The Creation of Domestic and International Bowl Games from 1942 to 1964: The United States Military and Football as Conjoined Twins

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In the foreword to Wilbur D. Jones’s book Football! Navy! War!: How Military Lend-Lease Players Saved the College Game and Helped Win World War II, the noted football columnist, commentator, and historian Beano Cook suggested America produced a strong relationship between its various military forces (i.e., Air Force, Army, Navy, Marines, and Coast Guard) and the game of football out of “both necessity and natural design” (Jones, 2009, 2). To highlight this point, Blue Network sportscaster Harry Wismer recognized the Department of the Navy as providing “inestimable value” in preserving the game of football during World War II because the Navy, Marines, and Coast Guard allowed students to play varsity football while preparing for service in their college officer-training programs. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) formally acknowledged this contribution by the military. Specifically, the NCAA thanked the Department of the Navy for supporting football as a tool to help the war effort and to keep both college football and some institutions from disappearing.

Donald Rominger, Jr. also acknowledged this conjointment between war preparation and football in his paper “From playing field to Battleground: The United States Navy V-5 Preflight Program in World War II” in the Journal of Sport History through the use of imagery. John A. Gunn, author of The Old Core, further recognized the training received on football fields extended to other parts of the world and to improving military performance. British military analyst Thomas Wintringham also supported this notion by suggesting the various British military units should look into embracing the American style of football in their military training practices because it provided important “points of resemblance to war” and more so “than any other sport” (1940, 43, 66). As an example, college football coaching legends Clark Shaughnessy and Harry Stuhldreher argued football was a game well suited to wartime because it best incorporated and simulated important strategy and tactics embraced by the military. Stuhldreher also specifically advocated that the “stamina, teamwork, and coordination of football men are getting on the gridiron will help make them better soldiers” (Gridiron Training, 1942, 5).
Not surprisingly, there is a great deal of literature that connects the United States military to American football through description, imagery, and metaphor. However, many of these beautifully mastered and researched descriptions of military football teams, players, and contests of the World War II era lack detailed information related to one unique outcome of this conjoined relationship: the military-staged bowl game. This is interesting because the various postseason contests created by the U.S. military involved units and bases all over the world, incredible extravagance, highly accomplished professional and collegiate stars, and on some occasions, competitors from other countries. The official records of the NCAA importantly identify 88 service bowl games that took place between 1943 and 1967. However, significant work has not been collected on this topic despite the fact that “competitive football enhanced troop and civilian morale on the home front and overseas by providing an uplifting, entertaining, and exciting diversion from the horrors, sacrifices, and boredom of war” (Jones, 2009, 23).

In 1945, George L. Shiebler mentioned in the NCAA Football Guide that, “The American fighting man was not satisfied to listen to shortwave broadcasts from bowl games played in the States. He wanted to play in a game or else be an actual spectator. Thousands of soldiers, sailors, and Marines in Europe and the Pacific war areas put on their own football bowls with uniformed teams, cheering sections, regulation officials, bands, and parades modeled after real American college football games” (Jones, 2009, 65).

This work aimed to explore the military’s use of the bowl game phenomenon created on domestic and foreign soil and investigated the impact those events produced on the military and the health or popularity of college football to further highlight the conjoined status of football and the U.S. military.

**Background**

During World War I, the “American people were shocked to learn of the high percentage of young men who failed to qualify physically as good soldiers” (Portal, 1941, 3) or about those that “flunked early-war enlistment and draft physicals because of [ill] health or mental conditions” (Jones, 1992, 43). This national epidemic resulted in the perception that the United States lacked “hard, physically fit, aggressive, courageous, and determined soldiers (Portal, 1941, 4). In order to build and/or improve the protection of the nation’s increasing global interests, the United States identified and used educational institutions to implement rigid physical education requirements to build up the physical capability of America’s soft youth. Interestingly, this occurred despite claims that physical combat has been “born and bred in the human animal for generations” and that “present-day conventions” relegated that asset “dormant” in the average American.

Princeton University’s Professor of Hygiene and U.S. War Department Army Training Activities Director Joseph E. Raycroft served as important advocate for change and convinced many university and college academic administrators to incorporate more combat-related sports (e.g., boxing, wrestling, football) into university curriculums to improve the conditioning, determination, and sportsmanship of college men following World War I. Similarly, General Douglas MacArthur, as superintendent of West Point after World War I, reorganized the educational...