



The National Football League – *A Legacy of Military Service and Support for Troops*

Since its birth in 1920, the National Football League (NFL) and its players have answered America's call during times of national crisis and military conflicts. More than 1,200 players, coaches and team owners interrupted or delayed their NFL careers to serve in the armed forces during World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War. Twenty-three, including former Arizona Cardinals player Pat Tillman, gave their lives for their country. Three World War II soldiers with pro football connections, Joe Foss, Maurice Britt and Jack Lummus earned their country's highest military honor, the Congressional Medal of Honor.

As an organization, the NFL has continually looked for additional ways to make a difference and at the same time raise the collective level of patriotism of all Americans. During World War II the league helped sell war bonds and donated the revenues of 15 exhibition games to service charities. But it was in 1965, during the Vietnam War, that then-NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle conceived of a program that continues today.

Looking for a way to demonstrate the NFL's support for America's fighting forces, the commissioner conceived of the idea of sending NFL players to Vietnam on "goodwill tours" to visit U.S. troops. In 1966, the NFL joined forces with the USO and became the first sports organization to send a group of players to Vietnam and other parts of the Far East. The first group of players to visit service members overseas included four future Hall of Famers: Sam Huff, Johnny Unitas, Frank Gifford and Willie Davis.

From 1966 until the removal of forces in Vietnam in 1973, players spent up to three-and-one-half weeks visiting remote firebases, aircraft carriers and other installations in Vietnam, Guam, Thailand and Japan. Among the dozens of players who traveled to Vietnam were Don Meredith, Dick Bass, Larry Wilson, Jack Snow, Floyd Little, Butch Byrd, Charlie Krueger, Grady Alderman, Jim Nance, Dan Conners and Larry Csonka.

Also during the 1970s, the USO Camp Show's Pacific Hospital Circuit brought several well-known NFL players to extend a personal handshake of thanks on behalf of the American people to the bedside of wounded and convalescent military patients in hospitals throughout the region. Dick Butkus, George Webster, Franco Harris, Diron Talbert, Otis Taylor, Gene Upshaw, Tom Dempsey and Mike Curtis were just a few of the football stars who headed to the Pacific.

In 1979, the USO began working with the NFL's Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders. Also known as "America's Sweethearts," the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders have participated on 59 USO tours as of Feb. 2006. The group has entertained troops in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo, Germany, Belgium, England, Iceland, the United Arab Emirates, Bosnia, Italy and Hungary. Several other cheerleading squads also visited troops abroad, including squad members from the Los Angeles Rams, Houston Oilers and the Washington Redskins.

During the 1980s, the USO and the NFL sent several players to numerous locations in both Europe and the Pacific. Participants included Chris Collingsworth, Matt Blair, Mike Davis, Mark May, Gregg Bingham and Matt Suhey.

In the 1990s, several active and retired players and coaches traveled on handshake tours to bases around the world. Terry Bradshaw, Howie Long, Mike Singletary, P.J. Foster and Terry White were just a few of the many NFL players to tour with the USO.

In June 2003, the first large-scale entertainment tour to the Persian Gulf region since the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom -- Project Salute 2003 -- brought a host of entertainers and professional athletes to pay tribute to the men and women of U.S. and coalition armed forces. NFL players Duce Staley and Jason Taylor were part of the star-studded brigade.

In 2004, the NFL donated \$250,000 to the USO for construction of a new center at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan named in honor of Pat Tillman. A former player with the Arizona Cardinals and an Army Ranger, Tillman was killed during combat operations in Afghanistan in 2004. In April 2005, current NFL stars Larry Izzo (New England Patriots) and Warrick Dunn (Atlanta Falcons) were on-hand to open the center.

This year, the NFL celebrates its 40th year working with the USO to support America's fighting forces. The USO is proud of its partnership with the National Football League and grateful for the organization's steadfast support for our men and women in uniform.

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