

The Football Classic

By Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)

"Tradition is the life blood of regiments."
—Sir Winston Churchill

Guadalcanal Island Dec. 24, 1944

On the afternoon of the day before Christmas in 1944, a football game was played on the island of Guadalcanal. A backwater of the war, far removed from the climactic battles fought in its jungles and swamps two years before, Guadalcanal was the staging area for Major General Lemuel C. Shepherd Jr.'s Sixth Marine Division.

The game, billed as the "Football Classic," and also referred to as the "Mosquito Bowl" pitted an 11-man team from Colonel Alan Shapley's Fourth Marine Regiment against a squad representing Col Victor Bleasdale's 29th Marines. Interest in the game was high throughout the Division even before the two teams lined up for the kickoff.

It was no small wonder that the contest was eagerly awaited. Both teams were made up entirely of former college football standouts who could have made any all-star team assembled in the States. "Irish George" Murphy had captained the 1942 Notre Dame Fighting Irish. Hard-running Tony Butkovich collected All-American honors at Purdue in 1943 while piling up a Big Ten single-season rushing record. Dave Schreiner and Bob Baumann had held down the tackle spots for the Wisconsin Badgers, while Bob Fowler anchored Michigan's line at center. Like his tentmate George Murphy, Walter "Bus" Bergman had been captain of his college team at Colorado A&M (Colorado State today). A third tentmate, Dave Mears, was a stellar performer at Boston University.

The Football Classic may have been the most hallowed football game west of Pasadena, Calif., but in the glamour department it fell somewhat short of the New Year's Day Rose Bowl Classic and the Rose Parade that precedes it. Somewhat short? Actually it was a bit more than that, a good bit more than that. In point of fact, the Football Classic was

football at its most primitive.

There was no stadium. The "playing field" was the 29th Marines' parade ground, bare, hard-packed earth and coral, a bit less unforgiving than concrete, but not very much less. If the playing field had nothing resembling grass, it did have a name, Pritchard Field, in honor of Corporal Thomas Pritchard, an explosive ordnance disposal specialist, who only one day before had died in an accidental detonation there.

Spectators (some counts put the crowd at as many as 10,000) perched and roosted wherever they could to watch the action. MajGen Shepherd was provided a coconut-



SCHEDULE OF EVENTS	
1330 - 1400	- Music by Regimental Bands.
1400	- Reception of Major General Lemuel C. SHEPHERD, USMC, Commanding General, Sixth Marine Division. Honors by 29th Marines Band.
1405	- Colonel Victor F. BLEASDALE, USMC, Commanding, 29th Marines, and Colonel Alan SHAPLEY, USMC, Commanding, 4th Marines, meet in center of gridiron and exchange greetings.
1415	- Kick-off.
Half	- (1) Music and ceremony by 4th Marines Band. (2) General SHEPHERD changes to opposite side of field. (3) Music and ceremony by 29th Marines Band and 29th Marines Drum and Bugle Corps.
End of Game	- Band music. *****

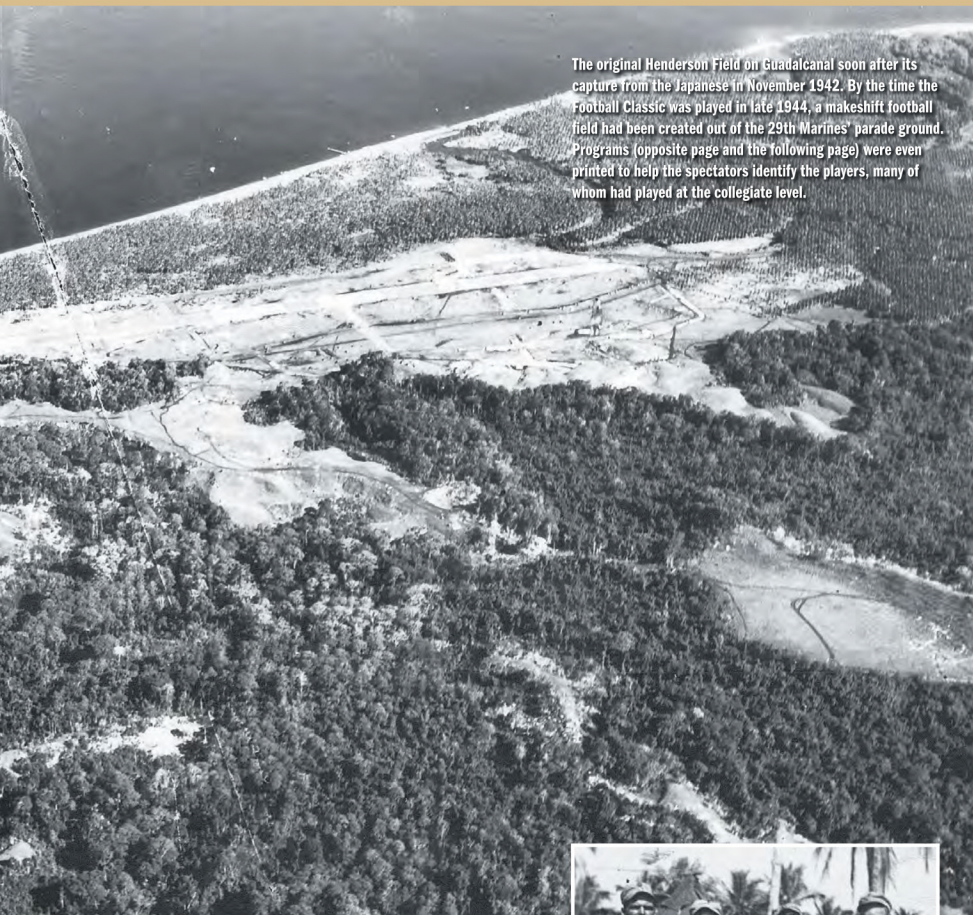
log bench from which he watched the fray. The general watched one half of the game from the 4th Marines' side of the field, and then he diplomatically crossed to the 29th Marines' side for the final 30 minutes of action. Aides carried MajGen Shepherd's bench across the field so he could enjoy a "comfortable" seat for the entire game.

As there was no stadium, neither was there any equipment beyond an elderly

and somewhat worn football. There were no helmets, no pads, no cleats and no uniforms. Players took the field in whatever they had.

A faded photograph that appeared in the *Denver Post* shows the 4th Marines' Dave Schreiner and the 29th Marines' Tony Butkovich shaking hands on the playing field. Butkovich wears shorts fashioned from what appear to be cut-

COURTESY OF TERRY FRIE



The original Henderson Field on Guadalcanal soon after its capture from the Japanese in November 1942. By the time the Football Classic was played in late 1944, a makeshift football field had been created out of the 29th Marines' parade ground. Programs (opposite page and the following page) were even printed to help the spectators identify the players, many of whom had played at the collegiate level.

off issue dungaree trousers and a T-shirt. Schreiner's "uniform" is much the same, although the Marine Corps dungaree trousers haven't been chopped into shorts. That was all by design. It had been agreed that for the purpose of recognition, the 29th Marines would wear shorts, while the 4th Marines would take the field in dungaree trousers.

There were a few amenities. Hundreds of programs had been printed, although with the players' uniforms bare of numbers, it was a bit difficult for spectators to know exactly who was who. Beer was available, a bit warm and tepid, but it still was beer. The Division band was on hand to provide rousing music. Communicators rigged a public address system.

Right: Four of the six lieutenants in Co A, 1st Bn, 4th Marines before the Battle of Okinawa (left to right): Bob Baumann, Joseph "Big Joe" Jamison, John Clark and Dave Schreiner. Baumann and Schreiner also had been teammates on the legendary 1942 University of Wisconsin football team. Both were killed during the Battle of Okinawa.



LIST OF PLAYERS

(* - Probable starting line-up)
29th Marines

POSITION	NO.	NAME	RANK	SCHOOL	YEAR	HONORS
End	1	*MEYF, George	2dLt	Notre Dame	1940-42	Capt.
End	2	JUDY, Saxon	PFC	Fulsa	1941-43	All-American
End	3	*HALIZEWSKI, Hank	Sgt	Duquesne	1938-40	
End	4	SMITH, Huston	Cpl	Miss.	1941-42	
End	5	BREAN, Charles	2dLt	(DetKib Detroit Lions	1938-41	Capt.
Tackle	6	*MEYF, Robert	2dLt	Notre Dame	1940-42	
Tackle	7	*GERS, John	Cpl	Ill.-Purdue	1942-43	Capt.
Tackle	8	MEARS, David	2dLt	Recon U.	1941-42	
Tackle	9	LYNCH, Joseph	1stLt	Holy Cross	1940-42	
Tackle	10	*BYSTRA, "Beast"	Cpl	Duquesne	1939-41	
Tackle	11	VAN ORDER, Ed	PFC	Cornell	1939-41	
Tackle	12	HEBRANK, John	Cpl	Lehigh	1942-43	
Center	13	*DE GREVE, "Red"	Pvt	Notre Dame	1940-41	
Center	14	FOZLER, Robert B.	Capt	Kidgdon	1940-41	
Qtrback	15	*GALLER, Frank	PFC	St. Marys, Cal.	1942-43	Capt.
Qtrback	16	MOATS	PFC	Duke	1942-43	
Qtrback	17	DOUGLAS, Jack	PFC	Miss. Sou.	1942-43	
Halfback	18	FLEMING, Don	1stLt	Creighton	1939-41	Capt.
Halfback	19	*SEELINGER, Bud	2dLt	Wisconsin	1941-42	
Halfback	20	GASTIGNOLA, Jack	Cpl	Penn. State	1942-43	
Halfback	21	*BERGMAN, Walter	1stLt	Colo. Aggies	1940-42	Capt.
Halfback	22	JOHNSON, Russ	Cpl	Marquette	1942-42	
Halfback	23	STRAUS	PFC	Rochester	1942-43	
Fullback	24	*BUTKOVICH, Tony	Cpl	Ill.-Purdue	1942-43	All-American; National's Leading Ground Gainer, 1943.
Fullback	25	BOND, John	Cpl.	Tex. Christian	1942-43	All-Southwest Conference.
Fullback	26	CEBISE, Vic	PFC	La. Tech.	1942-43	
End	27	KALUGER, Eli	Cpl	Ala. U.	1942-43	
General Manager - 2dLt G. A. BARRETT Coach - 2dLt Charles E. BERAN						(OVER)

COURTESY OF TERRY FRIE

More than a few wagers were placed very quietly and unobtrusively on the outcome. It was a long way from the Yale Bowl where Yale met Harvard, or Chicago's Soldier Field or Pasadena's Rose Bowl where in a few weeks the Trojans of the University of Southern California would meet the University of Tennessee Volunteers. None of that mattered. What mattered was that it would be a football game, and it would determine who the champions of the 6thMarDiv were.

It was supposed to be touch football: two hands above the waist. It was, but not for long. After only a few opening possessions by each team, the game quickly evolved into football as full of hard blocking and tackling as any game played on college or professional gridirons thousands of miles away. Somewhere ahead was a baleful unknown, one that would, for some, last forever. Twenty-two young Americans who would be facing that unknown decided just to play some old-fashioned football for an afternoon, and did they ever play!

John McLaughry, a star at Brown University who also had played for the New York Giants, started in the 4th Marines' backfield. Afterward, in a letter to his parents, McLaughry wrote: "It was really a lulu, and as rough hitting and hard playing as I've ever seen. As you may guess, our knees and elbows took an awful beating due to the rough field with coral stones here and there, even though the 29th did its best to clean them all up. My dungarees were torn to hell in no time, and by the game's end, my knees and elbows were a bloody mess."

Bloody knees and elbows? They were the norm, not the exception. Television viewers today may see National Football League teams occasionally take the field in "throwback" uniforms, the playing gear worn 50 or more years ago. The football that was played on Guadalcanal that long-ago December day was throwback football, with ball carriers buried under piles of tacklers, pass receivers flattened and blockers upended. Bloody knees and elbows may have been the norm, and bloody noses weren't far behind. There were no cheap shots, no taunting and no insults, just hard, clean, legal hitting on a rock-hard field.

All in all, it was a rip-roaring good time that for one brief afternoon allowed players and spectators alike to forget what was waiting just over the horizon. A battle royal it was, 60 minutes of controlled mayhem that ended when the 4th Marines' Bob Spicer intercepted a last-minute pass, ending the game in a scoreless tie.

After the handshakes and the good-natured banter faded, the 6thMarDiv

COURTESY OF TERRY FRIE

4th Marines

(* - Probable starting line-up)

POSITION	NO.	NAME	SCHOOL
End	2	* SCHNEIDER	U. of Wisconsin
End	3	* MC NEIL	Kentucky State
End	3	* RYBANSKY	Fordham
End	4	DUCE	Michigan Hi-School
End	5	REYNOLDS	Indiana Hi-School
End	6	JOHNS	Alabama Hi-School
End	7	HALB	L.S.U. & Texas A.M.
End	8	QUIRK	Ashrat College
Tackle	9	* ANDERSON	So. Dakota Hi-School
Tackle	10	* CLARKE	Purdue
Tackle	11	HIBBE	So. Methodist
Tackle	12	HEKESLEY	Ohio Hi-School
Tackle	13	* SAMPLE	Ohio U.
Tackle	14	* KEMPT	Northwestern
Tackle	15	PINCENES	Riverside, Calif, J.G.
Tackle	16	BAUMANN	Wisconsin
Tackle	17	WARRREN, P.	Purdue
Center	18	DALY	Loyola
Center	19	JABOSEK	Indiana Hi-School
Center	20	* SWEETONI	Forham
Back	21	* LEBRYGH	Montana - Cleveland Zone
Back	22	* GIBSON	Purdue
Back	23	* CLIFFORD	New York
Back	24	MC LAUGHRY	Brown U. - N.Y. Giants
Back	25	* BARTKIEWICZ	Chicago Hi-School
Back	26	* SPICER	Colorado
Back	27	LOFF, G. D.	Oklahoma Military Acad.
Back	28	* LEBRYGH	Notre Dame
Back	29	* HOPPER	USS New Mexico
Back	30	MC TYRE	Montana U. - Detroit Lions
Back	31	ZACKASH	Yonkers N.Y. Hi-School
Back	32	BRENNAN	Ohio State
Back	33	DOOLITTLE	E. St. Louis Hi-School
Back	34	BAUER	

Head Coach - 1stLt William V. LAZEWICH

OFFICIALS OF THE GAME:

1stLt Larry SULLIVAN, 29th Marines
1stLt Bob HERRIG, 4th Marines.

A coconut grove near the Tenaru River on Guadalcanal was the site of the 6thMarDiv's headquarters in late 1944. The relative serenity of the island allowed the leathernecks of 4th Marines and 29th Marines to meet on an improvised gridiron on Dec. 24, 1944.



PCF EDUARDO MERRIA, USMC

returned to preparing for combat. No one could possibly have known that 12 of the players who took the field that day had less than six months to live. Each one would die on Okinawa.

The football players who never came back were Bob Baumann, Wisconsin; Rusty Johnston, Marquette; Charlie Behan, Northern Illinois; George Murphy, Notre Dame; Tony Butkovich, Purdue; Johnny Perry, Duke; Bob Fowler, Michigan; Jim Quinn, Amherst; Hubbard Hinde, Southern Methodist; Dave Schreiner, Wisconsin; John Hebrank, Lehigh; and Ed VanOrder, Cornell.

"They say certain guys are heroes because they did this and that. I say the heroes are those guys who never came back. I've thought about that a lot. I think about the 60 or 70 extra years I got on them. I know I was lucky," Bus Bergman later recalled.

The Tentmates

George Murphy, Dave Mears and Bus Bergman led rifle platoons in Captain Howard L. Mabie's Company D, 2d Battalion, 29th Marines. Murphy and Mears were hit by Japanese fire on Okinawa's Sugar Loaf Hill on the same day, May 15, 1945. Irish George Murphy died there, never to see the infant daughter



COURTESY OF TERRY FREI

Dave Schreiner, left, and his University of Wisconsin teammate, Bob Baumann, were both officers in the 4th Marines. While serving in the South Pacific, Baumann sent this picture to his fiancée back in the U.S. On the back he wrote: "Junior (Dave) and I putting on a show."

who had been born after he shipped out for the Pacific. Mears was wounded and evacuated. He went on to a long career as an accountant. Bergman survived Okinawa, was awarded a Bronze Star

with combat "V" for actions on May 19, 1945, and returned to college to pursue a master's degree in 1946. His love for football never left him, and he spent his adult life as a coach. He died in 2010, one of the last living participants in the Football Classic.

The Football Classic, a forgotten football game played long ago on a faraway island, is unheard of by most of today's Americans. For Marines, though, the island of Guadalcanal occupies a special niche in our history, and the Football Classic is woven into the cloth of our traditions.

Author's bio: Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, a Leatherneck contributing editor, is a former enlisted Marine who served in the Korean and Vietnam wars as well as on an exchange tour with the French Foreign Legion in Algeria. Later in his career, he was an instructor at Amphibious Warfare School and Command and Staff College, Quantico, Va.

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