

Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

The Day the Sun Died: *September 1950, Erie's Pro Football Team, and Doomsday Theology*

By David Frew
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Dr. David Frew, a prolific writer, author, and speaker, grew up on Erie's lower west side as a proud "Bay Rat," joining neighborhood kids playing and marauding along the west bayfront. He has written for years about his beloved Presque Isle and his adventures on the Great Lakes. In this series, the JES Scholar-in-Residence takes note of of life in and around the water.



*The mid-afternoon sky in Bradford, Pennsylvania, southeast of Erie.
(Illustration courtesy of the Bradford Landmark Society)*

For two years, 1949 and 1950, Erie, Pennsylvania had a professional football team. The team was called the Erie Vets, and true to its name, several players were World War II veterans. Coached by a young Lou Tullio, who'd later go on to become Erie's six-term mayor, the Vets played two full seasons with games scheduled at today's Veterans Stadium on 26th and State streets. According to my father, who was a huge fan, the Vets were fearsome because of their toughness and fearlessness. Instead of being composed entirely of young men who had recently graduated from college, like most of the other teams in the league, the Erie Vets were powered by mature men who had experienced the war as part of Erie's internationally famous "Fighting 28th, the local reserve unit that had landed at Normandy (second wave), marched across Europe chasing the German Army, liberated France, and won the Battle of the Bulge."



The Fighting 28th marches into Paris

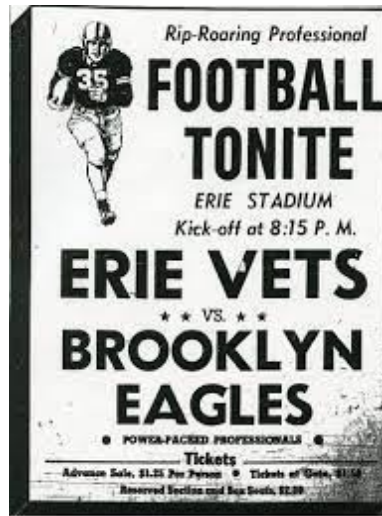
Erie's Fighting 28th, also known as the Bloody Bucket Brigade, was a reserve unit headquartered at the recently restored Armory on East Sixth Street. Having grown up during the Vietnam era, my general perception of reservists was quite different from the reality of Erie's Fighting 28th. Reservists from the late 1960s and early 1970s often seemed to be young men hoping to avoid active duty in Vietnam by opting for six years of weekly meetings as well as two-week summer camps. Without diminishing the contributions of those relatively recent reservists, Erie's veterans from the 1950s were quite different. While some may have joined the Erie reserve force in an effort to avoid the worst of the war, their strategy had clearly backfired. By the time they were done they had experienced the absolute worst of war, including hand-to-hand combat, multi-day marches through Europe's frozen mountains, weeks sequestered in muddy foxholes, sniper fire, enemy tanks, and death. There were almost 90,000 American casualties (wounded and dead) at the Battle of the Bulge alone.

The Erie Vets' 25-man roster included 16 war veterans. The team was also populated by young and talented players who had college-level football experience. Twelve of the 25 roster players had been drafted by the NFL and a few, notably player-coach Frank Liebel, were NFL players. Liebel played five seasons with the New York Giants. The combination of pure football talent and war experience made the Vets a fearsome opponent and newspapers in cities where the Vets were playing road games often wrote about the extreme physical toughness of the players. After enduring years of brutal combat, army veterans on the line of scrimmage were not as concerned about a few broken fingers or knocked-out teeth as the average collegiate player. There were two age cohorts among the players, recent grads and the older vets who were sometimes crowding 30 –years –of age. Players of that age were almost unimaginable in those old (pre-Tom Brady) days.

The 1950 season was the Vets' best year. That was the year they joined the American Football Association, a league that was just one level below the NFL. They scheduled 11 games that year, including a season-opening exhibition game against the Pittsburgh Steelers and season-ending league playoff game against the Richmond Rebels, which they lost, finishing in second place. Official league records list three player-coaches, including head coach Joe Zurovillef, and assistant coaches Frank Liebel and Ed Thomas. Lou Tullio was the head coach.

My father, who was a Fighting 28th veteran and a huge football fan, knew most of the older players and went to every home game. And he always took me with him. He enjoyed walking to the Sunday afternoon Vets games and I happily tagged

along. I was seven years old at the time. Sometimes we walked with his friends who were also army veterans.



Erie Vets program from the 1949 Season

As always, we arrived early on Sept. 24 so that my father could take me onto the field to meet players that he knew. Quite a thrill. By the time the game began, at 1 p.m., we were settled in great seats on the 40-yard line and enjoying game treats. Hot dogs and cracker jacks. The Vets were playing the Brooklyn Brooks (changed from the Eagles in 1949) and by the middle of the first quarter the Vets had the game in hand (they ultimately won 35-0). Everyone was having a good time until the middle of the second quarter when the western sky began to turn a strange shade of yellow. By halftime, the yellow had darkened to gold with reddish streaks rising vertically from the horizon. When the second half began, it was literally as dark as night and the stadium lights had been turned on. With the game obviously out of hand in favor of the Vets, fans began to depart, as conversations near where we were seated were trending toward impending disaster instead of football. Since we did not have a car, my father decided to stay until the end. For him, football trumped the possible “end of the world.”



Next day newspaper headlines explained everything.

Sept. 25, 1950 slowly became the scariest day of my life; a protected period during which I was terrified. The scariest aspect of the seemingly apocalyptic event, for a seven-year old, was listening to the adult conversations around me. It was the 1950s and people were filled with dread. Teachers were constantly warning kids of the possibly of a nuclear disaster, similar to the ones that we had seen in Japan where we could instantly be transformed to shadows on pavement. At Catholic school, Sister showed us the photographs, and these messages were accompanied by dire religious warnings: “Are you prepared to meet your God?” I was not so sure.

The Korean War had just begun (June 1950) and everyone knew that the Russians and the Chinese were ganging up on their arch enemy ... me! Conversations about the inevitability of war and the possibility that the anticipated bombings would reach the United States were common for my father and his friends. Would they be re-drafted into the Army to fight the Communists? What was a Communist? Leaving the stadium after the game we made the long, slow walk home, passing houses where people were standing on front porches speculating. My father stopped to talk and lacking an iPhone, which might have revealed the relatively benign truth of the situation, we were left to presume that the end of the world had arrived. Opinions ranged from "it must be the rapture," to "the communists had finally attacked," or "there was a major natural disaster."

Homeward bound on the long trek down State Street, I was gazing into the dark western sky, presuming that I would see Jesus at any moment. When I questioned my father, he came up with an idea. He was a great practical theologian and after considering all of the religious ramifications he came up with an awesome strategy that most contemporary child psychologists would find therapeutic. Nearing North Park Row, we stepped into the "Three Dogs For \$1" Greek restaurant and ordered three with everything plus a side of fries. While we ate, he noted that while everyone else was at home preparing for the end of the world, we were having a delicious meal.



On the way down State Street, I was watching for the Rapture in the western sky. Fortunately, I knew what to look for because we had learned all about it in Catholic School.

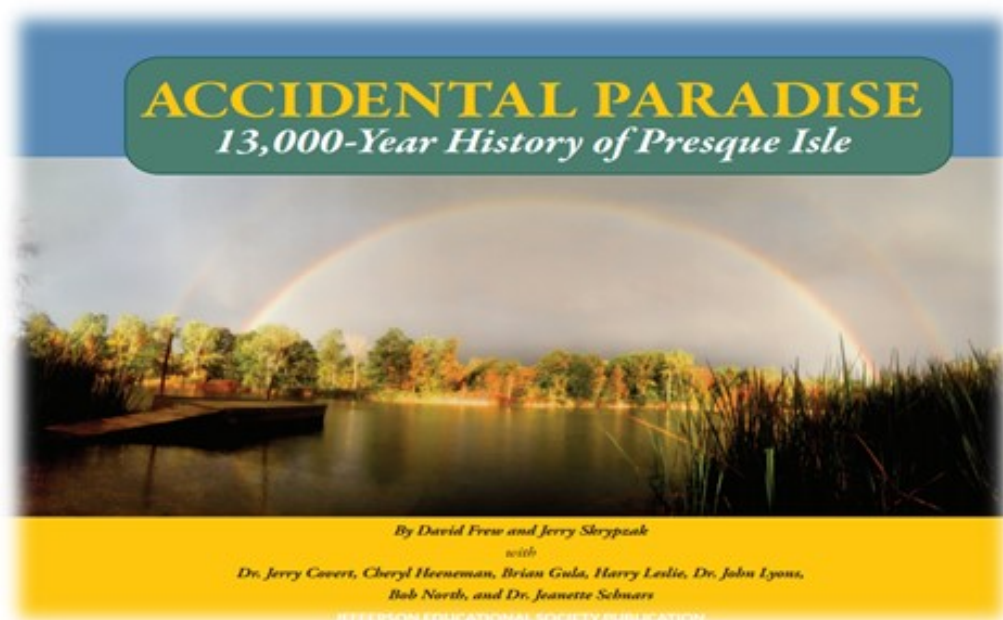


A map of the 1950 blackout area

I now realize that my father's approach was theologically correct. By the time that we had left the Greek restaurant and headed west for home, the sky was clearing. Somehow, we had used hot dogs with onions and chili to deal with the Rapture. The culprit in the day's frightening events turned out to be a huge Canadian forest fire that unleashed a thick veil of smoke, which rose to 20,000 feet and acted like a giant prism filtering the colors of the sky. In Michigan, the sky turned blue. In Cleveland, the western horizon changed to middle brown at 1 p.m., effectively making it seem like the sun had set. Across Pennsylvania, colors varied from deep yellow to brownish gold. By 6 p.m., however, the sky was beginning to lighten, streetlights went off, and the end of the world had ended. Just in time for my father and I to walk into our house and tell everybody that the Erie Vets had won.

Accidental Paradise Available at TRECF

Accidental Paradise
by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



The much-anticipated new book on Presque Isle by authors David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak – “**Accidental Paradise: 13,000-Year History of Presque Isle**” is on sale at the Tom Ridge Environmental Center’s gift shop and through a special website, AccidentalParadise.com.

The book, priced at **\$35 plus tax and shipping**, can be ordered now through the website sponsored by the TREC Foundation, AccidentalParadise.com.

Presque Isle Gallery and Gifts on the main floor of TREC, located at 301 Peninsula Drive, Suite #2, Erie, PA 16505 will also handle sales *Wednesday through Sunday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.*

For more information, send an email to aperino@TRECF.org.

To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click [here](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.



In Case You Missed It

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