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# Painting Noses

55 National Guard planes carry Donna Pitaro's artwork

Photographs and text by Doris Dumrauf

**D**ONNA PITARO OF MOON TOWNSHIP, Allegheny County, hopes to break what many may see as an unusual record. During World War II, Sgt. Tony Starcer, a line mechanic for the 91st Bomb Group based at Bassingbourn, UK, painted the noses of 129 airplanes, including the famous image of the George Petty girl on the *Memphis Belle*.

Pitaro is hoping to paint 130 airplane noses. A hairdresser by trade with no professional training in art, Pitaro has her own business, Color My View, in which she paints formal portraits, murals and caricatures and does calligraphy.



Since 1998, when she first painted the nose of one of the planes of the Pennsylvania Air National Guard's 171st Air Refueling Wing stationed in Pittsburgh, Pitaro has been commissioned to paint 55 nose art designs, including some for the Air Force Reserve's 911th Airlift Wing, also based in Pittsburgh.

In a hangar at the Pittsburgh International Airport, Pitaro is standing on the top platform of a B-1 stand, about seven to eight feet off the ground. She is charcoaling her latest design, the Duel 'n Fueler, on the nose of a KC-135T. The strong smell of the acrylic enamel paint she uses permeates the entire hangar.

To get to this point, Pitaro's design had to undergo an

approval process. It began when the crew chief first conveyed an idea to Pitaro, who then drew a rough sketch. After approval of the design by the general, the plane is sanded so that she can outline the draft on the nose. She usually spends two to five days to finish a nose art inside the hangar. Then, 30 days later, her design is clear-coated to prolong its life. Every five years, the entire plane must be sanded down and repainted.

Although nose art enjoyed great popularity among the winged services during World War II, the government has banned it off and on since the Korean War. For example, before planes were deployed during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, nose art that may have been offensive to





people in the Middle East was removed from aircraft. Around 1997 or 1998, the units received guidelines on subjects for nose art. Designs had to enhance unit pride and be gender neutral, symbolic, distinctive and in good taste.

Despite these restrictions, there appears to be no limit to the imagination of the crew members and the artist herself. Pitaro's images include Pittsburgh themes such as sports team symbols, local landmarks, the frontier past and Kennywood, patriotic and historic motives, and cartoon characters such as Yosemite Sam and the Tasmanian Devil.

Lt. Col. Thomas J. Hess, commander of the 171st Maintenance Squadron, has one requirement about the designs: The Strategic Air Command fist has to appear in each of the images Pitaro paints. The fist, which is grasping three lightning bolts and holding an olive branch, symbolizes the Strategic Air Command's mission of being both a nuclear

power and a deterrent. Although deactivated at the end of the Cold War, SAC's legacy lives on in the fleet of KC-135 aircraft maintained at Pittsburgh.

"The time and effort we put into designing and applying nose art to each of our aircraft is by far one of the best investments we've made at the 171st," says Lt. Col. Hess. "Unit members stop to admire the different designs, and we always draw a crowd when our aircraft land at other bases. Donna has become an integral part of our unit culture and has a permanent place in our storied history."

But, doesn't it bother her that her hard work will disappear from the planes when they must be sanded down after five years?

"No," she says. "It gives me job security. Besides, it provides an opportunity to create a new design."

—Doris Dumrauf lives in Coraopolis.

