

## **The magic of the War League Cup by Stuart Fuller (@theballisround)**

On the 1st September 1939, Adolf Hitler invaded Poland, sparking outrage across Europe and in the corridors of power in Westminster. However, twenty four hours later, the third "round" of games in the Football League took place as normal with barely a murmur of concern for events that were to unfold in the next few years. On that Saturday Blackpool's 2-1 at Bloomfield Road meant they had won three out of three in the Football League Division one, just a point ahead of Sheffield United and Arsenal.

A few hours later, on Sunday 3rd September, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain declared war on Germany and ordered an immediate ban on the assembly of crowds for safety reasons. Faced with a potential long campaign, the Football League announced that the 1939/40 season would be terminated with immediate effect. Whilst Blackpool (and Luton Town in the Second, Accrington Stanley in the Third North and Reading in the Third South) topped their division, they were not awarded any trophy.

However, regulations were soon relaxed and the government announced that football could return but with maximum capacities of 8,000 and no travel outside a fifty mile radius. So the guys at the Football League got their thinking caps on and came up with the idea of a cup competition instead of a league competition. And so was born the Football League War Cup.

The competition consisted of 137 games (including replays) which commenced in October and were all complete bar the final by January 1940. However, with London under constant threat of the commencement of bombing raids, no floodlights could be used and so it was decided to play the final during the summer months. The date was set as Saturday 8th June 1940, with West Ham United and Blackburn Rovers due to contest the final at Wembley Stadium. However, on the 10th May the Germans pushed into France and the threat of invasion increased.

But the English showed their stiff upper lip and carried on regardless, turning out in numbers for the final. Over 40,000 spectators filed into Wembley Stadium to see Sam Small score the only goal for the Hammers and they became the first ever winners of the new trophy, commissioned by the Football League. It is reported that after the game there was no official reception for the team but instead they headed back to Upton Park for a "few pints in the Boleyn".

The following season saw the commencement of bombing raids on Britain, with London heavily hit. But football still carried on, as the government saw it as "good for morale". The War Cup provided a great tonic for many Londoners who had been almost under siege for months and in May 1941 the second final took place at Wembley with over 60,000 coming out to see Preston North End take on Arsenal. A Denis Compton goal for the Gunners was enough to earn them a replay at Ewood Park where over 45,000 saw the Lancastrians run out 2-1 winners, who featured a very young Bill Shankley in their line up.

The cup was still an important part of "business as usual" in England during the almost daily bombing raids. Attendances remained very high, and a number of clubs had players on

active military duty, returning to the first team when they came back to Blighty. The Football League kept tinkering with the format in the next few years, firstly introducing a two legged final (won by Wolves 6-3 against Sunderland), and then in 1943 with Northern and Southern Finals with the winners meeting at Stamford Bridge (won by Blackpool who beat Arsenal).

In 1944 with the threat of bombing still high the title was shared between Aston Villa and Charlton Athletic after a 1-1 draw at Stamford Bridge. The southern semi-final saw Charlton beat Chelsea in front of over 85,000 at Wembley which caused some panic for the authorities.

Whilst the Second World War didn't finish until September 1945 when the Japanese forces surrendered, the war in Europe effectively ended in May of the same year, meaning the cup in that year was the last time it was ever held. On the 2nd June 1945 35,000 people saw Bolton Wanderers beat Chelsea 2-1 to win the cup which fortunately since has never been competed for.

Whilst Portsmouth's 4-1 over Wolverhampton Wanderers in May 1939 was officially the last FA Cup final until 1946, many will class the War Cup as a continuation of the competition. It cannot be underestimated the effect the cup had on morale of the English general public and for that reason it will always have a special place in the history of our game.