

# TO WIN A WAR . . . .

## An Original Pre-Flight Sports Story By Burgess G. Leonard, Jr., Sp.3c

The two stripes on his shoulder were very new, and bright as the Navy's history. He got out of the station wagon slowly and stretched his thick, short frame with a gesture that was almost angry, as his blue eyes frostily surveyed the Pre-Flight School. A stubborn resentment blunted the angles of a hard, fighting face.

Lieut. Tuck Kelly commented with complete feeling, "Damn!"

He went inside to report to the Officer of the Day. An hour later he was saying to the Skipper, "Please don't misunderstand me, sir. I'll do my job. But I feel that I've been misplaced, and the sooner I get out of here to a ship, the better I'll feel. I got in this war to fight."

The Skipper's stripes were not so bright; time and salt air had faded them. But there was the dignity of service in their dullness, and they somehow reminded Kelly of the Skipper's slow smile.

The Skipper asked softly, "Didn't we all?"

Surprise checked Kelly only for a moment. He burst out,

"But you're different. You're necessary here. I was born on the coast. I spent my childhood on fishing boats. I paid my way through college by taking out fishing parties during vacation months. I'm a football coach now, but I've spent every summer on my boat. I know the southern coast like another man knows the back of his hand. There's where I'm needed. I know places a sub might be basing—places that are not on any map. All I wanted was a boat. A little old wooden boat to chase subs with. And I end up here!"

The Skipper commented gently, "The Bureau of Naval Personnel is usually right. We need you here, Kelly."

Kelly hesitated, "I was hoping that perhaps you could have me transferred, sir."

The Skipper shook his head. "I asked for you here. When you see what we are doing, I think you will understand."

Kelly met Lieut. (j.g.) Mack Roberts, a big, solid man with a dent in his nose, that afternoon. A slow grin spread over the battered face as Roberts' hand swallowed Kelly's.

Roberts bellowed, "So they got you, too, Tuck? This will be like old times at Tech. I just learned we're to work together."

Standing on the sidelines with his stocky legs spread apart, Kelly let his brooding eyes follow the over-riding ball on the kickoff of an intra-squad game. An invader back accepted the ball somewhat awkwardly, then streaked upfield. A Deathdiver end hit him with stunning impact and bounced off. The back stumbled, but dug fiercely until two Deathdivers sandwiched him.

Kelly whistled softly. "They're playing for keeps."

The scrimmage raged, and the clean fury of it startled Kelly. Slowly the brooding faded from the lieutenant's eyes, and they began to gleam in reluctant appreciation. The boys were not so good. There were no stars among them; but they were playing with a fierce abandon that Kelly had never seen in an intramural game.

Roberts' team, the Invaders, scored in the second quarter when a guard swarmed through to block a punt on the Deathdivers' 20, and the tailback connected with an end on a desperately-long fourth-down pass. They counted again in the third on a sustained drive that carried 60 yards.

Kelly nodded approvingly. "Still moustetrapping the guards, I see, Mack. That's a good line you have. A good team."

Roberts nodded enthusiastically. "I've got the best bunch of kids in the whole world. All except one."

Kelly's quick eyes asked a question. Mack jerked his shaggy head toward the bench. "The blonde kid—the neat-looking one with the bored look. That's Roddy Payne. He's my problem child, and I've given up on him."

"What's wrong?"

Roberts shrugged. "I'll let you see."

The boy rose with arrogant reluctance as Mack gestured to him. He slouched past the coach, murmuring, "Wonderful game, football. Develops the reflexes, don't you know? I must have my share of those reflexes, or I can't shoot any Japs."

He went out on the field, and there was a flow to his motions that reminded Kelly of sullen music. He slouched into position, hands on hips, lips twisted thinly into a superior smile. The Deathdivers were passing recklessly now. A long one drilled through the air into Payne's territory.

The thin boy moved over casually, without interest. The song was still in his legs. He jumped just a trifle and with contemptuous ease flicked the ball away from the receiver's hands. He walked away lazily, without a backward glance.

Kelly grunted, "Nothing wrong with that."

Roberts suggested, "Watch."

Two plays later the Deathdiver wingback broke wide on a deceptive reverse that shuttled him free around the weak side, and his speed stranded the end. Roddy Payne was moving over with that swift lope. He ran smoothly, confidently. Then, with no one near him, Payne stumbled and fell. The safety man nipped the runner 20 yards further down the field.

Roberts said softly, "Sometimes he stumbles, and sometimes he misjudges the distance, and sometimes he just looks the other way. But he never makes a clean, honest tackle."

The big officer did not say it; but the word was in his eyes as clearly as though he had written it on a slate for Kelly to see: "Yellow!" He let Payne stay in for two more plays, then replaced him.

Roberts explained, "He's about through here. He doesn't fit in, and won't try. It hurts me to do it, but it's my duty to recommend that he be released from active duty."

Kelly looked again at the boy. He said, "Wait a while on that, Mack. Give me a shot at the kid."

He walked over to where Payne had flopped on the grass. The cadet was almost too handsome, slightly girlish in his thin-featured good looks. He stood for the officer, but his eyes were hostile.

Kelly said, "You're trying pretty hard to give the impression that you don't give a hang, aren't you?"

The boy lifted an eyebrow. "About this place, I don't. I'm a pilot with more than 500 hours. I had my own plane and I'm good enough to fly in combat right now. If the Navy wants to teach me to fly the Navy way, that's okay. But when I have to waste three months that could be used in flight school just playing games, I don't like it a little bit—sir."

Kelly fixed him with a cold eye. "You didn't have to choose football if you don't like it."

The boy's eyes flashed. "Who said I don't like football? Football or volleyball—what's the difference. It's the same waste of time."

Kelly told him, "That's a dangerous attitude. It can get you into trouble."

His attitude kept the boy in trouble, Kelly learned during the days that followed. Payne did not study. He responded half-heartedly to athletic tests. He was denied weekend liberty when his room was found untidy.

Kelly worked well with Mack Roberts. Roberts had the tireless patience, the fundamentals. Kelly added the fire that drove the boys to give the extra something that turned an ordinary team into a good one. With Kelly's revamped offense functioning behind Roberts' staunch line, the Invaders climbed into a tie with the Mammoths for first place in the team standings.

Three days before the game for the title, Roddy Payne missed a watch. It was the last straw, and, added to his other offenses, would have meant dismissal for Payne; but Kelly went to the military office and pleaded another chance for the boy.

The next day, while Mack Roberts supervised the rest of the squad, Kelly

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took Payne and a squat Invader guard, Jim Bohann, to another field.

Kelly said, "At ease." They stood there, looking at him uncertainly.

Kelly's eyes bored at Payne. "You're here on borrowed time, Payne. You haven't done very well here. You've dogged it and pretended you were protesting against the system. Maybe your pride refused to let you see it, but the cadets have another theory; they think you're yellow."

Payne's head went back as though he had been struck.

"So," Kelly continued calmly, "I've brought you here to find out. I want you two to take turns at tackling each other."

Bohann's swarthy features split in a grin. Payne stiffened. He protested, "Now, see here—"

Kelly stepped back, snapping, "That's an order."

Bohann chuckled, "Me first."

He shuffled forward, cat-footing, lowering his shoulders. Roddy Payne backed frantically, hands making little protesting motions. Bohann hit him a crashing tackle.

Payne knew how to fall—he had been well coached—but something tightened his muscles. He struck like a dead weight and lay with his eyes closed. Bohann scrambled up and waited.

Payne finally opened his eyes. He lay there, testing his limbs, unwilling to rise. But Bohann's taunting grin pulled him up.

Kelly said, "Your turn." Payne cried, "No! I won't be a party to such foolish—"

"All right, Bohann!"

Grinning, the little guard slammed into the other cadet again. Payne took even longer to get up.

He exclaimed, "See here, now. An order is an order, but—"

Kelly nodded. Bohann's shoulder plowed the ground with Payne. But this time the slim boy rolled over and sprang up. His face was flushed, eyes wild.

He shot through the air. There was a resounding thud as he struck Bohann. The stocky guard hit the ground and bounced a little. Payne climbed up and stood over him, rage fading and a bewildered look nibbling at his features. Bohann struggled to a sitting position

and stared at Payne, jaw sagging in an unbelieving grin.

Kelly was speaking, "If I had thought you were really yellow, Payne, I shouldn't have bothered with you. I was sure you weren't, and maybe you've just proved it to yourself. Your trouble came from the fact that you've never had to take any hard knocks. There are a lot of boys like that. I've seen little scared rabbits turn into football stars, once they learn that getting hit isn't fatal, and that they can hit back. There were boys who came here with you who were more scared than you ever were; the difference was that they admitted it to themselves. Your pride wouldn't let you do that; you stuck up a wall of feigned indifference that was pure bluff, and hid behind it. I think you've learned something here, Payne; and I expect you'll make a good Navy flier."

Kelly sat on the bench, his face hard and unchanging as the Mammoths drove down the field again in that hectic fourth quarter. The Mammoths had a powerhouse fullback, Bill Dover and they were riding along on his back, slamming him through for the tough yards, sucking the defense in with him and working shifty reverses for the long gains on first and second downs. The score stood, Invaders 14, Mammoths 13. The Invaders had scored early on a pass and a long run. The Mammoths had counted once in the third, once in the fourth, each time making a sustained drive pay off.

Now they were rolling again. Mixing them smartly, holding the power of Dover like a club over the Invaders' heads, the Mammoths drove to a first down on the Invaders' 35. Here a spinner netted them five, but a reverse gained nothing when an Invader end smashed through instead of waiting, and guessed right.

Dover took the pass from the short spot, and he crashed the line like a bull elephant, splintering a passage. The center hit him and got a ride. Knees pumping high, the fullback ripped off seven yards before the secondary converged to drag him down. If he had been faster, Dover would have been Varsity material. Too slow for the big time, he was too good for this league, and the Invaders just could not stop him.

But they fought him. They gave their hearts. And he shoved them back to their 10, with two yards to go on the third down.

Kelly walked over and put his hand on the tense shoulder of Roddy Payne. He said briskly, confidently, "This is your spot, Payne. Get in there for Scott."

Payne gasped, "Me? Now?"

"You. Now." There was a moment of horror in the blue eyes. Then Payne was racing across the grass, and Mack Roberts was gasping,

"Have you gone crazy?"

The Mammoths deployed in that potent single-wing, with Dover in the bucking slot. There was no mystery about the play. The Mammoths flaunted that; they dared the Invaders to stop it.

Dover plunged, and a hole opened for him. He lumbered through in that deliberate charge, picking up momentum and legging for pay dirt. The way was clear for a moment. Then a slim form came in like an arrow from a strained bow. There was an alarming crash like small thunder, and Dover rose high on Roddy Payne's shoulder to fall backward.

The big boy grunted when he landed, and the ball squirted from his loosened grasp. Bohann embraced it lovingly for the Invaders.

Kelly was watching tensely as Payne staggered up. There was a sheepish grin on the dirt-smudged face, and Payne's voice rang clear as a bugle class, "Come on, gang, let's shove out of here!"

And Kelly knew that Roddy Payne would never be afraid again . . .

He was writing a letter that night when Roberts complained,

"What's the idea? We ought to be

celebrating. What the heck are you writing a book?"

Kelly looked up. "I'm writing Washington. Mack, there's a war going on out there, and I want my slice of it. This is important work, sure; but there are plenty of other men who can do it. I have qualifications for something else."

He mailed the letter and waited. It was weeks before the reply came; and it was so impersonal as to seem a re-proof, a brief reminder that the personnel of the Navy would be used as the department deemed wisest.

He swore bitterly at that; but he had taken a solemn oath, and he tried to resign himself to his assignment. There was so much work to be done, that he could almost lose himself in it. If his heart had not been elsewhere, he would have loved training the cadets.

Winter passed. Spring came, and with it the unleashed fury of submarine warfare along the coast. Kelly studied the newspaper accounts, marking red crosses on a huge old map. A hunch grew into a conviction. He took the map to the Skipper.

Kelly said, "Look at this, sir. They must have a base along here somewhere. Right here—it doesn't show on the map—there's a place where the sea has broken through to an abandoned canal of the old Inland Waterway. A storm pushed me in there years ago. I have a hunch about that spot. That place ought to be investigated. Do you know the man to contact?"

The Skipper looked carefully at the map. He said finally, "I know the man. Write out the description, and I'll see that your canal is searched."

He wrote the description, and the Skipper forwarded it. A month later headlines proclaimed that an enemy submarine base had been discovered and four subs sunk or captured.

The Skipper said, "Your hunch was right. We owe you a lot for that."

Kelly blurted, "I couldn't have done a thing without your help, sir. But surely they'll see the light now and give me a boat."

The Skipper smiled a denial. "You are too valuable a man here."

Kelly shook his head and went on waiting for orders that never came. The summer passed. He was doing a job, doing it well, he knew. He was a good coach, and a fine platoon officer. He loved his boys. Some, he realized, might have failed the course without the help he could give them from his experience.

But the boys were always leaving. He met them, worked with them, won their friendship—and then they moved on, leaving him with a bitterly lonely and futile consciousness of standing still while everyone else was making progress.

Football came again; and Kelly and Mack Roberts coached their team to another title. He wrote another request for sea duty, and received another refusal.

So he decided to resign his commission. He said savagely to Roberts, "I'll join the Army or the Marines, as a private if I must. This is my war, and I want some action."

He completed writing his resignation. It was rolled in his hands, a neat, bitter document, when he walked into the Skipper's office the next morning.

The office was crowded, and he could catch snatches of excited comment.

" . . . right out of the sun . . . those torpedo planes fly so low you can't see them until they're right on you . . . his was the only plane that got up in time to help . . . bagged four in three minutes, and another ran off trailing smoke . . . no doubt about it, he saved that carrier . . ."

The Skipper raised his eyes from the newspaper, and they were dancing when they found Kelly.

The Skipper said, "A young friend of ours seems to have distinguished himself in the Pacific. By all accounts, he is credited with having saved a new aircraft carrier single-handed. Would you care to see, Kelly?"

Kelly moved over, and the big pic-