

**The Greatest
American
Football Story
that has Never Been Told**

**How Gridiron
Stopped the War**

Anthony Wootton



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SECTION 1:

Football Stars Far from Home

CHAPTER 1

The Toll of War

'The overwhelming majority of our people have met the demands of this war with magnificent courage and understanding. They have accepted inconveniences; they have accepted hardships; they have accepted tragic sacrifices.'

– President Franklin D. Roosevelt

MOST CANADIANS had been in Britain since 1940. The country declared war on Germany soon after Britain had in September 1939. Many Canadians initially headed to the Hampshire military town of Aldershot. Resident Aldershot divisions had been immediately mobilised and moved out at the outbreak of both world wars, so the camp was vacant.

The Canadians started arriving in December 1939, and large numbers headed over late into 1940. Although, as the Canadian Army grew and the headquarters moved out of Aldershot, the town itself remained the centre for the Army as they arrived in Britain. Thousands upon thousands of Canucks passed through that tiny part of Hampshire.

Initially, they were very unhappy, especially those that arrived in the December of '39. It was a particularly bad winter, and they were completely unprepared for it. Even

though the Canadians were used to the cold, they were not accustomed to the cold and damp of English winters. Nor were they used to the conditions of their barracks, which were large rooms of 15 or 20 men. The only source of heat they received came from a single iron stove, which was hopelessly inadequate. They had not even tasted war, but life had already become unbearable. According to Paul Vickers, local historian, and chairman of The Friends of Aldershot Military Museum, many of the Canadians wondered what they'd come into.

'They did get a warm welcome from the local population,' Vickers said. 'And there is a lovely story of one of the local residents from Christmas 1939, who was taking pity on the Canadians. He drove his car around North Camp, picked up a couple of Canadian soldiers who were walking to the nearest pub and invited them to his home and gave them Christmas dinner.

'That is typical of the sort of relationship that developed between the Canadians and the local population here in Aldershot,' added Vickers, 'and it started again with the Americans when they started to arrive a few years later.'

Early in the Second World War the Canadians had trained hard in the Hampshire countryside and had got themselves ready for combat. Therefore, when the Dieppe raid was launched in the summer of 1942, most of the men who were sent there had been drawn from the Canadians based in Aldershot. Of the 6,000 men that took part in the raid, nearly 5,000 of them were Canadians.

The raid, Operation Jubilee, was a disaster. Dieppe had the highest number of Canadian casualties in a single day during World War II, with 907 killed, 586 wounded, and 1,874 taken prisoner. There were 237 ships and landing craft in the Dieppe flotilla, and some accounts reported that the weapons that troops saw on the ships had never been fired.

RAF bombers were meant to hit the town the night before; however, they failed to do their job. Dieppe is a coastal town with white cliffs and stone beaches. Being able to run on stones is a lot more difficult than running on sand. The soldiers were forced to carry the weight of military equipment and had no chance of dragging artillery across the beach. They were sitting ducks.

There was just one officer who returned from the beaches unwounded. He was Captain Denis Whitaker, the main protagonist of this story, who we will learn more about.

The survivors of Dieppe returned to Aldershot. Their sacrifices were not in vain, and many historians believe that the lessons learned from Dieppe were subsequently applied to the D-Day landings. The success of D-Day owed a lot to Operation Jubilee.

There were 50 American Rangers involved at Dieppe. The raid had been the first US involvement in ground combat in Europe. Only 15 Rangers landed on the beaches. Three were killed, three captured and five were wounded.

The first of more than 1.5 million American troops arrived in Britain on January 26, 1942. The US War Department had provided the young men with a guide to living abroad. Many of them had never been outside the States before, so they were given a booklet called *Instructions for American Servicemen in Britain 1942*.

The 42-page book had tips and advice such as, ‘The British of all classes are enthusiastic about sports, both as amateurs and as spectators of professional sports ... the great “spectator” sports are football in the autumn and winter and cricket in the spring and summer. See a “match” in either of these sports whenever you get a chance. You will get a kick out of it – if only for the difference from American sports.’

Other advice included, 'Do not make fun of British speech or accents. You sound just as funny to them, but they will be too polite to show it.'

Servicemen knew something was building at the beginning of 1944. The previous year had seen Allied forces invade Sicily and the eventual downfall of fascist power in Italy. Benito Mussolini had been arrested on July 25, 1943. Hitler poured German troops into the country to prevent any chance of a peace settlement that would take Italy out of the war.

The main allied invasion of Italy began in September. By October 1 British troops had entered Naples. Deadly battles raged on throughout the country.

Months earlier, on May 16, the infamous Dambusters raid took place. Nineteen Lancaster bombers set off on one of the most courageous and innovative operations of the Second World War. Their operation was to blow up three dams in Germany's industrial heartland. The targets were heavily protected, and the bombers had to fly as low as 60 feet, at a ground speed of 232mph, for their bouncing bombs to be effective. The problem with flying so low was that they could not pass those defences unnoticed. Of the 133 men in the aircrew who were involved in Operation Chastise, 53 were killed.

On the Eastern Front, the Soviet Union defeated the German forces at Stalingrad in February 1943. Lasting almost six months, it is one of the deadliest battles in history, which resulted in 633,000 deaths. Throughout 1943, Soviet forces were winning back towns and areas of Russia that had been taken over by Germany.

Meanwhile, Britain was plunged into darkness. It was another winter of rationing, blackouts, and bombing. Dwight D. Eisenhower arrived in January 1944 to set up the Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force

(SHAEF). Plans for a cross-Channel assault by Allied forces were developing.

Throughout the Second World War, more than two million American servicemen passed through Britain. The height of activity was in 1944 when the country housed nearly half a million men stationed with the United States Army Air Forces. Around 200 airfields had been built, each housing 2,500 men. Small towns and villages were taken over by Americans, converting halls and properties into headquarters.

So, by Christmas of 1943, there was a sense of anxiousness around Canadian and American troops in Great Britain. Something was happening, preparations had begun, but they did not know exactly what it was or when it would be.

For many Canadian troops it was another cold and dull English winter, thousands of miles from the comfort of family and home. This winter had taken a toll on them because, combined with the miserable cold English climate, they were pressured with the intensive training for what would eventually become the invasion of France. The devastating assault on the northern coastline of Europe at Dieppe was still clear in their minds.

Having spent days in the countryside, shivering in damp tents and taking precautions against live ammunition in his combat manoeuvres, a Canadian major took himself into the warm confines of a London pub while on weekend leave.

In 1996 Denis and his wife, Shelagh Whitaker, were recording his memories of the Tea Bowl. It was clear that the games against the Americans were very fond memories for him. About that visit to the London pub, he told Shelagh, 'I started talking to a fellow next to me, who turned out to be a lieutenant in the American Army Recreational Services. He mentioned that he was pretty interested in football and had just brought over six complete sets of equipment for football teams.'

This got Whitaker excited. Whether or not it was the beer flowing inside of him, the MVP QB had an idea. ‘I knew a number of Canadians serving in Britain who had played pro or college football, so several beers later I found myself talking this fellow into lending us some uniforms and putting together a USA vs. Canada match.’

And so, the idea for the Tea Bowl was born.