



40 Years

Osborn

By Commander Howard Wheeler

At 78 years of age, Robert Osborn is in the autumn of his years. Grampaw Pettibone, the well-known, feisty sage of safety whom Osborn helped create 40 years ago this month, has always been in the autumn of his years. After all, Gramps came into being at a very old age.

With age comes wisdom and the well-deserved license to give advice freely without reservation or compromise. This was the idea behind Gramps when he first appeared on the pages of what was then *The News Letter* on January 15, 1943. Time hasn't changed Gramps or his attitude toward safety. Neither has it subdued the creator of his image, Robert Osborn.

Listening to Osborn talk today, one gets the picture of a straight-faced, Wisconsin-bred character with

a will totally opposed to the "dumb things people do" that cause needless loss of life, injury and damage to priceless equipment. He obviously is a staunch believer in the notion of responsibility and accountability for actions — good and bad. Perhaps that is why Osborn latched onto the idea of Grampaw Pettibone from the start.

Gramps has always been the most

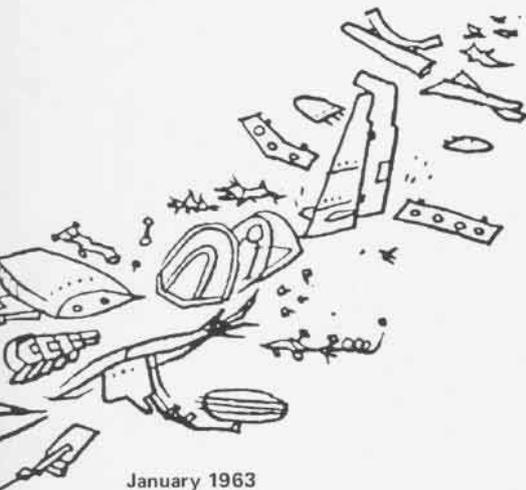
popular department in *Naval Aviation News (NANews)*, even among its non-aviation readers. In no small measure, Osborn's art has contributed to Gramp's success over the years. Grampaw Pettibone unabashedly airs dirty laundry with the hope that the same laundry won't have to be hung out again. The column has always been based on the idea that safety can be enhanced by sharing lessons learned. With his talented hands and remarkable insight into human behavior, Osborn through Gramps artfully puts out the laundry each month with both



skill and humor, which is perhaps the best way to get the point across. He does it in a way that makes the subtle impact reach home every time.

Osborn is an artist, really a painter who turned to the medium of paper and charcoal, with which he feels most comfortable. He prefers to refer to himself as "a drawer," awkward to say but more descriptive of his method. It obviously gives him great pleasure to create images on paper with a few cleverly placed lines and shadows that serve a noble purpose. His service to the Navy for so long, through the character of Gramps, has certainly contributed to his personal goal of promoting safety with imagination and wit. It is a serious business as far as he is concerned. There is little doubt that his drawings have saved many lives over the years by effectively personifying in Gramps the "safety conscience" of the Naval Aviation community.

But what about Osborn as a man? He certainly did not become a successful cartoonist, satirist and artist by doing drawings for *NANews*. The fact is that his artwork can be found in the pages of *Life*, *Look*, *Fortune*, *New Republic*, *Harpers*, *Horizon*, *The New*



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Wake Up!



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York Times and *Esquire*. The August 1982 issue of *Smithsonian* magazine carries his superb drawings in an article on the war against the boll weevil.

Few artists have a following large enough in their own time to warrant writing an autobiography. Not so with Osborn, whose biography was released on his birthday last October 26 called simply *Osborn on Osborn*. His own words provide some interesting clues as to why he has steadfastly and

generously supported Gramps' mission for so long.

Leaving no doubt that *he* wrote the book, the first sentence says simply, "I was born." Indeed he was, at home in Oshkosh, Wisc., now famous for its annual air show.

Osborn says his mother "had gumption" and his father was an early-on Wisconsin lumberman who did well and lived to be 82 before being struck down by cancer in 1940. He credits

his mother with helping to develop his fruitful imagination. Osborn says he "was a very slow, very naive learner" and that it was his mother who helped form his creative instincts by providing him with a wide variety of books at a very early age. He feels sorry for children today because television does little to stimulate the mind as books do.

The fondness he developed for the outdoors lingers today. His early years as a growing lad were spent in the fresh air with his father who was quite adept at hunting partridge, prairie chicken and duck. They also did their share of trout fishing in the perfect streams north of Oshkosh.

In contrast to the serenity of the quiet and peaceful woods he enjoyed so much, he points out that planes and cars have always been particularly fascinating to him. Herein, perhaps, lies a clue to why Gramps continues to be in print today.

In his book, he says, "I'm still excited by almost any airplane or hydroplane, against almost any sky, but best of all were the early planes with wings you could see through and engines, spun or fixed, which you could barely hear."

To satisfy his curiosity, once as a youngster he rode his bicycle to see a one-man air show only to witness, to his horror, the pilot climb to about a

thousand feet when the wing departed from the airframe. He says, "I could see the terror-stricken pilot from the ground. . . I didn't dare tell my family what I'd seen, and went to bed early.

Ironically, his curiosity about aircraft did not sour. He says, "My interest in them, even in their principles, seems endless beginning with those two very American geniuses, the Wright brothers. Blessed with uninhibited reasoning and imagining processes, they finally understood flight and solved problems that had previously prevented controllable flight."

Osborn's college education began at the University of Wisconsin as a freshman in 1923. But he was forced to drop out due to illness — a duodenal ulcer. After several months of convalescence at home, he applied and was admitted to Yale in the autumn of 1924, where he began to learn and truly develop his artistic talent.

His first freehand drawing class at Yale was a disaster. His teacher, whose teaching techniques were disciplinary and highly structured, did not appreciate Osborn's resistance to the drudgery of repetitious drawing exercises. He was asked to leave during the second class. But justice was served later in his life when Osborn earned the Yale Arts Association medal for "distinction in visual arts."

Life, however, wasn't filled with



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only good times for young Robert Osborn. The depression robbed him of a few of them, and he was forced to turn his talents into cold cash. When money from home stopped coming because his father simply had not enough to send, he "began to draw all sorts of ads at five dollars a drawing." He even tried to sell drawings to the *New Yorker* only to meet with rejection.

His interest in aviation was soon rekindled by the news of the day — Lindbergh's epic solo transatlantic flight. Osborn was intrigued by this, saying, "Anyone with any sense knew that he was hanging his life on the performance of one fairly reliable radial engine."

Perhaps borrowing the idea, with \$1,500 in his pocket he went off to Europe by himself, specifically to Rome and Paris via London. The journey by ship across the Atlantic was unlike Lindbergh's — a complete bore, especially after Osborn accidentally lost overboard the ship's only piece of recreational equipment, a large medicine ball. In Paris he learned to paint and studied art firsthand. On one occasion, he encountered Picasso in an artists' supply shop.

He lived in Europe for years off and on and finally came back to the United States for good in 1937. After settling into life on this continent, he tried to join the Canadian Air Force

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before the U.S. became involved in WW II but was rejected when they learned of his ulcer. In December 1941, he attempted to enlist in the Navy at a local post office in Connecticut. Eventually he became a reserve officer as a result of the combined wisdom of then Captain Arthur Radford and Commander A. K. Doyle, both of whom later attained flag rank.

Osborn told *NANews* a few years ago how it all began.

"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 Capt. Radford had



This caricature depicts the early days of Naval Aviation with typical Osborn style.

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 forgetting 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."

About the time Dilbert was being produced, the idea of Gramps came along. The Bureau of Aeronautics had created the Office of Aircraft Safety Counselor, which was headed by then Lieutenant Commander Seth Warner,

a "very experienced pilot in his own right," according to Osborn. "Seth was anxious to have some kind of character who could speak his wisdom about flying. He thought up the name Grampaw."

"The idea took off," Osborn said recently, "because things were so volatile in those days that you could put anything like this right into print and in two weeks get it going." Basically, the idea was good to "have this old aviator who has survived with his wisdom trying to speak, rather sharply, to these young pilots," says Osborn.

While the war continued in the Pacific, Osborn did not spend all his time at his drawing table. During a tour at sea aboard *Essex*, he saw the Saipan and Iwo Jima battles firsthand. There he witnessed death — and this time courage — with the same cold reality he had experienced when he was a young boy back in Wisconsin.

In his words, "The pilot who had taught me to fly at the Atlanta Naval Air Station appeared in a squadron of fighters on the *Essex*. [Osborn learned to fly in a Stearman biplane during his time in the Navy.] During the battle for Saipan, his plane was hit and he was seriously wounded. He managed to be guided back some 80 miles to the carrier, blood streaming down his face, his sight failing, two wingmen



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telling him what to do. 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: the view of a young man departing to death."

Osborn left the Navy because of his chronic ulcer, which once again became a debilitating and painful problem. He returned to his wife Elodie in New York City.

"What I discovered in the Navy," he says in his memoirs, "was that I had an ability to quickly comprehend a problem, organize its components and then produce the drawings that explained what needed to be known. The humor was added to assure attention."

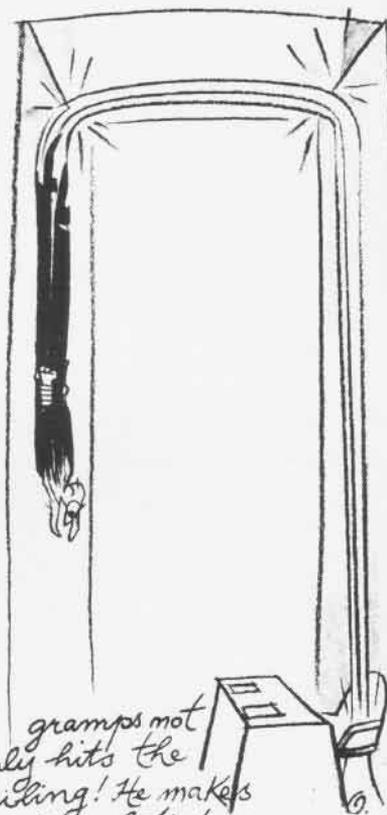
After returning to civilian life, he was asked by *Naval Aviation News* to continue drawing Gramps and he accepted the offer.

When asked how he would sum up his 40 years of drawing Gramps, he says, "It is a salute to the value of the creativity of Seth Warner," the man behind the original idea. "Gramps," he goes on, "has become a very real person for me. I'm amazed when I go to my studio that I now really see him as an old man, with whiskers, and

his whole inside character, which I suppose is getting quite a lot like mine. If somebody does something very dumb," he says, "I can really attack that. If I had to do drawings of all the wonderful things pilots did, pretty soon it would lose its edge."

Gramps does focus on good decisions and acts, and on heroic achievements, from time to time — perhaps not often enough for some, but it is not his lot in life. Neither is it Osborn's.

He admits, however, that he would be scared to death to fly in today's



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operational aircraft because of their complexity, and he holds "the greatest admiration for those young Naval Aviators. It's so complex today. It was so simple during the war."

When asked at his Salisbury, Conn., home recently if he had ever been bored drawing Gramps, he said with a warm, laughing outburst, "No. Never!" ■

NAVAL AVIATION
NEWS



Petibone's 20th Anniversary

JANUARY 1963

NavMap No. 00-728-3





The Warner-Osborn Team

On the occasion of Robert Osborn's 40th anniversary with Grampaw Pettibone, he asked that the spotlight be shared with the late Captain Spencer (Seth) Warner, the individual who created the old sage of safety. In the words of Capt. Warner in a letter to *NANews* in 1962, "Grampaw Pettibone was conceived in desperation, the offspring of frustration or despair.

"All accident reports were routed to my Flight Statistics desk [in 1942]. Daily review of accident reports soon produced a feeling of nausea and anger. Why were so many of the stupid accidents alike, and why were so many of them 100% pilot error?

"For years we squadron officers had to *read and initial* various safety instructions, and from personal experience I knew this was often done with only casual perusal. A great many of the accidents were caused by pilots and others who *initialed* but did not carefully read and take appropriate action. Hence the frustration!

"Something spectacular had to be done immediately to attract attention to make our safety warnings stick. We couldn't convert them into jingles and croon them to pilots over the radio, as the advertising agencies do.

"So, we invented a cantankerous old codger with a low boiling point and uninhibited with official language, and turned him loose hoping that his pithy remarks and sardonic humor would hold their attention long enough to stab with a vital safety factor — make them *safety conscious*. We named this choleric old curmudgeon Grampaw Pettibone."

Capt. Warner (Naval Aviator No. 2974) died on January 19, 1967, 24 years almost to the day after Gramps appeared in *NANews*. The Warner-Osborn team is a legacy of what imagination and creativity can do to save lives.

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