Jumpin' Jehoshaphat!

50 Years of Gramps

This month, artist Robert C. Osborn celebrates the 50th anniversary of his cartoon character, "Grampaw Pettibone," in the pages of *Naval Aviation News*. Retired Captain "Zip" Rausa, former *NANews* editor, tells the story in the following edited version of his article from the September 1991 *Proceedings*, reprinted with permission; © 1991 U.S. Naval Institute.

By Capt. Rosario Rausa, USNR (Ret.)

It was March 1942 and we were at war. The freshly minted Navy lieutenant surveyed his new office space in the Main Navy Building on Constitution Avenue, Washington, D.C. People moved about with purpose; some pecked at typewriters. An air of vibrancy prevailed. The lower drawers on two of the desks were pulled out and boards were set upon them for chairs. Lack of furniture wasn't about to inhibit production at the Bureau of Aeronautics Training Division – and Robert Osborn was eager to pull his share of the load.

Thus began the enduring association between one of our country's most gifted artist/satirists and the Navy. The relationship flourishes to this day; Bob Osborn is the creative force behind the grand old sage of aviation safety, Grampaw Pettibone. Although he is a fictional character, appearing regularly in *Naval Aviation News*, "Gramps" has become quite real to every generation of Naval Aviator, from WW II to *Desert Storm*.

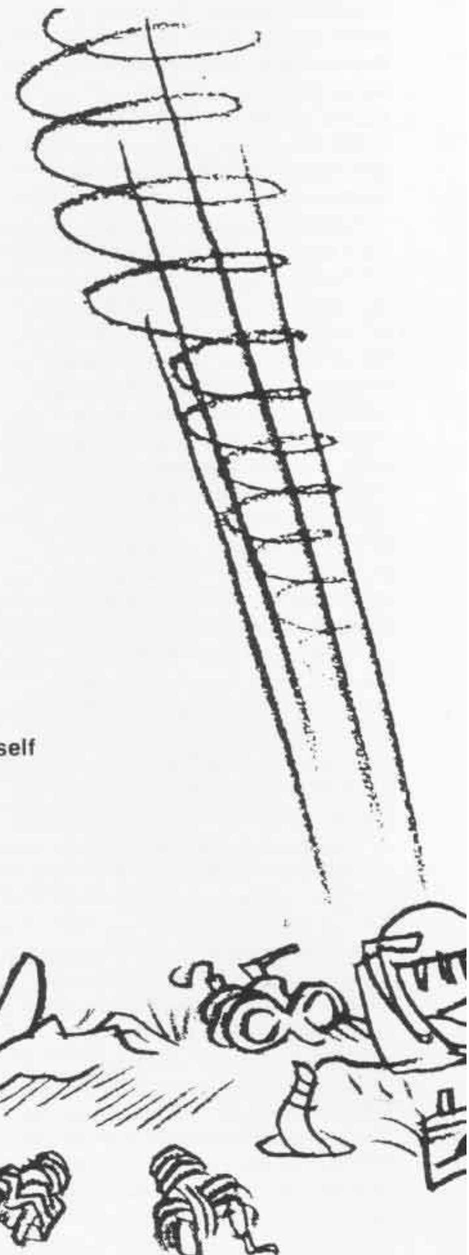
Osborn was born in Oshkosh, Wisc., in 1904. He credits his mother for his creative instincts. He hunted and fished with his father, and cars and airplanes fascinated him.

He attended the University of Wisconsin and later was accepted at Yale, where he honed his artistic skills. After graduation in 1928, he studied art in Rome and Paris.

When war broke out in Europe, Osborn tried to get involved. "In 1940, the Royal Canadian Air Force turned me down...too old, they told me. And I was rejected when I tried to enlist as a seaman in the U.S. Navy after Pearl Harbor. But I pressed on and discovered that with my background, I might be useful working in the camouflage area and brought [artwork] samples along to show the Navy in Washington."

Osborn recalls, "A bright officer sent me to Commander [later rear admiral] Luis de Florez, who headed the Training Devices Office, and also to Commander Arthur Doyle [later rear admiral]. In short order, Doyle had me commissioned as a lieutenant with a wonderful left-handed salute that would flummux any regular Navy man I encountered."

His drawing hand was anything but



Dilbert finally cured himself of flat-hatting.

clumsy, though. On the day he checked in, Osborn's boss, Cdr. Doyle, got a call from Admiral Ernest King, who asked Doyle if he had an artist on staff who could color a map. Minutes later, with a kid's box of Crayolas, Osborn was coloring a 10-by-15-foot map. "When he looked at you with those cold and piercing eyes," says Osborn of King, "he froze your giblets."

Among his fellow workers was the renowned photographer Edward Steichen; he introduced Osborn to a young lady named Elodie Courter, who had come down from the Museum of Modern Art in New York to organize a show of Navy photographs. A year later, they were married.

While Osborn labored in the training office, terrible statistics were amassing at training air stations all over the country. More Navy flyers were being killed in pilot-induced accidents than were being lost in combat. Could the headquarters people come up with some ideas to help reverse the trend?

"Artie Doyle had seen cartoons used in the Royal Air Force to teach pilots," says Osborn. "He sent me to NAS Atlanta, where I gained hands-on experience flying in a Stearman."

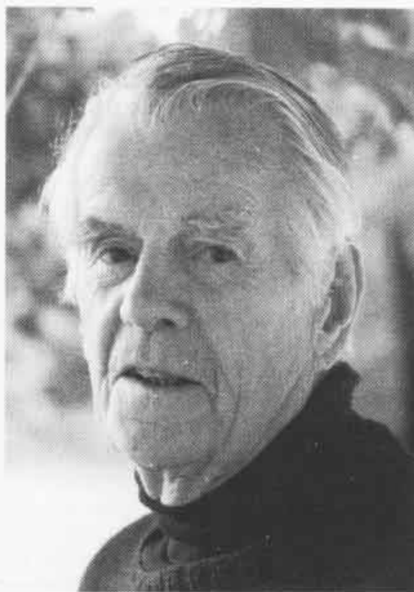
In the process, Osborn absorbed, in infinite detail, the state of mind and the inclinations of students and instructors as they went through their demanding paces. He also eyed the airplanes themselves, weary from day-in, day-out duty. (No one is better than Bob Osborn at depicting a weather-beaten aircraft with hound-dog eyes trained on a ham-fisted pilot, uttering, "Take it easy on me and I'll last a little longer.")

Riding in the rear cockpit of a "Yellow Peril" at Atlanta, Osborn's aircraft met another plane and an unannounced dogfight ensued. Just as the aircraft nearly smacked into each other, Osborn's pilot nosed over into a frightening, negative-G maneuver.

"Unfortunately, I had unfastened my seatbelt because it was too snug, and I was suddenly projected upward out of the cockpit," he recalls. "Somehow, my legs caught in the plane's longerons, but I was out there in the breeze until my instructor leveled off. Some lesson for stupid me."

Back in Washington, Doyle and Osborn, sitting atop a desk, conceived and named a cartoon character who embodied aviator incompetence and displayed blatant disregard for proper procedures. Perhaps this fictional ne'er-do-well might grab the attention of pilots in the real world, they thought. Osborn worked his magic with pencil on paper, and thus was born the notorious Dilbert Groundloop – later, just plain Dilbert.

Dilbert always flew the wrong way, ignored checklists, and personified the "fat, dumb, and happy" attitude that was a prelude to disaster. Spoiler the Mechanic, Dilbert's enlisted counterpart from the maintenance force, followed. Osborn drew more than 2,000 Dilbert and Spoiler posters, which hung in ready rooms and hangars throughout the Navy.



Cdr. Howard A. Wheeler, then NANews editor, took this photo of Bob Osborn in 1985 at his home in Salisbury, Conn.

Less than half of the originals survive in the archives today, treated as classic works of aviation art. They depict almost every aerial foible that could be humanly perpetrated, from leaving the wheels up on landing to "flat hatting," aviation's unforgivable sin.

People laughed at the carefully crafted drawings, and they also got the message that flying was not inherently dangerous but it was mercilessly unforgiving of human error.

Commander Spencer (Seth) Hubert Warner manned the flight statistics desk in the training division and was working on ways to stop mishaps. He and Osborn formed a partnership and together created Gramps. "Grampaw Pettibone was conceived in desperation," Warner once said, "the offspring of frustration and despair."

Seth Warner died in 1967. He is commemorated by a bronze trophy – recently transferrred from the Pentagon to the National Museum of Naval Aviation, Pensacola, Fla., for permanent display – that depicts an angry Gramps stomping on a typewriter, arms waving. Established in 1984, the Grampaw Pettibone Award is presented annually to the person or persons who best promote Naval Aviation safety through the written word.

Originally called P.S. (Post Script) Pettibone, Gramps was named by Warner and drawn by Osborn (who used some of Warner's personal attributes). The character had a long gray beard, favored a corncob pipe, and – like Warner – was wiry, had a sparse dome, and wore Wellington boots to keep his ankles warm.

Gramps was an old-timer who had started out in airplanes built of cigar boxes and baling wire at a time when an aircraft was considered a success if the pilot could coax it 50 feet into the air. If you walked away from a landing, it was a good one. He had flown just about every aircraft in the inventory and been in every type of accident. Now, back on active duty of his own volition, he was hell-bent on saving lives and planes. Warner wanted

Gramps to "speak his wisdom about flying."

Gramps was recognized as a cantankerous old codger with a low boiling point, uninhibited by official language. He was turned loose, says Warner, "hoping that his pithy remarks and sardonic humor would hold your attention long enough to stab you with a vital safety factor – make you safety conscious."

Pettibone entered the lore in the January 15, 1943, issue of the *BUAER News Letter* (later *Naval Aviation News*). Warner wrote the detailed narrative of accidents that had really occurred, and a whiskered Gramps grimaced nearby on the page.

Osborn has always credited Seth Warner with the creation of Pettibone. Osborn's own imagination and drawing skill, though have been responsible for the cartoon character's long life. There has never been a study to determine Pettibone's effect on the accident rate, but there are countless aviators who recall precarious moments when the image of that whiskered old timer – or of Dilbert – flashed before their minds, warning them: "No! Don't do that! Think!"

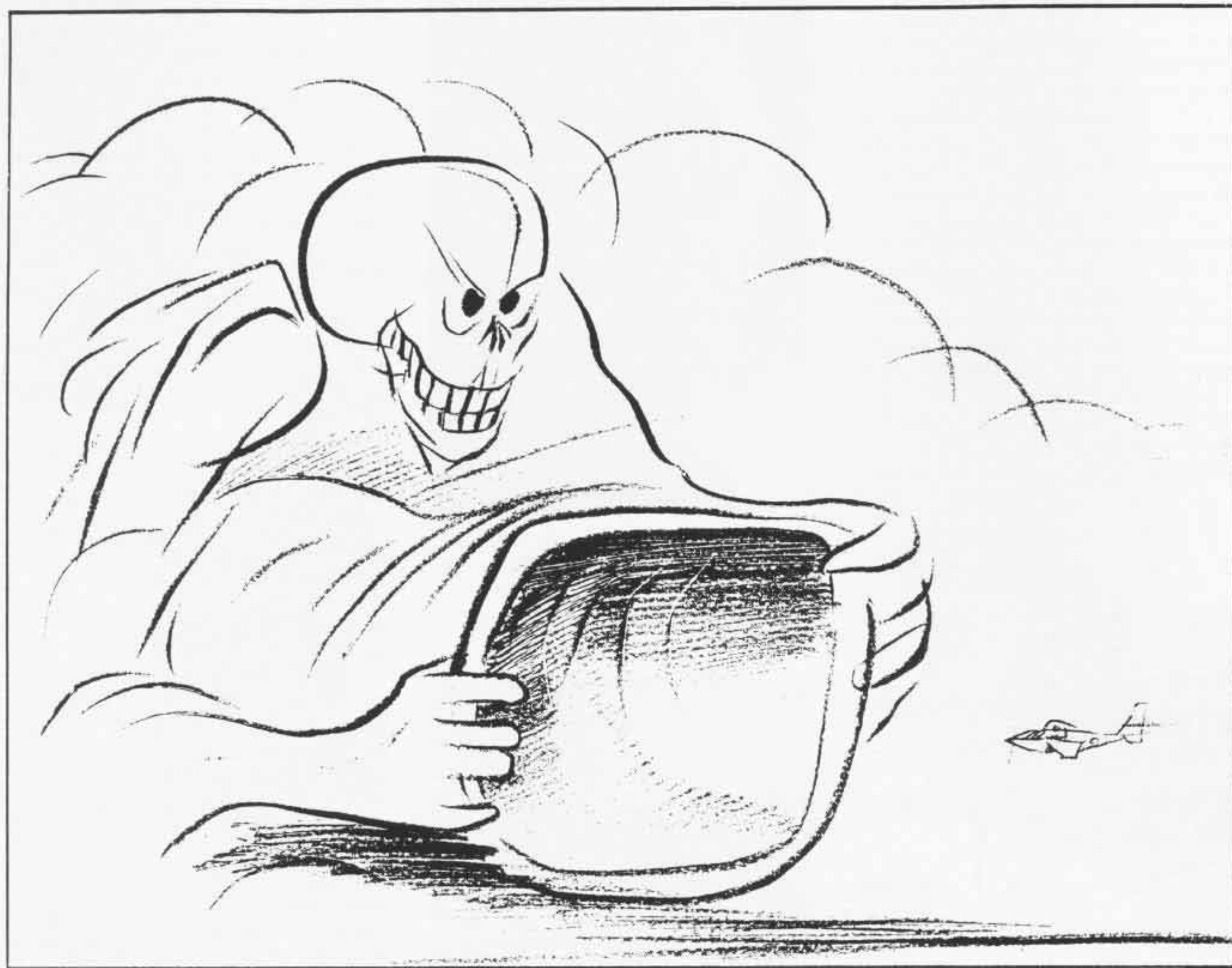
Osborn has also witnessed heroic death, notably when he went to the Pacific for a firsthand look at combat during WW II; he was on *Essex* (CVS-9). "The pilot who had taught me to fly at Atlanta was assigned to a fighter squadron," he relates. "During the battle for Saipan, his plane was hit and he was seriously wounded. He managed to fly 80 miles to the carrier, blood streaming down his face, his sight failing, two wingmen telling him what to do, trying to get him aboard safely. From below it became increasingly apparent that he was not going to make it down, and that if he did come in wildly and out of control he would certainly crash into needed planes. As we all watched, he simply flew away, leaving the task force and his friends, continuing on into the dusk of that alien sea. I cannot resolve this image in my mind even today...a young man departing to death."

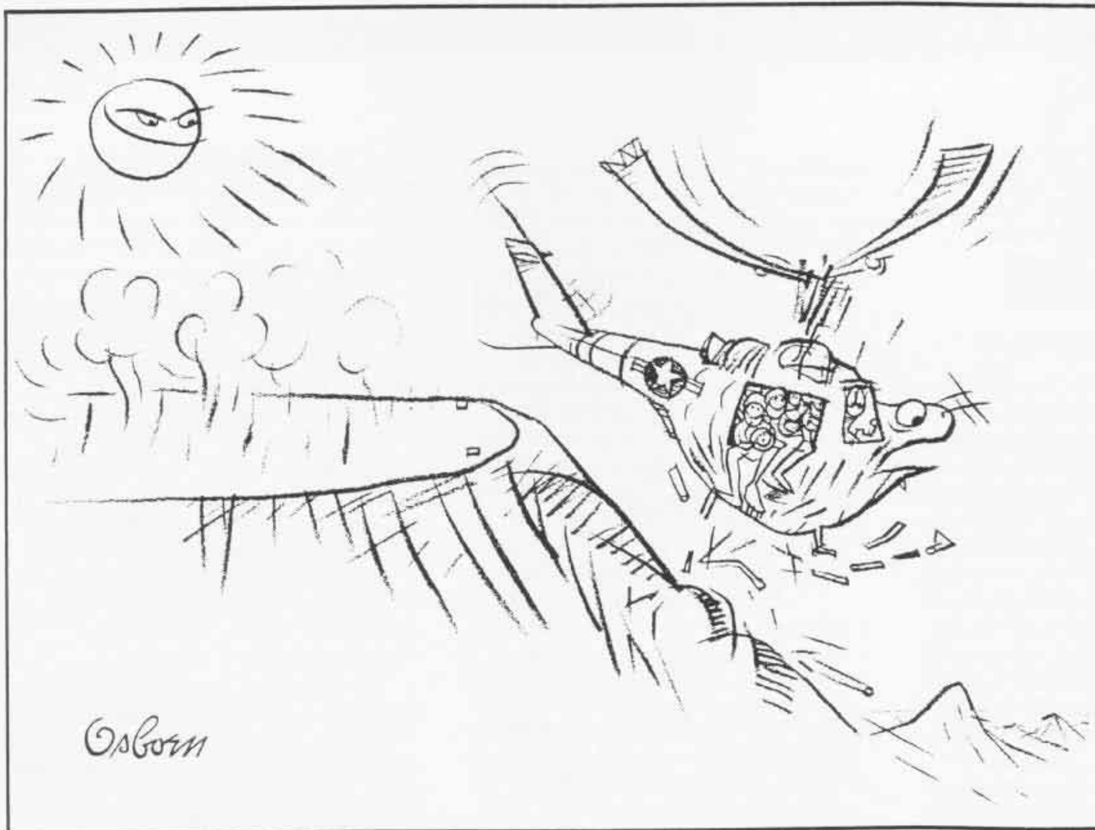
Since Warner, there have been only a dozen writers of the Pettibone feature – all Naval Aviators. They base their stories on actual accidents and compose a narrative that is forwarded to Osborn. He studies the stories and then goes to work, usually spending three or more hours to produce one drawing.

Osborn is quick to praise magazine staff members for the abiding success of *Naval Aviation News* and Pettibone. He cites in particular two outstanding WAVE (Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service) officers: Joy B. Hancock (who later became an admiral) and Izetta W. Robb (who left active duty after WW II and became the managing editor of the magazine).

He returned to civilian life after the war, but Osborn continued drawing

Get suckered into bad weather and you may not come out of the other end.





Heat, height, and heavy loads in a helicopter will hurry you downward every time!

Gramps for a modest sum. He also illustrated the "Sense" pamphlets, which he'd begun during the war. The word *sense* followed each subject title (for example, "Vertigo Sense"). Topics included cold-weather flying, night flying, helicopter rescue, swept and delta wing, and compressibility. By nature complex, these aviation subjects were simplified by expert writers and illustrated by Osborn's cartoons. They remain readable instructional documents today.

Osborn also illustrated books, and his drawings appeared in leading publications such as *Life*, *Look*, *Fortune*, *The New Republic*, *Harper's Horizon*, *Esquire*, and more recently the Smithsonian's *Air and Space*. His autobiography, *Osborn on Osborn*, published in 1982, is a treasure chest of cut-to-the-quick satire.

In 1958, Osborn received the Navy Distinguished Public Service Award, and in 1977 he was designated an Honorary Naval Aviator, one of a prestigious few so acclaimed. He is part of the Naval Aviation lexicon.

The admiration was mutual at a Navy ceremony in 1977. Osborn surprised a gathering of Naval Aviators when he proclaimed, "You are far superior in your ingenuity and imagination than those in private business. You show a truly creative, free-wheeling, and lively attitude toward work. I suspect that the difference between you and the businessmen is that you are not working to make money for yourselves, but for a common and worthy goal which is beyond you as individuals. You seem much more like my ideal of what American enterprise is."

Those early pioneer pilots didn't have fancy equipment but they did have pizzazz and, in their own way, a brand of professionalism that made Naval Aviation work!

Osborn says of his Navy work, "Never have I been told how to do the job. Never has an admiral, or anyone else, told me it should be done this way or that. I've always had free rein…this is rare indeed! With commercial publications, I'm often told it isn't quite right, or make an adjustment here or there, or make the aggressive bee sort of smile."

These days, Bob Osborn lives with his wife, Elodie, in the Connecticut countryside. He's still turning out his work in a studio adjacent to the house. Now 88, Osborn says, "If anything I can do saves a life or an aircraft, then I certainly am going to do it." ■

Capt. Rausa retired from active duty in 1988 and since then has been the editor of *Wings of Gold*, the voice of the Association of Naval Aviation. A former attack pilot and editor of *Naval Aviation News*, he has written several nonfiction books on aviation. In 1985, he became Gramps writer number 13.