

Idaho Falls Remembers Walt Brickner on Memorial Day

The welcoming scent of hot dogs fresh off the grill. The bright sun glistening over the jovial family and friends gathered for the cookout. The laughter of the jokes that might not be too funny, but certainly set the mood for an enjoyable summer. That's the typical scene on Memorial Day. Mix in a baseball game, and it's the perfect start to summer. However, sometimes baseball can be a reminder of what Memorial Day is really about.

World War II prompted a volatile time in the United States in the 1940's. In Major League Baseball, nearly 500 players entered military service. Many Minor League Baseball players were also sent to the front line. Walt Brickner is one of the members who spent time in the service and in Idaho Falls.

The Philadelphia, PA product played his first full season of affiliated baseball with the Moultrie Packers in 1940. As a prospect of the Phillies, then Pirates organization, the first baseman and outfielder was an above .300 hitter. The baseball stats are far from the most impressive part about Walt Brickner's life.

Walt Brickner joined the Army on January 28th, 1942. Just two years later, Brickner was the co-pilot of a B-25 Mitchell bomber that was shot down over Italy in World War II. The former baseball player escaped the plane, but he was captured by the Germans and interrogated. During the interrogation, the location was attacked by members of an anti-Nazi movement. That allowed Walt Brickner to be rescued and held safely until he was set free by British troops, June 12, 1944.

Walt Brickner never spoke about his experience, as all enemy evaders agreed to a vow of silence in order to protect those who helped. Author John Lanza discovered the truth after learning his uncle was involved in the same crash. The details are outlined in the Victorville Daily Press.

Walt Brickner went on to continue playing professional baseball. In 1946, the war veteran made a stop at Idaho Falls. As a member of the Russets, Brickner played in 211 games over two seasons. In 1947, the left-hander hit for a .263 batting average. Near the end of that season, Brickner collapsed and was taken to the hospital, due to his overworked condition from the war. Brickner bounced back to play two more years of pro baseball.

The former Idaho Falls Russet died on September 23rd, 2002 in California at the age of 82. A prime example of someone who sacrificed a possible Major League Baseball career to serve his country.

Information from Baseball-Reference, Gary Bedingfield's Baseball in Wartime, and Holly La Pat Special to the Victorville Daily Press was used in the article.