



Up in the Air

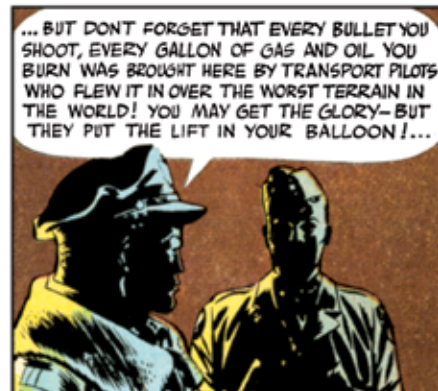
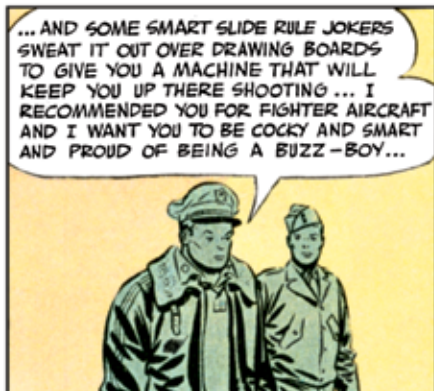
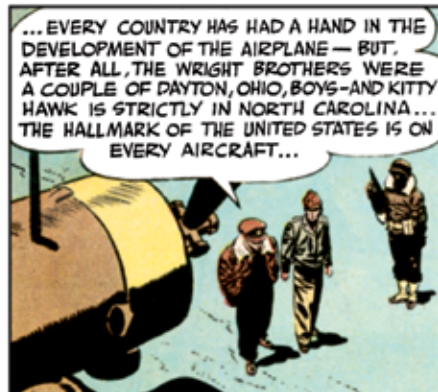
With Milton Caniff

By John T. Correll

There was Terry and the Pirates and Steve Canyon, to say nothing of the Dragon Lady.

When Raven Sherman, a character in "Terry and the Pirates," met her demise in October 1941, there was a tumult of reaction. Cartoonist Milton Caniff got 1,400 letters, newspapers reported the event as news, and 450 students at Loyola University staged a vigil in memory of Raven.

Left: In his studio in the Hudson highlands of New York state, Milton Caniff shows off the "Steve Canyon" Sunday page for September 1947.



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**CAUTIOUSLY, THE DRAGON LADY
DRAWS A SMALL AUTOMATIC FROM
A POCKET IN THE LINING OF HER CAPE**

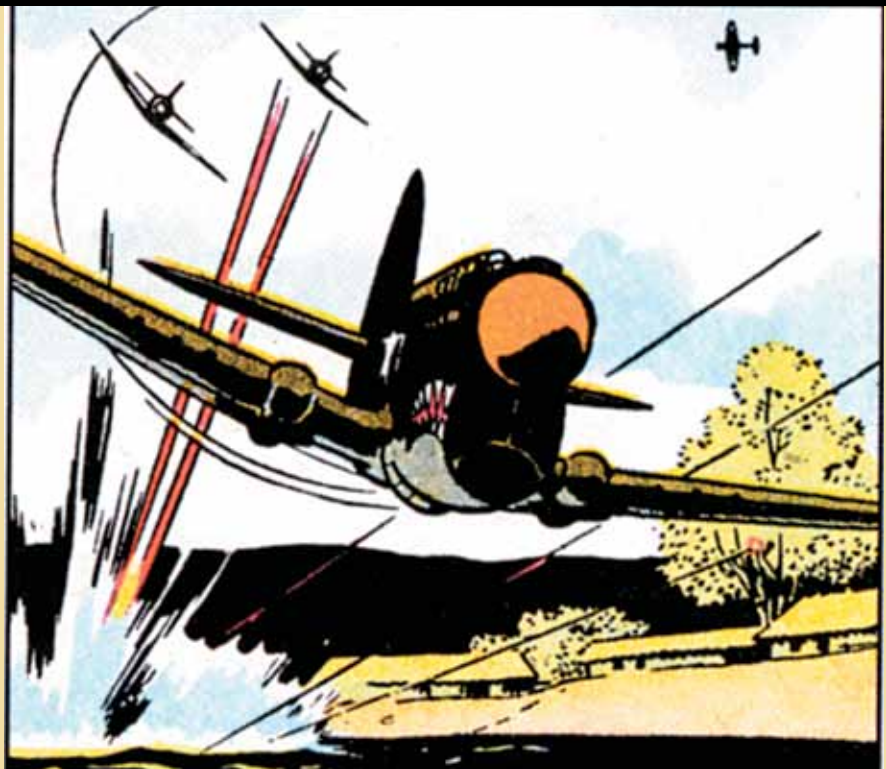
Above: The blue and gold bar on Terry's cap indicates that he is a flight officer, a new AAF grade created in 1942. Below: Terry in a P-40 evades three Japanese Zeros. Moments later, Flip Corkin showed up to help. Right: The pace of the story always quickened when the pirate queen made an appearance.

Such was the popularity of newspaper comic strips and "Terry and the Pirates" in particular in the days before television. Terry had already spun off a network radio show in 1937 and a movie serial in 1940. Some 20 million readers faithfully followed his exploits daily in the comics.

The strip began in 1934 when Terry Lee—described as a "wide-awake American boy"—and Pat Ryan, a "two-fisted adventurer," arrived in China with a treasure map left to Terry by his grandfather. They soon ran afoul of the Dragon Lady, the beautiful but cold-blooded boss of the river pirates for whom the strip was named. Over the next several years, Terry and Pat battled renegades and cutthroats on the China coast. There were also assorted damsels needing to be rescued.

Caniff grew up in Dayton, Ohio, home of the Wright brothers, but at the time of the Raven Sherman uproar in 1941 "Terry" was not yet an aviation strip. However, it could not go on as a picaresque adventure story. War had engulfed China and even the Dragon Lady and the pirates were fighting the Japanese.

Caniff, convinced that the United States would be pulled in, decided before Pearl Harbor that Terry would spend the war years in the US armed forces. Grown to young manhood, Terry learned to fly



in China in 1943, joined the Army Air Forces, and flew P-40s and P-51s with the Fourteenth Air Force "Flying Tigers."

For the rest of his life, Caniff was closely aligned with the Air Force. He drew "Terry and the Pirates" until 1946, when he gave

it up to start a new strip, "Steve Canyon," which he continued until his death in 1988. He forged a unique bond with airmen, who made Terry Lee and Steve Canyon lasting parts of the heritage of the force. During World War II, AAF Chief Henry



syndicate to do an adventure strip set in China. Strips in those days were owned not by their creators but by the syndicates that sold them. It was Patterson who decided on the hero's name (Caniff had proposed "Tommy") and dictated the title of the strip. Terry made his debut on Oct. 22, 1934.

Caniff was an excellent storyteller with a good ear for dialogue. Few newspaper artists of the day could match his drawing ability and the strip caught on quickly. The distinctive "Terry" logo with the fat drop-shadow letters appeared in August 1935, done by Noel D. Sickles, with whom Caniff shared a studio. Later on, Sickles did a similar logo for "Steve Canyon." It was from Sickles that Caniff adapted the "chiaroscuro" technique of strong black and white contrasts that often gave his panels a strikingly dramatic effect.

A natural left-hander, Caniff was pressured by his first grade teacher to use his right hand. Thereafter he wrote with his right but drew (and drank coffee) with his left. To avoid smearing, he began the inking of his pages from his right side and worked to the left.

The Japanese—initially called "the invaders"—showed up in the strip in 1938,

Left: In 1949, Steve joined a mercenary air outfit fighting the Red Chinese. And yes, the Summer Smith shown here is the same Summer Smith who eventually married Steve Canyon. Below: The general pinning on Terry's wings is a dead ringer for Claire Chennault.



H. "Hap" Arnold detailed an officer to assist Caniff with any help or technical details to maintain authenticity. In the 1950s, the Air Force gave Steve Canyon his own serial number (AO 041044) and the Air Force Chief of Staff, Gen. Nathan F. Twining, identified him as "an officer in my command."

Terry and the Invaders

From the perspective of 2013, it may be difficult to comprehend how comic strips were regarded as that important. Back then, almost everyone read the funnies, eagerly awaiting the next installment of the adventure continuities that could last for months. Cartoon strips in the daily newspapers were twice the size of comic

strips today and the most popular ones got a full page in color on Sunday.

Nobody did it better than Milton Arthur Paul Caniff, who created his first comic strip when he was 12 years old and graduated from Ohio State in 1930 with a major in fine arts. Curtis E. LeMay, future Air Force Chief of Staff, was at Ohio State at the same time, but they were not friends. Caniff, who supplemented his income with artwork for hire, did a poster for a group protesting military training for a fee of \$25. ROTC cadet LeMay was not amused.

After graduation, Caniff went to New York, where he drew "Dickie Dare" for the Associated Press. From there he was recruited by Joseph M. Patterson of the *Chicago Tribune-New York Daily News*



Right: In this Caniff cover for Air Force Magazine in 1972, Caniff drew Steve Canyon in World War II uniform talking with an F-15 pilot. Above: Steve retracts to jets in December 1952.

opposed by the Dragon Lady's guerillas operating in loose cooperation with Terry and Pat.

"They were referred to as 'the invader,' but everyone knew who they were," Caniff said. "They were portrayed as villains. Patterson and his cousin, Col. Robert R. McCormick, who was the publisher of the *Chicago Tribune*, were both isolationists and their newspapers reflected that stance."

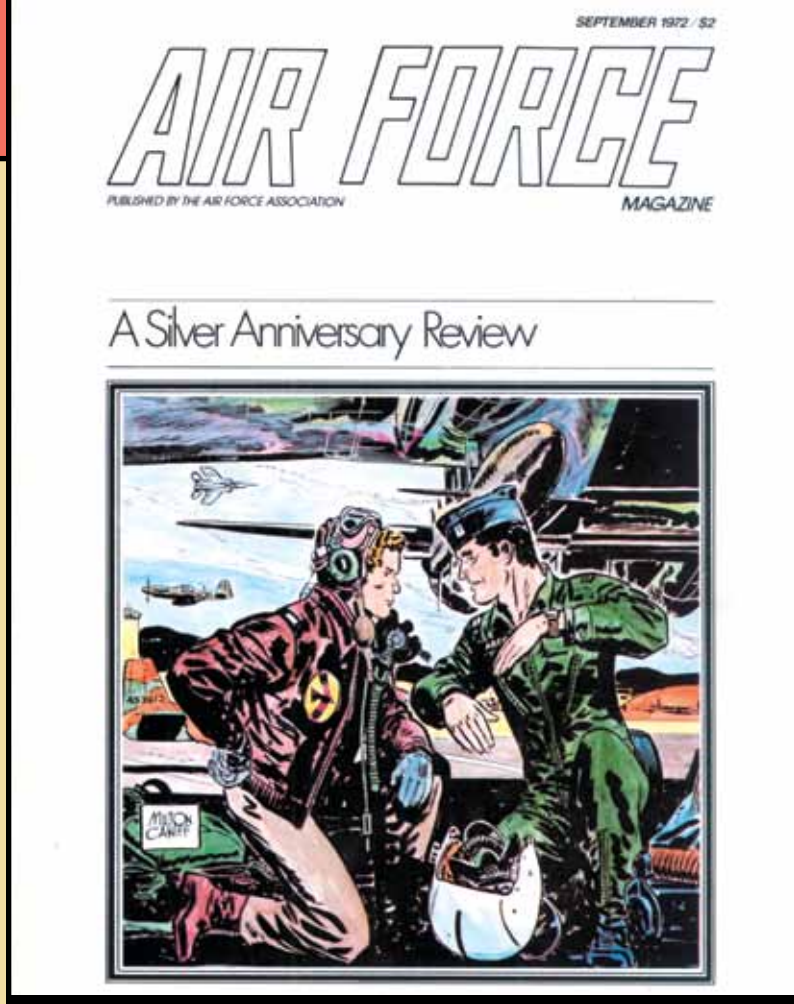
Patterson summoned Caniff to his office in September 1941 after a strip had shown invader aircraft clearly marked with the Imperial Rising Sun. "Don't think we want the Japanese in there," Patterson said and overrode Caniff's disagreement. "The Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor shortly after our discussion and I heard no more about not using 'the invader' in China," Caniff said.

Terry Wins His Wings

In the fall of 1941, Caniff received a visit that had lasting consequences. The caller was Philip G. Cochran, a first lieutenant in the Air Corps and commander of the 65th Pursuit Squadron flying P-40 Warhawks at a small airfield near Groton, Conn. Cochran, also an Ohio State graduate, had a slight acquaintance with Caniff and had come to Caniff's studio in the Hudson Valley, 40 miles north of New York, seeking a favor.

He wanted Caniff to design an insignia for his squadron. Caniff readily agreed but spent the rest of the afternoon pumping Cochran about flying. Cochran's descriptions, in the picturesque vernacular of the fighter pilot, jelled Caniff's plans for Terry.

At Caniff's request, Cochran spent the next four evenings at Groton writing out details of how he taught flying. The product was 23 pages long and coached Caniff on



jargon as well as details of instruction. Caniff filed it away until he was ready for Terry to begin training.

Caniff gathered additional background on trips to Groton. "He would come down and watch us," Cochran said. "We would dive bomb right off the edge of the field there into the [Long Island] Sound, and we had aerial gunnery right close that he could watch. He would watch our aerial combat work, and then he would talk with the kids."

"Suddenly it dawned on me that I was sitting on top of one of the most colorful

characters that I or anybody else had ever seen," Caniff later said. Terry's combat leader and mentor would be "Flip Corkin," who looked and sounded exactly like Phil Cochran.

Caniff did not want to divert Terry away from China for training. Besides, there were other complications. Terry was still too young to be an officer, and in a decade of knocking around the Orient, he had gotten little formal education. At the suggestion of a reader who wrote in, Caniff considered the possibility of Terry becoming a flying sergeant.



Milton Caniff never served in the armed forces. He got an induction notice in January 1943 when he was 35, just barely inside the age bracket for the draft, but was declared 4-F because of chronic phlebitis, inflammation of a vein. This seems to have enhanced Caniff's commitment to support those who did serve.

Terry was the special favorite of those in the Air Force, but there were plenty of readers in the other services, too. Pat Ryan, Terry's old China buddy, was an officer in the Navy and figured in several adventures. Army and Navy ground troops appeared regularly. There was even a Canadian officer who flew with Terry's squadron.

Caniff built his following in the armed forces with great attention to authenticity and extraordinary effort to ensure that everything—uniforms, equipment, terminology, procedures—was absolutely accurate. His studio bulged with photos, notes, Army manuals, and artifacts that

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Above left: Caniff based many of his characters on real people. This gallery is from our July 1957 cover and includes (from top, left to right) Poteet Canyon (based on Nancy O'Neal); Dude Hennick (Frank Higgs); Col. Flip Corkin (Philip Cochran); Lt. Upton Bucket (Bill Mauldin); Col. Vince Casey (C. D. Vincent); CAP Cadet Scooter McGruder (Margaret Kennefick); Allee McDean (Alice McDermott); Maj. Gen. Claire Chennault (himself); Steve Canyon ("a composite"); Gen. Joseph Stilwell (himself); Lt. Taffy Tucker (Bernice Taylor); Miss Lace (Dorothy Partington); Maj. Luke Adew (William Lookadoo); Col. Soup Davey (David F. McCallister); Lt. Peter Pipper "the Piper" (John F. Kennedy); Brig. Gen. P. G. "Shanty" Town (also C. D. Vincent); and Miss Mizzou (Marilyn Monroe). **Left:** Part of the appeal of "Terry and the Pirates" was Caniff's superb rendering of scenes in China.

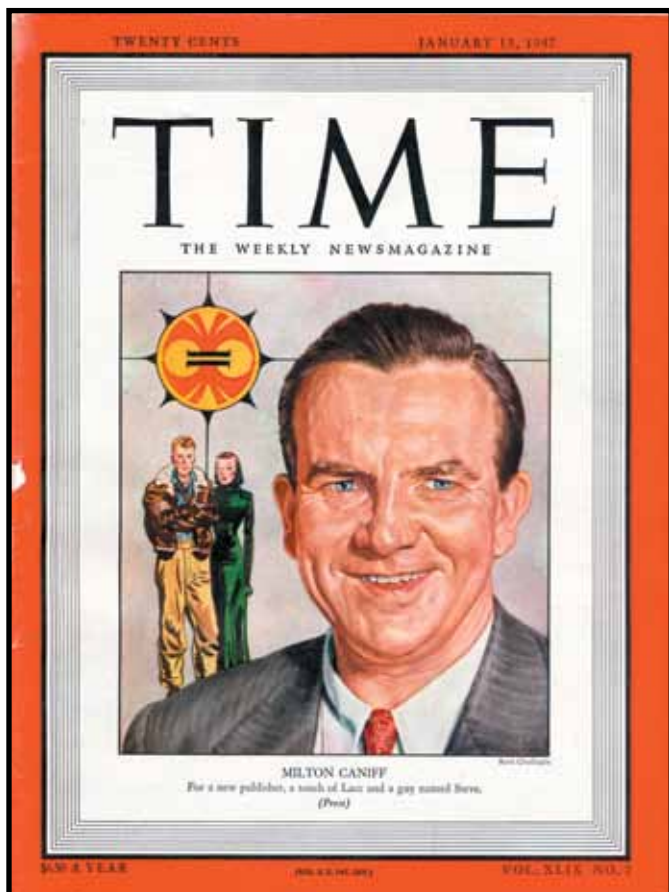
The solution was for Terry, suitably aged and sponsored by the US Army, to enter the Chinese Army Flight Sergeants School in February 1943. Corkin augmented his instruction. Upon Terry's graduation, an Army board appointed him a flight officer, a new grade established in 1942, approximately equivalent to warrant officer. In October 1943, a general—who was a dead ringer for Claire Chennault of Flying Tiger fame—pinned on Terry's wings.

In the most famous Caniff Sunday page of all time, the "Let's Take a Walk, Terry" segment on Oct. 17, 1943, Corkin walks around the flight line with newly fledged pilot Terry and delivers an inspirational talk about the war and the Air Force. This page, often reprinted, was "read" into the Congressional Record and appeared as an *Air Force* Magazine guest editorial in September 1985.

included a Chinese tongue scraper and a license plate from Shanghai.

In addition to his work on "Terry," Caniff produced a weekly strip, "Male Call," for the Army's Camp Newspaper Service. It featured Miss Lace, a sultry siren in a slinky, low-cut dress who concentrated her attentions on enlisted men instead of officers. Forty years later, Caniff was still getting requests for Miss Lace pinups.

Phil and Terry tangled with saboteurs and spies as well as Japanese pilots and in early 1944 they traded in their P-40s for P-51 Mustangs. They were joined by Lt. Charles C. Charles, "Hotshot Charlie," who stayed on as Terry's sidekick. When Phil Cochran got a promotion, so did Flip Corkin. Both moved up to full colonel. Newspapers in the United States carried features about Cochran as "the real Flip Corkin."



Above: When “Steve Canyon” began in January 1947, Time magazine’s cover pictured Caniff, Steve, and Copper Calhoon. Right: This self-caricature from 1942 noted Caniff’s obsession with getting the details right.

In February 1944, Corkin was alerted for a “big job coming up” and, along with Terry, deployed to a staging base in India. In the March 17 strip, Flip briefs his crews on operations from an “advanced field.” Passing comments in other panels left no doubt that the airstrip was in Burma.

On March 18, the Associated Press reported that Allied troops were engaged behind Japanese lines in Burma, having been inserted by a special air unit commanded by Cochran. (See “The Air Invasion of Burma,” *Air Force Magazine*, November 2009.)

The FBI was on Caniff’s doorstep forthwith. Caniff drew the strip four weeks ahead of publication. How did he know about Burma so far in advance?

Caniff said it was a coincidence. He had been aware that Cochran went to India and the overall Allied counteroffensive in Burma had been in the news for months. The “Terry” story had nothing in common with the real operation except the location. Caniff said that Cochran never told him anything.

Shortly thereafter, Caniff decided to leave the Tribune-News syndicate and give up “Terry and the Pirates,” for

which the syndicate held the copyright. He wanted a strip of his own and in December 1944 signed a contract with the Field Enterprises syndicate to produce a new strip, with Caniff keeping ownership and full editorial control. His contract with Tribune-News had another two years to run. He continued to give “Terry” his best effort and the quality of the strip never flagged.

Terry became a second lieutenant in 1944 and was promoted to first lieutenant just before the war ended. Recruited by Army intelligence as an undercover agent, Terry took a postwar job as a pilot for Air Cathay, a down-at-the-heels freight line flying war surplus transports. Hotshot Charlie and the Dragon Lady returned for one last rollicking adventure in 1946.

Horizons Unlimited

Caniff’s last Terry appeared Dec. 29, 1946. When he left, the strip ran in 220 newspapers and had 31 million readers, among them the Duke of Windsor, Margaret Truman, and novelist John Steinbeck. Even before the name of the new strip was announced, 125 newspapers signed up to carry it.

“Steve Canyon” made its debut Jan. 13, 1947. Caniff’s departure from “Terry” was front page news. The *Time* magazine cover story said it was “comparable to Henry Ford quitting his motor company and setting up shop in competition across the street.”

Stevenson Burton Canyon was an older and more rugged version of Terry. He flew B-25 bombers in World War II and left service as a captain. In 1947, he was the proprietor of Horizons Unlimited, a one-airplane air service that specialized in dangerous missions. Right away, Steve encountered Copper Calhoon, a hard-boiled babe in the mold of the Dragon Lady. She reappeared now and then in all her malevolence over the next 30 years.

It took Caniff a while to define his characters and story line. In the second year, mishaps in the Middle East eliminated the confining entanglements of Horizons Unlimited and the still-unpaid-for airplane, leaving Steve free to pursue adventures on his own. There was a flash of the old Caniff wartime flavor in 1949 when Steve joined a mercenary air outfit fighting the Red Chinese revolutionaries.

The strip gained its long-term focus and



direction when Steve returned to active duty in October 1950 as a major. He remained in the Air Force until the strip ended in 1988, alternating between regular military jobs and special detached duty. In his first assignment, he flew C-54 transports into Indochina from an unspecified "island off the Asiatic coast."

Steve began transition training into jet fighters in 1952, was promoted to lieutenant colonel, and in 1953 took command of an Air Defense Command fighter interceptor squadron. One of his pilots was Lt. Peter Pipper, modeled on the newly elected senator from Massachusetts, John F. Kennedy. This continued Caniff's penchant for fashioning characters on real individuals, as he had done with Flip Corkin. (Phil Cochran would reappear briefly in 1959 as "General Philierie.")

Steve barely had the interceptor squadron in hand before he was off again to Asia on another secret mission. His next promotion—his last, to full colonel—came in 1960. As with Terry, Steve maintained absolute accuracy in all Air Force matters. For reasons not disclosed, he and his colleagues preferred the alternative silver tan uniform to the regular blue one. In the moderately

successful "Steve Canyon" television show on NBC in 1958-1959, the actor playing Steve faithfully wore silver tans.

Friend of the Force

The Air Force valued Caniff as a friend and for his contributions to morale, recruiting, and public relations. "Milton Caniff has done more for the Air Force than any person since Billy Mitchell," said columnist Bob Considine, who may have gotten a little bit carried away in his assessment.

In 1957, Caniff stood on a reviewing stand at Bolling Air Force Base in Washington, D.C., for a parade held in connection with the bestowing on him of the Air Force Exceptional Service Award, the service's highest honor for a civilian. Gen. Thomas D. White, Chief of Staff, presented Caniff 400 letters, one from every general in the Air Force.

The unit insignia Caniff did for Phil Cochran in 1941 was the first of hundreds, including many designed for Air Force, Navy, and Army units in Vietnam. Caniff did portraits each year for the new inductees into the National Aviation Hall of Fame. Individual service members who wrote to ask for a drawing often got one.

Despite all the stories set in Asia, Caniff had never been there until 1960 when he got far enough ahead with "Steve Canyon" to take a month's vacation. On his stopover in Japan, he found time to visit with airmen based there and draw some cartoons for them.

He was also close to the Air Force Association, on whose board of directors he served. He was two times president of the Iron Gate Chapter in New York and was AFA's Man of the Year in 1965. AFA turned up periodically in his strips. When Terry and Hotshot Charlie joined AFA in July 1946, their lapel pins came in a letter from Flip Corkin saying, "Glad you're in the lodge." It was written on an AFA letterhead, which let Caniff work the AFA address into the strip that day. Steve Canyon was in the lodge, too. At an airstrip in the Himalayas in 1949, an ex-Navy expatriate snarled that Steve was "the golden-haired darling of the Air Force Association."

In 1960, "Steve Canyon" hit the peak circulation for the strip's 41-year run, appearing in 647 newspapers. However, the good times did not last. All of the adventure strips with stories strung out for months lost popularity in the 1960s, but in Caniff's case, the Vietnam War was a huge factor as well.

Steve Canyon went to Vietnam three times, and in 1967 encountered an obnoxious war protester named Felicia Lymph who distinctly resembled Jane Fonda. Caniff's hard-core fans loved it, but for the first time, Caniff was out of step with public opinion in his continued support of the Vietnam War and his pro-military stance. Readership fell and a significant number of newspapers dropped the strip.

"Steve Canyon was becoming another casualty of the war in Vietnam," said R. C. Harvey, author of *Meanwhile*, the definitive biography of Caniff.

After 1971, Steve Canyon—who was getting somewhat long in the tooth—stopped flying regularly. He was assigned to the Air Force Office of Special Investigations and wore civilian clothes. (His beloved silver tans had been phased out anyway in 1965.)

Back to Ohio State

Caniff died April 3, 1988. The strip continued for another two months, done by his assistants, but ended in June when the final story concluded. When Caniff died, Charles Schulz, creator of "Peanuts," said, "I think he did more for the profession of the comics than any other person." Cartoonist Jules Feiffer said, "What Astaire applied to dance, Caniff applied to paper."

Caniff is often described as "the Rembrandt of the comic strip" and still commands a following today. The IDW Library of American Comics has the full run of Terry in print in six elegant volumes. The wartime Terrys have been back to the press several times and the Steve Canyon reprints are up to 1952 so far.

The Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum at Caniff's alma mater has the papers, artwork, and memorabilia he left behind. The collection fills 526 boxes and includes 12,000 original pieces of art.

The Air Force "retired" Steve Canyon in 1988. A group at McGuire AFB, N.J., spent five months poring over old strips to compile an extensive "personnel record" for Steve. Finding the data for the last part of his service "incomplete," the researchers assigned him to McGuire's 18th Military Airlift Squadron as a C-141 instructor pilot for that period.

In 1989, McGuire presented the personnel record to Ohio State, along with a modern uniform bearing Canyon's insignia, rank, and name tag and a display holding his 13 medals and eight ribbons. ■

John T. Correll was editor in chief of Air Force Magazine for 18 years and is now a contributor. His most recent article, "SAC's Half Century," appeared in the March issue.