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Spaghetti Bowl

With World War II raging in Europe, the United States 5th Army took on the 12th Air Force in a game of American football. The game was called the "Spaghetti Bowl", and it took place on New Year's Day 1945 at the municipal stadium in Florence, Italy, now known as the Stadio Artemio Franchi¹⁻². During the war, many talented football players from college and professional teams faced a different draft, and were issued new uniforms as they joined the military³⁻⁴. Ignatius DeFrancisci from DEMACO, a World War II Army Air Forces veteran recalled: "All the military bases fielded excellent football teams with rosters full of super stars". Many of these military teams played NCAA colleges as a regular part of their season⁵. The competition was stiff, with the reputation of their respective military branches riding on the shoulders of the players, motivating them to excel on the field as they battled to garner bragging rights as the toughest service.

The Spaghetti Bowl was a morale booster for those serving in the military, with 25,000 fans cheering on their fellow soldiers and airmen as they clashed on the "grid-iron" football field⁶. Troops were pulled from the region to attend the game over the holiday, possibly including Lieutenant Paul Vermylen of A. Zerega's Sons, Inc., who was serving on the front-lines in Italy at the time⁷. Lieutenant Vermylen knew all about spaghetti as A. Zerega's Sons was (and still is) the oldest pasta company in the United States.



Photo credit: Acme Photo (digitized by Leonard J. DeFrancisci)

Opposing team captains shake hands before the game. Sergeant Cecil C. Sturgeon (left) from 5th Army played professionally for the Philadelphia Eagles and Lieutenant George W. Barnes from 12th Air Force played for University of Maryland.

Although the location was a closely held secret, this bowl game had all the trappings of one played in the states, but with a military flavor⁸. The halftime show included a parade of military vehicles decorated as "floats" and two 56-piece bands⁹. The traditional flyover by a formation of military planes was also part of the program, but on this occasion it was for real as P-38 fighter aircraft loitered above the stadium to ensure no enemy aircraft ventured into the area¹⁰⁻¹¹. When it was over, the

scoreboard showed 5th Army 20¹² and 12th Air Force 0.

For their victory, the Army team received a metal bowl style trophy filled with paper spaghetti¹³. While many Americans learned about pasta by enjoying bowls of spaghetti during their military service in Italy, on that day at the "Spaghetti Bowl", the Italians learned first-hand about American football.

Leonard J. DeFrancisci
National Pasta Association
History Committee



Cover of the Spaghetti Bowl program

Photo credit: United States Military (digitized by Leonard J. DeFrancisci)

Notes

1. *Fifth Army History: Part VIII The Second Winter*, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, DC (circa 1945), 45.
2. "The Spaghetti Bowl: Yanks have football game in Italy", *Life*, Time Inc., volume 18, number 5 (January 29, 1945), 74.
3. Sid Feder, "G.I. Spaghetti Bowl Site Remains Military Secret", *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, volume 232, number 1 (January 1, 1945), 16.
4. Sid Feder, "Captain Daly, Ex-Penn Star, Flier's Aid", *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, volume 231, number 176 (December 23, 1944), 13.
5. Charles Einstein, "When Football Went to War", *Sports Illustrated*, Time Inc., volume 35, number 23 (December 6, 1971), M6.
6. "The Spaghetti Bowl: Yanks have football game in Italy", 74.
7. *Fifth Army History: Part VIII The Second Winter*, 45.
8. Sid Feder, "G.I. Spaghetti Bowl Site Remains Military Secret", 16.
9. Sid Feder, "Fifth Army Winner in Spaghetti Bowl", *The Charlotte Observer*, Charlotte, North Carolina, volume 76, number 273 (January 2, 1945), section 2 page 2.
10. "Raid Threatens Spaghetti Bowl", *The Spokesman-Review*, Spokane, Washington, 62nd year, number 234 (January 3, 1945), 8.
11. Sid Feder, "Fifth Army Winner in Spaghetti Bowl", section 2 page 2.
12. Ibid.
13. Sid Feder, "Spaghetti Bowl to Make Debut", *Shreveport Journal*, Shreveport, Louisiana, volume 49 (January 1, 1945), 14.

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