Sportsmen’s 1000

The previous attempt to create a military unit of sportsmen in 1915 had been unsuccessful in Victoria. New South Wales had better success. Two years later, as part of a pressing drive for more recruits, the flow of which had been diminishing, it was time for a similar venture. Yearly national enlistment numbers had started with 52,500 in 1914 and peaked at almost 166,000 in 1915, before dropping to 124,500 in 1916. Despite Donald Mackinnon’s efforts, only 9,500 men, Australia-wide, enlisted in the first two months of 1917. Hence, the Sportsmen’s 1000 movement had its genesis in March, as a result of a recommendation of the Sportsmen’s Recruiting Committee though Mackinnon to the Minister of Defence, Senator Pearce. The intention of the new movement was to recruit 1000 young sportsmen to go into camp together, to train together and, if necessary, to go abroad and fight together. The target was to be raised in batches of 150 enlistments. George Inskip of the St Kilda football and cricket clubs, a member of the SpRC, was the VFL’s representative on the Sportsmen’s 1000 committee, eventually joining Harry Rush of the VCA as a vice-chairman.

Despite Donald Mackinnon’s efforts, only 9,500 men, Australia-wide, enlisted in the first two months of 1917.

Writing from the Front to Inskip, former top St Kilda defender Gerald ‘Gerry’ Balme, bemoaned:

The lack of reinforcements – the same old trouble that cut short our training in Australia – is going to be serious. It is to see who are going to fill the gaps when we chaps get knocked out.

Inskip naturally saw this letter as a glowing endorsement of the Sportsmen’s 1000.

By September 1000 young men had applied, with 700 being accepted. The VCA, in conjunction with the VFL, had put rooms at the disposal of the Sportsmen’s 1000 for use as an inquiry centre.

Throughout the year the SRC issued a series of posters designed to attract young men to the newly-formed Sportsmen’s 1000. Specific posters were aimed at a number of sports:

- **TENNIS** – Stand the ‘Racquet’
  And enlist in The Sportsmen’s 1000

- **GOLFERS** – Take your caddy with you
  And enlist in The Sportsmen’s 1000

- **YACHTSMEN** – Help to weather the storm
  And enlist in The Sportsmen’s 1000

- **OARSMEN** – Pull all together for Victory
  By enlisting in The Sportsmen’s 1000

A number of general recruiting posters based on original British designs, as had ‘Will they never come?’ were also issued:

Join the Sportsmen’s 1000

On 26 May, Chatterer in *The Football Record* urged all eligible men, and not just footballers, to join the Sportsmen’s 1000. Continuing, he said that he had been at the Fitzroy–Carlton match on 12 May and heard none of the demonstrations against the military recruiters that had been reported in the press. Further, he advised that he had spoken with others who had attended the South Melbourne–
Geelong and Collingwood–Richmond fixtures and they were unaware of the reported unrest at those games. He concluded by suggesting that the whole matter should be immediately laid to rest. xvi Over the succeeding weeks, Chatterer reserved a place in his writings to endorse the Sportsmen’s 1000 to his readers. On June 2, he stressed that the unit was open to any man associated with, or simply having an interest in, sport. Here was an opportunity to ready oneself to relieve the long-suffering, weary soldiers at the Front. xv A fortnight later, after reporting the positive rate of recruiting for the detachment, he stressed that there was ‘still plenty of room for you, and your football pals too’. xvi Seven days on, the football scribe described the melting pot of backgrounds of the members of the body and for readers to consider the call to arms. If a decision was made to enlist, then Chatterer implored that this be done with the Sportsmen’s 1000. xvii

Writing for the SRC in the rabidly anti-German The Graphic of Australia, ‘Captain Ginger’ advocated the formation of the Sportsmen’s 1000. With jingoistic fervour he implored:

Come on, then, you chaps, who, like me, love football, horse racing, hunting, shooting, boxing, and all the British pastimes, give it a rest now, and get into the firing line as quick as you can. That is the game now. There should be no other game until the war is over, and no true sport need be asked – he will of his own volition “play the game!”

Captain Ginger continued, offering a version of the chorus from the George Hunt-penned British music hall ‘Macdermott’s War Song’ from 40 years earlier: xviii

We don’t want to fight, 
But, by Jingo, if we do, 
We’ve got the men, 
We’ve got the guns, 
And we’ve got the money too. xix

Six weeks later, on 3 August, Captain Ginger was at it again. In another piece for the SRC, headed ‘Sportsmen Appealed To’, the Irish immigrant posed the question:

Remember [the men at the Front] … are just dying to get back – just for a little while – to have a “few bob” on a sure winner, to see [boxers] Llew Edwards and Herb McCoy having a scrap, or to watch Fitzroy and Carlton engage in another struggle … Now, then, boys, there is a SPORTSMEN’S BATTALION. Why not get your pals to keep step to that old tune, ‘Fall in and follow me’?

Finally, remember Gallipoli! We have a few more laps to run yet before the “final bell” is sounded; then, by Jingo, we shall make the last lap a veritable cracker. xx
In complying with the wishes of the SRC that all distractions to the recruiting process be removed, the VFL decided to postpone for one week the round of matches scheduled for 4 August. The SRC was avid in its quest for new enlistments to enable the battle-weary troops on the Western Front some rest and recreation, ideally back in Australia. In promoting the cause, Chatterer in *The Football Record* implored, ‘Now then, boys, it is up to us all to do our “bit”’. That plea was directed at footballers and spectators alike and concluded, ‘Everybody can’t go … but those who can should not hesitate a moment.’ The following Monday, *The Age* observed that while soldiers were parading through central Melbourne on the Saturday as part of the recruiting drive, thousands of ‘eligibles’ were seen scurrying to catch trains to the races at Caulfield. That the races were not cancelled like the football was a moot point for the football community. In the next *Football Record*, Chatterer lamented that fact and postulated that had football not been postponed the previous week there would have been a hue and a cry. It was noted that the VFL had been generally commended for its action, except in the newspapers which continued to fill up its columns with racing news. It was observed that some football fans would have used the day off from the football to attend the races. The football scribe took solace from that fact that the SRC was not going to curtail the football but was to do something with racing and boxing.

Three weeks later, the last verse of a poem ‘Dedicated to the Ever-Victorious Twenty’ appeared in *The Football Record*. The full poem, written by ‘C’, had, according to the publication originally appeared in the 1879 edition of Thomas Power’s *The Footballer*. That verse was an accurate prediction of footballers’ life options almost 40 years on:

One thing we rely on, if foes should e’er try on
A game that is sterner than football to view,
When bullets are flying and comrades are dying,
Our boys to the bright ‘Southern Cross’ will be true.

‘C’ was the pseudonym of James Lister Cuthbertson, often known as the ‘Bard of the Barwon’, who at the time of penning the piece was a master at Geelong Grammar School. The poem, the full name of which was ‘Carlton v. Geelong: Dedicated to the “Ever-Victorious Twenty”’, had first appeared the school’s *School Quarterly* in mid-1879 after a match between the two footballing powerhouses of the time. In 1926, Old Boy reprised the last verse in relation to schoolboys who had swapped their blazers for soldiers’ uniforms, and gone to war.

In an attempt to encourage further enlistments, the SRC placed full page advertisements in the 8, 15 and 22 September editions of *The Football Record*.

A number of prominent Melburnians and organisations, including the VFL, offered cash incentives to members of the Sportsmen’s 1000 who received military decorations. The first recipient of the Victoria Cross would receive £500. The VFL donated £20 for the third Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM) to be awarded. Donald Mackinnon donated £20 for the first Military Medal (MM) and Morrice Williams the same amount for the fifth.
Essendon not playing the greater game?

Essendon boasted that it had lost only two of 21 players it used in the 1941 finals series. The Dons used 54 players during the period 1942 to 1944, the fewest of all clubs. Of those, only 25 had enlisted, far fewer than at any other club. Next were Hawthorn 33 and Carlton 35. Clubs with the highest enlistments were St Kilda 50, Fitzroy 49 and North Melbourne 48. This sparked some critical comment articulated in the following letters to _The Age_.

While 18-year old boys are being sent to battle stations (my son after eleven weeks in camp has been sent away) Victorian footballers are being kept in Melbourne. Why? – Wondering (Thornbury).xxxi

To fathers, like myself, whose son has gone overseas and sacrificed everything – in many cases life itself – it is most unpleasant to pass football grounds on week days, and to see strong men training to play football, and receive additional payment for doing so. Citizens should demand a full investigation into each case, and ascertain whether these men could not be replaced by older men or women in the war-time jobs. One club boasts of having 15 out of 18 of last year’s players available for this year’s matches – Father of Airman overseas (Elizabeth St)xxxii

Sixteen of last year’s finalists are available for selection in one League team this year. The men, I presume, are in reserved occupations, and are not liable for military service. These occupations are mostly for unskilled workers, such as firemen, laborers in all classes of factories, etc. Men who are strong, virile athletes should be in the forces. Their places in munitions could be taken by youths from the 18 to 20 years class – M Webb (Essendon).xxxiii

The club actively sought to provide employment in protected industries for some of its players. For instance, Western Australian rover, Laurie Dearle, who transferred to the Dons in 1941, was found work along with Dick and Tom Reynolds in aircraft production. Dick was a supervisor on the manufacture of airframes at the Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation factory at Fishermans Bend.xxx The fire brigade was another source of employment for Essendon players. Arthur Showers, club president from 1935 until his death in 1940, a local businessman, and president of the MFB, helped find jobs for a number of players during the 1930s and early 1940s.xxxi The MFB employed defenders Cec Ruddell, Elton ‘Duffy’ Plummer, Wally Buttsworth and Percy Bushby who stayed with the club during the war years, and this was important for the success of the side.xxxii

Very few Essendon players enlisted during the first half of World War II. Fortunately, many were able to find themselves work in essential services that allowed them to remain at home. The city of Melbourne became the national centre for munitions work during this period, which is why so many League footballers found employment in that field. The Essendon committee and its many business connections proved important during these years as they were able to keep much of the playing list together.xxxii

By contrast, South Melbourne president, Tom Coles reflected, ‘In glancing over the names of our last year’s players and of our newcomers, I find that we could get a full team from the boys now in uniform’. Many played only a small number of games, but that was the crux of the issue. War cut short people’s lives and careers, football and otherwise.xxxiv

VFA players who represented South Melbourne in 1942 included Port Melbourne men, Tom Lahiff, Gordon Goldsmith, Ron Reynolds and Vic Castles. The local press intimated that South Melbourne and Port Melbourne had ‘to all intents’ amalgamated. That view was embodied in South’s invitation to a number of Port Melbourne committee men join the South committee. One of those was Port president, and VFA vice-president, councillor Tom Griffin, who filled a vacancy caused by an incumbent enlisting for military service.xxxiii The Bloods made a plea for supporters to buy a season ticket to help keep the club solvent.

Deciding who could play

In early 1942, the VFL Permits Committee decided that serviceman players and those engaged in essential industries would be granted permits to play without appearing before the committee in
person, if it was impossible for them to appear. That relaxation enabled triple Brownlow Medallist, Haydn Bunton to cross from Subiaco to Fitzroy in time for the start of the season. Corporal Bunton returned from Perth to Victoria in April 1942 to enter the Army physical training school at Frankston. An excited group of enthusiasts welcomed him when he trained for the first time since leaving Fitzroy at the end of 1937. He was observed to have maintained his form remarkably well. He played only two matches in 1942 and had to be replaced in the first quarter of the first one due to an ankle injury.

On 16 May, the media advised that residential qualifications for interstate players had been reduced from 12 months to three months.

In mid-1942 the VFL amended the (Permit) Form 4.

Players (except those who have already received permits) who have enlisted in the Services and who were bound to a club by Form 4 at date of enlistment will remain bound to that club for the period after their discharge equal to the period the Form 4 had to run at date of enlistment. [It was noted] that the Form 4 would be automatically cancelled on written application to the League by the player at any time after the form would have expired but for this rule. xxxvi

Geelong players

Following the withdrawal of Geelong, the VFL decided that during the period the club did not play, all of its players were still bound to the club, but were eligible to play with another League side during wartime. Geelong players wanting to play senior football outside the VFL had to obtain a clearance from the club and a permit from the VFL. No VFL club was permitted to recruit more than three Geelong 1941 senior players during the 1942 season.

Geelong’s withdrawal led to some clubs, including South Melbourne, being eager to pick over the Cats’ list for instant League players.

The rush to secure the pick of Geelong’s team will provide the only thrill of the recruiting part of the programme. South enthusiasts can rest easy that with Secretary Tom Coles on the job, the interests of the Red and Whites will be well looked after, and that the cream of the talent available at Geelong will be seen in red and white colours next month.xxxxii

Some clubs took a longer-term view and passed on the chance to temporarily bolster their teams. Richmond, a beneficiary of several Pivotonian transferees in 1916, said this time that it sought to develop their players without the curtain hanging over them of having to let such ‘recruits’ go when Geelong re-entered the competition after the war.

Association players

The cessation of the VFA fixtures led to an agreement on 5 May between it and the League for Association players to be granted permits to play with VFL clubs while the competition remained in recess. The agreement was that those players who transferred to the VFL would rejoin their Association clubs upon the recommencement of that competition.

Sectarianism not a factor

Sectarian sentiments did not influence how individual clubs determined their stances in relation to support of the war, and whether they encouraged or discouraged their players to enlist. There is no documented evidence to substantiate claims of influence, one way or the other. It can be asserted that a majority of Collingwood, Richmond, Fitzroy, North Melbourne and South Melbourne players and officials were Roman Catholics. Likewise, a majority of Essendon players and officials were Protestants. But in all cases they were not exclusively so, and there is no firm evidence that religious faith advantaged or disadvantaged the prospects of players’ football careers, or whether or not to enlist. xxxviii

It is somewhat paradoxical that those clubs that had more Irish Catholics in their number were more likely to have their players enlist, and the chance to secure a reliable income, when logic might suggest that they were more likely to turn their backs on what they perceived as ‘Britain’s war’. 
Footscray football ground lost due to questionable chemistry

The first evidence that Footscray’s home ground, the Western Oval, was destined for military occupation was when it was disclosed in early April 1942 that troops were ‘comfortably housed’ in the Footscray Harriers headquarters, which was only a very small part of the complex. At this stage there was no definite indication that the whole venue would be taken over by the military authorities. On 19 April, there was a public review of civil defence units at the Western Oval, attended by Arthur Drakeford, MHR for Maribyrnong, and Minister for Air.

There had been no formal decision by the military about its intentions for the Western Oval and Footscray Council pressed for a decision. The council made every effort to enable the football club to continue playing there. The training quarters were still available, and the Bulldogs trained at the ground on 2 May, one week before the season started.

Then, on 6 May the entire football ground, including all surrounding buildings and structures, was formally requisitioned by the HIRING DIRECTORATE. On 8 May, the venue was occupied by troops of the US Forces Chemical Warfare Service. Parts of the 62nd Chemical Company Depot and 10th Chemical Company Maintenance took occupation. Those arrangements were in place until 31 October 1942 when the US forces vacated.

There is another angle to this occupation of the Footscray ground by the US. Although Australia and the United States were signatories to the Geneva Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare, the protocol only prohibited the use of such weapons and not their production. The document can be characterised as a ‘no-first-use’ agreement rather than a non-proliferation treaty and some nations declared that it would cease to be binding on them if their enemies failed to respect the prohibitions of the protocol. Consequently, considerable stockpiles of chemical weapons were held in Australia for possible use against Japan. In addition to this, the United States had not ratified the protocol which left open the possibility of ‘first use’.

League seconds are under way

In late March, the League seconds season was ‘definitely off’ because only four clubs were prepared to field teams. In early April the newspapers said that the competition would be unable to function for lack of available venues.