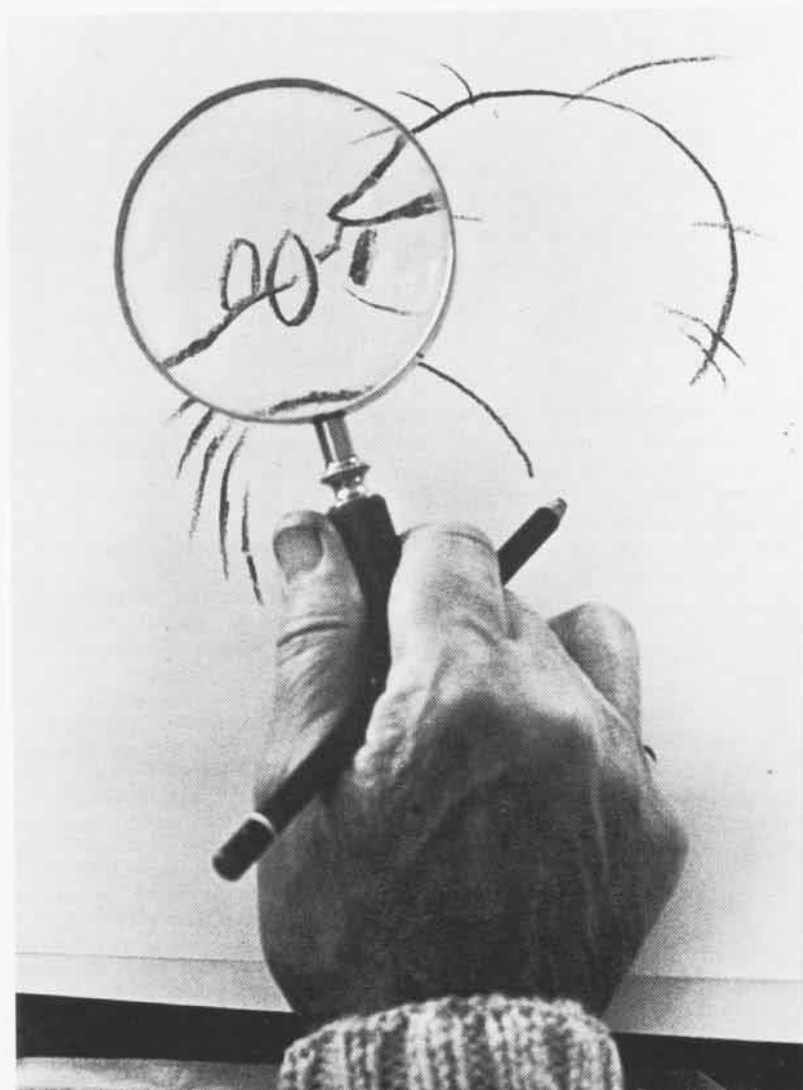


# TOP DRAWER

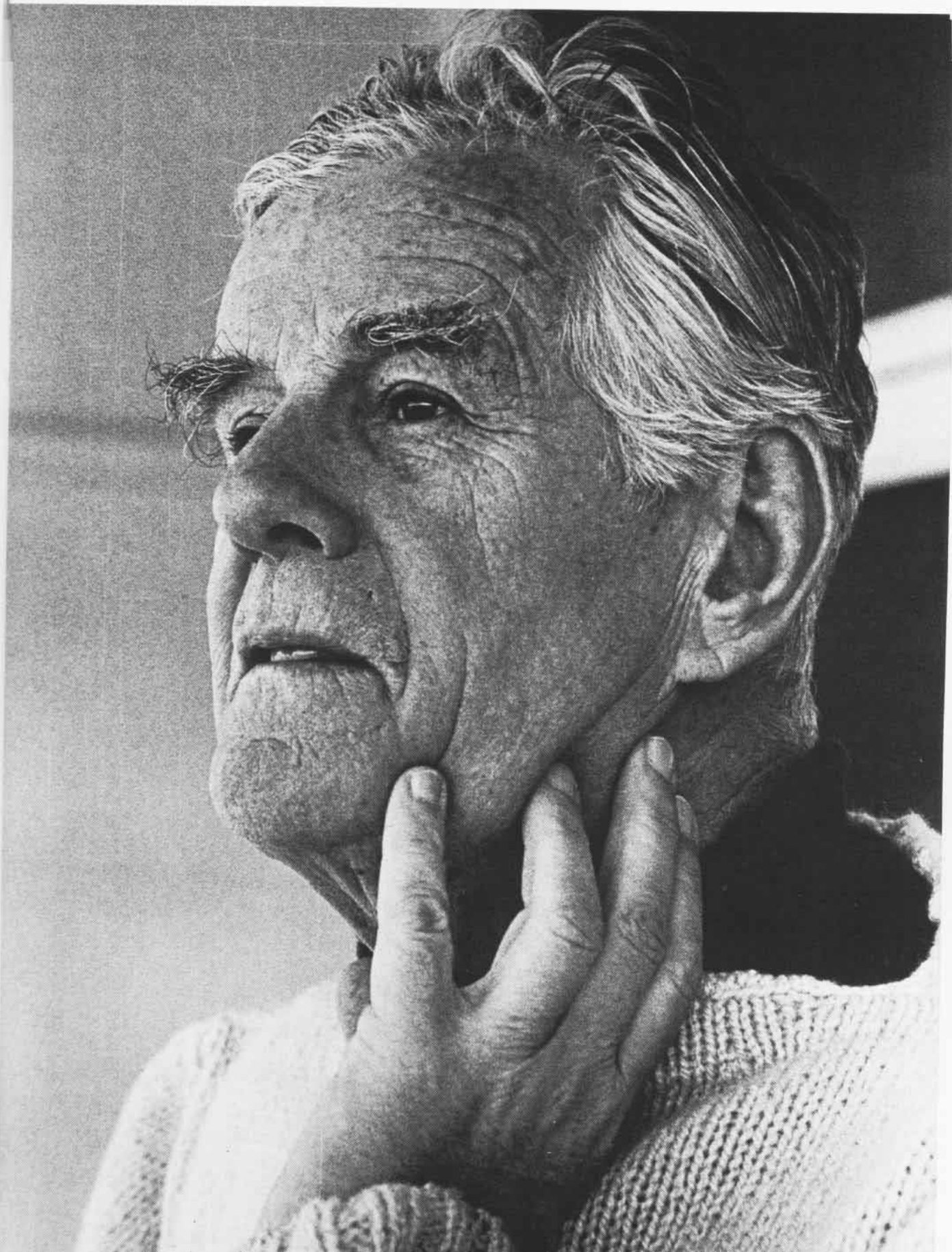


**Robert Osborn, the 'Top Drawer' whose magical pencil breathes life into the cantankerous Grampaw Pettibone. On these pages is the story of this great satirist and his impressions of the ageless Gramps.**

***A NANews Interview***

By Commander Rosario Rausa

Photos by JOCS Dick Benjamin



For more than 30 years the incomparable genius of Robert Osborn has been the single most critical ingredient in the make-up of a cantankerous commentator called Grampaw Pettibone. Although a succession of ten naval officers has created the flint-edged dialogue which flows like so many fire arrows from the mouth of this legendary sage of the airways, it has been Osborn's depiction of the man which gives Gramps visual impact and continuity.

Osborn's artistry has been a thread of pure quality woven into the hardy fabric of this character, known, feared and respected by generations of Navy flyers. Beyond his remarkable achievement in bringing Gramps to vibrant life lies another of Osborn's unequalled talents. He is the ultimate master in transforming aircraft into human or animal-like objects who have been subjugated to ignorance, indifference and brutality on the part of aircrews.

Who else could convert a super-sophisticated, multi-million dollar mechanical complexity into a frightened behemoth groveling through a fog bank with leg-like landing appendages groping desperately for the runway's security.

— or a perplexed creature frowning in frustration and pain, its belly wretchedly scraped by a gear-up landing.

— or a bird in the throes of bone-breaking agony because the ham-fisted *Homo sapiens* piloting it flew too swiftly and pulled out too strenuously from a dive-bombing run.

— or a forlorn soul shedding alligator tears, lost over the Pacific because a navigator failed to navigate.

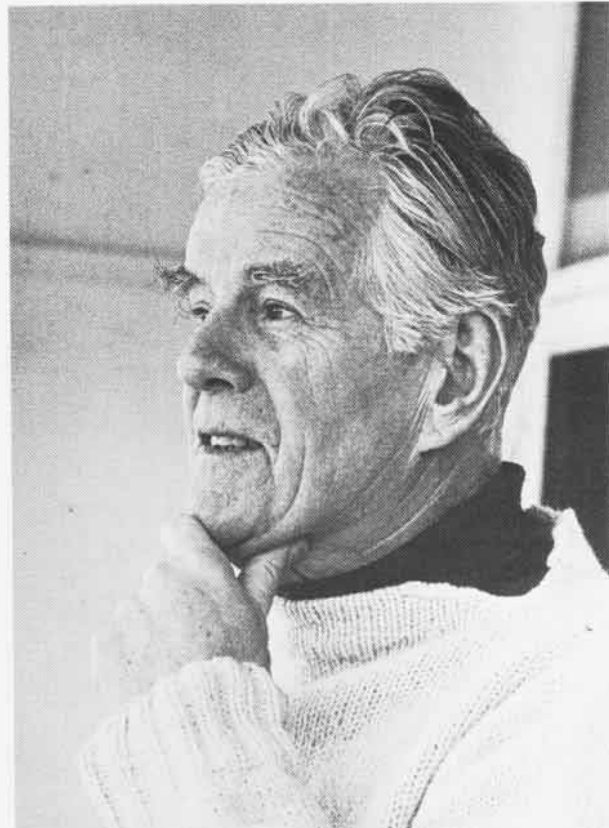
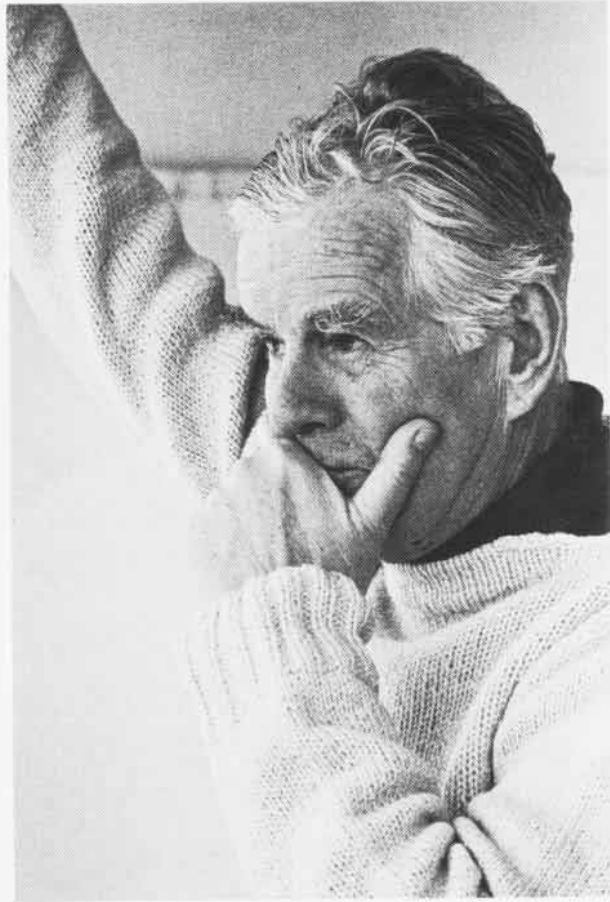
— or an outraged victim of the elements and shaky headwork, tossed into the twisting, hail-ridden fury of a thunderstorm.

It may be unknown to many of our readers that Robert Osborn is more than part-creator of Grampaw Pettibone. In fact, he is one of the most eminently successful and admired artists and satirists of our time. His works have appeared in *Life*, *Look*, *Fortune*, *The New Republic*, *Harpers*, *Horizon*, *The New York Times*, *Esquire* and many other top publications.

Older generations will remember the *Dilbert* and *Spoiler* posters which served as effective training aids in World War II and for years afterwards. Osborn drew each of them. Illustrations for the *Sense Pamphlets*, a series of publications which deal with subjects ranging from physical fitness to night flying, were also done by Osborn.

Mr. Osborn, born in Oshkosh, Wisc., in 1904, attended the University of Wisconsin and Yale, was a teacher at the Hotchkiss School in Connecticut, and studied art in Paris and Rome before entering the Navy. He has been described by Russell Lynes, a prominent social critic, in *Horizon* as "... the engineer at the throttle of a pencil or a brush ... his greatest pleasure is in driving the implement in his hand to do precisely what he wants it to do. Osborn is first an artist and second a satirist. If ever a society needed satirists who are also artists, our's does; and like every good satirist, Osborn bites the hand that needs him."

In 1958, he received the Distinguished Public Service Award for his contributions to safety programs.



LOOK into becoming

a GREAT cartoonist

VA RO 127889  
RD SS 091 24 7478  
EL SS 090 4 83-25  
MC SS 040 42 89 75  
ELDR SS 044 11 86 95

H.L. West  
1630  
R. Hatch  
5047  
R. Band  
731 N. Water St.  
Barton  
BARTON

**NANews: Mr. Osborn, how did your affiliation with the Navy begin?**

Mr. Osborn: Two days after the war started, I tried to enlist. I was sent from New York to New Haven, then to our local post office and, subsequently, by February 1942, was routed to Washington, D.C. About a half hour after I checked in with Commander (later Rear Admiral) A. K. Doyle, who was in the Training Literature Division, someone from Admiral Ernest King's office phoned down and asked, "Have you got an artist down there who could color the admiral's wall map?" Doyle said, "Sure!" and I was soon on my way with a box of children's crayolas and grease pencils to color an 18 by 30-foot map. I later told Doyle that I hadn't joined the Navy to do this sort of thing but he assured me I'd have loftier assignments. Of course he was right.

Since my background was in the art field—I thought I might work in the camouflage area—I had brought along some samples of my work. Somehow these came to the attention of Commander Luis de Florez (later Rear Admiral, a brilliant engineer, who headed Training Devices in WW II). He liked what he saw and decided I could be of use. In short order, I received a commission, which was quite a surprise

since I had fully expected to begin my service as a seaman.

**Where were you assigned?**

I was sent to an office in the old Main Navy/Munitions Building complex which stood alongside the Reflecting Pool, adjacent to the Lincoln Memorial on the Mall in Washington, D.C. The place was in a state of disarray when I arrived, which was to be expected considering this was shortly after Pearl Harbor. I recall Cdr. Doyle, who played an important part in starting Dilbert, sitting on a board which he and Captain (later Admiral) Arthur Radford had rigged across the extended lower drawers of their desks because there were no chairs.

There was quite a collection of talented individuals working there. These included Edward Steichen, who, of course, was one of the world's great photographers (he introduced me to Elodie, the young lady who later became my wife, by the way), and writers such as Robert Louis Taylor and Roark Bradford, who became prominent authors.

Anyway, we were tasked with developing training aids which might help reduce the terrible accident rate the Navy was experiencing. The Cadet ranks were suffering considerable losses. They were forget-

ting to switch fuel tanks, were trying to turn back to the field with engine problems rather than land straight ahead—mistakes of that nature. Luis de Florez had also observed that maintenance personnel were making careless mistakes repeatedly.

We came up with the idea of Dilbert the Pilot and, later, Spoiler the Mechanic. As I recall, I drew more than 2,000 Dilbert and Spoiler posters, many of them in color. I had had some experience with visual aid procedures while at Hotchkiss and used what I knew with the posters. For example, we put holes along the upper edge so they could be replaced easily and, therefore, often. We arranged to have them displayed in classrooms, hangar spaces, in the heads—everywhere people went.

**Since you aren't an aviator, did it take a great deal of study on your part to do the posters?**

No, not really. I'd been entranced by airplanes since the age of 12 when I saw a Curtiss biplane. So I was familiar, to some degree, with aircraft operations. It took me four or five hours, including seven or eight preliminary sketches, to come up with a Dilbert poster. Doyle was right there urging me on and always



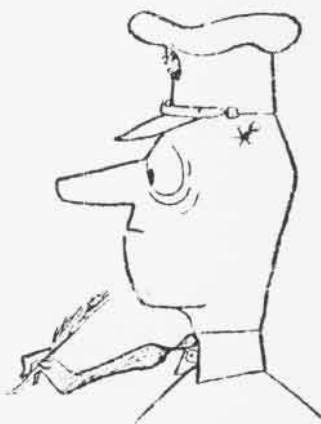
encouraging me. We didn't want to bore people, but we didn't want to be too preachy, either.

I did advise my colleagues that I couldn't really draw Dilbert unless I got some first-hand experience. I got on a train and went down to Atlanta where they were flying *Yellow Perils* and did some early research there. (I did some flying at Miami, Pensacola and Corpus Christi, too.)

I talked with everyone I could, flew each day and took elaborate notes in my travels around the air station at Atlanta. I questioned everybody about their problems and difficulties—the instructors, the students, the chiefs, especially, and all the maintenance personnel. My task was to transpose these problems into drawings in the hopes that they would prevent repeat mistakes.

Initially, there was the reaction, "Oh, no, everything's O.K." The tendency was to conceal goofs which were taking place. But as time went by and positive results were achieved, people really opened up and it seemed like everyone had ideas on how to improve safety. The chief petty officers were particularly helpful.

We soon branched out to all phases of flight training and maintenance. I remember Lt. Fred Lee. He made me fly hooded in the rear seat of an SNJ at Pensacola to really learn the difficulties of instrument flying. I think, in the end, we did more than 50 posters on that phase.



Osborn by Lt. Osborn

### How did Grampaw Pettibone evolve from this?

Arty Doyle had seen a cartoon character used by the Royal Air Force called "Pilot Officer Prune." That got us to thinking about creating one for ourselves. This led to Dilbert.

But the true creator of Gramps, the man who deserves a full measure of credit for bringing him to life, was the late Captain Seth Warner. One morning, this bright, chipper, then LCdr. Warner walked into our room with his idea about this really savvy old aviator. In fact, I think of Gramps as Seth Warner with a beard and I still draw him that way.

The Bureau of Aeronautics had established the office of Aircraft Safety Counselor which was manned by Capt. Warner, a very experienced pilot in his own right. His were the words behind Gramps when he was introduced by *Naval Aviation News* (then the *BuAer Newsletter*) on January 15, 1943. Seth wrote the dialogue and I drew the caricature.

### Did you ever suspect Gramps would last as long or become as popular as he has?

No! Certainly not. Seth and I thought he might prevail until the end of the war. After a year or so, however, we sensed pretty clearly that we had something. By this time, the Dilbert posters and the *Sense Pamphlets* were also catching on.

After the war, *Naval Aviation News* asked if I would go on draw-



ing Gramps and I said, "Yes, I would be pleased to do so."

### How long does it take to do an average Gramps drawing?

I receive three stories and some accident photographs each month. Out of the three episodes, I select two which I feel I can best draw to. I read the stories one day and let my subconscious work on them overnight. Next day I go up to the studio and begin preliminary sketches.



***'Let us be thankful for the fools,  
But for them the rest  
of us could not succeed.'***

Mark Twain, 1835-1910  
Following the Equator: Vol. 1, Pudd'nhead  
Wilson's New Calendar, Chapter 20

On occasion I can go directly from an early sketch to the final drawing. Usually, though, I spend about four hard hours digesting the information, doing the sketches and getting a final drawing completed.

**It still takes this long, even after all these years?**

Yes. There are no shortcuts. I just sent off a packet to Washington and I felt as if I had spent two exhausting days in the effort. But most times I'm pleased with the results. Also I feel strongly that if I can help save even one crew from making a thoughtless error, it's certainly worth it.

For example, it's been very gratifying to me to hear firsthand from pilots about how Dilbert or Gramps has helped them. I recall one flyer, shot down a half mile off a Japanese-held island. "Enemy soldiers were shooting at me," he said, "and I was about to inflate my life raft when I vividly recalled a poster of Dilbert caught in a similar situation. The lesson on the poster was: Don't inflate the raft and make a bigger target of yourself. I didn't and was eventually rescued." A few other pilots have related stories like this to me.

**You have been able to capture the very essence of the pilot/aircraft relationship, yet you aren't an aviator yourself. How do you account for this?**

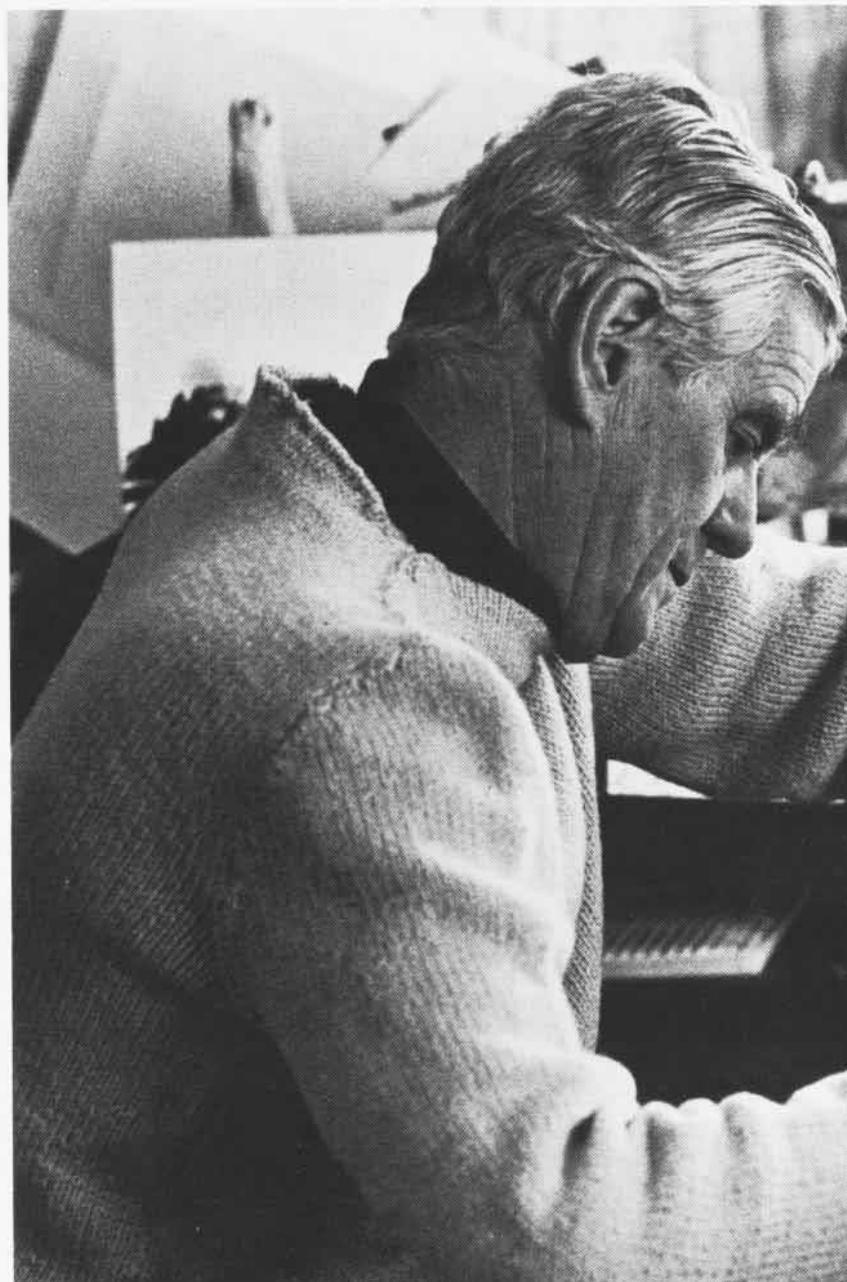
Ever since I was a small boy, I've had a certain strange intuitive sense about how things "feel." When I began drawing as a four-year-old in Oshkosh, I had this certain insight or feel of things. I would draw a robin, for example, and try to make it look like it was *listening* for a worm. Strange but true.

**In other words, if you were commissioned by AMTRAK to express visually the emotion of a hard-working locomotive or how the beset driver might feel, you could do it.**

Sure! This is the basis of my talent, this intuitive sense. Nowadays, for instance, if I'm working for a medical journal, I know I can draw a picture of how a head cold feels and

**'Fools are my theme,  
let satire be my song.'**

George Noel Gordon, Lord Byron, 1788-1824  
*English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809)





get the feeling across to the reader. I once had the third cover on *Life* for which they used a drawing. I showed a man with a hangover with a nail going right through his head. I've used the idea often.

At the risk of sounding immodest, I think I've been gifted with this sort of intuitive sense. It hasn't been developed, it's simply been there from the beginning. Some time ago, I went to hear Duke Ellington perform in New York. You can tell from the moment his fingers strike the keys that he plays with an extra intuitive feel for music which I'm certain he's had since childhood.

**Over the years you have undoubtedly observed that pilots seem to make the same chronic mistakes — such as unintentional wheels-up landings. Do you feel that this will always be the case? That certain errors will be made regardless of Gramps and other safety efforts?**

I'm terribly pessimistic about that. I suspect we'll always have that slightly low grade man who isn't thinking as hard as he ought to be. Or even the high grade individual who is preoccupied with something else, like next Saturday night's date or, worse, problems in his personal life.

I recognize that there are times when everything turns to worms up there and mistakes are just naturally going to follow. We won't eliminate the wheels-up landings, but we can certainly decrease them in number.

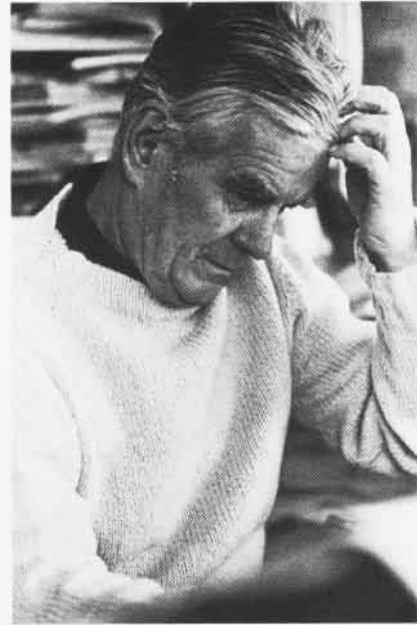
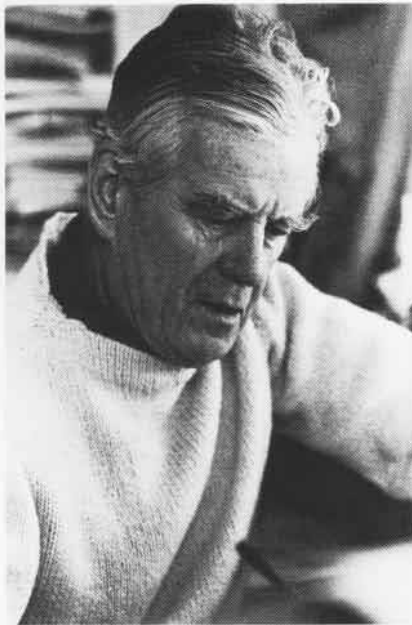
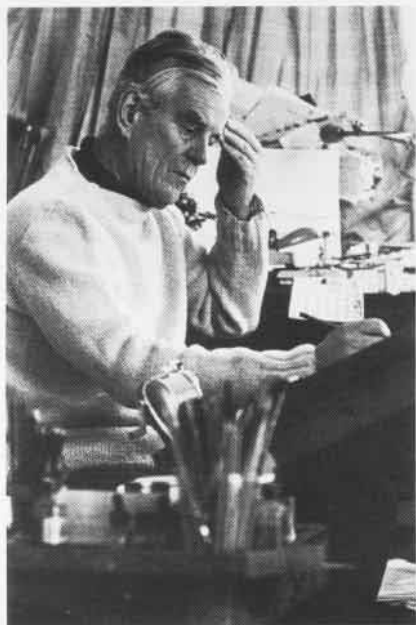
**As you note the increased sophistication of today's aircraft from your vantage point, are you able to compare the pilot of the 70s with his counterpart of the 40s?**

The pilot of today, it seems to me, is way ahead. In the WW II years, a flyer could make a mistake and still escape catastrophe, largely because the speeds were so much slower. I once saw a pilot at Corpus Christi slam his F4F off a barracks wall, demolishing the wall as well as the aircraft, and then skid on down the street. He walked away from the crash and, when I talked to him later, he told me the only injuries he suffered were some bruises in the shoulder area where





## 'Parodies and caricatures are the most



his harness straps had been. And he was flying the next day.

Do the same thing today and it's probably curtains for the pilot and crew. The body muscles and ligaments just can't hold together at today's high speeds.

I also feel that much more skill is required of the pilot. I base this on the stories which are sent me. It's as if the Naval Aviator of today must possess the education level of an MIT graduate plus the ability to actually fly the aircraft.

Which reminds me of a story. During a visit to NAS Miami, I was taken on a flight by a young officer in an SNJ. We climbed to about 10,000 feet. Immediately on arrival at that altitude, without notifying me, the pilot dumped the nose and commenced a near vertical dive. I was scared! The ground loomed larger and larger in front of me. I've forgotten what the speed limitation was in the plane, but I think that it

was around 200 knots. I saw the airspeed needle go through 210 and beyond, to 218 knots where it finally pegged.

I was absolutely petrified sitting there in the back. I looked out, expecting the wings to shred and give way. Well they didn't. We recovered from the dive and eventually landed safely. After we got out of the airplane, the pilot said to me in a voice of proud excitement, "Did you see that airspeed needle?"

He outranked me, so all I could say was "Yes, sir," and left the scene. I was not amused. In my book, it was really just a terrible demonstration of flying. It was the last thing I wanted, you can be sure — to be my own subject, so to speak.

Getting back to the point, I find it difficult to believe that the pilots of today take chances like that. When you think of it, it's pure nonsense to abuse such expensive machinery in this way.

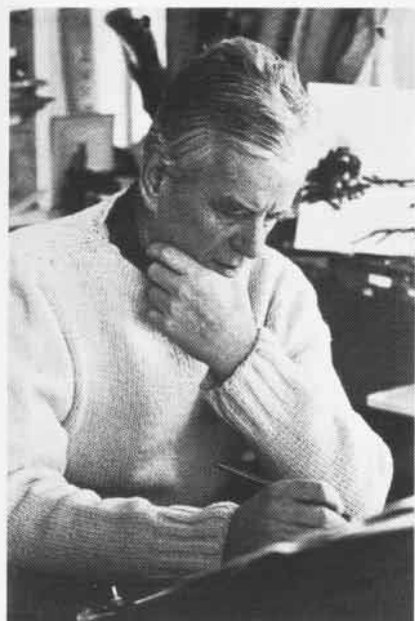
I recall another incident at Atlanta. I was scheduled for a back seat ride in a *Yellow Peril*. The young pilot found it rather unusual that I was there doing research to draw pictures for the Navy. He was nice enough and really a first rate pilot. (I later saw him killed in the Pacific.) But I had suspicions he wanted to put me through some sort of pre-arranged aerobatic session.

We went up and he found another *Yellow Peril* flying along. Within moments we were engaged in a wild dogfight. Our two planes made very close passes at each other until, suddenly, after another exchange, our adversary whizzed by so close that my pilot had to abruptly push the nose over to avoid a collision. We were in a frightening, negative-G maneuver. Unfortunately I had not properly secured my seat belt.

Mrs. Osborn's son was suddenly projected upwards out of the cockpit. Somehow my legs caught in the

***penetrating of criticisms.'***

Aldous Leonard Huxley, 1894-1963  
*Point Counter Point*



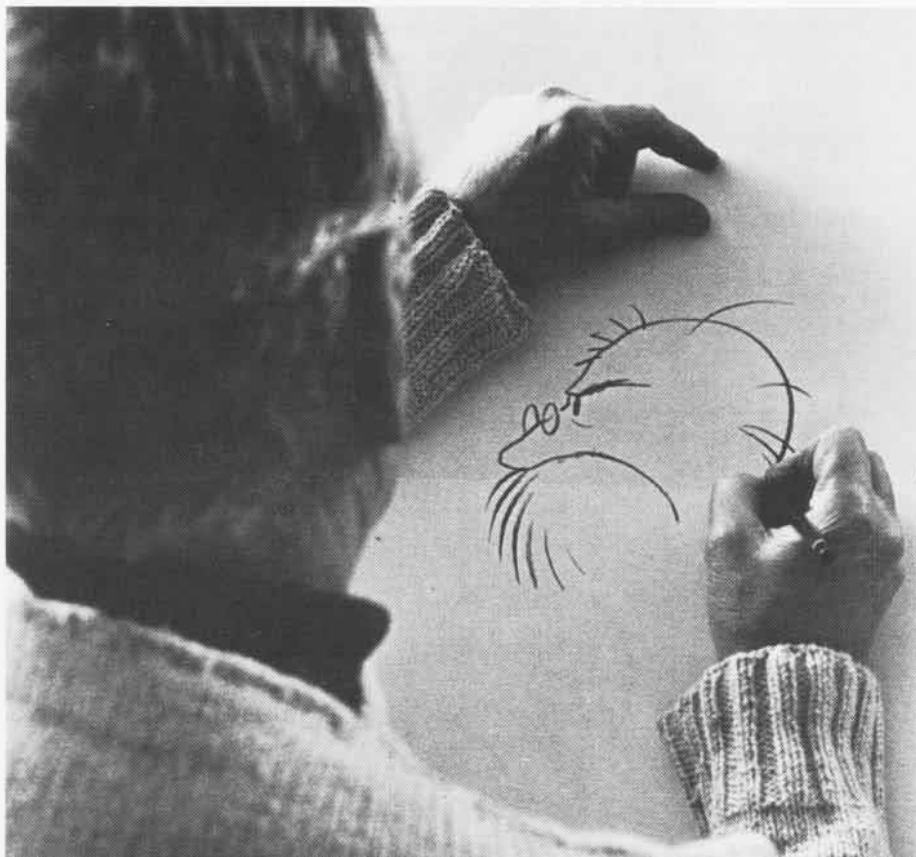
framework of the cockpit. I was withering in the breeze for an eternity until the pilot returned us to a level flight attitude. I suppose that, if I had had to bail out, I might have boggled that, too.

Still, that wasn't very good headwork on the part of this pilot. I like to think things like this don't happen nowadays. There is such an enormous difference between the canvas-covered contraptions of 30-40 years ago compared to the gigantic metal monsters of today.

**You would say, then, that the pilot of today is probably better, and has to be better, than one 30 years ago.**

I think almost *twice* as good. I feel that they have had to master a great deal more than those young men flying during WW II.

**The Navy aircraft accident rate has decreased, on the whole, in recent**



years. It can't be proved that Gramps has contributed directly to this, but common sense, as well as common knowledge, within the aviation community would tend to verify that he's been a factor in accident reduction. Do you agree with this premise? That is, that the cynical-humorous approach to Grampaw Pettibone has had a salutary effect on flyers and makes them think twice, thus avoiding possible mistakes?

Modesty forbids. It looks to me as though Gramps actually *has* prevented some accidents. The best proof I have of this is the apparent popularity of Gramps in *Naval Aviation News*. As I understand it, according to surveys over the years, the Gramps portion of the magazine is the most widely read. I think it can be logically construed, since the rate has gone down and since Gramps is read by a large number of pilots, that we have, in some way, contributed to the reduction in mishaps.

It is my feeling that what makes Gramps stick in peoples' minds are the comments made by the Gramps writers. The ten writers have given Gramps his vitality. I just can't say enough about them. Each accident situation is well described, then followed by an intelligent statement made by a real professional in the safety field. He inserts the critical comments with enough barbs attached to ensure that the appropriate nerves are touched.

Despite the fact that these writers have been changed regularly due to tour rotations and the like, I find it really fascinating that these men, even with their expected individualism, have been collectively successful with Gramps. *There has never been a weak one*. Somehow the Navy has selected writers who, for me, have been great to draw to. Each of the ten has added a slightly different flavor to Gramps. Yet, each has sustained a vivacious life in the old man. I simply can't praise these men enough and I must, especially, tip my hat to Seth Warner who truly started it all.

Ten Naval Aviators have written the narrative accounts of aviation mishaps and Grampaw Pettibone dialogue since the initial appearance of the Sage of Safety in *Naval Aviation News* in 1943. In the past, the originators of the brash words of anger, frustration and wisdom which flowed from Gramps have been cloaked in some degree of anonymity. As Robert Osborn has enthusiastically asserted, however, the gentlemen who write, and have written, Gramps have provided the character with a continuing vitality and their importance to the success of Gramps should be made known. The following list delineates those who have written the Grampaw Pettibone feature for *Naval Aviation News*. It should be noted that these men have been assigned primarily as CNO Aviation Safety Officers. Writing the Gramps feature is strictly a collateral duty which, for the most part, is completed during spare time, beyond normal working hours.

Captain Seth H. Warner  
Jan. 1943 to Feb. 1945

Commander Oliver Ortman  
Aug. 1958 to June 1963

Commander Andrew W. Bright  
1946 to Jan. 1953  
Jan. 1956 to Mar. 1956

Commander Mack E. Wortman  
July 1963 to Feb. 1965

Commander Charles A. Collins  
Feb. 1953 to Apr. 1954

Commander Walter T. Zebrowski  
Jan. 1966 to Aug. 1968

Commander Samuel G. Parsons  
May 1954 to Dec. 1955

Commander Donald E. Maunder  
Sept. 1968 to July 1971

Commander Warren E. Johnston  
Apr. 1956 to July 1958

Commander Nicholas Pacalo  
Aug. 1971 to date

**Has doing Gramps ever bored you? Have you ever said to yourself, "I've had it with the old man, no more will I draw him"?**

Marvelous question. The answer is no. *Honestly*, no. This peppery old man with a cane is and always has been, from a psychological viewpoint, an interesting character. The writers have given him a slightly different bite over the years, yet his central character remains the same.

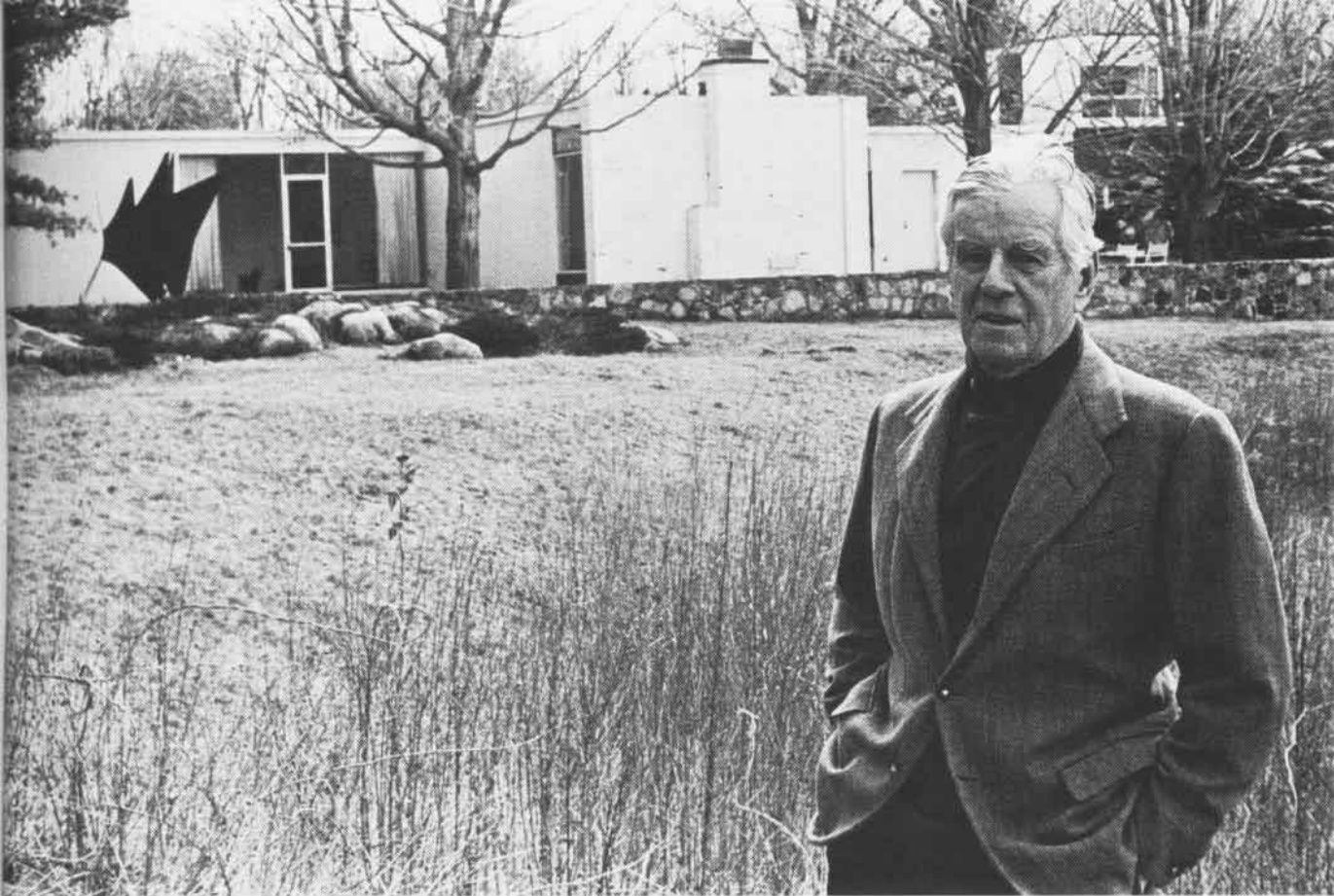
Drawing Gramps is a very pleasant task for me. I happily anticipate going up to the studio for a session with him. I must also tell you that I thoroughly enjoy drawing in itself. You probably feel the same way about a particular airplane you like to fly. On a clear summer day, for instance, I'm sure you've had the feeling of simply wanting to take that aircraft up and just fly around. I feel that way about drawing.

**Do you prefer to be referred to as an artist?**

I really call myself a drawer.

At one time I considered myself an artist. Before the war, I studied in Rome and Paris. I was surviving on \$500 a year. I am fortunate in that I learned in time that I didn't have the credentials to become a true artist in the pure, classical sense. But I did have the perceptive knack. Before going into the Navy, I had made 16 drawings for a book on duck shooting for a publisher in New York. I soon did another series of illustrations for a book on trout fishing. I eventually worked on three such books. They sold something like 40,000 copies. So, when I checked into the Navy Department, I brought copies of this work with me in the hope it would favorably influence those who were in charge of enlisting personnel.

Prior to this, I was clawing my way upstream. I certainly don't feel I *lowered* my sights from pursuing an artist's rather than a drawer's, or cartoonist's, career. I consider that I made a lateral shift. I accepted this turn in direction in my career



and have been most happy with the decision ever since.

**Then you don't consider yourself a frustrated artist?**

No, no, no! I've found it important psychologically when you think out your life's goals to be honest enough with yourself to say, "All right, you're not going to be this, but look here, what's wrong with being that — something you're suited for." Consequently, I've had a marvelous life. I have a wonderful wife, two grown sons. I go sailing down the eastern seaboard on occasion. I travel to Europe with some regularity and visit Italy and France where I studied as a young man. I set my own work pace, live comfortably in these fine Berkshires with Elodie and have absolutely no complaints.

**Readers might associate the man behind Grampaw Pettibone with a very caustic individual. Would you describe yourself as a jovial person?**





***'I really have been blessed in***



**JOCS Dick Benjamin, Associate Editor, photographed Robert Osborn in the environs of the artist's Salisbury, Conn., home. The estate, where Osborn has plenty of room for leisure time activities, includes a contemporary style main structure and, adjacent to it, up a small rise, a studio where he labors at his craft. The surrounding beauty of the Berkshires contrasts with the organized clutter inside the studio where drawings in progress are stacked on the floor and notes to himself are etched on the walls.**

A few years ago someone from the Navy came up here for a visit and told me they expected to be confronted by a snapping turtle. After lunch, a bottle of wine and much laughter, he concluded that the contrary was true. I enjoy life and kid around a lot. I do see the humor in things so I suppose you could describe me as jovial. I really have been blessed in these years,

**Do you have any other feelings about your "life with Gramps?"**

I would like to comment on my relationship with the Navy. I have the highest regard for the people with whom I've been associated and I've been most grateful for their attitude over the years. Never, in all this time, 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 reign, the prerogative of doing things in my own way.

With commercial publications the case is far different. Some quite often look at my efforts and tell me "It isn't quite right," or "Make an

adjustment here . . . or there . . . or *there!*"

I have found that the Navy people with whom I've been associated are an ingenious and *imaginative* group of professionals. This, I would think, is contrary to the routinely accepted impression of the military man as a very correct, conservative individual with sharp creases in his shirt and trousers.

In the Pacific, I spent some time aboard *Essex* and couldn't help being amazed at how Navy men, under pressure, handled themselves. I saw pilots, part of their wings blown off, bringing planes back to the ship. And there was the Marianas Turkey Shoot. We had little sleep over a three-day period and Japanese subs were a constant threat, but the men were still able to sustain a belly-laugh sense of humor. These were truly superb efforts and left lasting impressions on my mind.

These men, and let's not forget the women like Joy Bright and Izetta Robb (Joy Bright Hancock Ofstie and Izetta Winter Robb, Wave officers who played significant roles in the development of *Naval Aviation*

**these years.'**



*News*), seem to me to be far more free wheeling than the business men I've known. This surely is true. I see the men running air stations and find them most interesting individuals and much more spritely than their counterparts in the business world. I hold very much respect for my Navy acquaintances.

This whole relationship has been a wonderful experience for me. To tell the truth, I am moved by it. I figured out once that I must have made over 30,000 drawings for the Navy. By the end of the war, I was able to draw a perfect circle free-hand. I served my apprenticeship in the Navy. My hand was really trained there. Gramps has become quite a real person to me. I've been fortunate in being able to achieve a certain success in the civilian world but I owe much of that success to the Navy.

Actually, as I look back on it, the Navy, and more definitively, Naval Aviation, has really *been* a third of my life.

**Thank you, Mr. Osborn. We might add, for far more than this interview.**

