

A LAND MINE AND BOMBS ON CARDIFF ARMS PARK

What in peace time would have been the club's normal 1940-41 season turned out in war time to be the nation's most crucial in history as the Germans now turned their war effort to the subjugation of Great Britain. France capitulated to the Germans, and Britain's efforts culminated in the remarkable withdrawal at Dunkirk which saved over 300,000 of our troops, but with the serious loss of our guns, tanks, equipment, etc. Britain now stood alone in defence of its island fortress. The greatest of our Prime Ministers, Winston Churchill spoke to the nation. There would be no capitulation, the whole nation must be mobilised to defend the country, we would fight the enemy to the last, on the beaches—everywhere, and even from Canadian soil if need be.

The country was blitzed and bombed, but our gallant R.A.F. won the Battle of Britain. The Civil Defence Corps was fully engaged and so was the Home Guard, the whole nation was mobilised. The Cardiff Arms Park was not to be immune from the ravages of war, it suffered from two bombs, a land mine explosion and many flares of enemy aircraft passing over to drop bombs elsewhere.

The land mine, a heavy one, was dropped during a heavy raid on Cardiff and near areas on 2nd January 1941. It exploded just behind the goal line at the west end of the ground and caused much structural damage to the south wing stand, west terrace and the north stand in which some military personnel were housed, and where Miss Babs Filer, alone, was clearing up the social bar in her control. Frightened but unhurt except for shock, she managed to obtain assistance from an army sergeant and contacted Norman Riches, who with Arthur Cornish was acting as joint hon. secretary of the Athletic Club.

These then were no times for much Rugby football, or any other football for that matter. Wooller's 77th Heavy "Ack-Ack" Unit was fully engaged in South Wales coastal defence. In December 1941 it proceeded to the Far East where in Java in 1942 a train load of its personnel was involved in a terrible train disaster which caused the deaths of 21 officers and other ranks including that of B.S.M. Street who was the last appointed Cardiff Athletic XV captain. Over 100 were injured. Later, Wooller and B.S.M. Les Spence amongst others, were to become prisoners of war to the Japanese. Most of the committee were engaged in one form or another of Civil Defence, I became much engaged in the Home Guard, at times thirty hours weekly in addition to my normal occupation in the Inland Revenue. Consequently it was much later in the war before any rugby matches could be arranged on the Cardiff Arms Park. Brice Jenkins came along to help in our thin administration with Arthur Cornish and a few of us of the continuation committee. Some Rugby football was being played in certain areas, Maldwyn James in the Cilfynydd Colliery area for example, there was also Billy Cleaver and others in preparation for mining careers who became available as they were exempted from National Service, we were also aided by Jack Matthews and other students of the Cardiff Medical College. In one charity game I remember "The Meds" captained by Jack, beating a Cardiff XV by 28 points to 26.

Probably the last of the war time charity matches was that between South Wales and Sir Robert Webber's XV billed as a semi-international match. The local "Tenovus" organisation had sought funds to help provide a mobile rest house called "Cardiff Rest House" for returning soldiers of the Burma campaign. F/O Bleddyn Williams and Lieut. W. E. Tamplin appeared in the Sir Robert Webber's XV, and in the South Wales XV were Jim Sullivan the former Cardiff full-back of the Wigan Rugby League Club, Lieut. Haydn Tanner and F/O H. Johnson of the R.A.F. Regiment. In war time professionals were allowed to play with amateurs. Gus Risman was another well known Rugby League player who took part in a war time charity game in the Cardiff Arms Park.

No records of the war time charity matches, except those kept by myself for the 1939-40 season, were maintained. But they did suffice in themselves to assist the different causes financially, and provide occasionally a pleasant respite from the toils and stresses of war. Most of the players who had assisted the club actually formed the nucleus for Cardiff's post war emergence to official Rugby football in Wales for 1945-46.