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Warzeka misses command but still delivers for AFA

By Jim Benton, www.armedforcesbowl.com

Fort Worth, Texas, December 31, 2009 - Jonathan Warzeka disobeyed an order of sorts Thursday but nobody at the Air Force Academy minded one bit.

Warzeka returned a kickoff 100 yards for a touchdown early in the third quarter to enable Air Force to maintain its momentum that led to a 47-20 upset victory over Houston in the Bell Helicopter Armed Forces Bowl.

Air Force saw its 18-point halftime lead cut to 24-13 when Houston's Tyron Carrier returned the opening kickoff of the second half 79 yards for a touchdown which had fans at Amon G. Carter Stadium anticipating a Cougars comeback.

Warzeka, however, had a different idea.

The 5-foot-9 sophomore from Lake Elsinore, Ca. didn't see teammate Asher Clark tell him to down the kickoff in the end zone. Instead he broke three tackles and got loose for the first Air Force touchdown on a kickoff return in 297 games since Scott Thomas' scoring return against Utah in 1985.

"It was one of those things, we were up a little bit because of the wind and the next thing I know it's (kickoff) over my head," Warzeka explained.

"Asher, the other returner, told me to stay but I didn't get the call so I turned and tried to make something out of nothing. The next thing I know is there was open space and I just took it."

Warzeka's return was the longest ever in a Bell Helicopter Armed Forces Bowl game and the first special team touchdown in a bowl game in Air Force history.

Air Force outscored the Cougars 20-7 the rest of the game to notch its first bowl victory since a 37-34 win over Fresno State in the 2000 Silicon Valley Bowl.

The Falcons, playing in its third consecutive Bell Helicopter Armed Forces Bowl, notched its first win over at Amon G. Carter Stadium after four losses to TCU and two bowl setbacks in Fort Worth.

"We were ready," Air Force coach Troy Calhoun said. "When we got here Saturday, you could just sense something about our guys. I thought two years ago, we were extraordinarily giddy to be here.

"Last year we were a little bit wide-eyed at some spots. This week we were good at practice. These guys, there's nothing they wanted to do more than a win."

Calhoun could look at all phases of the Air Force game to find heroes.

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Air Force, the nation's fourth leading rushing team with a average of 273.3 yards per game, ran for an Armed Forces Bowl record 402 yards and threw for another 161 yards to finish with 563 yards total offense, a new Armed Forces Bowl standard.

Warzeka carried the ball six times for 35 yards, caught three passes for 45 yards and returned five kickoffs for an Armed Forces Bowl best of 175 yards.

Fullback Jared Tew set an Armed Forces Bowl record with 173 yards rushing and two touchdowns on 26 carries. Asher Clark, voted Air Force's Most Valuable Player, added 129 yards on 17 carries and scored twice.

Quarterback Tim Jefferson outdueled Houston's heralded signal caller Case Keenum.

Jefferson rushed 16 times for 37 yards and one touchdown and completed 10 of 14 passes for 161 yards and didn't throw an interception.

"Ever since last year when we lost the game here (34-28 to Houston), I felt I didn't throw the ball well enough in that last drive to get us down the field to score points," Jefferson said. "I committed over the summer and during the season to work on my passing. I think it finally paid off.

"I know everybody was talking about Houston's offense, how potent they are, and I was flying under the radar. That's what I wanted to do. I didn't want my name out there because then I would have felt a lot more pressure on my shoulders. My performance today, I think I played pretty well."

Air Force's defense play very well, limiting Houston's nation total offense attack to 331 yards, 250.2 yards below its season average.

Keenum, the NCAA leader with an average of 419.2 passing yards per game, completed 24 of 41 passes for 222 yards and was intercepted six times by the Falcons.

Senior defensive back Chris Thomas led the Falcons with 10.5 tackles and also had two interceptions. Anthony Wright wound up with an Armed Forces Bowl record three interceptions and Jon Davis had one pick.

"It all goes into the preparation," Thomas said. "Coach did a great job of putting us in the right spots to make plays."

Air Force finished the season with an 8-5 record and Thursday's win could set the tone for next season.

"We're going to be a much better team in the future," Jefferson said. "Other teams in our conference (Mountain West Conference) who were watching this game know what they will be going against next year."



Jim Benton - Jim Benton was a sportswriter for the Rocky Mountain News in Denver for 41 years until the paper folded last February. He started as a high school beat writer four decades ago. Since then, he has covered a variety of sports including college football, basketball and hockey, professional hockey, football, baseball and basketball, tennis, golf, bowling, soccer, horse racing and NASCAR. Benton is a Denver native and a graduate of the University of Denver.