

## OWEN HUGHES ARCHIVAL DOCUMENT

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### ABSTRACT

#### *Biography*

Owen Hughes was born in Freemont, Ohio, in 1919. After high school, he worked as a commercial sign painter and trained in hand lettering techniques. In anticipation of the draft, Owen joined the Army Air Force with hopes of becoming a flyer. After arriving for training in aerial photography in Patterson Field, Ohio, he was deployed overseas to England.

Owen was stationed at Burtonwood Airfield and later went on to Paris, where he worked and lived in the airplanes beneath the Eiffel Tower. In his later years, he designed the nose art for *Doc*, one of only two B-29 bomber planes still flying today. Owen continues to attend air shows throughout the country.

#### *Summary*

In this interview, Owen recalls witnessing air raids while stationed at air fields in England, experiencing Paris nightlife, and working on designs for *Glacier Girl* and *Doc*. He also speaks about his work with various mediums of art, including hand lettering, nose art, jacket designs, and photography during World War II.

#### *Keywords*

*Army Air Force, Patterson Field, England, Pointon Park, air raids, Paris, nose art, Glacier Girl, Doc, photography*

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03:30 – Allowed to graduate high school with “major credit” in art  
04:10 – Underwent basic training in Mississippi and did sign work; went to Patterson Field, Ohio for aerial photography school  
05:27 – No photography school at Patterson Field, so sent overseas to England  
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50:30 – Traded videos of Doc being built to Midland Air Force Museum in exchange for being allowed to measure a B-29

52:30 – Story of *Doc* being rescued and restored by Tony Mazzolini, including nose art

53:51 – Seeing *Doc*'s first flight in Wichita, Kansas; meeting the last Rosie the Riveter

56:17 – Met Brigadier General Paul Tibbets, who dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima

57:04 – Designed artwork for A-2 leather jackets worn by Air Force pilots; allowed to ride in two B-17s in exchange for work

1:01:58 – Painting different designs on jackets, mostly airplanes; using sign paint

1:03:20 – Advice to younger generations: learn to do what you dislike (i.e. lettering)

1:04:28 – Learning to dry, brush paint; enjoyed learning new art form

1:06:52 – After the war: worked in commercial art and attended Rochester Institute of Technology

1:08:22 – Interest/experience in photography; has photos from wartime on 620 film and video on 8mm film

1:12:40 – Conclusion

## **STORY TRANSCRIPTS**

### **Story 1: Getting Lost on the *America* [06:13 – 07:12]**

I was with the 10th [Division] at Patterson Field for a year. Then, we went overseas.

CSK: *Where did you go?*

Went to England. And I'm quite happy, the way we went. We went on the fastest ship in the world, the *America*, which I have a model of out in my other room. It was the fastest ship in the world and it was a very secret ship. It was one of the first trips that it made that we were on. We had 15,000 men on that trip. Can you image 15,000 men on a ship? That's a lot of men.

The first day, we were going to breakfast. And the first sergeant had to lead us; we had to follow him. We wandered all over the ship and never got to breakfast. He didn't know where he was going. The ship was so big that we couldn't find our way. Well, then I think he found the way, so we could get to breakfast the next day! [*laughs*]

**Story 2: First Encounter with Germans**  
**[07:22 – 08:26]**

I was all over England, [including] Pointon Park, which was a small village. And it was in the village park. That was our first encounter with the Germans.

We were in tents that the British had set up for us. And we heard some strange plane—sounded strange to us. We knew the American planes; just from the sound we could tell what was American. We heard this strange plane, and we all went out of our tents and looked up like this. And the plane dropped a flare. And left.

Well, [laughs] we got chewed out by the British. I forget what rank he was, but he chewed us out. “You blokes had perfect portraits taken by the Germans!” They flew over, took a photograph of us. There we are standing there looking at him. And [laughs] we shouldn’t’ve done that! Well, we didn’t know.

**Story 3: Air Raid at Burtonwood**  
**[17:15 – 19:07]**

We used to go out at night and watch the air raids, ‘cause it was fascinating to watch. Every night, we’d have air raid sirens go off. And a lot of times, the bombs were dropping in cities near our airfield. So, we could go out and watch this—actually, like a Fourth of July celebration. We knew people were being killed, but there’s nothing we could do about it, except watch from a distance.

And one night, they were bombing a city somewhere near us. And all of a sudden, we hear an awful racket. And it’s a German plane coming over our field, one single plane. He dropped a string of bombs right down our runway and knocked out ten of our airplanes. And then, they were getting too close.

Then, we all jumped in our trench, which we should’ve been doing in the first place according to the regulations. And we got in that trench. And after it was all over, we wondered if anybody was hurt or how much damage was done. Well, there was ten airplanes. And the guard down ‘round the planes had jumped in our trench and gravel hit him in the face. But he wasn’t hurt bad.

And after we got out of the trench, we went around the front of the tent and we were discussing the air raid—what damage did it do to our airfield. And then, we hear some guy yelling and cussing like mad. And it was our littlest guy. He was still in the trench; he couldn’t get out [laughs]. And nobody helped him.

So even after the war, when we had reunions every year, we’d kid him about being in the trench. And we just left him there [laughs]. We did help him out.

**Story 4: Sleeping Under the Eiffel Tower**  
**[30:41 – 32:14]**

And I was all by myself. These other guys, the ones that put the exhibit together, left. And I was there [in Paris] all alone. I didn't have anybody to run around with; I didn't know anybody. And so, I lived in this C-47. It was made up like a hospital ship. Night and day. I slept in there.

And then, the second story of the Eiffel Tower, I must tell 'ya. The Americans, as I say, took over the tower. And they had a radio station set up in the top. We had the second landing as a bar. The guys, they had to walk up. The elevator wasn't operating. And they'd walk up the stairs to get to the [bar]—. It was quite a walk, getting up to the second landing.

And they'd go in and buy whatever drinks they wanted. And it was open 'til two o'clock in the morning. The guys would buy a bottle of whiskey or something, and then they'd walk around the tower. And that's quite a walk, going around there. They'd finish the bottle and they'd throw it over, and it would come down crashing on the airplanes or on the concrete.

And one time, it did hit my plane and I was already in bed. It [is] a rude awakening when that thing hits the airplane, 'cause it's really loud.

**Story 5: Working on Doc**  
**[52:30-54:18]**

CSK: *So, the one that has Doc on it though: is that the last B-29 that was restored?*

That'd be the last one that'll ever fly. And it was out on the China Lake desert out in California. Why they call it a lake I have no idea. But there's a bunch of 'em out there, but they're all in bad shape. And this was the best one—it looked the best to them. And Tony Mazzolini from Cleveland; he worked for Continental Airlines. He decided that's what he wanted. So the government said, "We'll give it to you, but you hafta have a museum." They won't give it to a person.

So, he formed a museum and Yusam is the museum. It's no longer in existence 'cause the plane is no longer his. But he got the plane off and they rebuilt it. And that's when I got to go out there and do the painting. My wife went with me. Like I said, she did everything with me. If I was painting an airplane in China, she woulda been with me.

CSK: *So, has the plane been restored?*

Yes. And it flew last summer. I went down to Dayton to the Air Force Museum in July. And then in August, the plane was gonna fly. So, my daughter was here and she took me to Dayton—when I had that interview there. And she took me to Wichita, Kansas. I have to stop thinking of names. She took me to Wichita, Kansas, and we saw the plane make its first flight.

**Story 6: B-17 Crash Landings**  
**[57:04 – 1:01:58]**

CSK: *And speaking of the artwork that he was mentioning: you also did artwork on jackets, is that true?*

Oh, lots of ‘em.

CSK: *These were bomber jackets?*

Well, not necessarily bomber. A-2 jackets, they call ‘em. They’re leather jackets the Air Force had for the pilots. And I did jackets for any Air Force pilot that wanted ‘em. And they wanted to pay me ten dollars for the artwork. And I said, “I didn’t want the ten dollars. I wanted to fly. If they’re going up, let me know.” So, I went up twice in one day in two B-17s, both of ‘em were crash landings [*laughs*]. Really!

CSK: *You were in the crash landing?*

The first one was in the morning. I’d see a plane warming up, way across the field. I wasn’t supposed to do this. I was supposed to be painting signs. Anyhow, I’d see the plane warming up over there, so I’d get over there and motion to the pilot like that. I mean, the engines running, you can’t talk or holler.

I’d just motioned [that] I wanted to go in and he’d nod his head. And he’d point down at the ground crew chief. You had to sign a paper. So, in case the plane crashed, they’d know who was on the plane.

I got in the plane and the whole crew was on the plane. And as we circled and were coming back to land, the crew asked me to come on up. The crew came back and asked me to come up in the radio room. The radio room was only one seat for the radio man and all the radio equipment. And it’s small. So, the whole crew got in—he wanted all, everybody over the wing. Because the plane wasn’t handling properly.

I came in and I sat down on the floor. And the other guys were all standing. When we hit the ground, the radio tubes were popping out of the radio, falling on the floor. And boy, we hit the ground hard. And we bounced. The plane went back up in the air and back down again. People on the ground said, “That plane bounced high enough for a truck to drive under it!”

That was in the morning. That didn’t discourage me. I saw another plane in the afternoon warming up. So, I went out there; motioned to the pilot. He nodded his head. He said, “Sign the paper.” So, I got in there. Wasn’t a soul on it. The pilot and co-pilot were up front, and there were three ground officers up in the Plexiglas nose. [*laughs*] This guy was declared the first B-17 ace during the war. I didn’t know who he was; he was just a pilot to me. Riordan from Texas.

And so, we take off and he wanted to scare [us]—. There was a hedge right before the runway. A British hedge. And they are *thick*. Been there for hundreds of years. The runway is just on the

other side of the hedge. So, he wanted to scare these three guys in the nose. So he come down low, like head right into the hedge. And he was gonna raise the plane up and land it.

He didn't raise it up. He went right through the hedge. And I had, all by myself—back in the back end, I thought—I knew he was coming in for a landing. So I went up to the radio room and sat in the radio room's chair. And man, I heard this crash. And I looked out the door. I thought the tail was gone. The plane looked all right, but I didn't know what the crash was.

And we landed and stopped in the middle of the runway. Didn't even run the full length of the runway. We stopped. Here we had gone through the hedge, hit a post, and the post had caved in the ball turret, which is steel that thick. It caved in that ball turret, took the tail wheel off. And it scared those three guys in the nose. They were cussing up a blue streak. And I thought, "This is no place for me." [laughs] I wasn't gonna hang around. So, I walked back to my hangar where I was working.

## **PHOTO CAPTIONS**

### **Current 1 – 2**

Owen Hughes shares his stories at his home in Newark, New York (Photo Credit: Susan Porter)

### **Current 3**

Owen Hughes stands in front of his nose art on *Doc*, one of two remaining functional bomber planes in the country (Courtesy of Owen Hughes)

### **Artifact 1**

Owen Hughes enlisted in the Army Air Force and worked as a sign painter during the war (Courtesy of Owen Hughes)

### **Artifact 2**

Wartime memorabilia and representations of Owen's work on *Doc* (Photo Credit: Susan Porter)

### **Artifact 3**

Owen Hughes' wartime manual for the 441st Troop Carrier Group, circa 1943-1944 (Courtesy of Owen Hughes)