

METAL STORYTELLERS:  
REFLECTIONS OF WAR CULTURE IN SILVERPLATE B-29 NOSE ART  
FROM THE 509TH COMPOSITE GROUP

by

Terri D. Wesemann

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

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in

American Studies Specialization Folklore

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## ABSTRACT

Metal Storytellers: Reflections of War Culture in Silverplate B-29 Nose Art

From the 509<sup>th</sup> Composite Group

by

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Utah State University, 2019

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Most people are familiar with the *Enola Gay*—the B-29 that dropped Little Boy, the first atomic bomb, over the city of Hiroshima, Japan on August 6, 1945. Less known are the fifteen Silverplate B-29 airplanes that trained for the mission, that were named and later adorned with nose art. However, in recorded history, the atomic mission overshadowed the occupational folklore of this group. Because the abundance of planes were scrapped in the decade after World War II and most WWII veterans have passed on, all that remains of their occupational folklore are photographs, oral and written histories, some books, and two iconic airplanes in museum exhibits. Yet, the public's infatuation and curiosity with nose art keeps the tradition alive.

The purpose of my graduate project and internship with the Hill Aerospace Museum was to collaborate on a 60-foot exhibit that analyzes the humanizing aspects of the Silverplate B-29 nose art from the 509<sup>th</sup> Composite Group and show how nose art functioned in three ways. First, nose art was a canvas to express airmen's emotions regarding their training and ending the war. Second, nose art framed the airmen's experience and created an identity for the crews. Last, after the war, the men reframed

their war experiences by transitioning the art from the plane to their storytelling performances.

Looking beyond the pin up girls and cartoon images, aircraft nose art opens an opportunity to reflect on stories of bravery and fear, loneliness and pain, and a desire for change. While some nose art was a snapshot of a specific time in these airmen's lives—1944 to 1945—other images reflected a culmination of lifelong feelings: dedication, support, and love. A nose art exhibit is a vehicle to help society better understand the experiences of today's veterans and launch conversations about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

(55 pages)

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Most people are familiar with the *Enola Gay*—the B-29 that dropped Little Boy, the first atomic bomb, over the city of Hiroshima, Japan on August 6, 1945. Less known are the fifteen Silverplate B-29 airplanes that trained for the mission, that were named and later adorned with nose art. However, in recorded history, the atomic mission overshadowed the occupational folklore of this group. Because the abundance of planes were scrapped in the decade after World War II and most WWII veterans have passed on, all that remains of their occupational folklore are photographs, oral and written histories, some books, and two iconic airplanes in museum exhibits. Yet, the public's infatuation and curiosity with nose art keeps the tradition alive.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank the members of my committee: chair Randy Williams, Fife Folklore Archives Curator and oral history specialist; Dr. Jeannie Thomas, head of the Department of English; Dr. Susan Grayzel, Professor of History; all of Utah State University, for their diligence, patience, and persistence while guiding me through this process. I would also like to thank all the professors, archivists, museum employees, and descendants of those connected to the 509<sup>th</sup> Composite Group who assisted me in my research. In particular, Aaron Clark, Hill Aerospace Museum Director and Justin Hall, Hill Aerospace Museum Curator, for providing me the opportunity to intern and research for the World War II nose art exhibit. My most sincere appreciation goes to my husband Andreas and my children, Matthaus, Jordan, Jared, and Morgan, for their love, support, and understanding while I fulfilled my dreams.

Terri D. Wesemann

**Slide 1: Title Page**

Metal Storytellers:  
Reflections of War Culture in Silverplate B-29 Nose Art  
From the 509<sup>th</sup> Composite Group

By Terri Wesemann, Utah State University

**Slide 2: Master's Plan B Project**

### Slide 3: 509<sup>th</sup> Composite Group Nose Art

Most people are familiar with the *Enola Gay*—the B-29 that dropped Little Boy, the first atomic bomb, over the city of Hiroshima, Japan on August 6, 1945. Less known are the fifteen Silverplate B-29 airplanes that trained for the mission, that were named and later adorned with nose art. However, in recorded history, the atomic mission overshadowed the occupational folklore of this group. Because the abundance of planes were scrapped in the decade after World War II and most WWII veterans have passed on, all that remains of their occupational folklore are photographs, oral and written histories, some books, and two iconic airplanes in museum exhibits. Yet, the public’s infatuation and curiosity with nose art keeps the tradition alive.

Throughout my research, I found three heavily repeated sources of cultural data from the 509<sup>th</sup> Composite Group: the sign at the front of Wendover Army Airfield, the top-secret training environment, and a poem called “Nobody Knows.” Professor Jo Fox from the Institute of Historical Research claims that “War art tends to reproduce recognized visual codes through colour, style, texture, theme and choice of subject. Such codes have particular importance for propagandists, since they signify potential points of connection with the audience through pre-existing beliefs, values and ideologies that might be summoned to underscore the ‘message’ or viewpoint.”<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of my graduate project and internship with the Hill Aerospace Museum was to collaborate on a 60-foot exhibit that analyzes the humanizing aspects of the Silverplate B-29 nose art from the 509<sup>th</sup> Composite Group and show how nose art was a mechanism that bonded a crew through “everyday items” from their previous life and helped them rebel against the rules, cope with destruction and death, all while maintaining a sense of self.<sup>2</sup> I established that nose art functioned in three ways:

1. Nose art was a canvas to express the airmen’s emotions regarding their training and ending the war.
2. Nose art framed the airmen’s experience and created an identity for the crews.
3. After the war, the men reframed their war experiences by transitioning the art from the plane to their story telling performances.

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<sup>1</sup> Jo Fox, “Propaganda, Art and War,” in *War and Art: A Visual History of Modern Conflict*, ed. Joanna Bourke (London, UK: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2017) p. 198.

<sup>2</sup> Idea of “everyday items” based on Leora Auslander & Tara Zahra. *Objects of War: The Material Culture of Conflict and Displacement*. (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, NY, 2018). p.2.

#### **Slide 4: Methodology**

The Hill Aerospace Museum asked me to research the stories behind the 15 Silverplate B-29 nose art images. I began my project using qualitative methods: historical accounts of the 509<sup>th</sup> Composite Group, followed by oral and written histories, memorabilia, and conversations with descendants to clarify events.

Next, I used academic research in folklore, anthropology, history, military history, art history, cultural studies, and media studies to search for explanations or theory behind the actions and events.

Exploring museums brought the airmen's story to life, and I immersed myself in learning about this group when I visited Historic Wendover Airfield, Los Alamos, and "sat bombardier" on a 30 minute flight in Doc—one of only two flying B-29s in the world. The crew took me over Lake Winnebago in Wisconsin to simulate the overwater approach flying toward Japan or returning to Tinian.

I conclude that nose art was not trivial images of pin up women or cartoon characters, but folklore—informal, meaning unauthorized; traditional, meaning passed on; pieces of expressive culture that was transmitted on the fuselage of planes, as what I call some of the first worldwide memes, and humanized the men who served in the 509<sup>th</sup>.

## Slide 5: Wendover Army Air Field 1944-1945

Part of understanding nose art is to learn the background context. Dan Ben-Amos claimed, “there are contextual conventions that set folklore apart. These are specifications as to time, place, and company in which folklore actions happen.”<sup>3</sup>

The year was 1944.

- General Dwight D. Eisenhower takes over command of the U.S. Forces in the European Theater of Operations.
- Plans were underway for Operation Overlord, codename for the Battle of Normandy, now commonly known as D-Day.
- In the Pacific, U.S. Marines were invading the Mariana Islands and later in August, Navy Seabees will begin the Miracle of Construction—transforming the island of Tinian into the world’s largest air base to accommodate the United States’ newest very heavy bomber.
- Back in the United States, the early B-29s rolled off the assembly line, modified during the “Battle of Kansas,” and designated for the Pacific Theater of Operations.
- Col. Paul W. Tibbets was selected to lead the 509<sup>th</sup> Composite Group, the first Army Air Force group that was organized, equipped, and trained for atomic warfare. The code word Silverplate was established to help Col. Tibbets acquire whatever was needed to conduct the mission. In a newspaper interview he later said, “Nobody in the future will ever be given the responsibility and authority that was given to a 29-year-old man. Today four-star generals have less authority than I had then.”<sup>4</sup>
- Wendover Army Airfield was selected for their top-secret training.
- On September 14<sup>th</sup>, the 393<sup>rd</sup> Bomb Squadron moved to Wendover Field, Utah. The 509<sup>th</sup> Composite Group was activated at Wendover on December 17<sup>th</sup>; a group of ordinary men who were tasked with an extraordinary mission to end WWII.

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<sup>3</sup> Dan Ben-Amos, “Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 58, no.331, (1971):11.

<sup>4</sup> *Ann Arbor News*. “Hiroshima.” (Ann Arbor, MI), Aug. 3, 1975.

## Slide 6: Silverplate B-29

The Silverplate B-29s were developed in 6 Phases starting with the 1944 prototype in Phase 1 and finished with over 145 modified aircraft to transport an atomic bomb by the end of Phase 6 in 1950. A total of 65 aircraft were built under the code name Silverplate and another 80 under the new code name Saddletree in Phase 6.<sup>5</sup>

For the atomic missions on Tinian, the 509<sup>th</sup> Composite Group used 15 Silverplate B-29s developed during phase 3 at the Glenn L. Martin Aircraft Plant in Omaha, Nebraska. The planes were delivered to Wendover Field in April to June of 1945. The modified planes could fly above 30,000 feet at an average speed of 260 mph while carrying a payload of 10,000 lbs. over a distance of 2,000 miles.<sup>6</sup>

Raymond Biel, pilot for Crew A-1, said, “The highlight at Wendover was to visit the Boeing assembly plant in Omaha and pick up a new aircraft specially equipped for a top secret mission; like driving a new Cadillac off the showroom floor.”<sup>7</sup>

Elbert Christman Owens, 393<sup>rd</sup> Bombardment Squadron Flight Chief, said, “I would say one of the most memorable times was going to Omaha, Nebraska, to watch the seven aircraft I had being built. The airplanes were special built and had equipment the other B-29s did not have. To me, this was quite an honor.”<sup>8</sup>

(Cost of Silverplate B-29)<sup>9</sup>

(Cost of F-35)<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Richard H. Campbell, *The Silverplate Bombers: A History and Registry of the Enola Gay and Other B-29s Configured to Carry Atomic Bombs*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005) p.14-15.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Raymond P. Biel, “Biel, Raymond P. 393<sup>rd</sup> Bomb Squadron, Pilot, Crew A-1,” in *The 509<sup>th</sup> Remembered*, ed. Robert and Amelia Krauss (Buchanan, MI, Self-published, 2013) p.38.

<sup>8</sup> Elbert Christman Owens, “Elbert Christman Owens 393<sup>rd</sup> Bombardment Squadron Flight Chief,” in *The 509<sup>th</sup> Remembered*, ed. Robert and Amelia Krauss (Buchanan, MI, Self-published, 2013) p.213.

<sup>9</sup> Richard H. Campbell, *The Silverplate Bombers: A History and Registry of the Enola Gay and Other B-29s Configured to Carry Atomic Bombs*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005) p.6.

<sup>10</sup> “Producing, Operating and Supporting a 5<sup>th</sup> Generation Fighter,” Lockheed Martin Corporation, last modified 2019, <https://www.f35.com/about/cost>.

### **Slide 7: Makeup of the 509<sup>th</sup> Composite Group 1944-1945**

Col. Tibbets handpicked 15 crews from the 393<sup>rd</sup> Bomb Squadron at Fairmont Army Airfield and moved them to Wendover Field, Utah. The airfield was chosen due to its remote location near the salt flats and nearby rural town. The sign at the entrance of the base was the airmen's first clue that they were involved in something different. After arriving at Wendover, Col. Tibbets gathered the airmen in a large room, and revealed they were in a top-secret program for the government that would help end the war possibly a year sooner.

FBI agents watched and followed the men throughout their time at Wendover, on weekend passes to Salt Lake City, and while they were on leave back home. Members were here one day and gone the next for violating orders, getting drunk and talking too much, or for giving a tour of their top-secret B-29. Rumors said these men were shipped to Alaska. Another story said Col. Tibbets' wife asked a Ph.D. scientist from the Manhattan Project to unclog her sink because she was told they were sanitary engineers. At the time, the scientist was not sure why she asked for the help but played along as a good sport.<sup>11</sup> The secrets were a catalyst for the demise of Col. Tibbets's marriage. How do you express your emotions when you have no one to talk to? You turn to art.

Col. Tibbets said, "it took every man of the 509<sup>th</sup> to put those airplanes into the air. Each, not just a select few, played a part and should be recognized for their individual part."<sup>12</sup> James Payne said everyone has a story, and although there were 15 planes, this slide can only expound on 6 of the images.

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<sup>11</sup> Paul W. Tibbets. *Return of the Enola Gay*, (Columbus, OH: Midcoast Marketing, 1998). p. 173.

<sup>12</sup> Paul W. Tibbets. Letter. *Radar Echoes* Newsletter, (May 24, 1993).

**Slide 8: First Point**

1. Nose art was a canvas for expressive culture.

## Slide 9: History of Nose Art

World War II ignited the phenomenon known as the golden years of aircraft nose art. Airmen decorated their plane to protest the structured world they lived in and take back the control they lost during the war. The military drafted them into the service and told them, under the threat of punishment, how to cut their hair, what to wear, what job they were going to do, where they were going to live, and censored what they could and could not talk about. Within a conformed unit, airmen often lost their personal identity and gained a new group identity. During their transformation, the men were exposed to visual culture, which they stored as inventory for later use. Furthermore, the military environment was void of female companionship.

After training, the airmen were assigned to a crew and the crew was assigned to a specific aircraft, entering them into a relationship that continued throughout the war. The more time the airmen spent in the plane, the more humanlike the plane became to the crew. After the war, T.G.H. Ward studied the relationship between pilots and their planes. His 1951 article for the *British Journal of Medical Psychology* concluded that:

When a machine becomes as complicated as an aircraft, with an engine that emits a particular sound, has a particular ‘feel’ and characteristics and usually a certain amount of beauty, it tends to be regarded as a living creature having a personality and sometimes even feelings of its own, and this curious animism results in a relationship developing between man and machine which in ways is similar to relationships that develop between one human being and another human being (283).<sup>13</sup>

Airmen needed a distraction from the death and destruction that surrounded them while training stateside, the B-29s reputation fell just below the B-26 Widowmaker while fighting in a war zone. The men participated in a ritual of naming their airplane and creating unauthorized visual rhetoric on the fuselage alongside the authorized aircraft insignia. Although some of the 509<sup>th</sup> crews named their plane prior to the first atomic mission, the group was banned from applying artwork to avoid detection.

Naming an airplane adopted it into the “military family” the crews had formed. Traditionally, the pilot had the ultimate decision on the name, but most pilots wanted the entire crew to agree on a name that represented all nine crew members; it was a deeply personal gesture. America, in the 1940s, known for its wholesome values, did not publicly talk about violence and sex. The graphic messages in the form of cartoon characters and pin up girls were meant to shock audiences on both sides of the world—and may be considered some of the early forms of world-wide memes transmitting expressive culture as planes flew across the globe. Even though the countries at war spoke different languages, the images translated between the cultures. Combining the horrors of war with familiar references to pop culture increased the audience’s recognition of the symbols. The 509<sup>th</sup> nose art was cultural data produced by the group

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<sup>13</sup> T.H.G. Ward. “The Psychological Relationship Between Man and Aircraft.” (*British Journal of Medical Psychology*, vol. 24, no. 4, 1951) pp. 283–290).

that created rhetorical space and became a platform for storytelling both during and after the war.

### **Slide 10: Why Were the 509<sup>th</sup> B-29 Tails Different?**

The tail markings were the only official and 'unofficial' markings on the Silverplate B-29s. But, after Tokyo Rose welcomed the 509<sup>th</sup> to Tinian, Col. Tibbets changed the black arrow tail designators to blend in with the other B-29 groups.

**Slide 11: *Top Secret***

Numerous memoirs from the 509<sup>th</sup> described the top-secret environment and the sign at the front base gate:

WHAT YOU HEAR HERE-  
WHAT YOU SEE HERE-  
WHEN YOU LEAVE HERE-  
LET IT  
STAY HERE!

In an interview over 71-years later, Jack Widowsky, navigator for Crew B-8, claimed he named the plane and showed he could still keep a secret when he refused to explain what the highlighted “T” and the “S” stood for. His inspiration may have started from the top-secret training environment but an injury that occurred during a training mission finalized his choice. Numerous other crew members recounted the same incident in their memoirs.

In the spring of 1945, Crew B-8 was on a training mission from Wendover to Los Angeles to San Francisco. At about 31,000 feet over San Francisco, the co-pilot called Widowsky up to the cockpit to look at the lights on Alcatraz. He reached the front of the plane an instant before a turret cover blew, opening a hole in the floor, and causing a decompression explosion. Widowsky left his navigation instrument, possibly the Norden Bombsight, in the tunnel, which flew forward and hit him on the head and knocked him “coo-coo.”<sup>14</sup> He was bleeding all over the plane as he returned through the tunnel to his seat. The pilots landed the plane but because it was top-secret, no one could board the plane. While an ambulance took Widowsky to the hospital to stitch up his wound, other crew members drove all over base to find a Sargent with the special orders for dealing with a top-secret plane like theirs. They were even pulled over by a police officer who let them go after seeing they were covered in Widowsky’s blood and obviously in the middle of an emergency.<sup>15</sup>

On June 6<sup>th</sup>, the crew left Wendover for Tinian in a brand new Silverplate B-29 called *Top Secret*.

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<sup>14</sup> Jacob Y. Bontekoe, “Bontekoe, Jacob Y. 393<sup>rd</sup> Bomb Squadron, Pilot, Crew B-8,” in *The 509<sup>th</sup> Remembered*, ed. Robert and Amelia Krauss (Buchanan, MI, Self-published, 2013) p.45-47.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

## Slide 12: *Straight Flush*

The obvious interpretation of *Straight Flush* is that playing card games occupied and distracted the men's mind during down time. Gambling was a favorite pastime of the 509<sup>th</sup> at both Wendover and on Tinian. A straight flush is the best hand in poker containing five cards of the same suit in sequential rank unless playing with jokers. Military members were given spotter cards to identify enemy aircraft and ships. Cards are small and lightweight and could easily be stuffed in a pocket or duffle bag when the men are on the move. Yet, there are no gambling symbols in the nose art.

Franklin K. Wey, bombardier for Crew C-11, remembered:

“As for naming The Straight Flush, I recall the painter had drawn a number of pictures and since Buck and I played a lot of poker, he offered the name to us. The Straight Flush crew was recognized as the most ‘unmilitary’ crew in the 509<sup>th</sup>. We tended strictly to business when on duty, but off duty we saw to it that our enlisted men were taken care of, airmen and ground crew alike. We were all the best of friends.”<sup>16</sup> Note, the aircraft commander, pilot, and bombardier were named Eatherly, Weatherly, and Wey—and stories show they were quite the trio.

Eugene Grennan, flight engineer, recounted:

“They had been flying on autopilot when an argument broke out about a map. Sometimes the men played Black Jack, quarter stuff, on the aisle stand in the middle of the cabin; that, said Thornhill was the trouble. No one was watching exactly where we were going because Buck, the copilot, the bombardier, and crew chief were playing cards. Someone happened to look out and see that we were about ten feet off the ground, yelled at Buck, and he poured the coal to the engines, pulled back on the stick, and the wheels and tail skid hit the Salt Flats.”<sup>17</sup>

Jack Bivens, assistant flight engineer, picked up the story:

“When we landed, Eatherly, Kenny, and other officers came down from their front ladder and joined those of us who had gotten out first from the rear ladder, standing under and looking up at the tail section. It had salt on it! Eatherly snapped, “get that salt off there before Classen or Tibbets sees it! Someone from our crew started wiping all the salt off the tail and we never heard another word about the incident.”<sup>18</sup>

Wey provides further information connecting the gambling name to the crew:

... As for watching the Hiroshima bomb drop, we were 35 minutes ahead of the Enola Gay. We did talk it over among ourselves, but we had been ordered beforehand not to

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<sup>16</sup> Franklin K. Wey, “Wey, Franklin K. (Ken) 393<sup>rd</sup> Bombardier, Straight Flush, Crew C-11,” in *The 509<sup>th</sup> Remembered*, ed. Robert and Amelia Krauss (Buchanan, MI, Self-published, 2013) p.201.

<sup>17</sup> Eugene Grennan, Compilation of memoirs edited by Robert Kraus and Amelia Kraus.

<sup>18</sup> Jack Bivens. “Bivans, Jack. 393<sup>rd</sup> Bomb Squadron, Asst Flight Eng/Scanner, Crew C-11,” in *The 509<sup>th</sup> Remembered*, ed. Robert and Amelia Krauss (Buchanan, MI, Self-published, 2013) p. 41.

stay. When we returned to Tinian, we used a Poker game Eatherly had to play as an excuse for not staying.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Franklin K. Wey, "Wey, Franklin K. (Ken) 393<sup>rd</sup> Bombardier, Straight Flush, Crew C-11," in *The 509<sup>th</sup> Remembered*, ed. Robert and Amelia Krauss (Buchanan, MI, Self-published, 2013) p.202.

### Slide 13: Nose Art Reads Like Political Cartoons

Coding is a persuasive technique used in nose art and similar to that in political cartoons.<sup>20</sup> Deciphering the rhetorical strategies in the 509<sup>th</sup> storytelling helps us better understand their experiences while serving in the 509<sup>th</sup>.

**Symbolism:** Symbols stand for larger concepts or ideas.<sup>21</sup> Uncle Sam's sleeve represent America. Toilets are used to flush away waste. Uncle Sam is giving the Japanese soldier a swirly meant to torture people.

**Exaggeration:** Cartoons often exaggerate or overdo the physical characteristics or features of people or objects.<sup>22</sup> The Japanese soldier wears glasses over eyes made of slits and large bucked teeth—a typical stereotype of Asian people during the 1940s. Looking at the nose art with 2019 eyes tells us it is politically incorrect. However, in a folk group the rules of politically incorrect messages vary depending on who is saying what, to whom, and under what circumstances.<sup>23</sup> The United States entered the war after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor and everyone was affected—even those on the home front suffered from losses of family and friends killed in action, lack of consumer goods, and fear of air raids. The life size toilet is also symbolic of getting rid of the Japanese people.

**Labeling:** Labels given to objects or people show exactly what they stand for.<sup>24</sup> As mentioned in the previous slide, a straight flush is the best hand in poker.

**Analogy:** An analogy compares two unlike things that share some characteristics and is used to compare a complex issue to one more familiar.<sup>25</sup> Although the plane is named Straight Flush, the image is void of gambling symbols. Instead an analogy is made to flushing a toilet and flushing or cleansing the earth of Japanese citizens. The lines attached to the “S” and the “F” give the impression of motion like water moving around the toilet before it drops out the hole at the bottom like the bomb dropping out of the belly of the airplane.

**Irony:** Irony points out the difference between the way things are and the way things should be, or the way things are expected to be, and irony may be used to express an opinion on the topic.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> The following is a summary of the Cartoon Analysis Guide found at: “It’s No laughing Matter,” Library of Congress, (n.d.).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Diane E. Goldstein, “Not Just a ‘Glorified Anthropologist’: Medical Problem Solving Through verbal and Material Art” (presentation, Annual Convention of the American Folklore Society, Jacksonville, FL, 1993) p. 19.

<sup>24</sup> The following is a summary of the Cartoon Analysis Guide found at: “It’s No laughing Matter,” Library of Congress, (n.d.).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

Straight Flush is one of two images that reference a bathroom with gambling terminology. The missions were long—a 12 ½ hour round trip flight to Japan—and there was no bathroom on the B-29. The men put money in a bucket to avoid using it. The holdout would earn the money when the other crew members relieved themselves.

Literature professor Joan Radner wrote, “Because interpretation is a contextual activity, the ironic arrangement of texts, artifacts, or performance can constitute a powerful strategy for coding. An item that one environment seems unremarkable or unambiguous may develop quite tendentious levels of meaning in another.”<sup>27</sup> A card game and a toilet meant little back home but took on different meanings to the men on the front line of a raging war.

Inferences that can be made from analyzing the image and the written histories:

- The men gambled with their lives each time they flew the B-29.
- The missions to Japan were long—especially when there was no bathroom.
- The men wanted to get back at Japan for their role in bringing the U.S. into the war.
- Given that Crew C-11 was the least likely to follow orders, the men feared atomic bomb fallout if they stayed in the area to watch the atomic bomb drop on Hiroshima.
- The United States played the winning hand when they dropped the atomic bombs.

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<sup>27</sup>Joan Radner, *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women's Folk Culture* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1993) p. 13.

## Slide 14: Gender in Nose Art

During WWII, visual culture exploded to meet the demand from soldiers, sailors, and airmen. Men's magazines like *Esquire* were sent to soldiers free of charge and contained images of pin up girls drawn by artists like George Petty, Gil Elvgren, and Alberto Vargas—the most famous and was known for his Vargas Girls images. The pin up girl increased gender stereotypes by creating an ideal image of beauty in the airmen's mind that was symbolic of America, which projected his moral obligation to fight in the war. USO tours used Hollywood actresses like Betty Grable and Rita Hayworth to reinforce these images and remind the 'boys' what they were fighting for. Even cartoon strips included female characters that looked like pin up girls.

The pin up girl was playful and teasing with her peek-a-boo and alluring looks. She had long legs, voluptuous breasts, and bedroom eyes. She influenced the home front culture through fashion, make up, and hair as girls imitated these images and sent their own photographed versions to sweethearts fighting overseas. Of the fifteen images, only crew B-10 commissioned a nude woman, *Up an' Atom*, but she was quickly covered during two modifications, first a sheer cover and later a black dress. However, not all female images promoted sexuality. WWII airmen also used images representing relationships with their mothers, sisters, and daughters. The two most famous B-29s were not sexual in nature: *Enola Gay* was named after Paul W. Tibbets mother and *Bockscar* was a play on the name of their aircraft commander Fred Bock.

Contrary to popular belief, not all nose art images were pin up girls. Nose art is classified into roughly three categories: 55% of the images were pin up girls; 30% were varied subjects like cartoon characters, babies and children, death symbols, zodiacal signs, devils or gremlins; and 5% were four legged animals, birds, and insects.<sup>28</sup>

Nose art cartoon characters were usually male and showed more aggression. For example, Donald Duck was a favorite choice because of his hot-headed antics whereas Mickey Mouse was calm, collected, and solved problems with his mind. Five out of the 15 Silverplate B-29s have a male connotation. There are four images of men and two images of objects. Vehicles like trains can be male or female but as mentioned above the crew named the plane to honor their aircraft commander. *Laggin' Dragon* was inspired by the fire breathing dragon on the 393<sup>rd</sup> Bomb Group patch. Dragons are widely used in folklore to symbolize chaos, evil, power, wisdom, strength, and control. Although Chinese culture associates dragons with the emperor, this dragon's color is green, a color symbolic of mother nature and the cycle of life, death, and rebirth—like the outcome of the atomic missions. The passive stance confirms her female connotation.

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<sup>28</sup>Ethell, Jeffery L & Clarence Simonsen. *Aircraft Nose Art: From World War I to Today* (St. Paul: Motorbooks International, 2003) p. 12.

**Slide 15: Second Point**

2. Nose art framed the airmen's wartime experiences and created an identity for the crews.

## Slide 16: Tinian Island: April – November 1945

The 509<sup>th</sup> began arriving on Tinian in May 1945 and the secrecy continued. Col. Tibbets described July 1945 as “nerve-shattering” for the men of the 509<sup>th</sup>.<sup>29</sup>

The 509<sup>th</sup> Composite Group lived in North Field near their Silverplate B-29s. Their Quonset huts were the nicest on the island. A barbed wire fence kept curious military members out and prevented the 509<sup>th</sup> from talking. The crews trained later in the day—after the other bombers departed on missions giving the impression that the 509<sup>th</sup> slept in and was lazy. They trained at high altitudes and dropped an occasional bomb over enemy territory while the other groups flew dangerous bombing missions.<sup>30</sup> The lack of visual results bred suspicion among the other crews. Jeeps passing the 509<sup>th</sup> quarters in the middle of the night brought a bombardment of rocks that hit their tin roofs.<sup>31</sup> Poems and songs mocked them.

*“Well, in one way you could say we were called the laughingstock, because we always went when the other planes were down, and when we went up, they stayed down. They always said, “The 509th is winning the war, but not going up with the rest of them.”*

-Russell Gackenbach, Crew B-10 navigator<sup>32</sup>

This map, another piece of folk art, was hand drawn by Allen Louis Karl—an enlisted member of the 509<sup>th</sup> who specialized in sign making and nose artist for the *Enola Gay*. The map visually describes the layout of Tinian, which was the same shape as Manhattan, coincidentally the place where the Manhattan Project began. The caricatures point out important places of interest to the men and the block letters are like Karl’s block letters he painted on the *Enola Gay*.

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<sup>29</sup> Paul W. Tibbets, *Return of the Enola Gay*, (Columbus, OH: Mid Coast Marketing, 1998) p.196.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Russell Gackenbach. Interview by Alexandra Levy, Atomic Heritage Foundation, “Voices of the Manhattan Project,” Florida, December 27, 2016.

### Slide 17: *The Great Artiste*

The August 20<sup>th</sup>, 1945 issue of *Life Magazine* put names and faces behind the atomic acts. The B-29 *Enola Gay*, flown by Aircraft Commander Paul W. Tibbets and bombardier Maj. Thomas Farabee, dropped the atomic bomb, *Little Boy*, over Hiroshima, and *The Great Artiste* flown by Aircraft Commander Maj. Charles W. Sweeny and bombardier Capt. Kermit K. Beahan dropped *Fat Man* over Nagasaki. The previous mistake contributed to years of historical confusion. In reality, Crew C-15 flew *Bockcar* during the second atomic mission and the wrong plane was almost memorialized in the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force.

However, nose art and other markings like the fat man, follows the crew no matter which plane they flew the mission in.

The Elegantly dressed man from top hat, to zoot suit, pocket watch chain, carnation, bow tie and cummerbund is a caricature based on Kermit K. Beahan. A white coat and black pants are the most formal dress for a special event, like dropping the second atomic bomb. His thumb in air is a sighting technic that bombardiers used for targeting. The exaggerated smile shows large teeth, similar to Beahan's real smile.

From an unpublished manuscript, James F. Van Pelt and Charles D. Albury explained how the plane got its name:

*"One morning, we were to be on a test mission calibrating our airspeed indicator on the calibration course in Wendover. We had been out with the group the night before at a party... We got home about 1 or 2 a.m. and managed to get to bed about 3 a.m. We had to get up at 4 a.m. in order to take off by 5 a.m. The reason we had to take off so early was that once the sun was up, you get a lot of thermals which made the air bumpy and made it hard to hold a true, steady speed... I called Beahan at 4 a.m. and he was grouchy and feeling bad. He said, 'A great artiste like me doesn't have to get up this early.' He lets the other boys take care of that. It was all in a bragging manner, so after that we called him 'The Great Artiste'..."*

*When we went overseas, the personal affairs officer wanted to know the name of our plane. The boys submitted a lot of names. I think every member of the crew put the name 'The Great Artiste' in at least once. After the process of elimination, 'The Great Artiste' was unanimously chosen. It was named just before our first mission."*<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> James F. Van Pelt & Charles D. Albury, "Unpublished Manuscript 1946," in *The 509<sup>th</sup> Remembered*, ed. Robert and Amelia Krauss (Buchanan, MI, Self-published, 2013) p.188.

### **Slide 18: *Some Punkins***

Mail call was an important part of military life to keep strong ties to home. Not only did newspapers contain hometown information but they also had funny pages. Reading comics was another way for men to stay busy and the humor kept them upbeat and distracted them from the destructive war environment. The average age of a bomber crew was 19 years old and most men were barely out of high school.

In a memoir, Aircraft Commander James Price explained the inspiration for the nose art on his plane:

*“We were dropping 10,000-pound bombs. They were called ‘pumpkins.’ That was one reason I named my airplane ‘Some Punkins.’” The Salt Lake City Newspaper had a cartoon about two long legged girls. They were called ‘some punkins’ and they looked like one of the girls we had painted on the airplane.”<sup>34</sup>*

Other connotations of pumpkin:

- A term of endearment and represented the amount of time they spent together as a crew.
- Another name for women’s breasts.
- Past time to return home. The ending of the war meant it is time to return home.
- Something unintelligent—the comic strip character fit the stereotype of a dumb blond.
- Something attractive like a woman’s breasts. The nose art women is more endowed than the comic strip.

The caterpillar is symbolic of Uncle Sam who is staring at her breasts and reaching out as if he was trying to grab them.

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<sup>34</sup> James Price, *The 509<sup>th</sup> Remembered* edited by Robert and Amelia Krauss p. 214.

### **Slide 19: Fred Neher**

Price referred to Bell Syndicate's comic strip, "Life's Like That" drawn by Fred Neher. Neher pokes fun at everyday life and domestic problems that society can relate to. The curvaceous young women, a reoccurring character through the years, were called "Some Punkins." The comic strip ran from 1934 to 1972 with a short break during WWII while he visited the wounded in hospitals to boost morale. The cartoon started back up in June of 1945—two months before the atomic bombing missions. Other characters were:

- Hi-Teens (teenagers)
- Will-Yum (young boy)
- Mrs. Pip's Diary (middle-class housewife)
- Us Moderns" (precocious infants)<sup>35</sup>

Readers would write in and ask for signed copies, artwork for girlfriends, and suggest he use their baby's name on an U.S. modern crib.

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<sup>35</sup> "Fred Neher Papers: An inventory of his Papers at Syracuse University," Syracuse University Libraries Special Collection Research Center, 2017.

## Slide 20: Nose Artists

Nose art was similar to cave drawings and graffiti because airmen wanted to claim their territory and leave evidence of their existence. Nose art showed affiliation to a unit and the men transferred the tradition onto patches and leather bomber jackets. Censorship from the United States Office of War Information and proximity to the front lines played a role in the level of graphic messages.

509<sup>th</sup> crews added smaller paintings of fat man bombs symbols to track their combat missions—not the plane’s missions. Pilots are known to brag about the experiences of their crew and aircraft; during these conversations, plane #44-86292 or No.82 does not have the same effect as the *Enola Gay*. Proud crews took pictures in front of their nose art which boosted morale even though the machines were known to be difficult at times and break down.

Commissioned nose art ranged from \$25-\$50 or the airmen traded cigarettes and alcohol. Except for drafted Disney and Warner Brother animators, most of the nose artists were unschooled in the basic rules like elements and principles. They were self-taught making their work outsider art and they painted in their off-duty hours.<sup>36</sup>

The *Enola Gay* was the first Silverplate B-29 painted. While watching the *Little Boy* atomic bomb loaded into the belly of his plane, Col. Tibbets decided to name the plane after his mother for her support of his career in aviation that went against his father’s wishes. He sent someone to fetch enlisted 509<sup>th</sup> member Karl Allen, an artist who “drew maps that navigators used in making bomb runs,” to do the lettering and sign work on the side of the plane.<sup>37</sup> After the war, Allen went on to “become an architect and engineer and designed numerous Chicago area churches.”<sup>38</sup>

A picture confirms T/sgt. Port Richardson, a 393<sup>rd</sup> Radar Countermeasure Line Chief, as the nose artist of *Bockscar* and he later claimed to have painted *Strange Cargo*. An unknown artist is shown in the picture painting *Full House* but based on the similar primitive feel and technique, notice the similar female figures, Richardson may have painted most of the 509<sup>th</sup> planes. The rare circle background in nose art is unique to the 509<sup>th</sup>, twelve planes wear them, and is another clue suggesting they are his work. With the exception of *Jabbit III* and *Luke the Spook*, who returned to the U.S. to await orders to bring over components for the third atomic bomb, all the planes were painted on Tinian after the first atomic mission on August 6<sup>th</sup>. The date and isolation increase the chances that Richardson was the nose artist.

Former Seabee and artist Hal Olsen recalled a group of airmen found him working in the carburetor shop on Tinian and said “there’s one more we need to do.”<sup>39</sup> The men showed

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<sup>36</sup> Michael Bingham, professional artist, phone conversation with author. June 6, 2019.

<sup>37</sup> Kenan Heise, [Why is this all caps?] “ALLAN KARL; PAINTED ENOLA GAY BOMBER.” (chicagotribune.com, September 1, 2018).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Hal Olsen. *WWII: The Golden Age of Nose Art Up an Atom*. (Niceville: Patriot Media, Inc., 2012) p.32.

Olsen a picture and he painted the nude woman on the side of their plane.<sup>40</sup> When he finished, he asked the airmen “What did you do? What do you want for the name of the plane?”<sup>41</sup> Marquardt replied, “We were the camera plane on the Hiroshima mission.”<sup>42</sup> Olsen answered, “Well, what about the name *Up an Atom*?”<sup>43</sup> After the war, Olsen went to school followed by a 25-year career as part of the illustrators’ group at the Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory.<sup>44</sup>

It is unknown why Crew B-10 went outside of the 509<sup>th</sup> and sought another artist to paint their image?

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

## Slide 21: *Necessary Evil*

*Necessary Evil*'s nose art drew upon symbols in the airmen's cultural inventory, like pin up girls from men's magazines, and brought this representation of home to the frontlines as a reminder of what they left behind. However, overtime, these sensationalized images of women became hyperreal when they no longer represented reality, as explained by French sociologist, philosopher, and culture theorist Jean Baudrillard in his essay "Simulacra and Simulations." An example of hyperrealism is exhibited in the nose art of *Necessary Evil* where two iconic symbols were combined. The first, a red, white, and blue roundel used on WWII aircraft for national insignia, represented democracy, freedom and the American identity they were fighting to uphold.<sup>45</sup> British Historian Jo Fox supported this theory and said during war "National symbols are also put to work in constructing visual representations of identity, desired behaviors or ideological positions."<sup>46</sup> The second image of the larger than life light skinned blond beauty was the male occupation with sexual identity and fighting for the imaged "ideal" woman and country back home.<sup>47</sup> In reality, by the end of the war, she no longer waited inside the house cooking, cleaning and tending children but instead worked in a factory producing the planes the airmen flew—symbolized by Rosie the Riveter. She was fighting for women's rights and the right to fight in the war alongside another marginalized group, black Americans.

*Necessary Evil*'s image switches the woman's role from needing to be protected to empowering her to that of protector. Tracy Bilsing argues "the women depicted on these planes were imbued with elemental, dangerous power: the female body as a weapon of war."<sup>48</sup> The woman's powerful stance is spread over a fractured Japanese flag, a symbol of the enemy's country.

The name of the plane may have been inspired by the August 20, 1945 *Life* magazine. The issue explored the scientific side of the atomic bomb, the military crews who dropped it, and society's reaction to the event. A featured article called "Atomic Age" claimed: "This was a new room, rich with hope, terrible with strange dangers. The door that slammed behind man at Hiroshima had locked. Life, as always, was irreversible. There was no choice but to grope ahead into the Atomic Age."<sup>49</sup> As opposition to atomic warfare grew, perhaps Crew C-14 choose the idiom *Necessary Evil* to justify their plane's role as the camera plane on the first atomic mission, the fact that they were overshadowed by Crew B-10, who are still attributed to *Necessary Evil*, for flying it during the Hiroshima mission, and its selection as the third plane to drop an atomic bomb if Japan did not surrender.

Myron Farina, bombardier on *Necessary Evil*, believed the name was appropriate for a plane and a crew who did what needed to be done.<sup>50</sup> "The people who dropped the bomb weren't

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<sup>45</sup> Bredau, R. N. (1989). "The Meaning of Nose Art: An Anthropological Perspective." p. 113-116.

<sup>46</sup> Jo Fox, "Propaganda, Art and War," in *War and Art: A Visual History of Modern Conflict*, ed. Joanna Bourke (London, UK: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2017) p. 199.

<sup>47</sup> Bredau, R. N. (1989). "The Meaning of Nose Art: An Anthropological Perspective." p. 113-116.

<sup>48</sup> Tracy Bilsing, "Mors Ab Alto: The Dangerous Power of Women's Images in WWII Nose Art," (Texas Review 35, no.1/2, 2014) p. 94.

<sup>49</sup> "Atomic Age," *Time Magazine*, August 20, 1945, p. 29.

<sup>50</sup> *Ann Arbor News*. "Hiroshima." (Ann Arbor, MI), Aug. 3, 1975.

ogres. They didn't brag that they did it. People I worked with for years didn't know that I was involved in it. I didn't go around publicizing it," Myron said.

## Slide 22: *Up an' Atom*

Although numerous images hint at the strange cargo, whether or not another bomb was needed, or justify the crew's actions, none of the other images are as bold as *Up an' Atom* which referenced the atomic bomb in its name and quite possibly the first use of the term that sparked the atomic culture that permeated the American way of life. Authors Scott C. Zeman and Michael A. Amundson wrote that "Early American culture first celebrated the bomb and the end of World War II and then taught the American public about cutting-edge science."<sup>51</sup> Atomic references showed up in comics, songs, movies, drinks, jewelry, artwork, and more.

Unlike *Big Stink's* primitive form of the kitsch mushroom cloud and *Necessary Evil's* image of atomic fallout, *Up an' Atom* portrays a passive emotionless woman. The feathery paint strokes and shadowing added to her mythical looking image. Zeman and Amundson went on to say that "By attaching one of the most destructive forms of weaponry to such romantic fantasies, High Atomic Culture encouraged Americans to disassociate the devastating potential of nuclear warfare from the realities of everyday life."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Scott C. Zeman and Michael A. Amundson, *Atomic Culture: How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2004) p. 3.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

### **Slide 23: Multiple Roles of Nose Art**

As the personification of the images increased, the nose art took on symbolic meanings. The sequences of Crew B-10 shows how their image *Up an' Atom* encompassed the aircraft into a paradox of role play that protected them from the tragedies of war.

#### **1. During takeoff nose art was used as a talisman or good luck charm.**

*Up an' Atom* was the most risqué nose art of the group and Aircraft Commander George Marquardt later confessed that “every time they took off, he’d reach out and touched her boobs for good luck.”<sup>53</sup>

Literature Professor Tracy Bilsing disagrees that nose art objectified women and argued:

We can look at the ways in which the airmen of WWII appropriated the highly popular pin-up and recreated these images on the planes for a specific purpose which, rather than diminishing female power, invoked female sexuality in war as a mythical symbol of power and danger. By ritualizing these women’s images in various ways, airmen recreated the talismanic power of a pre-Olympian goddess whose nudity and sexuality was linked specifically with the initiatory rites of young warriors and the events of war.<sup>54</sup>

#### **2. During flight, nose art transitioned into a guardian angel.**

Crews called upon the nose art’s special powers of protection while flying through the heavens. Folklore Professor Jeannie Thomas wrote, “Traditionally, a guardian angel watches over a person from birth to death, providing guidance and protection in the form of putting good thoughts into people’s minds, praying for people, protecting them from danger, revealing the will of God, receiving and protecting the soul at the moment of death, and encouraging them to praise God.”<sup>55</sup> Thomas’s description can transfer symbolically to the life of a bombing mission—take off, flight, and landing.

Marquardt remembered the notorious reputation of the aircraft and losing a crew every month while he was an instructor in the B-29 providing context for his fear.<sup>56</sup>

Patrick I. Grill of the 390<sup>th</sup> Air service Group Base Signal Office remembered, “The drone of B-29’s was constant, including those returning with critical damage. We watched some crews bail out in parachutes.”

#### **3. When the mission was complete, nose art transformed into a surrogate mourner.**

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<sup>53</sup> Hal Olsen. *WWII: The Golden Age of Nose Art Up an Atom*. (Niceville: Patriot Media, Inc., 2012) p.33.

<sup>54</sup>Tracy Bilsing, "Mors Ab Alto: The Dangerous Power of Women's Images in WWII Nose Art," (Texas Review 35, no.1/2, 2014) p. 93.

<sup>55</sup> Jeannie B. Thomas, *Naked Barbies, Warrior Joes, and Other Forms of Visible Gender*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003) p. 42.

<sup>56</sup> George Marquardt, “Field Order #13,” Written History, n.d.

After safely arriving back on Tinian, the crew walked away leaving their plane as a surrogate mourner, a female “stock symbol,” to watch over the flight line and absorb the grief as other B-29s, minus the Silverplate modifications, limped home from injuries received on bombing runs or crashed into the ocean like fallen angels with their dark, violent female images bobbing in the water until sinking underneath.<sup>57</sup>

Thomas went on to say that these nude women statues are symbolic of an angelic connection to God.<sup>58</sup> Greek and Roman mythology was common inspiration during Neoclassicism—when art was meant to teach morals and glorify God. Unemotional women, like the image on the slide, were often portrayed. Thomas argues that surrogate mourner statues in European cemeteries lacked the “common physical attributes of their flesh-and -blood counterparts” because

there are no red and puffy eyes, runny noses, or even clothes. This is morning become erotic. The Graces are sexualized witnesses to death and idealized depictions of mourning. They are part of the larger tradition of using the female form to symbolize such abstract principles as liberty or victory.<sup>59</sup>

Charles D. Albury, Aircraft Commander, and James F. Van Pelt, Navigator, on *The Great Artiste* wrote in an unpublished manuscript that “Between our camp area and the ocean was the American graveyard which was kept in perfect condition. No mother need fear her son’s grave would be mistreated in any U.S. cemetery. The casualty rate for the flying crews was so great they had to keep 15 of these graves open at all times. A disheartening sight to pass every time you went on a mission.”<sup>60</sup>

Norman F. Ramsey, physicist from the Manhattan Project, wrote to Robert J. Oppenheimer expressing his fear of the B-29—the plane he chose to carry the atomic bomb—and his concern for the safety of the crews and everyone on the island: “I can’t urge too strongly the importance of complete nuclear safety in takeoff for future models” after witnessing four planes in succession crash at the end of the runway during takeoff on the night before the first atomic mission.<sup>61</sup>

However, the men of the 509<sup>th</sup> were mission oriented with little time to question the actions of their orders or mourn the other bomb group losses that would make them appear weak to their fellow airmen and cadre. Col. Tibbets had confidence in his men and nose art will soon allow them to keep a strong outer appearance under the most stressful conditions.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid. p.4.

<sup>58</sup> Jeannie B. Thomas, *Naked Barbies, Warrior Joes, and Other Forms of Visible Gender*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003) p. 40.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. p. 44.

<sup>60</sup> James F. Van Pelt and Charles D. Albury, “Van Pelt, James F., Navigator Albury, Charles D., Airplane Commander,” in *The 509<sup>th</sup> Remembered*, ed. Robert and Amelia Krauss (Buchanan, MI, Self-published, 2013) p. 187.

<sup>61</sup> Norman F Ramsey, Letter to Robert J. Oppenheimer. (Tinian, 1945) p. 1.



**Slide 24: Third Point**

3. After the war, the men reframed their war experiences by transitioning the art from the plane to their story telling performances.

## Slide 25” “Nobody Knows”

Col. Tibbets said an “anonymous headquarters base clerk” wrote the “sarcastic poem entitled “Nobody Knows” which was mimeographed and widely circulated on the island.”<sup>62</sup> The poem was “meant to ‘razz’ the 509<sup>th</sup> Composite Group; however, the 509<sup>th</sup> said the events on August 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> of 1945 proved the old adage: “He who laughs last...”<sup>63</sup>

When the *Enola Gay* landed safely after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and word got out about the extraordinarily risky mission the crew embarked on, the men of the 509<sup>th</sup> finally felt vindicated for all the months of top secret training they endured. To celebrate ending the war, the 509<sup>th</sup> was finally allowed to participate in the ritual of applying nose art. Some used their training environment, the men in their crew, or the type of missions they flew for inspiration. The colorful life size images personified the plane names, established their identity among the fleet of shiny metal aircraft, and made the Silverplate B-29s more memorable to American society as reporters carried their story to the home front. On objects of war, Gardien Jonker wrote, “The very site of them provokes images, memories, and emotions. In daily dealing with them, things sometimes become the memory they embody. They are considered spirited objects that are thought to bring the past back to life.”<sup>64</sup>

When the 509<sup>th</sup> returned home and performed their stories for family, friends, and during interviews, the men began to reframe the events. The nose art now represented the planes and crews was inserted in stories before the images were commissioned.

Storytelling through artwork, and later in written memoirs and oral performances, helped the men make sense of the new atomic technology, the role they played, and the changes they felt. To the men, the personified nose art images were living objects that experienced the same events that they did and were transferred into their storytelling. Folklorist and Anthropologist Richard Bauman claimed that performance was verbal art and that it “may comprehend both myth narration and the speech expected of certain members of society whenever they open their mouths, and it is performance that brings them together in culture-specific and variable ways, ways that are to be discovered ethnographically within each culture and community.”<sup>65</sup> At first, the artwork transported the men from their everyday existence in the post war zone, but later it offered different viewpoints, in fact fifteen different crew points, about the atomic events. Later, storytelling connected the men back to the planes and the war environment. Furthermore, while telling stories, the names of the planes were inserted in situations and events prior to the first atomic mission—before the planes were named and personified with nose art—causing the public to perpetuate the misinformation and added to the confusion between *The Great Artiste* and *Bockscar*, and *Necessary Evil* and *Up an’ Atom*. Folklorist Frank de Caro said stories shape a particular perspective and “in remembering we edit and reformulate the past, partly because memory is fallible, partly because we prefer certain memories to others or prefer to remember them in certain ways, partly just to order and make sense of what we remember.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Paul W. Tibbets, *Return of the Enola Gay* (Columbus, OH: Mid Coast Marketing, 1998) p. 196-197.

<sup>63</sup> 509<sup>th</sup> Composite Group, *The 509<sup>th</sup> Pictorial Album 1944-1946* (Tinian: 1945).

<sup>64</sup> Gardien Jonker, “Lisa’s Things,” in *Objects of War: The Material Culture of Conflict and Displacement*, ed. Leora Auslander and Tara Zahra, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018) 231.

<sup>65</sup> Richard Bauman, “Verbal Art as Performer,” *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 77, No. 2 (1975) p.291.

<sup>66</sup> Frank de Caro, *Stories Of Our Lives* (Boulder, CO, 2013) p. xii.

## Slide 26: Conclusion

The meta truth behind the 509<sup>th</sup> nose art is that airmen used artwork on the fuselage of airplanes to make sense of the war culture to which they were subjected. Analyzing the folklore from their material art to their storytelling performance, helps society better understand how the airmen felt about the war, their environment, their plane, their crew, the enemy, their actions, and the things they missed such as hometowns, and family—wives, girlfriends, and mothers. During the year they served together, not a single man or plane was lost despite the odds against them. The men claimed their unique role in ending WWII—turning ordinary men into extraordinary heroes of their time—and transformed their memories into sacred experiences. No one had ever experienced dropping an atomic bomb nor would anyone else experience dropping it on humanity.

After the war, most men were discharged and the Silverplate B-29s were sent to new bases, given new crews, new missions, and eventually some were used as ground fire trainers which destroyed them. Other excess WWII planes were sent to Kingman Army Air Field, Arizona, where they were melted down into ingots.<sup>67</sup> Three furnaces ran 24 hours a day.<sup>68</sup> Within three years, Kingman had destroyed a total of “85 reconnaissance aircraft, 615 fighters, 54 light bombers, 266 medium bombers and 4,463 heavy bombers” and all the cultural data that was painted on them.<sup>69</sup> Few people saw the importance of preserving the messages that were no longer needed. Military regulations changed and most nose art was banned.

During the aftermath of the atomic bombing, the men struggled individually—often only Col. Tibbets’ name and the *Enola Gay* are remembered in historical accounts—and collectively as a group—like during the Smithsonian *Enola Gay* exhibit controversy—showing a need for group identity. In 1993, when the Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum planned a 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of WWII, featuring the *Enola Gay*, “A fiery controversy ensued that demonstrated the competing historical narratives regarding the decision to drop the bomb.”<sup>70</sup> A two-year battle ensued as veterans and military groups voiced opposition. The exhibit development plan underwent numerous revisions, including cancelling the exhibit until the plan was replaced with a simpler “display of the fuselage of Enola Gay with little historical text” that left no one on either side satisfied.<sup>71</sup> The Smithsonian moved the *Enola Gay* to its permanent home in 2003 igniting the flames of controversy again.<sup>72</sup> The negative press brought many of the men back together again.

Until 2017, the 509<sup>th</sup> organized reunions that linked the men to their past. Today, the families continue to memorialize the men, planes and missions by unofficially gathering together even though they did not play a role in the experience. Reunions provide a place

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<sup>67</sup> “Kingman AZ Airplane Boneyard,” Kingman Army Air Field aircraft boneyard in post-WWII Arizona, Storage Depot No. 41, and modern-day airliner storage at Kingman Airport, (2019).

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> “Controversy over the Enola Gay Exhibition,” Atomic Heritage Foundation, (2016).

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

to tell stories that keep the events and their ancestors alive in their minds and in the public.

Over the years, many planes wore 509<sup>th</sup> nose art like *Laggin' Dragon* and *Enola Gay*. However, *The Great Artiste* and *Straight Flush* are the only two recreated images on a B-29 that remain today. Yet, other Air Force planes continue to transmit the historic images. The 509<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wing used the nose art on their FB-111A fighters and nose wheel doors with a changed purpose—the artwork is meant to honor the men of the past and remind new airmen that they are guardians of a peaceful nuclear world.<sup>73</sup>

In total, 3,970 B-29s were produced, 145 were secretly modified to carry an atomic bomb, and 15 trained and flew the atomic missions during WWII.<sup>74</sup> Now, 26 B-29s remain, and only two of these aircraft are Silverplate. The *Enola Gay* is housed at the National Air and Space Museum Annex, the Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center, in Chantilly, VA. *Bockscar* is housed at the National Museum of the United States Air Force in Dayton, OH. Although the B-29 played an important role during WWII, only another two are flyable today: *Doc* and *Fifi*.

Nicholas Saunders analyzes material culture and wrote, “The objects of war are not anonymous weapons, scrap or ephemera, but rather different kinds of matter that can be seen as embodying an individual’s experiences and attitudes, as well as cultural choices in the varied technologies of production.”<sup>75</sup> The shared and repeated cultural creations, spanning the four categories of folklore: things they said, things they made, things they did, and things they believed, are an insight into the lives of the men serving in the 509<sup>th</sup>.<sup>76</sup> Looking beyond the pin up girls and cartoon images, aircraft nose art opens an opportunity to reflect on stories of bravery and fear, loneliness and pain, and a desire for change. While some nose art, like the *Great Artiste*, was a snapshot of a specific time in these airmen’s lives—1944 to 1945—other images reflected a culmination of lifelong feelings: dedication, support, and love as demonstrated by Paul W. Tibbets who payed tribute to his mother, Enola Gay. A nose art exhibit is a vehicle to help society better understand the experiences of today’s veterans and launch conversations about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

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<sup>73</sup> “F-111A – F-111G Tail Numbers,” F-111.net, (2005).

<sup>74</sup> Richard H. Campbell, *The Silverplate Bombers: A History and Registry of the Enola Gay and Other B-29s Configured to Carry Atomic Bombs*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005) p.14-15.

<sup>75</sup> Nicolas J. Saunders, “Culture, Conflict, and Materiality: The Social Lives of Great War Objects,” in *Materializing the Military*, ed. B. Finn and B.C. Hacker (London, UK: Science Museum, 2005) p 77-94.

<sup>76</sup> Lynne S. McNeill. *Folklore Rules*, (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2013) p.37-64.

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