

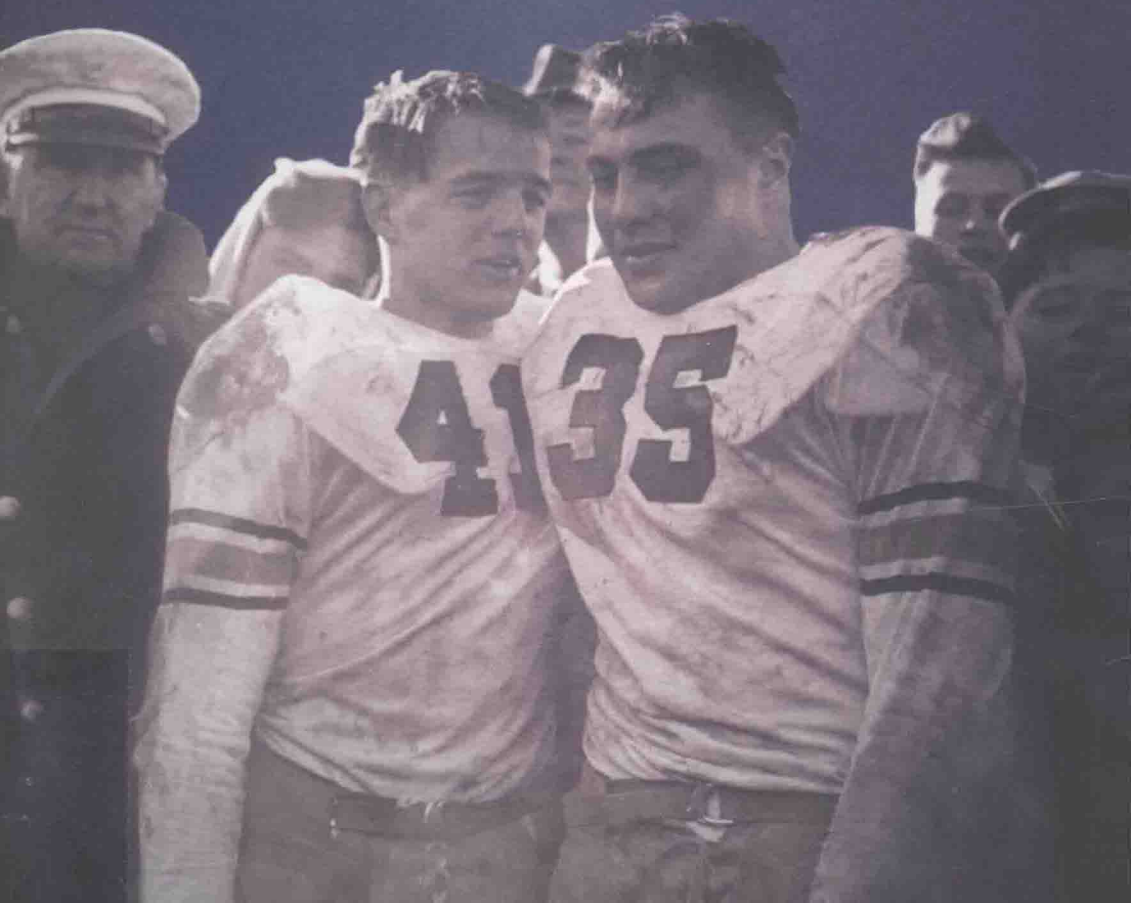


RANDY ROBERTS

A TEAM FOR AMERICA

— ★ ★ ★ —

THE ARMY-NAVY GAME THAT RALLIED A NATION



A Team for America



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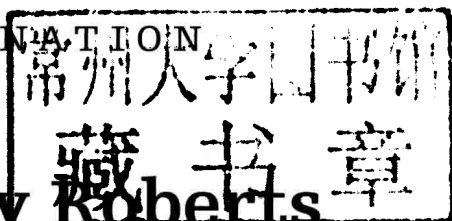
A R M Y - N A V Y

G A M E

T H A T R A L L I E D

A N A T I O N

Randy Roberts



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FOR DOUG KENNA,
*West Point Class of 1945, and for his teammates and friends at the
Academy who have served their country in war and peace*

Prologue

*Far off I hear the rolling, roaring cheers.
They come to me from many yesterdays,
From record deeds that cross the fading years,
And light the landscape with their brilliant plays,
Great stars that knew their days in fame's bright sun.
I hear them tramping to oblivion.*

— GRANTLAND RICE

BUT OUR SON played at Harvard,” the couple explained when they were refused tickets at the gate of Michie Stadium for the 1943 Army-Navy game. It seemed like a perfectly valid reason, irrefutable to them. Still, unless they had spent the previous few weeks in quarantine, they must have known what everyone else who read a newspaper, listened to a radio, or heard any of the football gossip knew—anyone who lived beyond a ten-mile radius of West Point and who failed to send in a verified application for a ticket would be banned from the contest. Gasoline and tire rubber were too valuable. Army officials would not sell any tickets at the gate. That was football near the end of the second year of the war. Even in an age when college football was king, its most important annual game could not escape the impact of the war.¹

“Use it up, wear it out, make it do or do without,” was the

mantra of 1943. What with rationing, shortages, and continual privations, nothing seemed to look or taste like it had before Pearl Harbor. What American ever heard of making rubber from desert shrub guayule, rabbit bush, goldenrod, or milkweed? What self-respecting coffee drinker could abide the brew made of soybeans, chicory, or used grounds? And meatless Tuesdays and Fridays were one thing, but quite another was being served lungs, tripe, or heart on the other days. It was enough to make people long wistfully for the Great Depression.

An Army-Navy game played before a half-filled Michie Stadium at West Point instead of a packed house of more than 100,000 in Philadelphia's Municipal Stadium was a sorry sight. Even worse was the spectacle of the Army band busting onto the field playing "Anchors Aweigh" before swinging into "On, Grand Old Army Team," and the entire First Regiment of cadets sitting in the Annapolis cheering section wearing Navy's distinctive white peak hats. They actually shouted "We want Bill" and followed the command of the Navy cheerleaders. Demanding to see the Navy goat and rooting for the blue-and-gold appeared to many gray-clad men a clear signal that wartime unity had been stretched too tightly. But President Franklin Roosevelt had ordered the low-key affair. Midshipmen were not allowed to travel, so Army cadets had to root for the enemy in their stead. It was all part of college football in 1943 in a time of rubber shortages, gas rationing, and travel restrictions.

Pacing the sideline, Earl "Red" Blaik hardly noticed the tomfoolery. The hard, uncompromising aspect of his face looked as if it had been chiseled in the rock of Mount Rushmore. His nickname was the product of his bronze hair, cut short in a no-nonsense fashion. His nose was full, his mouth slightly turned up on the left side, and his lips thin as razor blades when he was concentrating, but his jaw and eyes attracted most people's attention. His jaw looked as if it had been squared with a bevel and

fixed into place with screws—strong, tight, unmoving. His pale blue eyes, normally shaded under a baseball cap during practice or a neat, gray fedora during a game, were not so much cold as distant, as if he were always thinking about the next move on a chessboard. Joe Williams of the *New York World-Telegram* thought that if you didn't know Blaik and had to guess his profession, "you'd probably catalogue him as a professor of mathematics."²

Doug Kenna played for and coached under Blaik, becoming one of his closest friends over the years. "The thing that you've got to understand," he began, "is that Red Blaik didn't have a shred of an iota of a sense of humor. He was serious when he woke in the morning and he just stayed that way until he went to sleep at night." The day was never long enough for all the important work he needed to accomplish, so he drove himself relentlessly, measuring days into fifteen-minute units, eating meals at his desk, laboring to bring order to a game whose outcome often resulted from some whim of the gods.³

No game would be lost because the other coach outworked Red Blaik. His commitment to his profession was so single-mindedly complete, so numbingly uncompromising, that during his son's high school football career he saw him play only one half of one period, about six minutes of action. He watched from behind a shrubbery that guarded the Highland Falls High School football field. Later he remarked, "I had to leave for Army practice before the first period was over, but I stayed long enough to see that Bob's team was going to get a good licking."⁴

Blaik's schedule left no time for frivolous activities or what he considered questionable behavior by his strict Scot Presbyterian standards. He didn't drink alcohol, smoke, or swear—except for an occasional "Jeepers Katy!" and a very rare "Jesus Katy!" Well into his forties, he was the same size and weight as when he played end at West Point. At 6-2, 180 pounds, he was rock solid and could still fit into the same uniform he had worn as a first lieutenant in the early 1920s out on the dusty plains of Texas.

Over the years other coaches put on weight and aged; Blaik just didn't seem to do either. It was not part of his plan.

And his life was all about precise plans. Robert Woods played for him at West Point and remembered that he was "like a ballet teacher. He drilled everyone on their exact moves. His plays were not designed to pick up 5 or 6 yards. He was sure that if every player performed his job they would end in touchdowns." Glenn Davis, who earned All-American honors and won a Heisman Trophy playing for Blaik, recalled that his coach never praised him or anyone else. Praise was not required for simply performing his role perfectly. That was expected. Nor did Blaik berate anyone for failure. "I never heard him degrade anyone in the presence of anyone else," Davis said. "Never heard him raise his voice, hardly, in the presence of or to any player." "Red Blaik didn't yell," Kenna noted, "but he remembered. Fail once too often and you would never get another chance on his team."⁵

More than any other emotions, Blaik inspired respect and loyalty from his players, coaches, and associates. Robert Chabot, who played for him in the mid-1940s, said he was a "tough, hard-working type of guy" but also, in a chilly way, "compassionate." He demanded everything from a player, but he also cared for each one. John Sauer, who played and coached for Blaik, agreed. Whenever he went into the coach's office and saw him sitting at his desk, a framed picture of General Douglas MacArthur behind him on the wall, his knees started shaking. "I had more respect for that man," he said. "I was a smoker in those days, not a big one. . . . No way Earl Blaik ever saw me with a cigarette. I mean, that's just the respect you had for the man."⁶

Now his team was in trouble. His jaw visibly tightened as it always did when he faced adversity. With a nervous tic, he turned his class ring—West Point, 1920—on his finger. There had to be some adjustment, some bit of fine-tuning, that he could make to change the momentum of the game. Behind its mammoth,

bruising linemen, Navy was taking over the contest. Ben Chase, Jack Martin, and Don Whitmire—especially the quick, violent Whitmire—were punishing Army's linemen, beating them up and wearing them out. The game was won between the tackles, Blaik knew, and that was exactly where Army was now losing it.

His team had started strong, biting off chunks of yards on end runs and battling the bigger Navy line on defense. In the first series, the sensational plebe Glenn Davis broke off tackle and streaked down the sidelines for a first down. He had another beautiful run in Army's second offensive series. But then he began to play erratically. After breaking off a nice end run on Army's third possession, he fumbled a handoff and on the next play bobbled an easy pitch.⁷

Suddenly the brilliance was gone, and he played like his mind was not in the game. On the fourth Army series he failed to catch another easy underhand pitch, resulting in a large loss and another punt. Later, in the second quarter, he threw an interception. By then Army's offense appeared AWOL, and time after time Navy's defense smothered Army's runners near the line of scrimmage. At the half the score was 0-0, but Army's players seemed to drag toward their locker room.

Navy had a powerful squad in 1943, ranked sixth in the nation going into the Army game. Their only loss was to undefeated, number-one-ranked Notre Dame. The Midshipmen's strength was their line play and their powerful, fleet backs. Whitmire had been an All-American tackle at the University of Alabama before transferring to Navy, and in 1942 he was a consensus All-American. His teammates called him Rock; sportswriters referred to him as a Neanderthal. Both described his physical, take-no-prisoners play. His role on offense was to open holes for Bobby Tom Jenkins, another Alabama transfer described as "190 lbs. of fluid force." In both the starting lineup and the reserves, Navy's power threatened to overwhelm Army.⁸

Blaik had foreseen the challenge before the season even began.

To give Army a chance in the game, he had installed a T offense that took advantage of Army's speed and discipline. Army was deep in exceptionally fast backs—Doug Kenna from Mississippi, Max Minor from Texas, and especially Glenn Davis from California. But the season had taken its toll. Kenna badly injured his right knee, Minor suffered a series of nagging smaller injuries, and Davis became mired in academic troubles. Before the big game they spent more time healing and studying than preparing to face Navy.

Now that lack of preparation was painfully apparent. In the middle of the third quarter Navy's offense stirred awake. Their march began when the smallest player on the field, a transfer from the University of Arkansas named Hal Hamberg, punted the ball 50 yards to the Army 8. After Davis was tackled for a 6-yard loss, Army punted the ball back to Navy. Hamberg fielded the kick, carrying it 10 yards to the Army 42.

The speed of the game seemed to change. As he had the year before, "little" Hal Hamberg simply took over. He carried the ball twice for 11 yards to the Army 31. On the next play he took off to the right, cut off tackle, veered toward the sideline, and, just as two Army tacklers slammed into him, pitched the ball to fullback Hillis Hume, who raced down to the Army 6. The play covered 25 yards. On Navy's sideline, the cadets in white peak hats followed orders and cheered loudly, if not quite enthusiastically.

Their backs to the goal line, Army's line stiffened. In three plays Navy advanced only to the 2. Fourth and goal. Navy's captain, John Whelchel, coaching his last game before receiving a combat assignment, sent in his power back, Bobby Tom Jenkins, to replace Hamberg. Like all single-wing offenses, Navy's running game was built for power, designed for its toughest back to carry the ball close to the goal line. Blaik knew—hell, his players and everyone with any knowledge of the game knew—that as sure as football was played without face masks, Jenkins would

carry the ball off right tackle behind Whitmire's and Ben Chase's double-team block.

And he did. Jenkins lined up 4 yards behind the center, in back of a Navy line unbalanced to the right. He took a direct snap and, without a fake or attempt at deception, ran toward Whitmire's ample rear. As he did, Joe Stanowicz, Army's best tackle and an NCAA heavyweight wrestling champion, knifed through the line and hit Jenkins on the 4, wrapping his right arm around his waist and his left arm around his neck. He looked like a rodeo cowboy grabbing a calf to throw it to the dirt. It was a perfect high hit, fully executed to stop Jenkins's forward momentum and throw him backward.

The tackle straightened Jenkins, who stood erect, almost like a boxer who had just been hit with a devastating uppercut, but he just kept moving forward. With Stanowicz draped across him, attempting to rip his head back, Jenkins struggled like a soldier who had been shot, in a slow-motion death run, one, two, three, four steps then collapsed across the goal line. Touchdown. Extra point. It was 7-0 Navy.

Army battled back. Blaik replaced Davis with Kenna, who hobbled onto the field favoring his injured knee, fortified with frequent injections of Novocain. "I knew the knee was gimpy, no question about it, but I wasn't in pain, and Colonel Blaik put me in the game to pass, not run," Kenna recalled. Later in life he claimed that he was verifiably the worst passer in the history of Army football. "I really was," he said, "and I've got the statistics to prove it." In truth, Kenna was not a classic quarterback with a short, quick delivery but a gifted tailback with a long delivery and a fluid, graceful motion. And he immediately began to complete passes.⁹

The problem was not Kenna's throws but Army's fighting spirit. From the first kickoff the play had been intense, bordering on combative. As the last minutes of the third quarter ticked away, the action crossed the border into dirty. At times it seemed

like a fight night at Madison Square Garden as players hit after the whistle and slugged each other at the slightest provocation. Both Army and Navy players were guilty. In the 1930s and 1940s rough play was common, and officials turned a blind eye to occasional punches and late hits. But this Army-Navy game careened out of control. One reporter counted seven fights involving at least fourteen different players. The bloody noses and cut lips finally overcame the officials' laissez-faire, boys-will-be-boys attitude. Red penalty flags began to litter the playing field. Time and again Kenna's passes were nullified by drive-killing penalties.¹⁰

Near the end of the third quarter, one penalty-plagued series forced Army to punt from deep in its own end of the field. Once again, Navy simply overwhelmed Army as they powered their way to a second touchdown. Allison Danzig of the *New York Times* commented, "Army, fighting its heart out in desperation to end Navy's long supremacy, simply could not stand up to that power. . . ." ¹¹

In the fourth quarter, penalties, mistakes, and interceptions halted each Army drive. Final score: 13-0 Navy. It was Army's fifth straight loss to its rival and the fourth shutout of the five. For Red Blaik, Glenn Davis, Doug Kenna, the Army team, the Corps of Cadets, and every member of the Long Gray Line, from the new second lieutenant fresh out of the Academy to General Douglas MacArthur in the Pacific Theater and General Dwight Eisenhower in the European Theater, it was a bitter loss.

The newspapers of the day had yet more trouble for Army, questioning its leadership at the highest levels. A few months earlier, in Sicily in August, General George Patton verbally attacked and slapped several soldiers hospitalized for shell shock. In one case he exploded at a traumatized GI, "You dirty no-good son-of-a-bitch! You cowardly bastard! You're a disgrace to the army and you're going right back to the front to fight, although that's too good for you. You ought to be lined up against a wall and shot,

although that's too good for you. In fact, I ought to shoot you myself, right now, God damn you!" Then he shouted at the attending physician, "There's no such thing as shell shock. It's an invention of the Jews."¹²

On his November 21 radio broadcast, Washington columnist Drew Pearson went public with the story, reporting, according to Eisenhower's chief aide, "a very vicious and exaggerated version of the Sicilian hospital incident." The timing could hardly have been worse. The bloody Marine landing on the Tarawa Atoll in the Gilbert Islands was just days away.

Now the newspapers were full of charges and countercharges, General Eisenhower's official explanations and congressional hand-wringing, and columns editorializing on the insensitivity of Army officers and the bungling of military strategists. West Point's performance at Michie Stadium only provided more fodder.

Red Blaik had returned to West Point to accomplish a task. And he had failed. Every plebe learned on arriving at the Academy that there were only four responses: "Yes, sir." "No, sir." "Sir, I do not understand." "No excuse, sir."

Red Blaik had no excuse.

A Team for America

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1



A Week in November

The sand of the desert is sodden red,—
Red with the wreck of a square that broke;—
The Gatling's jammed and the colonel dead,
And the regiment blind with dust and smoke.
The river of death has brimmed his banks
And England's far and Honour a name,
But the voice of schoolboy rallies the ranks,
"Play up! play up! and play the game!"

— SIR HENRY NEWBOLT

RED BLAIK HAD dug himself out of holes before the one at Army. His career, an unending uphill battle, was epitomized by two games in November 1940. It had been a raw month. Across the nation, extreme weather conditions buffeted people and buildings. In the Pacific Northwest, near gale force winds peeled shingles off houses, blew over flimsy structures, knocked down thousands of hardy citizens, and forced the less sturdy indoors. On November 7, 40- to 50-mile-an-hour winds in Tacoma, Washington, caused the First Narrows Bridge—aptly dubbed “Gallopig Gertie”—across Puget Sound to undulate and sway like a belly dancer. Shortly after frightened officials closed the structure, its rhythmic dance turned into a spastic two-way twist, increasing from 5 to 28 feet

while the roadbed twisted from a 45-degree angle in one direction to 45 degrees in the other. It performed its danse macabre for half an hour before breaking apart, piece by piece, into the water hundreds of feet below.

The Armistice Day blizzard that swept across the Rockies into the Midwest was less spectacular but more deadly. It came virtually without warning, catching duck hunters out on the rivers, lakes, and wetlands. One moment, a Minnesota hunter recalled, it was so warm that he had to remove his heavy jacket. Then the winds stirred, the skies darkened with ominous, smoky clouds and ducks looking for shelter—and it rained, sleeted, and snowed to depths of more than 2 feet. Forty-nine people died in Minnesota, and over a hundred more in the rest of the Midwest.

In the Northeast, the conditions were merely uncomfortable. Gray sheets of cold rain drenched New England and the Middle Atlantic States. Shoppers in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia sought something wool and warm, and when they left, their shoulders were hunched against the cold, wet winds that broke umbrellas like twigs.¹

It was not exactly football weather, but it was November, and the race for the national championship was heading into the home stretch. Football players then as now were the postmen of sports, performing their appointed tasks in rain, sleet, or snow. For teams like Cornell and Minnesota, locked in a close race for the national championship, bad weather was simply a factor in a game plan, not a reason to postpone a contest. The same was true for such other midwestern and eastern powerhouses as Michigan, Notre Dame, Boston College, and Pennsylvania. On November 16, 1940, they would all play in conditions that recalled Noah and his ark.

The premier game in the East was Cornell-Dartmouth. With an eighteen-game winning streak, Carl Snavely's Big Red team had not been beaten since 1938. They started the 1940 season ranked first in the nation, and although they slipped to second