







# gridiron WAR

Pearl Harbor's bombs nearly sank American football as draft-exempt men tried to fill the cleats of MVPs who went off to war.

by Eric Ethier

**C**OLUMBIA UNIVERSITY FOOTBALL COACH Lou Little knew a rough season was ahead when he unpacked his cleats in the fall of 1942. War was on. His stars of the previous season had deserted the gridiron in droves for the armed forces, trading their colorful, numbered jerseys for the drab and anonymous outfits of the army, navy, and marines.

Some colleges were barely able to field a competitive team, and when they did, depleted student bodies left stadium seats empty. "But these things don't matter," Little wrote with admirable pluck. "The game is being played and played harder, faster, perhaps even more fiercely than it has been played before. We have become an offensively minded nation. Defense bonds have become war bonds. The bombers and the ships they buy are weapons of attack, not defense. We've got to strike, not parry."

Little's outlook reflected the mood of a ticked-off nation. Across the home front, reminders of the Second World War were everywhere—in newspapers and movie theater newsreels, in booming factories, and in the empty beds of brothers, fathers, and sons. Anxiety knotted stomachs. But the war-driven economy also put money in the pockets of Americans, who were eager to lose themselves in their favorite sports like never before.

Baseball remained America's game, soothing millions in sun-splashed ballparks with its blend of beauty and anticipation. But

Left: A West Virginia University guard takes down Fordham University's ball-carrier in an October 22, 1942, game at New York City's Polo Grounds. College and pro football went on during the war even as enlistments and the draft depleted the number of players available. Top: A 1930s Reach football.

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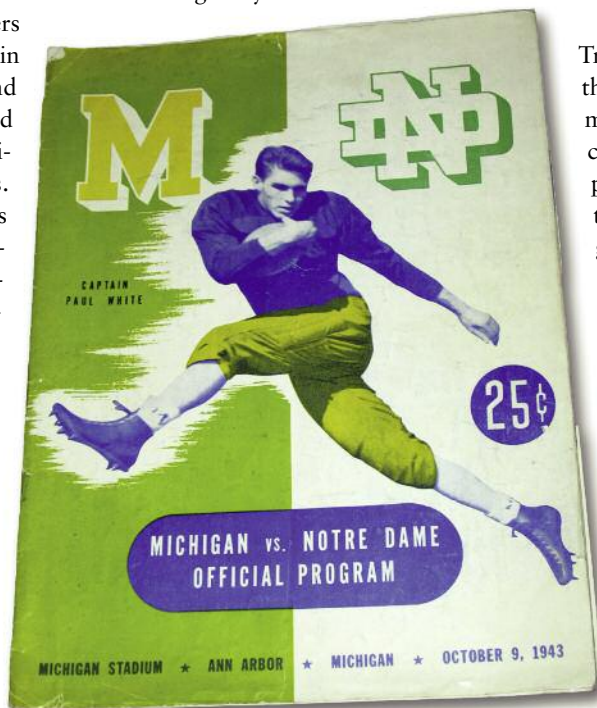
by 1942, roaring throngs were also following football, the hard-thumping gridiron game that once was so dangerous it was nearly outlawed. For every well-executed sacrifice bunt, smartly turned double play, or stolen base that baseball offered, football countered with a dazzling touchdown gallop, a bone-jarring collision, or a powerful sweep around end. The aggressive spirit of the game suited the American mood. Football remained rough—and more exciting than ever.

The fierce action and inherent violence of football had thrilled American spectators since the late 1870s, when Yale's Walter Camp transformed a rugby-soccer hybrid into something truly American. By the time Japanese carriers brought war to the American shore in December 1941, the pageantry and rivalries of the intercollegiate game had survived decades of controversy, fatalities, and countless rule changes. Massive concrete football stadiums dominated campuses across the country. Nationwide polls traced the success of the nation's elite college football programs. Images of muscular, golden-haired ball-carriers graced the covers of *Collier's*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and *Life*.

The onset of war turned the college football world upside down—beginning with the January 1, 1942, Rose Bowl, which nervous organizers had to relocate from sunny Pasadena, California, to Durham, North Carolina, due to government restrictions on the size of crowds permitted to gather on the seemingly vulnerable West Coast. As waves of capable gridirers left for military service, talented squads such as the University of Wisconsin Badgers (ranked third in the country in 1942) disintegrated. "I'm not going to sit here snug as a bug, playing football, when others are giving their lives for their country," wrote end Dave Schreiner, speaking for many. At Columbia, Coach Little lost Heisman Trophy candidate quarterback Paul Governali to the marines, and his depleted squad went 8-25 between 1941 and 1944.

As scores of traditional football powers filled their thinning rosters with 17-year-old freshmen and 4-Fs (men deemed unfit for military service), the navy used football to help prepare officers and aviators for combat. In the game's teamwork and toughness, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox saw a clear connection between "the spirit which makes great football players and the spirit that makes great soldiers and sailors." The nation's youth seemed to back him: a poll published in the December 22, 1942, edition of the *New York Times* revealed that virtually all college-student fans of the game believed that "football bolsters national morale and helps boys to be better soldiers."

Under the parameters of its V-12 College Training Program for prospective officers, the navy dispersed thousands of navy and marine reservists and enlistees to deserted college campuses to begin concentrated programs of study and physical fitness training. Previously sagging football programs, such as the one at California's College of the Pacific, suddenly leaped into the spotlight; fortified by navy-bound transfers from the St. Mary's College team (then a California football power), the Pacific Tigers of ageless gridiron general Amos Alonzo Stagg reeled off a series of upsets and bounded back into the nation's top 20. (In December 1942, in another, more coincidental, convergence of football and the war effort, scientists of Enrico Fermi's Manhattan Project witnessed the world's first controlled nuclear reaction in a secret laboratory beneath Stagg Field, the then-dormant



University of Chicago gridiron where the legendary coach had made his name.)

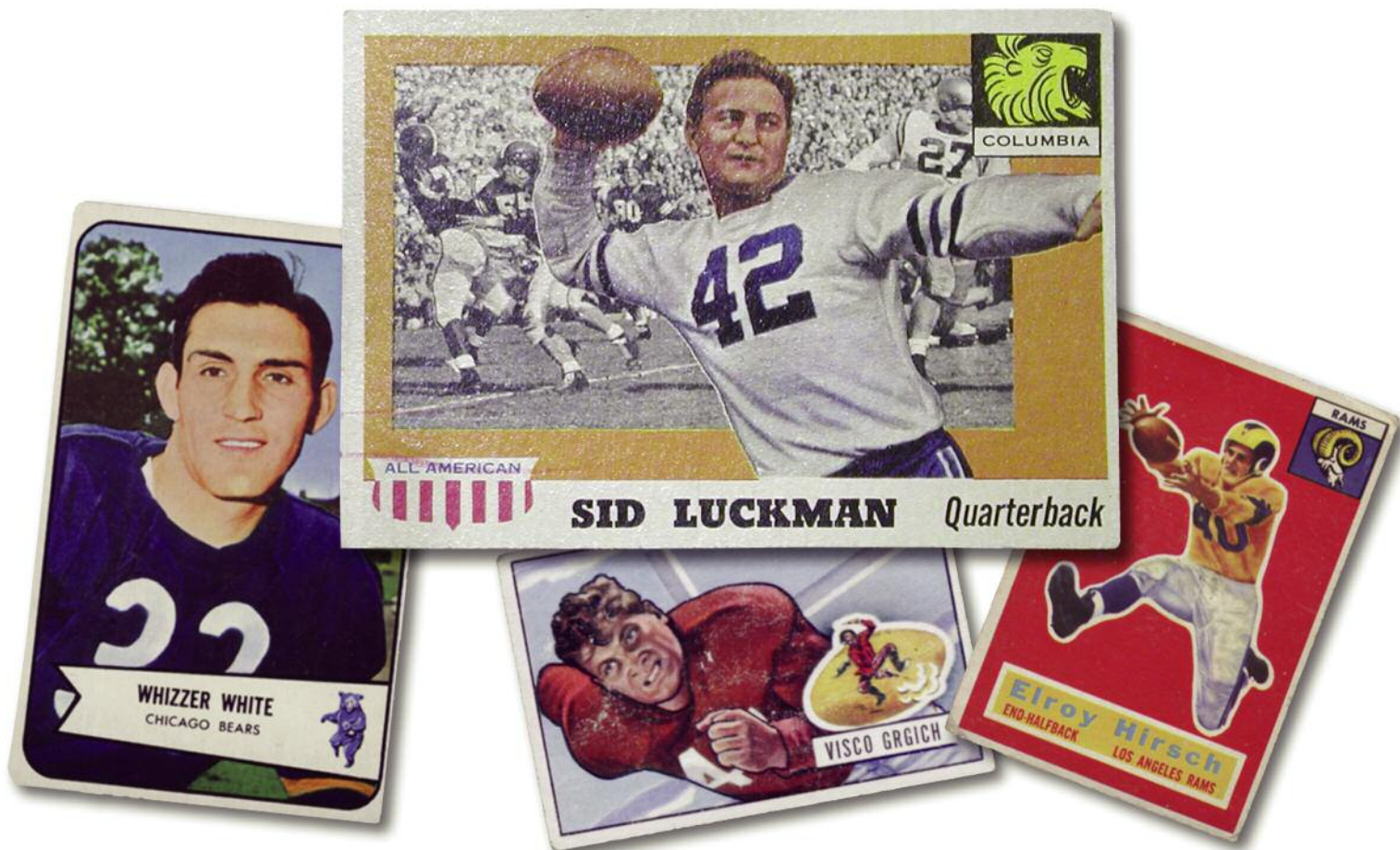
Stagg's victims included a powerful squad from the previously unheard-of Del Monte Pre-Flight School of Monterey, California, one of a handful of new varsity programs spawned by the navy's V-5 Preflight Training Program for aviators. Installed at the Universities of Iowa, North Carolina, and Georgia, and at St. Mary's College and California's Del Monte Naval Air Station, the

No team or player was unaffected by the war. Top: Old-time leather helmets remained standard through the '40s until football recovered.

Above: University of Michigan captain Paul White graced the program cover for his school's October 9, 1943, home game against Notre Dame. Officer candidates in training at his school helped keep the team going. Opposite, bottom: Reservists on Colgate University's squad trade jerseys for marine uniforms after a 6-win, 1-tie, 2-loss 1942 season. Opposite, top, clockwise from top center: Chicago Bears quarterback Sid Luckman, whose passing won 1940's NFL championship, kept his gridiron job even as a wartime merchant marine; Elroy "Crazy Legs" Hirsch (on a mid-'50s bubblegum card as a Los Angeles Ram) played for Michigan starting in '43 as a marine in the navy's V-12 training program; Visco Grgich, a San Francisco 49ers guard on this 1951 card, played on army air force teams; Byron "Whizzer" White, shown as a Chicago Bears halfback in the mid-'50s, reported on the loss of *PT-109* as a naval intelligence officer—the boat's commander, John F. Kennedy, appointed him to the US Supreme Court in 1962, where he remained until 1993.

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preflight schools—together with the Great Lakes Naval Training Station and even the Marine Corps Air Station El Toro near Santa Ana, California—helped turn the college football polls into a virtual who’s who of service teams. Traditional powers such as Notre Dame, which lost star quarterback Angelo Bertelli to the marines in 1943, found themselves losing to these hybrid upstarts, whose rosters were filled with experienced college and even professional players. Not affected by defections, the US Military Academy also returned to power. In 1944, Coach Earl Blaik’s West Point Cadets ruled the national polls, trampling the Fighting Irish along the way.

Despite travel restrictions and other hurdles, rabid football fans continued to celebrate the college game by filling stadiums for the annual post-season bowl games. After all, one fan wrote, the “colorful fanfare and tradition associated with college football still are the main attractions which draw the fans, regardless of inferior play.” Others, however, wondered why thousands of much smaller events, such as scientific conventions, were being cancelled all over the country, while football fans “utilized the transportation which the scientists gave up so that the army could use the roads, so that the vital rubber supply would be saved, so that the war effort could be materially helped.” In fairness, however, bowl games were the exceptions. On the whole, attendance at college games was down. While play-



NATIONAL ARCHIVES

ers made do with taped-up padding and cleats coming apart at the seams, national rationing of gasoline and rubber kept automobiles garaged and fans at home next to their radios.

Meanwhile, the young National Football League was about to explode in popularity. Purists had traditionally considered professional ball the ugly, mercenary cousin of the star-studded college game. But since its creation in 1920, the NFL had quietly built a grudging fan base, offering a slightly rougher version of the run-dominated college game. Then, in the midst of the Depression, league fathers looking to add some razzle-dazzle to the game moved end zone goalposts up to the goal line to increase scoring by making field goals easier and, more importantly, eliminated a rule that permitted quarterbacks to pass the ball only if they were at least five yards behind the line of scrimmage. With the passing game opened up, Chicago Bears coach George Halas unleashed quarterback Sid Luckman and his versatile new T-formation offense in the January 1940 NFL Championship Game. The Bears’ 73-0 thrashing of the Washington Redskins was broadcast on radio nationally—a first that made instant fans of millions of listeners.

The manpower shortage that bedeviled the college game also took its toll on the NFL. By May 1942, the armed forces had claimed a third of the league’s 346 players, some of whom returned home on weekends to cheer on their former teammates.



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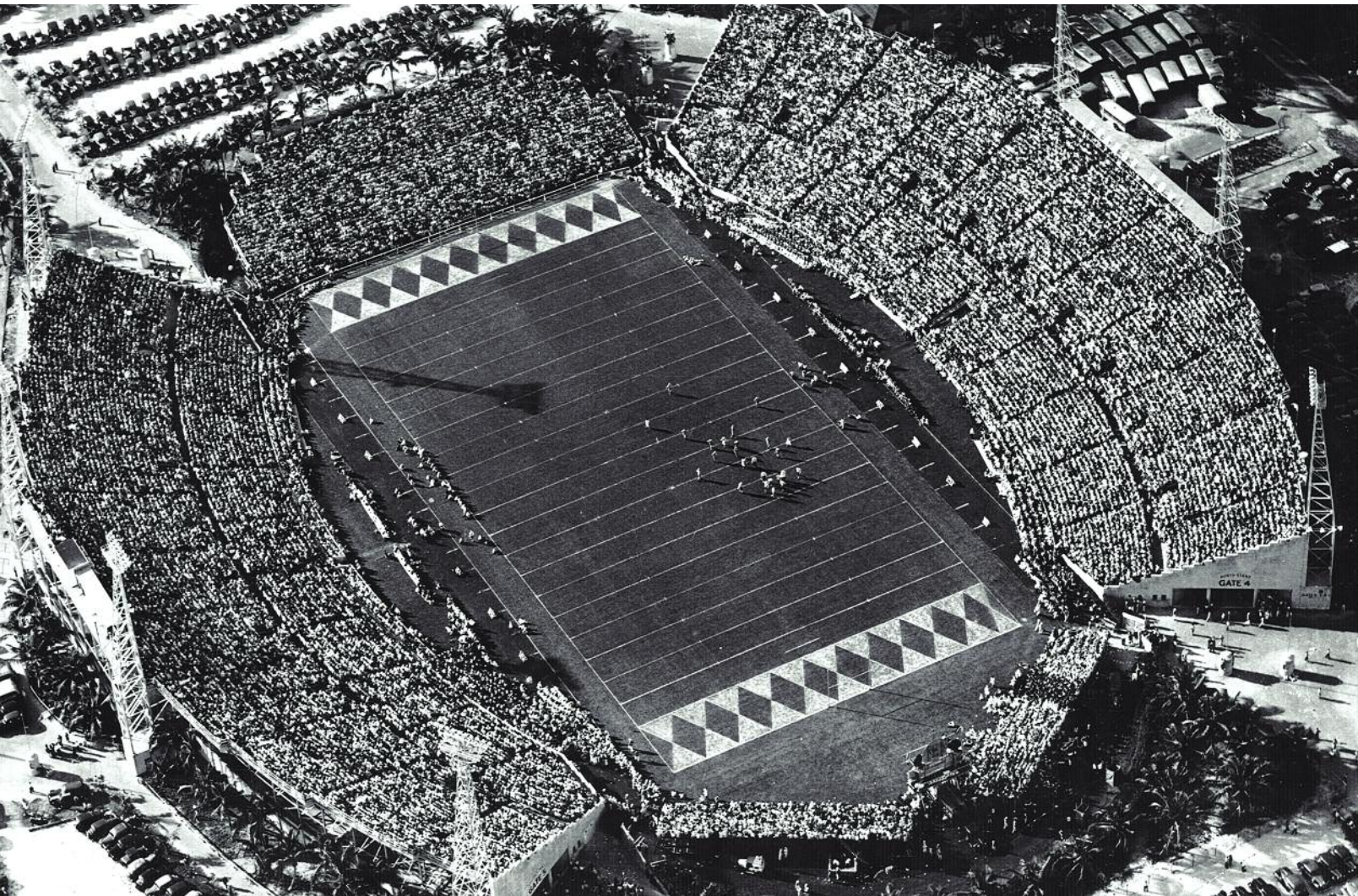
by Eric Ethier

“I’ve been waiting two years to get back into a Giant uniform,” the New York Giants’ Chet Gladchuk told the *New York Times* in December 1944. “And I’ll wait a few more years but some day I’ll be back and I’m living for that day.” Others managed to keep playing. Duty with the merchant marine cost Luckman only a few games. Hank Soar of the New York Giants played each weekend—until the army transferred him to Greenland.

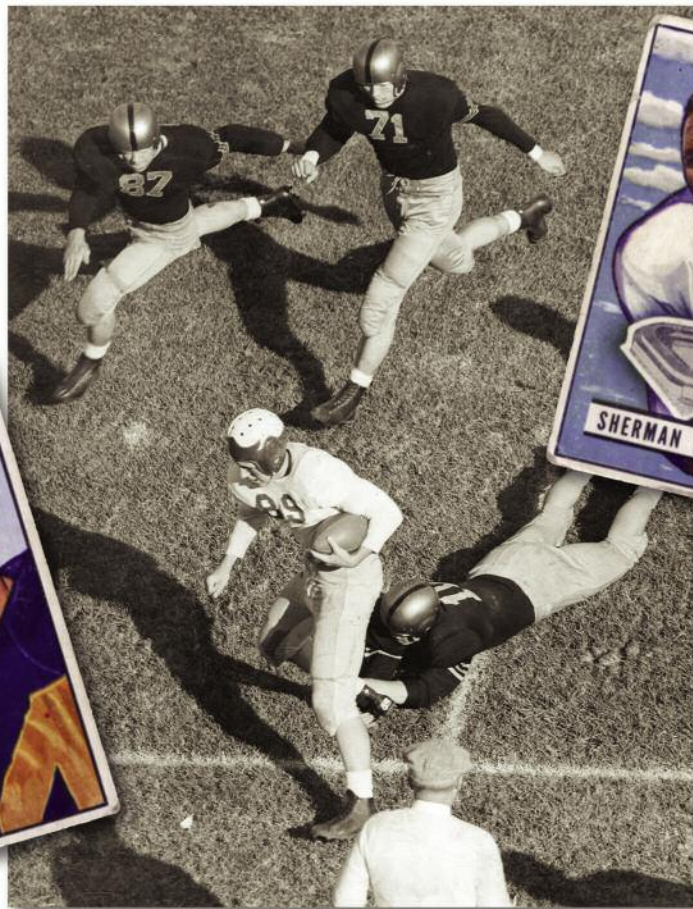
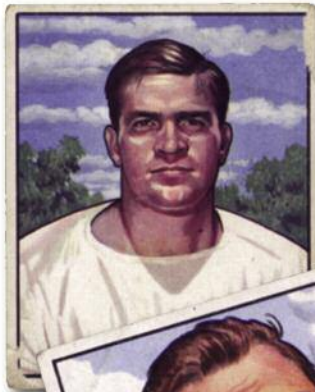
In Chicago, the war interrupted a dynasty in the making. “Had the war not come when it did,” Bears running back George McAfee lamented years later, “there’s no telling how many championships we might have won.” McAfee joined his boss, coach George Halas, in the navy. After six years of quiet retirement, full-back Bronco Nagurski returned in 1943 to fill a hole in the Bears’ backfield. The Cleveland Rams, meanwhile, closed up shop for the season, while the Pittsburgh Steelers and Philadelphia Eagles joined forces to do battle as the Steagles. A year later, a combined Steelers and Chicago Cardinals team struggled through a season as the idiotically named Card-Pitts. Opponents walked all over the makeshift interstate squad, which earned itself a winless season and the unflattering nickname Carpets.

Though filling team rosters was difficult for NFL teams, filling stadium seats was not. Helped in part by the suspension of some college programs and the convenient big-city locations of its teams, the NFL drew a record 1,115,154 fans in 1942. That number increased to 1,234,750 in 1944, including more than 56,000 diehards who watched the November 19 battle between New York’s Giants and the Green Bay Packers. Chunks of profits went to relief agencies, beginning with the NFL’s 1942 preseason college all-star game, which alone raised more than \$150,000.

**T**HE PRO GAME WAS A BIT DILUTED, but it was still played with passion, ferocity, and even occasional humor. “If you were a good ballplayer—a passer or whatever—they tried to hurt you and get you out of there,” Washington Redskins quarterback Sammy Baugh testified. Slingin’ Sammy remembered with a grimace how “every now and then they’d run what they called a ‘bootsie’ play, and everybody’d hit one man and just try to tear him to pieces. If they could cripple you, fine.” Halfback Bill Dudley played his rookie year with Pittsburgh and then spent two winters in the Army Air Forces before returning to complete a







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CARDS: AMERICA IN WWII COLLECTION

Football had steadily gained popularity before the war. Opposite: A 1939 college game packs the Orange Bowl, home of the University of Miami Hurricanes. The field had lights for night games. Above, center: Army defenders drive a Cornell University end out of bounds in an October 10, 1942, game at West Point's Michie Stadium. Army won 28-8. Above, cards, clockwise from upper right: Sherman Howard, a New York Yanks halfback on this 1951 card, put in nearly two and a half years fighting in the European theater; Bruce Alford, an end for the Yanks, was a 1942 All-American before flying 35 missions with the Eighth Air Force as a pilot; Tom "Cricket" Kalmanir, a Los Angeles Rams halfback in 1951, served in the Army Air Corps; and Paul Burris, a Green Bay Packers guard, seen on a 1950 card, was a combat engineer in Belgium and the Rhine River operations.

Hall of Fame career. He remembered his early days in the league with a laugh. "You'd stick your head in the huddle and the smell of alcohol would hang there till hell froze over," he said. "But you'd just raise up and go, 'Ahhhhh,' and get a breath of fresh air, and then go to work. We had a lot of fun." So did the Sunday afternoon crowds. After 60 minutes of cheering, fans spilled out of stadiums grumbling over a tough loss or marveling at an especially crunching hit. For a few hours, the war was forgotten.

Not everyone was following the action with pleasure. Director of War Mobilization James F. Byrnes, for one, was "seriously concerned that at this critical period when we are exerting every effort to direct manpower into critical war industries, we find such a large number of men between the ages of 18 and 26 engaged in professional athletics of all types." In December 1944, with American GIs and paratroopers struggling a world away to hold an icy hamlet called Bastogne, Byrnes wondered how physical defects could keep men from the battlefield, but not the football field. (According to a *New York Times* report, 23 of 28 Washington Redskins players had been either classified 4-F by the army or discharged for ailments ranging from trick knees to perforated eardrums.) Eyeing additional manpower and resources for the war effort, Byrnes shut down racetracks across the nation and ordered a second look at the mili-

tary qualifications of professional athletes.

Byrnes's concerns were soon moot. As the 1945 NFL exhibition season got underway, the war ended. Scores of college gridgers and 19 NFL players had been killed, but most of the veterans returned. Many resumed their playing careers, older, bigger, and faster than the men who had filled their roles while they were away, and the football world soon began to make sense again. Sadly missed for two autumns, the classic annual Yale-Harvard game returned, as did Notre Dame's dominance of college ball—after one last season of West Point perfection in 1945. Little's speedy Columbia bunch roared back into Eastern prominence with an 8-1 record.

Meanwhile, legions of new fans were driving the NFL toward its own golden age, while a new competitor, the All-America Football Conference, prepared for action. The AAFC was destined to fold in 1949 and contribute three new teams to the growing NFL. By that time, representatives of America's gridiron game could look back fondly on the wartime weekends when they had provided anxious citizens with their own brand of war relief. ★

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OPPOSITE: NATIONAL ARCHIVES