allow black soldiers to compete equally alongside their white comrades. At the Games, Black athlete Solomon "Sol" Butler won a gold medal in the long jump with a record-setting jump. He went on to compete in the Olympics in 1920.

The Inter-Allied Games received favorable publicity worldwide, and for the first time exposed international audiences to the American sports of baseball and basketball. For the two weeks of competition, news reports focused on the outcome of events there, providing a welcome but all too short respite from the horrors of war.