Nose Art

By William E. Dietzel

A house is built by human hands, but a home is built by the human hearts.

1943, Its mid-winter you're twenty years old, it's 04:30 in the morning, it's raining, the wind is blowing and it's cold. You've got a hangover, and you're walking in mud (there's always mud).

You're wearing a fur-lined flying suit, because where you're going its thirty degrees below zero. You've got an oxygen mask, because where you're going it's hard to breathe. You're carrying a map, because at 25,000 feet there are no signs. Prior to December 7, 1941, your main goal in life was to buy a car and marry Ginger Rogers, but now it's just to stay alive another day, because you're a crewman on a B-17, and where you're going, people are going to die.

But not you, not your plane, not your crew, because you're special, and the special people always come back. They don't blow up in the sky, or go in at 400 miles per hour, one wing gone, no chutes, on fire, no- not the special ones; they always come back. A thousand B-17s, identical in every way, roll off the assembly line and fly to an uncertain fate, but each one can be different. The difference is not in the tail number. Those are for record keepers and ribbon clerks. The difference is in the imagination and talent of the crew.

Females have a history of adorning ships of war as sea art figureheads. Men have often named their cars, horses and motorcycles after women. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the women created by Alberto Vargas, George Petty, Gil Elvgren and other pin-up artists went to war as calendars and aircraft nose art. Although, pin-up nose art was virtually non-existent during World War I, there was a large-scale expansion during World War II and the Korean War.

Pin-up nose art were viewed as sexy, playful and even exploitative. Often suggestive, sometimes crude graffiti accompanied the art. This nose art often paid homage to wives, girlfriends, movie stars and even mothers. The heroine was depicted in a manner to suggest sentiment, lust, or wishful thinking depending on who the artist was portraying. Sometimes the artist seemed confused and the heroine appeared to be both virgin and sinner in the same picture.

Sentimental Journey

During war, there was little chance that the art would be seen by the general public, therefore, the "peacetime sense of morality" was replaced by a healthy dose of "reckless disregard." The women in the nose art were depicted as naked or in various stages of dress and undress, available and "wanting", often accompanied by overtly phallic images and fetishistic apparel. Usually, she would be least likely to be invited home to meet Mom; and more unlikely to be invited back by her. Occasionally the nose art featured a pin-up that possessed a quality that was safe and demure, "the girl next door."

So we need a special name for our plane – and a special picture on it. Maybe a picture of Betty Grable, or one of those Varga girls from Esquire. And we'll name it something like "Sack Time," "Mister Completely" or "Target For Tonight." But it has to be special, and when it's finished, it will be ready-Ready for Duty. It was good or it was bad, it was naughty or nice, funny or sad, and sometimes it was self-deprecating, and during World War II it was everywhere. It has come to be known as nose art, because it was normally found on or about the nose of the aircraft.

The artwork could be painted on the plane by anyone. Those units that were fortunate enough to have talented artists produced excellent nose art. Some units went so far as to recruit artists, while some did without. It all had to do with the place, the people and the situation. Some of the remote outfits did not have the paint to do detailed work, while others had all they could ask for. So nose art came in all different shapes and sizes. The small ones could fit on a card table, while some of the B-29 artwork was bigger than a billboard. There were four main cultural sources of 1940s nose art. The first was the popular men's magazine Esquire, whose calendar page was the era's equivalent to the 1960s Playboy centerfold. The most duplicated nose art images were the product of Esquire's artist Alberto Vargas. Vargas was the premier pin-up artist of our time. Everyone has seen his work, whether it was a pin-up poster or a perfume ad. During the

war, Vargas was the main artist for Esquire magazine, producing most of the artwork for the magazines pin-up page and calendars. I think it would be safe to say that the arrival of a new Esquire with one of Vargas' exquisite airbrushed artworks was a red-letter day around th world.

Nose art thrived in its infancy largely because servicemen had more freedom to alter their aircraft. Although the mili

tary never officially sanctioned nose art, it unofficially approved it as a morale-booster. It was a survival technique in a harsh environment. A little bit of levity and diversion goes a long way, and a measure of pride and enthusiasm comes from individual expression.

Similarly, young men, who were generally under the age of twenty, could derive some comfort from images of women, mother, and home. Anne Josephine Hayward, a member of the American Red Cross Aero Club in England and a painter of nose art, challenges current objections to nose art as degrading to women or others: "Its purpose was worthy, to bolster military morale in a terrible time. The members of each crew came to feel that their plane and their painting were somehow special and would bring them luck, a safe return from hostile skies. The art may have been frivolous at times, but it was never anti-social"

There is no question that the golden age of nose art was during World War II and Korea. World War II was a time during which almost anything was allowed in an effort to boost morale and unit efficiency. But, as is the case with most things, a free hand led to some excesses and some censorship is evident in some of the artwork. After Korea, nose art all but disappeared from U.S. aircraft. Artwork reappeared on a few Vietnam-vintage planes, but then it disappeared again. I am happy to report that nose art is making a comeback, slowly but surely, as commanders begin to see the positive effects that it has on aircrews and their support personnel. Nose art can be beautiful, inspiring and in good taste.

It was not unusual for the clothing to be painted on the women when the planes were sent back state side. Although, this common practice began in World War II, it continued during Desert Storm. Despite the strict guidelines of the Saudi Arabian government regarding women many allied aircraft depicted highly erotic pin-ups. Although, this nose art managed to escape the guidelines they received a fresh coat of paint before being sent back to their home base.

One might wonder if pin-up nose art is doomed to be erased by a thick coat of political correctness. Given the current climate of sensitivity and with more women entering the military it is logical to assume that this would happen during peacetime. It is unlikely, however, that this would occur during combat. One must consider that during combat an unusual environment is created populated predominately by men (often young and sexually immature). Also, these warriors' lives depend on their ability to function within a totally different code of ethics and morality that are difficult to judge by those outside it (certainly not by the standards of the current peacetime politically correct environment). It is hard to envision a pilot being directed to destroy a target or given the more difficult assignment to bomb a community and then be punished because the instrument he used to accomplish his mission had pin-up nose art on it. Therefore, one must assume that pin-up nose art will be around as long as there are wars to fight and planes to fly.