

Submitted to The Dunnville Chronicle
Via E-mail; January 2, 2004
For Publishing; January 14, 2004
By William A. Warnick
180 Rosslyn Ave. South
HAMILTON, ON L8M 3J5
Phone 905 549-6086 E-mail wwarnick@cogeco.ca
(Word count 978)

The Flying Wildcats. . . to the Hamilton Tiger-Cats!

The past few months my articles have reflected many of my own memories. Recently Cheryl MacDonald published a book by Robert Schweyer called *Sights on Jarvis* and I picked up a copy. I noticed it did not have any mention of the Flying Wildcats, a team developed with the encouragement and sponsorship of Sam Manson a well-known Hamilton sports figure. I soon mentioned this to both Cheryl and Rob. Duh! The Wildcats did not have any connection with Jarvis. It was the No. 16 Service Flying Training School (SFTS) at Hagersville, with whom they formed their relationship. Clearly good reason to stop using my memory when telling stories, or at least give my brain a rest for a while!

Before I go too far afield, let me tell you a bit about the Flying Wildcats. When WWII broke out there had already been a long history of football in Hamilton. At this time, the Hamilton Tigers were playing at the *H, triple A* grounds in Hamilton. With the commencement of war, it was deemed better to put the team in moth balls for the duration. That was fine, but Sam Manson approached a number of former Tiger players and suggested they get together with some of the fellows at the Hagersville training school and put together a Rugby team. The base C.O. agreed to grant leave to the boys so they could go to practice and the games. The team would play in the Ontario Rugby Football Union (ORFU) and the Armed Forces would broadcast the games overseas. The term rugby football was what they called football then! Just to clear up one other outstanding matter, I recently looked over all the Wildcats game programs and nowhere in them did I find the name "*Flying Wildcats*." The term *Flying* was given to them in deference to the players, who came from the flight training school in Hagersville.

As mentioned, a number of former Hamilton Tigers were asked to join the team. One name that stands out as a player was Joe Krol, who was inducted into the Canadian Football Hall of Fame and Museum in 1963. If you attend a function at the Skydome, you will see one of the sections is named after Joe. I have had reason to talk with him on occasion as he was a teammate of my father-in-law Steve Levantis, on the Toronto Argonauts. I talked with Joe recently. He is eighty-four years old, and still visits Hamilton with some regularity.

The Flying Wildcats would win the Grey Cup in 1943, and after the war, when the Tigers regrouped the Wildcats would become rivals to the regrouped Hamilton Tigers, rugby football team. Then in 1950, the Wildcats and the Tigers amalgamated into the football team we still know as the *Hamilton Tiger Cats*. Some of the names that may be familiar to a few of you old-timers from this first team are Jake Gaudaur -a former commissioner of the C.F. L., Vince Mazza, Bill O'Breza -a former Wildcat, Ralph Sazio, -who's son Mark and I often share a pew together at church, and Vince Scott. To continue with the name dropping, my father-in-law Steve Levantis, was also a charter member of that newly incorporated team. Steve, who carried with him, five Grey Cup Championships, came from the Argos as a coach-player. He would hold the same position with the Tiger-Cats for two seasons.

So who is still around from the Flying Wildcats? Two, some-what local names that come to mind are connected with Beckley Beach and oddly enough both men were councilmen and are both still involved in preserving football history. They are Tom (Red) Hickey, who now lives in Burlington. Tom's family still have a cottage at Beckley. Tom, to my knowledge is the only councilman ever elected to Sherbrooke Council while a non-resident. The other gentleman, and yet another relative of mine, through his wife Grace and my father, is Reg Wheeler, Reg was a longtime councilman in Hamilton, and a founding member of the Canadian Football Hall of Fame and Museum. To add a bit of irony to this story, Reg, was a member of the 1944 Wildcats, and played in the Grey Cup championship against a Navy team from Montreal known as HMCS Donnacona, in which my father-in-law was a player-coach. Hamilton was as much as guaranteed to be the sure winner! Old Daddy-in-law, and his bunch of Navy boys surprised the Wildcats and beat them 7 to 6! I never let Reg forget that!

How did I ever get talking about football in my local Dunnville history column? I know little about the sport and if you promise not to tell anyone, I will tell you that I generally watch the N.F.L. on television. I think this is because of the years of pettiness and bullying by the Hamilton Tiger-Cats, who did not permit us to watch home games on television. What really ticked me off about them was their year after year of harping about how it was my responsibility to go to the games while they refused to televise home games, even when it was an Eastern final, or semi-final game! I must send this article to Bob Young, the new owners of the Tiger Cats. Who knows maybe he will give me a season ticket! Two Bob, two, my wife will want to go as well!

Pep Leadlay, was a Hamilton Tiger, back in the teen and twenty years of the twentieth century. Some of my older and wiser football friends tell me that bare-none, Pep was the best player to ever lace up for a rugby game. In a future article I will tell a story about Pep and his days involved in the construction of the Canada Coal docks at Port Maitland in 1927, and his attempted rescue of one of its construction workers.

If you have items, you wish to have written about or pictures you would be willing to lend me, please drop me a note. Let me know how you feel about these articles. William (Bill) Arthur Warnick 180 Rosslyn Ave. South HAMILTON, ON L8M 3J5 e-mail wwarnick@cogeco.ca Phone 905 549-6086.



1944 Grey Cup Champs - HMCS Donnacona - Steve Levantis is holding the Grey Cup.



HAMILTON WILDCATS, 1943 — DOMINION CHAMPIONS