

The Svobodas of Lawrence, Kan.

One Family's Convergence of Fate, History, and Heroism

By Matthew D. Keenan

According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, 415 World War II veterans died every day last year. But if you think this is an obituary for the passing of another member of our greatest generation, prepare to be enlightened. Because Kansas lawyer Chuck Svoboda is very much alive. And if his name is familiar to you, it may be because I first profiled him here back in 2011. And now, without a word limit, I have the rest of his story.

And so whatever time you were going to bill today, push pause. Because when you are finished reading this story, that deposition you have tomorrow will seem much less important.

Where It All Began

If the History Channel ever wanted to set a ratings record, it should dedicate a miniseries to the life and times of Joe and Florence Svoboda and their six children. That tale would include heroism in the most violent battle of World War II, a father who was a veteran of the two world wars, and would also involve a football game between a high school player and an iconic figure of college football and the NFL.



Florence and Joe Svoboda Sr.

And it would start with Joe Sr. Joe Svoboda stood 6 foot 4 inches and was a native of Ellsworth. His parents, Alois and Anna Stejskal Svoboda, were immigrants from Praha, Czechoslovakia. Joe met Florence Saindon in Damar, Kan., which is northwest of Hays,

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and were married for 38 years. They spent most of their adult years in Lawrence and had six children – Joe Jr., Lloyd, Floyd, Betty, Norma, and Charles.

Joe Jr. contracted polio as a youth but that was barely a speed bump. He got a degree in chemical engineering at the University of Kansas and taught at the University's War College, and then, later obtained master's and doctorate degrees at Carnegie Tech. Next came Floyd and Lloyd, who were identical twins. Betty stayed in Lawrence, married and raised a family (Elizabeth Josephine Brune). Norma became a nurse (Norma Jean Hamrick) and assisted with the war effort. And six years later, came Chuck.

The Twins, Floyd and Lloyd

Floyd and Lloyd enlisted in the Army on May 1, 1942. They were assigned to the 76th Infantry Division, which was attached to Patton's Third Army. Lloyd was a graduate of Officers Candidate School in June 1944 and promptly traveled to the European Theater with his brother. Historians tell us the Battle of the Bulge was the bloodiest battle for American troops in all of the war. Casualties – depending on the source – ranged somewhere between 80,000 and 100,000. And in the middle of it all were two brothers from Lawrence.



Floyd and Lloyd Svoboda

"The Germans had constructed a pillbox which was harboring a number of high powered guns that were doing significant damage to the positions of the American forces," Lloyd's son, Tom, told me. "Dad was the second lieutenant and was leading his brigade to take out those guns." A bullet struck him in the face, entering through his left eye. The *Lawrence Daily Journal-World*, in a front-page story on May 19, 1945, had this headline: "Directed his men after being hit. Lt. Lloyd J. Svoboda awarded Silver Star for action." It offered additional details: "Ignoring the terrific rain of lead directed at him from the besieged Germans, Lieutenant Svoboda rushed to the head of the squad and skillfully maneuvered them to a spot about 30 yards from the pillbox. While placing the men in position, a hidden Nazi machine gun opened fire and Lt. Svoboda was struck and seriously injured.

"Crawling back to a covered position, he called his squad leader and instructed him to hold the ground gained, and to send back word to the company commander informing them of their plight and of the fact that only four men remained in the squad.

"The word went back, reserves came forward, and the pillbox was captured." Lloyd received the Silver Star, the Bronze Star, and Purple Heart. You can look it up.



“Though he lost his left eye, it never bothered him nor stopped him from getting his engineering degree and working at Black and Veatch for 40 years” Tom told me. “When we were growing up, my friends and I would put tape over our eye and try to play baseball and basketball to be like Dad. We gained an appreciation for what he lived with. But he never talked about his actions on that day in February, 1945.”

Lloyd had an appointment with history once again when he and Rosemary were both at the Kansas City Hyatt Regency on July 17, 1981. Rosemary was one of the witnesses the *Kansas City Star* quoted for the 30th anniversary of the accident, and she told the paper that two of the husbands from their party had “gone to the main floor and were at a bar when they were pinned under the debris until around 3:30 a.m. and were rushed to the hospital. They both remained in the hospital for two and a half months. I will never forget the cries for help from people pinned under the debris.” The Svoboda’s escaped without injury.

And what about Floyd? He got his degree in petroleum engineering and worked in the oil and gas business. He never married.

Joe, Sr.

Joe Sr. served in World War I as a lieutenant. In WWII he served as a major. Between the wars, he worked as a banker but was still in the Reserves on December 7, 1941.



Joe Svoboda Sr., World War I

While the twins were engaged with Hitler, Joe was directed to engage the Japanese on United States soil – in one of the forgotten battles in WWII in Adak, Alaska.

Six months after Pearl Harbor, on June 6, 1942, 500 Japanese soldiers landed in Alaska and claimed U.S. soil as Japan’s. Brian Garfield, in his book “The Thousand Mile War – World War II in Alaska and the Aleutians” said this about the fight to retake U.S. territory back from the Japanese: “It is about a thousand miles from Dutch Harbor, near the Alaskan Peninsula to Attu at the far western tip of the Aleutian Island Chain. They are the most brutal thousand miles in the Pacific Ocean. Here, for fifteen months in 1942-1943, was fought one of the toughest campaigns of World War II.”

And in the mix was one Joe Svoboda. His position was staff officer, 17th Naval District and Commander, Marine Corps base at Adak, Alaska.

In 1943 he wrote this letter: “Sometime in the early part of June we sailed on board to the Aleutians. The life here is very rugged but we don’t mind. We have no newspapers, no radios, no music or dances, no trees or shrubs, no women, no comforts of life, but we have plenty of fog, rain, clouds, mud, wind, mountains, snow, lakes, fish, tundra and other things we read about in the states.”

Garfield’s work quotes one soldier on the dense fog: “When you could see a hundred feet that was a clear day.”

American forces reclaimed both Attu and Kiska, with the latter island resulting in a 19-day battle that left 549 Japanese dead.

Football, War, and the Youngest Svoboda

Which brings us to football. Trivia buffs of both KU and MU know that Don Fambrough and Don Faurot have histories deeply rooted in the intersection of war and football. Fambrough played at Texas in 1941 and 1942, and then entered the military in the Army Air Corps, where he met a man named Ray Evans. The rest of that story is hardly trivial.

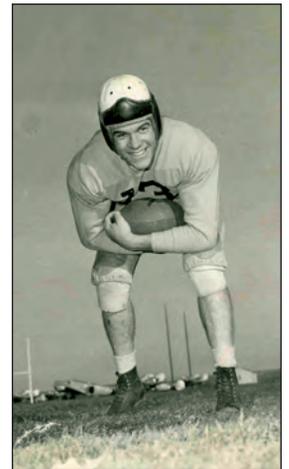
Don Faurot coached military teams at the Naval Air Station at Jacksonville in 1944, where he met a man named Bud Wilkinson. Faurot taught Wilkinson offensive strategies that helped lead Oklahoma to three National Championships in the 1950s. Other college coaches inextricably connected with the war effort included Paul Brown and Bear Bryant.

Wilbur D. Jones Jr. penned a book, “Football! Navy! War! How military ‘lend-lease’ players saved the college game and helped win WWII.” It’s a largely forgotten yet fascinating era of our most popular sport intersecting with military history.

Beano Cook wrote the foreword: “Pearl Harbor had left the nation battered, humiliated and uncertain of the future. The Rose Bowl Game, after all, had to be moved from Pasadena and played in a misty rain in Durham, North Carolina. There were losing battles abroad and on the home front: the manpower drain and travel restrictions would force hundreds of colleges to drop football for anywhere from one season to the duration of the war. A game plan for the nation’s survival, as well as the survival of the game, had to be devised. There was never a time, and probably never will be, when war and football were more closely coupled than World War II. That’s because football, in so many ways, saved America. And the war, in turn, saved football.”

So many NFL players were commissioned in the war that some teams, like the Pittsburgh Steelers, had only six players on their roster, and combined their team with the Philadelphia Eagles. In an interview with the *New York Times*, the Steelers co-owner Bert Bell stated, “Pittsburgh had no backs left and Philadelphia had no line-men.” With a roster full of 4-Fs — men ineligible for the draft — Phil-Pitt was born. Newspaper columnists dubbed the team the Steagles.

Nineteen active or former NFL players died in the War. Collegiate stars were lost as well. The University of Iowa’s Nile Kinnick, for instance, for whom their football stadium is named, won the Heisman, was drafted in the second round of the NFL draft, but spurned the league to attend law school. When the war started he joined the Navy. He died when his plane crashed in June 1943.



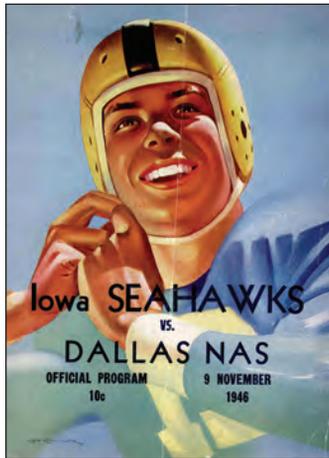
Chuck Svoboda

A Nostalgic Touch

Still, football flourished. Which leads us back to the youngest Svoboda.

“After December 7, 1941, Dad was ordered to report to San Diego. The following summer of 1942 I drove mom out there. She stayed there, I returned to Lawrence alone. I lived with the Penny family for most of my high school years – they treated me like one of their own.” Chuck lettered in football as a sophomore and started his junior and senior years, and helped win state titles, which for Lawrence High is about as newsworthy as saying grass is green.

Upon high school graduation, at the mature age of 17, Chuck was headed to the Navy Air Corps. “I was fascinated with air planes. Everyone was. I wanted to be a pilot. So I called my dad, who at that time was the commander at a Marine base in Seattle. I needed his permission, which I received. Six months later I was at the Naval air station in Dallas. When I arrived one of the first things I noticed was that they were practicing football. I asked the coach if they would let an aviation cadet play – ‘yes, if you are good enough to start’ he told me.” Three weeks later another cadet arrived, equally skilled at handling the pigskin. His name was George E.R. (Gus) Kinnear. His football pedigree? Florida State University.



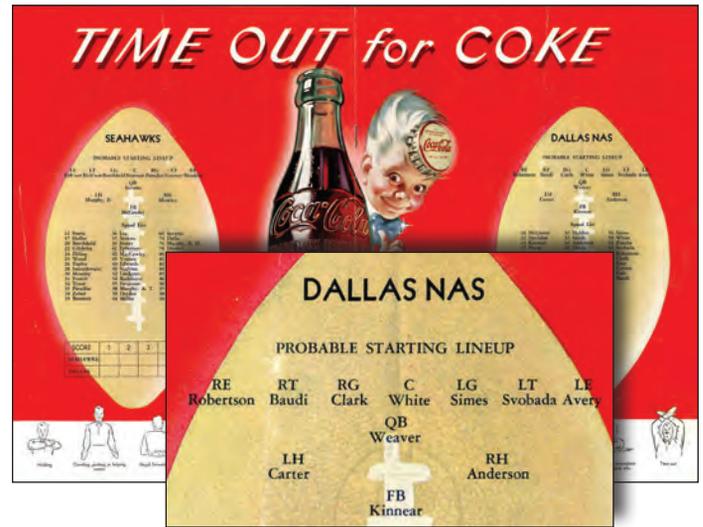
After the Japanese surrendered in September 1945, Chuck learned what the Navy had had in mind for him and his fellow pilots: “The bomb was a secret and the Navy was proceeding with its own plan for attacking Japan. The aviation cadets in Dallas were going to be the advance strike force for the invasion of Japan. They estimated 80 percent casualties.”

The world was a dangerous place but there was still time for football. Svoboda created the holes that Kinnear, a fullback, ran through. On November 23, 1946, in Beaumont, Texas, his team, the Dallas Naval Air Station (NAS), played an Army team whose star player was Doak Walker. Walker was not only a Heisman trophy winner, but also a three-time All American, and later, a four-time All-Pro. He is a member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

And in that game, there was one play where Gus was sprinting up the sideline, jumped up to take a pass, and the only person between Gus and the goal line was that kid named Doak.



Gus Kinnear (No. 13) and Chuck Svoboda (No. 46) of the Dallas NAS football team.



Starting lineup for the Dallas NAS football team with Chuck Svoboda at left tackle.

“Doak cracked him pretty good” Chuck recounted. “Back then you played both ways. I saw Gus get hit. There was a steel drainage cover and Gus landed right on top of it hitting his head. The crowd went dead quiet. Gus laid there for a second and then jumped up. He looked at Doak and said ‘good hit buddy.’ The crowd went wild.”

“Later we played against Wee Willie Wilkin,” a player, worth noting, who was most certainly not Wee. A tackle at 6 foot 4 inches and 261 pounds, who went on to be a three-time Pro Bowler and two-time first team All-Pro. You can look that up too.

All in all, a pretty impressive football pedigree for a Lawrence High kid.

Chuck graduated in engineering in 1949 then law school and practiced defense work in the metro for 50 years. He was an AV-rated attorney for most of those years. And Kinnear? “Gus stayed in the Reserve and made his own mark.” He was recalled during the Korean conflict with combat tours on the USS Princeton and USS Lake Champlain, and during Vietnam on the USS Kitty Hawk and USS Ranger. Later he was the Naval Air Corps commanding officer for the Pacific Fleet.

When he retired he was the only four-star admiral from the Navy Air Corps. And you know where to find that fact as well.

And last year Kinnear, now retired at York Harbor, Maine, called his former teammate. “We need to get together at least one more time before the sand runs out.” And in November, Svoboda obliged by flying to Maine to see his fellow teammate, friend, and naval comrade.

Like most of the Greatest Generation, they probably didn’t dwell on their military accolades. But those football games against future NFL Hall of Fame players?

No doubt. ■

About the Author



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