



Herman Sitrick (left) as a World War II GI. Sitrick at 92 still keeps a full schedule (right) at his Skokie, Ill. ad agency office.

Mild-mannered man former Cubs ad man Sitrick really the greatest American hero

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
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A Jewish man holding his M-1 carbine on 21 Nazis in subzero weather in early 1945 would have been the furthest thing from my mind chewing the fat with Herman Sitrick.

At 92, Sitrick is the same soft-spoken, modest man I knew 20 years ago during the Golden Age of Access at Wrigley Field, when reporters were free to do their work unhindered, a huge divide did not exist between media and ballclub employees, and people got to know each other one on one with a corporate atmosphere kept at bay.

Sitrick ran a small advertising agency which handled the Cubs' account. On behalf of marketing chief John McDonough and assistant Phil Bedella, who did the details, Sitrick purchased a schedule of ads on my "Diamond Gems" baseball radio show from its inception in 1994 through about 2002. But the business deal was just that – business. The pleasure of Sitrick's company was hearing old stories about his sales work for WGN-Radio when it got the Cubs rights in 1958, all the people he knew in broadcasting and a Jack Brickhouse scheme to start an all-sports TV station years before ESPN.

Immersing one's self in baseball past and present was a great way to get away from one's cares. But no one who knew Sitrick in and out of the ballpark could have conceived in their wildest dreams he had stared down hell, and won. He was the ultimate compartmentalized man. His service in World War II was just that, placed in its proper time and

place. Afterward, he went on to complete school, work his rear end off and raise a family. Ne'er the twain met.

But you can't keep a good story down forever. When Sitrick's staggeringly brave feat of single-handedly disarming and capturing a host of German soldiers during the chaos of the Battle of the Bulge was circulated by a fellow veteran, he had to eventually accept someone's thanks. Sure enough, Sitrick – still running his ad shop in north suburban Skokie – was recently awarded the Legion d'Honneur, the highest honor given by France to a foreigner for military and civil actions. He got the award amid pomp and circumstance in a River North ceremony staged by the French Consulate.

And it was not the sheer act of keeping cool while being outnumbered 21-1. The morality of the scene of Sitrick, not even old enough to take a legal drink, dovetailed with the barbarity all around him. Sitrick adhered to the Geneva Convention along with U.S. Army regulations and Jewish customs in not abusing his POWs. All around him, SS fanatics staged the worst atrocities their country committed in the war against American POWs with hundreds massacred.

If the French think enough of Sitrick to honor him, then institutions much closer to home ought to join in. The U.S. Army awards medals many decades after the original acts of heroism, so someone in the Pentagon should take a cue from the Legion d'Honneur process. And now that Sitrick has to admit he rose above himself and everyone else, the Cubs should recognize his achievements, given he was part of the buildup of the franchise in marketability during the Tribune Co./Harry Caray era.

The Chicago Baseball Museum's mission is to honor the city's contribution to the American pastime and the heroics of Sitrick. He deserves recognition after being woven into the fabric of Chicago baseball with his long connection to the Cubs. Team officials may be unaware of a member of their historic recent past and his major wartime service to our country.

When the CBM educated Cubs management about the legacy of Margaret Donohue, baseball's first major female executive, the team noticed and took it upon themselves to recognize her contributions. Likewise, we hope this piece on Sitrick's heroics will be recognized by the franchise that he has long been associated with.

Others will still have to do much of the talking in ceremonies. To this day, Sitrick realizes he'd rather be lucky than good in his actions.

"If they were SS troops, fanatics, I probably wouldn't be here," he said the other day.

In a nutshell, Sitrick simply did his duty. Wounded four times in the six months since landing in France shortly after D-Day, he was part of an American unit who had their path blocked by German fire in the mid-



Gen. George Patton's Third Armored Division took Herman Sitrick's 21 German POWs off his hands after a harrowing night.

dle of Adolf Hitler's final counteroffensive on the Western Front. After capturing a German sergeant who surrendered, professing he had a wife and three children at home, Sitrick was told to take his prisoner and get help.

GI collects his POWs in ones and twos

Both were lost in the thick forest of the Ardennes. They came upon a nearly-wrecked farmhouse. Stashing his prisoner in the basement, Sitrick soon noticed other lost Germans, in ones or twos, seeking shelter in the farmhouse. Half-hidden, he got the jump on them with his M-1, ordered them to lay down their arms and herded them into the house.

"I had a gun on them and they hadn't expected me," he said. "There were see-through steps I was sitting behind. I took their arms and put them back in the corner. I'm not surprised since they were regular German troops. If someone has a gun on you, you surrender. By the morning, I had 21 prisoners."

Fortunately, the George Patton-led Third Armored Division, which had raced north to relieve the "Battling Bastards of Bastogne," passed right by Sitrick's makeshift POW camp. Flagging down the tanks, Sitrick got the reinforcements to take the prisoners off his hands.

Briefly going back to his unit, Sitrick told his fellow GIs what happened. They were astounded. But they could not celebrate. He went to the rear to a hospital for treatment of what he still calls today "frozen feet." More likely, he suffered frostbite and was fortunate to not suffer any amputations.

While hospitalized, reporters and photographers from major news outlets descended on Sitrick's unit. They heard the story and wanted to give him national press. But without the hero, the media left, and the story receded into history.

Sitrick obviously desired to bottle up the horrors he had witnessed. Marrying wife Marcia soon after he was mustered out, he suffered what seems to be a form of post traumatic syndrome disorder (PTSD).

"I had nightmares in which I'd be shouting (to other soldiers) to take cover," Sitrick said of his early months of marriage. "When I woke in the morning, Marcia told me of these nightmares. I had no recollection of every having them. I didn't remember any of it. I broke out in beads of sweat, according to my wife. She said she had to hold me down at times."

But in his conscious life, he was too busy establishing a career to feed his family that eventually grew to three sons. Attorney-son Ron Sitrick, for one, played among his father's medals, but heard no war stories.



Working with Herman Sitrick for the better part of three decades, John McDonough got not a hint of his past heroism (Photo courtesy of Chicago Blackhawks).

Sitrick kept his counsel better than anyone I've known. McDonough, now Blackhawks president and CEO, worked with him for the better part of three decades. Sitrick handled the pro-soccer Sting account when McDonough was a young marketing man in the early 1980s. When McDonough moved over to the Cubs in 1983, he took Sitrick with him. They worked together until McDonough departed for the Hawks late in 2007 – and the super salesman never heard of his adman's "other" life.

"I read the story," McDonough said. "It was astonishing, the fact he never mentioned it speaks to his humility. Maybe these are circumstances he'd just as soon forget.

"I knew he was in the service. But he never talked about it. Herman loves to talk. He loves to talk advertising. He loves to talk ratings points. He loves to talk about Marcia. He loves to talk about his kids. He might be the most persistent person I've ever met."

No statute of limitations on military honors

Now others must be persistent in getting Sitrick to take some bows. There's never a statute of limitations on heroism, on the U.S. Army honoring its best no matter how long it takes.

"I feel the Army should carefully review Sitrick's actions now that they have been publicized and honored by France. They sound extraordinary," said Dr. David Fletcher, president of the Chicago Baseball Museum, who was a captain in the Army's medical corps in the 1980s.



Jack Brickhouse pitched Herman Sitrick on the concept of an all-sports TV station not long before ESPN's debut.

"It sounds like a combination of doing one's duty and sheer bravery given the fact Sitrick was outnumbered 21-1. If the Army could consider something like the Silver Star, I think that would be very appropriate. I know if I was his doctor treating him after the incident, I certainly would have recommended him for high honors."

Already a Bronze Star and Purple Heart with three clusters awardee, Sitrick ought to get recognition for his entire package. After being wounded multiple times in 1944, he was eligible to be rotated out of combat. But he was persuaded to go back to the front lines due to high casualties. He was placed as his company's lead scout and bearer of the unit's radio with its high antenna – both inviting targets for German sharpshooters.

Sitrick said he heard he'll be honored before a Blackhawks game. It's good to have the top guy in charge shocked at his back story, and giving the word to do the ceremony.

The Cubs should follow suit. Under the previous ownership, Sitrick threw out the first pitch before a game. This time, a bigger ceremony should be staged, honoring both his

wartime heroism and his three decades of loyal service to the Cubs running the team's ad agency, plus additional past work with the game broadcasts on WGN-Radio.

After a stint in sales at the old WCFL-Radio – then the White Sox flagship – he worked as local sales manager of WGN-Radio when it acquired the Cubs radio rights in 1958 for a 67-season run

Sitrick landed the Wieboldt's contract that ended up with one of the most hilarious commercials in Chicago sports history – baseball announcers Jack Quinlan and Lou Boudreau breaking up and tittering trying to read live spots for panty hose and a “shadow panel” on women's slips. The spot was so legendary WGN contacted me for a tape when Boudreau died in 2001; the station could not locate its own copy.

Sitrick suffered no repercussions from the slip-ups on slips. Quite the opposite. “I broke up from it, and it's my guess the client enjoyed it as much as the rest of us,” he said.

While at WGN and later around the Cubs, Sitrick became friends with Quinlan, Boudreau, Jack Brickhouse, Ernie Banks and Billy Williams. WGN bossman Ward Quaal valued his work so much he was shocked when Sitrick left the station. His connections led to an interesting conversation at the dawn of the Seventies.

Brickhouse looked at all-sports TV station

Brickhouse looked beyond his play-by-play grind. He wanted to be his own sports-broadcasting boss. Brickhouse suggested Sitrick invest with him to start an all-sports format on a TV station they'd run. Brother Joe Sitrick was a leading broker of TV station deals.

Herman Sitrick did not pursue the deal, recalling: “I said, ‘Jack, there isn't enough sports to program a station day and night.’ He said, ‘Don't worry. There's plenty. I can get it.’” The talk further cooled when Herman Sitrick said he was short in funds helping Brickhouse finance the deal.

They were correct in concept, though. A few years later, in 1979, ESPN made its debut.

Sitrick also ran WNUS-Radio, Chicago's first all-news outlet that went on the air 3 1/2 years before WBBM Newsradio 78. He also managed WCIU-TV, the city's first UHF station. Moving South, Sitrick ran stations in Atlanta and Birmingham, landing an invitation to meet Gov. George Wallace while obtaining his private office number.

Could Sitrick possess the perfect temperament to handle combat or the media politics? Sometimes the latter is more dangerous than the former.

“He's very measured,” McDonough said. “He doesn't lose his temper. He's pretty even. Look, he's probably seen the most horrific scenes that mankind witnessed, so he probably said to himself, ‘Why would anything else upset me or bother me, or why would I get emotional over it?’ I've never seen him angry.”

Getting to know him for the first time, I was just thrilled Sitrick didn't blanch on purchasing time on “Diamond Gems” even with McDonough's endorsement. But if he had

decided to reveal his Jan. 1945 self two decades ago, I'd have devoted an entire show on the man. That would have been an automatic move. Some things are far more important than the insular world of baseball and advertising revenue.