

# A Brush With the





**Milton Caniff was out front with “Terry and the Pirates,” but other cartoonists also found their calling in the wild blue yonder.**

# Air Force

By John T. Correll



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In October 1934, Terry Lee—described as a “wide awake American boy” of about 10 years of age—and Pat Ryan—termed a “two-fisted adventurer”—arrived in China. They had a treasure map, left to Terry by his grandfather, and were in search of a lost gold mine. Before they reached their destination, though, they ran afoul of pirates operating along the southern coast of China. The pirate leader was a remarkable woman known as the Dragon Lady.

The setting for all this was “Terry and the Pirates,” a syndicated comic strip written and drawn by Milton A. Caniff. It was enormously popular. It spun off a long-running radio show, a movie serial, and other products, and claimed 30 million readers at its peak.

However, chasing pirates and brigands wasn’t Terry’s ultimate destiny. In World War II, he became a pilot in the US Army Air Forces and flew P-40s and P-51s with the Fourteenth Air Force Flying Tigers in China. That is the image of him that has been remembered ever since.

Terry got involved in the war before the United States did, joining the resistance to the Japanese invaders in 1938. Caniff’s syndicate, wary of strong isolationist sentiment in the United States, objected to naming the aggressors as Japanese in the comic strip. Caniff had to call them “the invaders” until they bombed Pearl Harbor.

Terry, grown to young manhood, learned to fly in China with Col. Flip Corkin. Caniff liked to model some of his characters on real people. The

prototype for Corkin was Air Force Col. Philip Cochran, a noted World War II pilot and leader of air commandos in Burma. (See “The All-American Airman,” March 2000, p. 52.) He became a continuing character in “Terry.”

In a famous “Terry and the Pirates” Sunday page from 1943, Corkin opened with, “Let’s take a walk, Terry,” and then delivered an inspirational talk about the war and the Air Force as he and the newly fledged pilot Terry strolled around the flight line. The page was “read” into the Congressional Record and reported in the newspapers.

Terry, Flip, and their colleagues had a great following among airmen, and the strip had considerable morale and public relations value. Gen. Henry H. “Hap” Arnold, Chief of the Army Air Forces, assigned an officer to assist Caniff with any technical details he needed. Caniff produced another strip, “Male Call,” without charge for camp and base newspapers. It featured Miss Lace, who was reminiscent of the Dragon Lady but less standoffish.

It is difficult today to comprehend what a big deal the funnies used to be. Everybody read the comic strips. Characters were as well known as movie stars. The strips were printed much larger than present comic strips are. On Sunday, a popular strip might get a whole color page to itself.

During a newspaper strike in 1945, New York City Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia read the funnies to children over radio station WNYC. His “dramatic reading” of “Dick Tracy” was fondly remembered.

When Caniff killed off Raven Sherman, a character in “Terry and the Pirates,” in 1941, he got 1,400 letters, newspapers played it as a news story, and 450 students at Loyola University in Chicago staged a vigil.

“Comic” strips were so called because they began with the likes of “The Katzenjammer Kids,” “Moon Mullins,” and “Mutt and Jeff.” By the 1930s and 1940s, though, the “funnies” had matured and were also the domain of adventure continuity strips, including “Flash Gordon,” “Dick Tracy,” “Little Orphan Annie,” “Prince Valiant,” and “Smilin’ Jack.”

Among these classic adventure strips, “Terry and the Pirates” stood out. Caniff was an excellent storyteller with a good ear for dialogue. Many of his panels, rendered in bold lines and shadows with a Winsor & Newton No. 1 brush, were good enough to frame. Caniff

*At left: Milton Caniff drew Steve Canyon talking with an F-15 pilot for a cover of Air Force Magazine in 1972. Steve was an Air Transport Command pilot in World War II, transitioned to jet aircraft in 1952, and commanded an air defense interceptor squadron. Above: This is the opening panel from the famous “Let’s take a walk, Terry” Sunday page in 1943. It was read into the Congressional Record.*

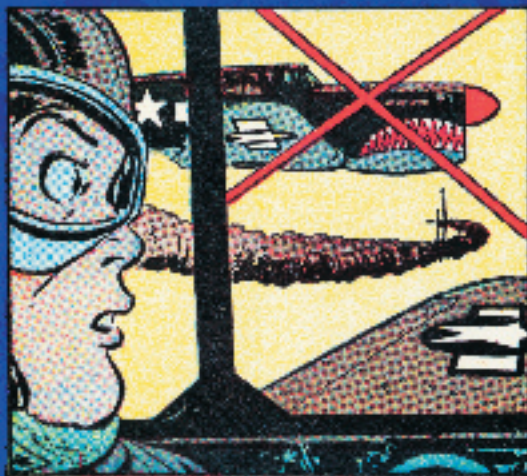
# TERRY AND THE PIRATES



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has been called the “Rembrandt of the Comic Strip.”

Terry ended the war as a lieutenant and in 1946 was recruited by US intelligence as an undercover agent. He took a job as a pilot for Air Cathay, a down-at-the-heels freight line flying war surplus transports.

At that point, Caniff bailed out. He wanted to control his own strip, but the syndicate held the copyright on “Terry and the Pirates.” When Caniff quit, George S. Wunder took over drawing “Terry.” He suffered harsh treatment from critics, most of it unjustified. By any reasonable standard, Wunder’s Terry was usually good and often excellent. His only sin was that he wasn’t Caniff. The strip continued in his hands until it folded in 1973.

Caniff launched a new strip, “Steve

Canyon,” with great fanfare on Jan. 13, 1947. Its beginning was the cover story that week for *Time Magazine*.

Steve Canyon had been a captain in Air Transport Command in World War II and he “had been everywhere.” He was an older and more rugged version of Terry, and for the first several years of the new strip, he ran Horizons Unlimited, an air service that specialized in dangerous assignments.

### Jet Pilot

He was called to active duty as a major during the Korean War. In 1952, he qualified in jet aircraft, was promoted to lieutenant colonel, and became commander of an air defense interceptor squadron. One of his pilots, introduced in 1953, was Lt. Peter Pippier. Again basing a character on a real person, Caniff modeled the ebullient Pippier on the newly elected Senator from Massachusetts, John F. Kennedy.

Steve Canyon remained in the US Air Force until the end of the strip, although he was often off on special assignments and adventures that had little connection with regular military service. He was recognized by Gen. Nathan F. Twining, the Air Force Chief of Staff, as “an officer in my command.” He had his own serial number, AO-041044.

Caniff also had a special relationship with the Air Force Association. He served as president of AFA’s Iron Gate Chapter in New York, was on the AFA Board of Directors, and in 1965 was AFA’s Man of the Year. When Terry Lee joined AFA in 1946, it was the subject of the strip on July 19. As Caniff told

*In this panel (top left) from 1944, Flight Officer Terry Lee watches a Japanese fighter go down in flames under the guns of Flip Corkin’s P-40. In the above promotional drawing, Terry wears the patch of the Fourteenth Air Force Flying Tigers on his leather jacket.*

it, AFA had Flip Corkin send Terry and his sidekick, Hotshot Charlie, their lapel pins with a letter saying, “Glad you’re in the lodge.” Corkin wrote on AFA letterhead, which let Caniff provide the AFA address to his readers.

Caniff died on April 3, 1988. His assistants continued to produce the strip for another few months, after which it was discontinued. Col. Steve Canyon retired from the Air Force on April 3, 1989, exactly a year after Caniff’s death. McGuire AFB, N.J., worked up Canyon’s personnel records and presented them to the Milton Caniff Research Room at Ohio State University. The file included assignments, decorations, citations, family data, flight and personnel records, and Servicemen’s Group Life Insurance forms.

Terry and Steve weren’t the only airmen in the funnies, nor were they the first. “Fliers were celebrities in the ’20s and ’30s, like ballplayers, prizefighters, and movie actors,” said Ron Goulart in *The Adventurous Decade: Comic Strips in the Thirties*. “People wanted to follow aviation not only in real life



*This is George Wunder’s version of Terry, who is a lieutenant colonel in the Vietnam War in this panel from the late 1960s.*



but in all the entertainment media. So there were air movies, air pulps, and a slew of air-minded comic strips."

The first aviation strip was "Tail-spin Tommy," introduced in 1928. It featured Tommy Tomkins and his pals and their exploits in biplanes and open cockpit monoplanes. Both the artwork and the writing were awkward, but it nevertheless achieved circulation in 250 newspapers. The strip hung on until 1942.

Another early entrant was "Buck Rogers" in 1929. Buck, a World War I pilot, went to sleep and woke up in the 25th century. It was more of a space opera than an aviation strip, but the first flying machines to appear were a squadron of biplanes. Even the spacecraft looked and performed much like airplanes. The artist, Dick Calkins, had been in the Army Air Service in World War I and sometimes signed his work "Lt. Dick Calkins."

The aviation strip took a big jump in popularity with Zack T. Mosley's "Smilin' Jack" in 1933. Jack Martin was a pilot with a Clark Gable mustache and a permanent smile. In the 1930s,



Above: Bert Christman drew this "Scorchy Smith" panel in 1937. Christman became a pilot, joined the Flying Tigers, and was killed in combat in Burma. Left: Steve Canyon sports a leather flying jacket and a pistol in a shoulder holster for this drawing that accompanied the announcement in January 1947 of Caniff's new comic strip.

his adventures took him to a multitude of exotic locales. He fought in both theaters in World War II. The people in the strip were sketchily drawn, but the airplanes were first-rate.

Mosley was one of the volunteer pilots who helped form the Civil Air Patrol. He flew more than 300 hours of CAP anti-submarine patrols off the Atlantic Coast in 1942-43 and was awarded the Air Medal. In 1976, he was inducted into the CAP Hall of Honor. "Smilin' Jack" ended in 1973 after the longest run of any aviation strip.

"Scorchy Smith" began in 1930, featuring a flying soldier of fortune modeled loosely on Charles A. Lindbergh. The drawing was lackluster until Noel Sickles took over as artist in 1933 and raised the quality. If "Scorchy" had a strong resemblance to "Terry and the Pirates," it was no coincidence. Sickles shared a studio with Caniff in the middle 1930s and the two often contributed to each other's strips. In fact, it was Sickles who designed the distinctive logo for the Sunday "Terry" pages.

In 1936, Sickles quit in a dispute with the syndicate and was replaced in midstory by A. Bert Christman. Christman drew "Scorchy" for two years and became a pilot himself. In 1941, he

joined the American Volunteer Group, the famous Flying Tigers, engaged by China to protect the Burma Road. On Jan. 23, 1942, Christman was flying a P-40 in the defense of Rangoon when he was shot down. He bailed out of his aircraft, but a Japanese pilot strafed and killed him as his parachute came down.

"Buz Sawyer," drawn by Roy Crane, came along in 1943. John "Buz" Sawyer, was a Navy pilot. He and his gunner, Roscoe Sweeney, flew off the aircraft carrier *Tippecanoe* and from other locations in the South Pacific. It was great stuff, but it did not achieve the acclaim and following that accrued to "Terry." (Buz wasn't the only Navy pilot in the comics. Terry's old buddy, Pat Ryan, returned to "Terry and the Pirates" as a Navy aviator during the war years.)

There were various other aviation strips. Among them: "Ace Drummond" (1935-40), "Barney Baxter" (1935-50), "Bruce Gentry" (1945-51), "Fly-in' Jenny" (1939-52), and "Skyroads" (1929-42).

There were also a great many aviation/Air Force comic books. Few of them were of a quality and caliber comparable to the comic strips, but one stood out. Every red-blooded boy read "Blackhawk."

The Blackhawks were freelance fighter pilots, operating from an island in the Atlantic, first fighting Hitler and, later on, despots and criminals

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**Smilin' Jack was always smilin'. He was usually flyin' as well. The artist, Zack Mosley, flew anti-submarine missions for the Civil Air Patrol and is in the CAP Hall of Honor.**

of assorted stripes. Blackhawk's team was multinational: Olaf, Hendrickson, Andre, Chuck, Chop Chop, and Stanislaus. Their leader, Blackhawk, came from Poland.

### That Strange Airplane

They appeared first in *Military Comics* (1941), then *Modern Comics* (1945), and, in the postwar years, in *Blackhawk Comics*. James Steranko, writing in his book *The Steranko History of Comics*, noted that, at one point during World War II, "Blackhawk was outselling everything but Superman."

The question was, what was that strange-looking airplane that the Blackhawks flew? The two engines and the leading edge of the wing were well forward of the fuselage and the cockpit. It looked almost as if the airplane held the wing in its teeth, like a knife blade. Bill Ward, one of the artists who drew "Blackhawk" from 1942 to 1945, did not know what the airplane was, either. He worked from art samples he had been given and assumed the airplane to be fictional. As airplane enthusiasts saw right away, the Blackhawk airplane was a Grumman F5F-1 Skyrocket. It was the prototype for a Navy fleet defense fighter, designed in 1938. It first flew in 1940 but soon gave way to more effective aircraft designs.

Over the years, Air Force newspapers and magazines and publications related to the Air Force have carried the work of numerous artists. Three of these—Bob Stevens, Jake Schuffert,

and Jack Tippit—were in the major leagues of comic art.

Bob Stevens was commissioned in the Air Corps in 1943. He flew just about every World War II fighter the Army Air Forces had except for the P-39. He transitioned to jets and set a world speed record in 1950 in the F-86 Sabre. He later commanded the first Atlas missile squadron and retired as a colonel. In his second career, he was an editorial cartoonist for Copley News Service and his work was syndicated in more than 300 newspapers. He continued to fly his own puddle-jumper airplane.

Stevens' greatest claim to fame was "There I Was ...," which appeared on the back page of *Air Force Magazine* every month from 1964 to 1993. It was one of the most popular features the magazine

**Many of the "Blackhawk" readers—and some of the artists—were in the dark about the strange-looking aircraft, seen here on a comic book cover from 1946. It was a Grumman F5F-1 Skyrocket.**

ever published. (See "Aerospace World: Obituaries," August 1994, p. 21.) Stevens had to be good. His subject was everyday life in the Air Force and, month after month, he laid it before people who had been there and done that. Fortunately, Bob Stevens knew his stuff, and he did not make many mistakes. Books reprinting selections from "There I Was ..." sported back-cover blurbs with praise for Stevens from such luminaries as Ira C. Eaker, Francis S. Gabreski, Chuck Yeager, and Milton Caniff.

Jake Schuffert's cartoons will be instantly familiar to all except the youngest of Air Force veterans. A typical Schuffert character had a big nose, an ample waist, and frequently a cookie duster mustache. Jake drew fast and produced a great deal of material. It appeared in *Airman Magazine*, *Air Force Times*, and in all sorts of other places, including the Air Force Art Collection and USAF Humor exhibit at the National Museum of the US Air Force.

Sgt. John H. Schuffert was a radio operator and gunner on B-24s during World War II. (See "America's Airmen," January, p. 22.) His airplane was shot down in 1944 and he spent the rest of the







© Barbara Stevens

In "There I Was . . ." Bob Stevens often made note of the changes in flying as experienced by different Air Force generations.

war evading the Germans with the help of Yugoslav partisans. During the Berlin Airlift in 1948, Jake was a radio operator for Lt. Gen. William H. Tunner, the airlift commander. Jake drew cartoons for *The Task Force Times*, and some of them had an edge. Tunner backed Jake and overruled a base commander who tried to ban the paper from his base.

Jake spent 13 years on flying status before entering the graphics career field. He kept on drawing, retired from the Air Force as a master sergeant in 1962, returned as a civilian employee, and retired again in 1986. His cartoons appeared in *Airman* for more than 27 years. At first, his page was called "It All Counts for 20," then "It All Counts for 30," and finally, "Here's Jake." For a year following his death in 1998, *Airman* ran a monthly selection of the best of Jake's cartoons. In 1999, some of Jake's drawings from *The Task Force Times* were shown at a special exhibition at the Allied Museum in Berlin.

Jack D. Tippit flew combat missions as a B-24 pilot in the Southwest Pacific in World War II and jet aircraft in the Korean War. He never lost his affection for airplanes and airmen, and remained in the Air Force Reserve. Tippit had a successful civilian career as a syndicated cartoonist. "Amy," which he drew for many years, won the National Cartoonists Society award for panel cartoons in 1970. His work appeared in all major magazines, including *The*



This Jack Tippit illustration appeared with an article on "Washington Duty" in the May 1973 issue of *Airman*.





*The Jake Schuffert look shows in these two panels from Airman. The one at right is from "Memories of the Berlin Airlift," published in 1973, in which Jake recalled his experiences from 25 years before.*

*New Yorker* and *The Saturday Evening Post*. He was president of the National Cartoonists Society in 1971-73 and the first director of the Museum of Cartoon Art in 1974.

### "Jungle Jollies"

As an Air Force Reservist, Jack Tip-pit had a long affiliation with *Airman* Magazine, beginning in 1963. He drew a monthly page, "Jungle Jollies," during the Vietnam War, and developed the little spaceman who for years presided over the magazine's letters page. He was at his best illustrating articles that had a lighter side. He retired as a colonel in 1974.

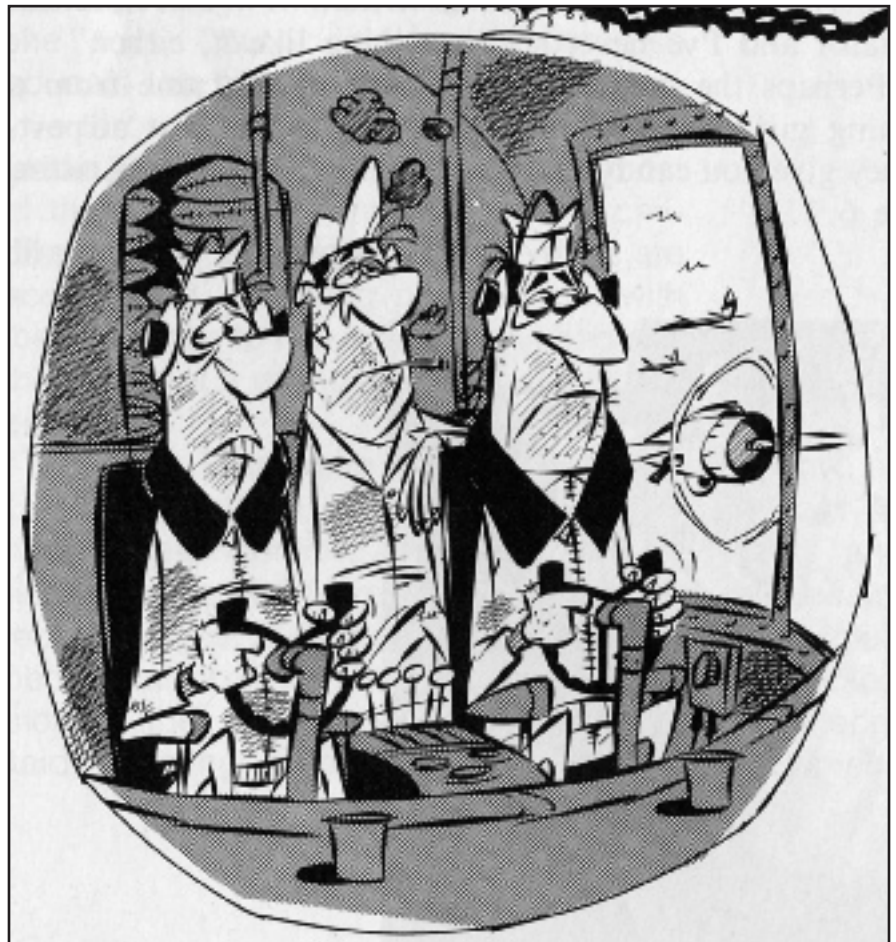
The surface forces were represented in the comics as well:

- "Don Winslow of the Navy" was begun in 1934 by Navy Reserve Lt. Cmdr. Frank V. Martinek to help Navy recruiting and public relations. Winslow was a Navy intelligence officer whose adventures satisfied the need for action in peacetime. In World War II, Lieuten-

ant Commander Winslow and his pudgy partner Lt. Red Pennington saw plenty of combat. The strip lost some of its steam after the war but continued for years in both newspapers and comic books.

- Long before he created "Dennis the Menace," Hank Ketcham drew "Half Hitch" for his camp newspaper while serving in the Navy during World War II. "Half Hitch" was picked up for a while in the 1940s by *The Saturday Evening Post* but was discontinued when the war ended. In 1970, Ketcham revived "Half Hitch" for King Features Syndicate. The strip featured Half Hitch—so named because he was short—his fellow sailors on the aircraft carrier *Clagmire*, and a seagull named Poopsy. It ran for five years.

- "Willie and Joe," among the most famous cartoon characters to come out of World War II, were first drawn in 1940 by Army Pvt. Bill Mauldin for the 45th Division News. Mauldin, working in the evenings and in his spare time, depicted a pair of disheveled dogfaces who got through the privations and dangers of war with as much good humor as they could muster. They eventually moved to a bigger readership in *Stars and Stripes*. Gen. George S. Patton was not amused







are currently in print. Used copies of others, including the comprehensive *There I Was ... 25 Years*, are easy to find and obtain on the Internet.

Newspaper funnies have mostly reverted to being funny. Only a few adventure continuity story strips remain and none of them are about the Air Force. Now and then, we see the World War I American air ace Snoopy flying his doghouse against the Red Baron, but such episodes are infrequent. Besides, artist Charles Schulz is dead and "Peanuts" is in reruns.

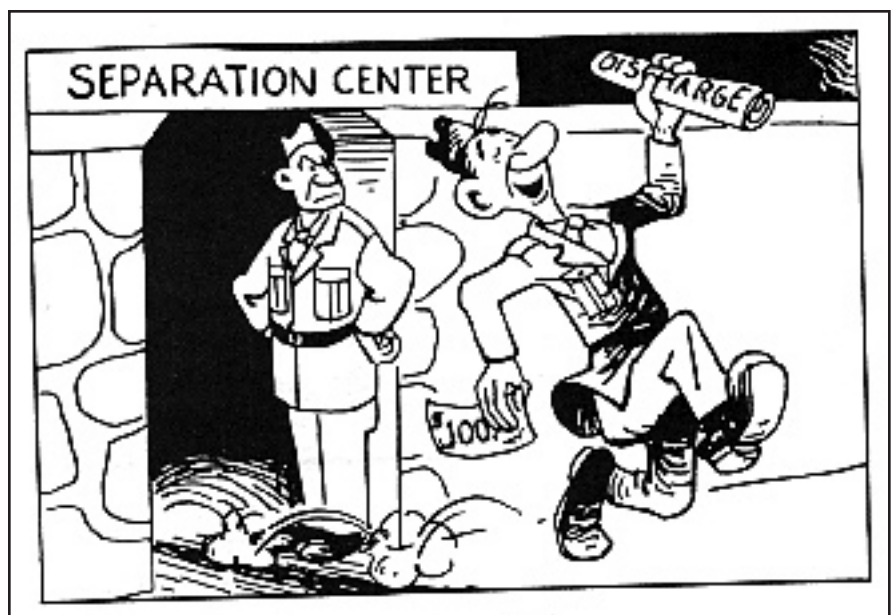
Nevertheless, the tradition of Air Force adventure in the comics is still alive, or flickering anyway, with "Green Lantern," the popular superhero of DC Comics. This is not the same Green Lantern with the purple cloak that older readers may remember from the 1940s. The character has gone through metamorphosis several times.

In the current version, there is a

and attempted to squelch Mauldin, but he was not allowed to do so. Willie and Joe were featured in Mauldin's postwar book, *Up Front*, and Mauldin went on to a long career as a Pulitzer Prize-winning editorial cartoonist. Mauldin, a neighbor of Caniff's in New York, joined the cast of "Steve Canyon" as Lt. Upton R. Bucket.

■ "The Sad Sack" by Sgt. George Baker began in the Army weekly magazine *Yank* in 1942. (Baker said he took the title from the Army term "sad sack of ...") Sack, a hapless private with a handdog look, was put upon by first sergeants, mess sergeants, drill sergeants, officers, and almost everybody else. There was no dialogue, as Sack's misery was conveyed perfectly without words. Sad Sack finally showed a smile as he skipped out the gate of the separation center, discharge in hand, in 1945. The strip went civilian with the Bell Syndicate after the war. Naturally, Sack's luck in the civilian world was no better than it had been in the Army.

■ "Beetle Bailey" by Mort Walker began in September 1950 as a college humor strip but nobody was interested. After six months, Walker had only 25 client newspapers signed up. Beetle joined the Army March 13, 1951. It was a stroke of fortune for Walker. "Beetle Bailey" currently runs in more than 1,800 newspapers. How it worked out for Beetle himself is open to question. He has 56 years time in grade as a private. He and the troops at Camp Swampy still wear Army uniforms from the 1950s.



**At top: Hank Ketcham, who had a big winner going with "Dennis the Menace," revived "Half Hitch" from World War II, but it did not catch on. Above: This was one of the few times that Sad Sack ever smiled. His gloomy look soon returned when his luck in civilian life was no better than it had been in the Army.**

The heyday of the airpower cartoon and the aviation adventure strip is over. The last of them disappeared with the death of Jake Schuffert in 1998. However, many of the old strips and cartoons have been collected in reprint anthologies. Some of these books, notably volumes of the early "Steve Canyon,"

Green Lantern Corps, and the most prominent member is Hal Jordan, a test pilot equipped with a green ring that endows him with super powers. When not rigged out in his Green Lantern regalia, Jordan serves in the United States Air Force Reserve and flies an F-22. ■

*John T. Correll was editor in chief of Air Force Magazine for 18 years and is now a contributing editor. His most recent article, "A Brave Man at the Right Time," appeared in the June issue.*