

*As Featured On*



## **Henry "Zeke" Bonura**

### His Contributions To Wartime Baseball

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To the casual baseball fan, Zeke Bonura is remembered as an affable buffoon, known by the colorful nickname of "Banana Nose" and for his unique Mussolini Salute – his tendency to wave his glove at ground balls that rolled past him into right field.

But Bonura was the first true power-hitter for the Chicago White Sox, stroking 48 home runs in 1934 – 1935, his first two seasons in the major leagues. However, his power had begun to fade as he could only muster 11 home runs in 1939. He began the 1940 season with the Washington Senators and through 79 games compiled a .273 batting average with 3 home runs. The Senators sold Bonura to the Chicago Cubs on July 22nd and he struggled through the final 49 games of the season with a disappointing .182 average and 4 home runs.

Bonura spent much of the 1941 season completing a stint in the U.S. Army at Camp Shelby in Mississippi and trying to work his way back to the major leagues through the Minneapolis Millers of the American Association. He received his military recall notice shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7th and returned to Camp Shelby in Mississippi after he was reintducted. He would willingly postpone his return to the majors, stating to Stars and Stripes that "Uncle Sam needs me more than baseball."

While at Camp Shelby, Bonura was placed in charge of baseball operations and quickly set to work organizing teams and scheduling games. He petitioned the Major League's Ball and Bat Fund for money and equipment, convinced his hometown New Orleans Pelicans to donate their old uniforms and persuaded his former major league teams to contribute their old equipment. He also oversaw the construction of a new ball field. By mid-1942 Bonura's Camp Shelby team had developed into quite a formidable squad. In August, Bonura coached his club to a 10 – 2 victory over a group of Navy All-Stars stationed along the Gulf Coast.

In the spring of 1943 Bonura was posted to Oran in Algeria where, despite the instability caused by a German force that was putting up stiff resistance in their retreat, he was still able to organize large-scale baseball operations. By the summer of 1943 the Germans had been neutralized in North Africa and the leagues and teams that Bonura had established began to flourish under his direction. By the end of the summer, he supervised 150 teams in 6 leagues, involving nearly 1,000 players.

Bonura not only encouraged soldiers to participate, he made in-roads in getting the local Arab population to play baseball. He tried to assemble an Arab team, but the concepts of baseball

were just too foreign for the locals to grasp. For instance, they could not steal a base as that was against Islamic teachings.

For his contributions to the morale of the armed forces in North Africa, General Eisenhower presented Bonura with a Legion of Merit Award on October 26, 1943. One portion of his citation reads:

By his resourcefulness, enthusiasm and leadership [Bonura] was able to overcome many shortages in needed assistance and construction materials, and he established twenty baseball fields in the area through the use of volunteer assistants and salvaged materials.

Ever the opportunist, Bonura convinced Eisenhower to autograph several dozen baseballs, which he planned to present to the members of the winning team in his upcoming North African World Series.

Bonura had been promoting the North African World Series non-stop, using his notoriety to get coverage on the Armed Forces Radio Network. The playoffs narrowed the field to two finalists – the Casablanca Yankees and the Algiers Streetwalkers. The Armed Forces Weekly reported on the series, describing the Yankees' victory and the presentation of the Eisenhower-autographed baseballs on November 7, 1943.

While in Algeria, Bonura also acted as a de-facto scout for the Minneapolis Millers and actually signed several promising players to professional baseball contracts. Two of these, however, were later so severely wounded that they would never play baseball again.

Bonura followed the advancing Allied forces into Europe and he continued to organize and promote baseball events for the benefit of the troops. He was also responsible for organizing and promoting other sporting events as well. In early 1945 he was successful in promoting two football games – the Arab Bowl in Oran, Algeria and the Mustard Bowl in Dijon, France. Both received tremendous critical and popular acclaim.

Master Sergeant Henry "Zeke" Bonura was mustered out at the conclusion of the fighting in mid-1945.

Bonura attempted a comeback in 1946 at the age of 37, catching on briefly with Minneapolis and then back home with the Thibodaux Giants in the Evangeline League (Class D), where he hit .352 with 11 home runs. Two years with Stamford in the Colonial League (Class B) produced a respectable .385 average in 1947 and .384 in 1948, but not well enough for a call-up even to Class A. He spent 1949 with the Kingston Ponies in the Border League (Class C), followed by two seasons with the Midland Indians in the Longhorn League (Class C) before abandoning his dream of returning to the majors. He was 43 years old.

However, the affable buffoon had proven himself to be one of the most successful wartime baseball organizers, earning him a more appropriate nickname – "Czar of North African Baseball."

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