



## Shullsburg's Very Own:

### John Gerlach: Professional Baseball Player, World War II Pilot, Accomplished Lawyer

By Cory Ritterbusch

One of the more accomplished people that Shullsburg has produced is that of Johnny Glenn Gerlach. He played five seasons of professional baseball before honorable military service in World War II then a career practicing law. However, his athletic pursuits are most celebrated.

The Gerlach name was well associated with baseball by the time John Glenn was born in 1917. His Father, John Sr. "Pop", kown as "Mr. Baseball" around town and led the Shullsburg Nine to several championships as a young man. A trend that would continue. A longtime catcher, "Pop" played until he was 50 years old, batting .350 as of July 14, 1937, at the age of 46. He served as commissioner of the 11-team Illinois-Wisconsin league. He also owned the Brewster House Hotel and Restaurant where young Johnny and his brother were raised. Today owned by the Shullsburg Creamery. Gerlach's Shullsburg Nine dominated the Illinois-Wisconsin League in the 1930s with sons Johnny Glen at shortstop and Joseph at second base, and University of Wisconsin pitcher John Marriott on the mound.

Gerlach graduated from Shullsburg High School in 1934 and was the fireplug of a Shullsburg team that won 52 games in a row dating back to 1930. He famously pitched a 21 strike out one-hitter against Blanchardville at 16 years old. He had hoped to play football at the U-W. However, UW baseball coach Irv Uteritz persuaded Gerlach to play baseball. Gerlach's older brother, had started as a Badger outfielder.

John captained the 1937 and 1938 U-W baseball teams (a .415 hitter his senior season) and was drafted by the Chicago White Sox in the summer of 1938. On September 3rd, he was called up to the White Sox. Gerlach became the sixth youngest player in the majors at 21 years, 115 days. That day in Chicago, Gerlach

ran for pinch-hitter Larry Rosenthal in an 11-4 loss to the Detroit Tigers. On September 15, Gerlach went two-for-five in the leadoff spot with the only RBI of his career as the Sox beat the Philadelphia Athletics, 5-4. After going hitless in seven at-bats against the A's in his next two games, Gerlach went three-for-five in his next two starts against the St. Louis Browns and started the final three games of the season, finishing seven-for-25 (.280). Little did he know that would be the last taste of the major leagues.

Gerlach's career always seemed to be in the hands of Baseball Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis, prohibiting his progress on two separate occasions. Known for his strong handed and sometimes ruthless decisions. He interfered John from being called up twice, and the slick fielding John remained in the minors for four seasons. John played for Shreveport, St. Paul and Atlanta, becoming a fan favorite in those cities. In 1942, fate called as the draft board in Wisconsin ordered a "physical examination at Fort McPherson for enlistment in the U.S. Army Air Corps." Although he achieved his best single-season fielding percentage and impressed with his glove work so much that sportswriters did not know what the (Atlanta) Crackers 'would do without him.' But such was life for baseball at the time.

On February 10, 1943, Gerlach married Mary Jean Hebenstreit at St. Matthew's Church in Shullsburg. Soon appointed corporal on Feb. 23, 1942, after reporting to Mississippi. Gerlach earned the Distinguished Flying Cross flying supplies in New Guinea and the Pacific Rim until the end of the War. He piloted a C-47 named the "Defenseless Virgin" and trained paratroopers stateside. He was honorably discharged after flying 150 missions and being rotated back to the United States. Legend has it; during a poker game at the Brewster Hotel Gerlach Sr. was asked when his son

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would be returning home from the war. That night, a low flying plane grazed the city of Shullsburg. Young John was en route to land at Fort McCoy.

Following the War, Gerlach earned a law degree from the University of Wisconsin. He continued to play semi-professional baseball during the 40's and 50's in the Madison Industrial League. As the league's outstanding infielder in 1947, Gerlach hit a ground rule double over the right field fence at Madison's Breese Stevens Field against Hall of Fame pitcher Satchel Paige. In 1948, Gerlach was league MVP and batting champion hitting a robust .409.

He and his wife raised seven children and enjoyed nine grandchildren in Madison. He practiced law until his death. For many years, Gerlach shared an office with attorney John Walsh, the University of Wisconsin's longtime boxing coach, and his sons John and James joined in practice in 1988. In 1995 he was interviewed by the *Wisconsin Veterans Museum Research Center* about his war experiences. Today the interview is permanently archived in Madison.

Gerlach was inducted into the Madison Sports Hall of Fame in 1972 and the UW Athletic Hall of Fame in 1994. He passed away on August 28, 1999 and is buried at St. Matthew Catholic Cemetery in Shullsburg.