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When the Packers Went to War

by Bob Barnett

On the afternoon of December 7, 1941, the Green Bay Packers were in high spirits. Their 10-1 season record meant that only the Chicago Bears at 9-1 had any chance to tie them for the Western Division championship. On that Sunday afternoon no Packer expected anything worse than a Bear victory over their cross-town rivals the Chicago Cardinals.

"We were in Chicago on December 7 to watch the Bears-Cardinals game. Coach Lambeau took the whole team down to scout the Bears," recalled Charles "Buckets" Goldenberg, a veteran Packer guard. "They announced the bombing of Pearl Harbor during the game. We just didn't know how it would affect anything. We were stunned like everyone else."

There was little immediate change as far as pro football was concerned. The game continued and the Bears did indeed beat the Cardinals, 34-24. The following week the Bears easily beat the Packers, 34-14, in a playoff game and the next week defeated the New York Giants, 37-9, for the NFL championship before a disappointingly small crowd of 13,341. Tony Canadeo, a rookie tailback on the 1941 Packer team, said, "The playoff game drew a lot more fans than the championship because everyone knew either the Packers or the Bears would crush the Giants." Perhaps attendance would have been higher if fans had known the championship game would be their last opportunity for many years to watch teams of prewar caliber play. For in 1942 pro football entered the strange world of wartime football.

Throughout the war years, everything on the home front geared up for the war effort. The NFL was no exception. As able bodied men were drafted and travel was restricted, the NFL had difficulty merely keeping teams on the field.

Before the 1942 season began, the two-year-old American Football League folded. The next year the NFL shrank from ten teams to eight when the Cleveland Rams suspended operations for one year and the Pittsburgh Steelers merged with the Philadelphia Eagles to form the famous "Steagles," who finished third in the four team Eastern Division.

"Travel was really different during the war," recalled Canadeo. "Servicemen had priority on trains and in hotels so a lot of times we would crowd up in day coaches rather than getting sleepers. Hotel reservations were hard to get but we just put a lot of people in a couple of rooms."

In 1944, Cleveland reactivated its franchise and the Boston Yanks joined the NFL. The league stayed at ten teams when the Steelers merged again, this time with the Chicago Cardinals. Card-Pitt failed to win any of the ten games they played.

Despite the difficulties of other teams during the 1942 through 1944 seasons, the Packers prospered with a record of 23-6-2, including one NFL championship. An important reason for their success was their roster. The Packers didn't lose as many players to the armed services as did most of the other NFL teams. Even though they lost 16 players in 1942, including All-Pro Clarke Hinkle (FB) and another nine in 1943, teams like the Giants and the Lions lost 44 and 45 respectively.

"One of the reasons more of our players weren't drafted was that we were a bunch of broken-down stumblebuns," said Buckets Goldenberg. "A bunch of us tried to get in but were rejected. Bill Lee (T) and I went down to volunteer, but when the doctors examined us they said we had the knees of 80 year old men. When we asked them how come we could play pro football and yet be rejected for the service, one doctor said, 'Well, if you're playing in a football game and your knee gives out they can stop the game and take you out, but in a war you can't call time out during a battle.'"

"Some of our players received deferments. Larry Craig was exempt because he was a farmer and that was vital to the war effort," said Tony Canadeo. "I think some others were in the National Guard or did

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war work in factories. I know I was deferred for a while because I was the sole support of my mother, wife, and child."

Despite their infirmities, the Packers rolled to an 8-2-1 record in 1942 behind the passing of Cecil Isbell to Don Hutson. Unfortunately the losses were to the Bears (11-0) who crushed everybody in the regular season only to lose 14-0 to the Washington Redskins in the championship game.

"One of the things that made playing a little bit easier during the war was that the NFL went to unlimited substitutions," recalled Canadeo. "Before that, if you were taken out of a game you couldn't return during the same quarter. I am not saying we went to two platoon football or anything like that because they cut the rosters down to 28 players to spread the able bodied players around the league, but if you got tired they could take you out to catch your breath."

The Packers were stunned by two events prior to the start of the 1943 season. Cecil Isbell, their all-Pro passer, retired to take a coaching job at Purdue University and Bronko Nagurski, long a Packer nemesis, ended a five year retirement at age 34 to return to the Bears. Actually neither event proved to be earth shaking as the season unfolded. Canadeo and Irv Comp, filling in for Isbell at tailback, hit Don Hutson with 47 passes, and Nagurski played only in spot situations.

The Packers had another outstanding season with a 7-2-1 record but for the fourth straight year finished second to the Bears (8-1-1). The Bears crushed the Redskins 41-21 for the NFL championship.

In 1944, Nagurski retired for the second time and the war finally caught up with the Bears. Losses in their first two games to the Pack (42-28) and the Cleveland Rams (19-7) sealed their doom. Meanwhile the Packers, with the Comp to Hutson passing combination, the running of Ted Fritsch, and the line play of Goldenberg, Baby Ray (T), and Charley Brock (C); won their first six games. They coasted to an 8-2 record which was good enough for the division championship. In the NFL championship game with the New York Giants, the Packers used Don Hutson as a decoy. He drew double coverage which spread the Giant defense. The Pack ground out two second quarter touchdowns and held on for a 14-7 victory and the NFL championship.

Although the war ended in September, only a few players who had been discharged early rejoined their old teams for the 1945 season. By 1946, however, all of the returning war veterans were available for football duty. Some did return to their old teams, others joined the newly formed All American Football Conference, but many chose to retire.

Clarke Hinkle was one who chose to call it a career. "I was visiting Green Bay after the war and Lambeau called me into his office," he recalled. "He wanted me to come back as a kicking specialist, but I knew he would try to get me to play a little defense and then try to get me to run the ball. I had had ten good years and wanted to go out on top. You know, after a four year layoff, you can never get your legs back in shape."

PACKERS IN THE SERVICE DURING WORLD WAR II

(Courtesy of David Neft, Dick Cohen, et. al.)

42	43	44		Bob Adkins
			45	Tony Canadeo
	43			Joe Carter
		44	45	Dick Evans
		44	45	Sherwood Fries
42	43	44		Ed Frutig
42	43	44		Tom Greenwood
42	43	44	45	Clarke Hinkel
	43	44	45	Bob Ingalls
42	43	44	45	Ed Jankowski
42	43	44	45	Bill Johnson
42	43	44		Smiley Johnson (killed)

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in action at Iwo Jima)					
				45	Bob Kahler
		44	45	45	Jim Lankas
	43	44	45		Bill Lee
	43	44	45		Russ Letlow
42	43	44	45		Lee McLaughlin
42	43	44			Moose Mulleneaux
	43	44			Ernie Pannell
42	43	44	45		George Paskvan
	43	44	45		Ray Riddick
42	43	44	45		Herm Rohrig
	43	44			Charlie Sample
42	43	44	45		Charlie Schultz
42	43	44	45		George Svendsen
		44	45		Andy Uram
42	43				Alex Urban
42	43	44	45		Hal Van Every
	43	44	45		Fred Vant Hull
			45		Ray Wehba
	43	44	45		Dick Weisgerber
41	42	43	44	45	Gust Zarnas
1	16	25	27	23	Totals