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Centennial of Naval Aviation: Kinnick a Heisman winner, Naval aviator

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Written by Hill Goodspeed Museum of Naval Aviation

College football is in full swing across America, and one of the places people flock to is Kinnick Stadium in Iowa City, Iowa.

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It's there — and in every Big Ten stadium — that the coin flipped before kickoff bears the likeness of the man for whom that stadium is named, one with a connection to Naval aviation.

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The fall of 1939, the start of the football season coincided with the German invasion of Poland that marked the start of World War II. Yet, that war was thousands of miles away, and Americans remained cloaked in innocence and focused on peacetime pursuits.

On the field

At the University of Iowa, the football team had a new coach and players eager to change the fortunes of the school's program, none more than that of 5-foot-9, 170-pound Nile Kinnick.

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In six of the Hawkeyes' eight games, he never left the field as he played on both sides of the ball, kicked and punted. At the end of the 6-1-1 season, Kinnick had been responsible for 107 of Iowa's 130 points. He led the nation in kickoff return yards and had eight interceptions.

His play earned Kinnick the Heisman Trophy, and at the ceremony, his words revealed the true measure of a man being honored for his actions.

"I'd like to make a comment, which in my mind is indicative,

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perhaps, of the greater significance of football and sports emphasis in general in this country," Kinnick said, "and that is, I thank God I was warring on the gridirons of the Midwest and not on the battlefields of Europe. I can speak confidently and positively that the players of this country would ... much rather struggle and fight to win the Heisman award than the Croix de Guerre."

Joining the fight

Kinnick spurned the chance for money as a professional player, instead enrolling in law school. But with the U.S. entry into World War II becoming likely, he realized that young men of his generation would have to leave gridirons and baseball diamonds for distant fields of battle.

He joined the Navy in August 1941, his call to duty just three days before the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.

"Every man whom I've admired in history has willingly and courageously served in his country's armed forces in times of danger," he wrote during the war. "May God give me the courage and ability to so conduct myself in every situation that my country, my family, and my friends will be proud of me."

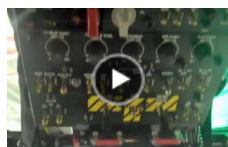
An aviation cadet, Kinnick completed flight training and was assigned to aircraft carrier duty.

On June 2, 1943, while flying from the carrier Lexington (CV 16) during her shakedown cruise in the Caribbean Sea, Kinnick's plane developed an oil leak, and he was forced to ditch the plane at sea four miles from the ship.

When a plane guard destroyer arrived at the scene, all that remained was an oil slick. Nile Kinnick was 24 years old, one of six of the first 10 winners of the Heisman Trophy to serve in the Navy and Marine Corps during World War II.

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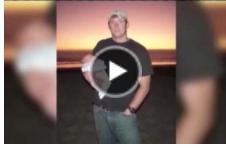


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