

# The VARGA GIRL



By Walter Brown

England during World War II was a long way from home. England during the war was a long way from the comforts of Home apple pie, and the girl he left behind were the missing realities of life on Eighth Air Force airbases across East Anglia. Some of the 8th airmen married their sweethearts prior to going overseas into combat; some broke up with their steady girls in case they didn't come back from the war.

Almost all of them missed someone back home. The advent of the Pin-Up Girl began with servicemen in the army and the air corps. From magazines, some published for the troops, such as *Yank* and *Stars and Stripes*, cheesecake shots of movie starlets were posted on the walls of barracks and Quonset huts to brighten the decor and keep alive memories of home; a small reminder of what the war was being fought for. Some of the favorites were Betty Grable, Lana Turner, Rita Hayworth, Frances Langford, Deanna Durbin and Hedy Lamarr. Hollywood stars visited the airbases appearing in USO shows and as singers in the Swing bands.

Frequently the beauties autographed and personalized their photographs for a few of the luckier airmen. Pin-ups proliferated with the availability of artwork by magazine artists Alfredo Vargas, George Petty, and Gil Elvgren. Milton Caniff's illustrations achieved worldwide popularity and were featured in *Life* magazine. The artists' works appeared primarily in monthly magazines such as *Esquire*,

but pin-ups in *Life* and *Saturday Evening Post* were regularly clipped out by the troops. Calendar girls were also much sought after usually an even dozen. Pin-up girls became commonplace features in base barbershops, crew huts, and in clubs. They were service wide; every theater of operations and all branches of services had their favorites. They could be expected to be seen in the island jungles of the Pacific and in the desert of North Africa.

Alfredo Vargas fell in love with the excitement of the city and with the beauty of American women.

*Esquire* magazine liked his work with which he had been scratching out a living during the 1930s, and hired him as a staff artist. Taking some leads from the Petty Girl style, Vargas' artwork became an eagerly anticipated feature in the monthly magazine.

He signed his paintings "Varga", dropping the last letter of his name.

After his first painting appeared in *Esquire*, a legend was created.

Vargas' beautiful wife from Tennessee, Anna Mae Clift Vargas, was always his favorite model for his paintings, and a young lady named Jeanne Dean, accompanied to each session by her mother, also served for poses. Early in his career, Vargas painted an image of American women, which presented a taller, slimmer and stronger image than the view held by the public at the time. The Varga girl had a height of 5' 7", a weight of 124 pounds, and measurements of 36-24- 36, figures which are still considered to be ideal today. Vargas developed the unique flesh tint seen in his paintings after many years of experimentation with flesh tones, utilizing 8 sanguine chalk sticks and three shades of burnt sienna heavily diluted with water, occasionally adding a touch of yellow. He stated, "The flesh is always my first concern, since it is the single most important factor in my work." Alfredo Vargas received many requests for special artworks



to be commissioned for various military combat units, and he fulfilled every one. Two of his most popular 8th Air Force paintings appeared as aircraft nose art on the 490th B-17 Love 'Em All and on Fred Hollister's 479th FG P-51 Pin Up Girl.

Pin-up girls were common at air station facilities all over East Anglia, but rarely in Operations. In the Eighth Air Force, the most attractive artworks accompanied aircrews into combat, displayed as nose art on heavy bombers and fighter planes. Occasionally a crewman would even post a favorite pin-up at his station in the aircraft. Eighth AF Historian Roger Freeman states that upward of 70 of aircraft nose art featured the female form.

The pin-up girls from home would sometimes offer solace to servicemen who received Dear John letters of goodbye from their sweethearts. Some squadron barracks reserved a special darkened corner John Harold Robinson, 445th Bomb Group, was not a recipient of a Dear John letter during his tour in the early days of the war. He completed his tour and returned home to marry Elizabeth, his girl who awaited his return. Harold recalls, "When I was in England I never heard anything about the Varga pin-ups, maybe the come later crews had them. But I can still see the black and white polka dots on the shorts and hal\ter. It may have been Rita Hayworth. Every one in

the hut had a copy of that pin-up on the wall!" After V-E day, many airmen carefully packed away their favorite pin-up girls for the trip home. As decades have passed, times have changed. The freedom which accompanies television and computers has seen the decline of the pin-up girls, but paradoxically original pin-ups, especially those that adorned the barracks walls during the war,

have become sought after by collectors and historians. They have become a valued art form in themselves, one which tracks its origins back to the airmen on the 63rd Fighter Squadron Operations Status Board airbases of World War II. A few airmen who served in the Mighty Eighth are keeping pin-up girls alive. Artist Jim White, 352nd Fighter Group, paints pin-ups reminiscent of original art but with a modern touch, at his home in Florida. His work has been featured in various veterans meeting halls, and Jim sends these special paintings out over email to his buddies from the war. Through the years, he has acquired a large collection of the pin-up art form. Jim states, "Glamour and cheesecake as we think of it today began to gain popularity in the 1930's, but during the war America's



fascination with the pin-up took off like a rocket. In many cases, the pin-up girl was the soldier's only link back home. Movies were made about pin-up girls and artists. Classically trained illustrators created some of the most memorable, technically exquisite Americana ever produced! In the 60s, the public's fascination turned away from the creativity and beauty exhibited in pin-up art, but now we seem to have come full circle. The appreciation of the art style has returned; pin-up art is being re-discovered. Sale prices of original pinup art is up into tens of thousands of dollars.

New artists are appearing on the scene. The revitalization of this wonderfully, unique and specialized art form brings attention to the pin-up girl to a degree not seen since the war." Nose art still proudly adorns the bombers and fighters of some combat groups today; the pin-up girls are still going into battle. Many commercial airliners have reminders of wartime artworks on their fuselages. The American spirit, always individual and often very special, lives on in these illustrations and paintings, works of art which bring back warm reminiscences from troubled, exciting and memorable times.

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