

Through his drawings, a fighter pilot–artist captured the life of a flyer during World War II.

# The Art of a Fighter Pilot

**L**ike thousands of young men during World War II, George W. Rarey was drafted into the Army. The cartoonist and commercial artist left his Greenwich Village studio apartment and reported for duty in January 1942, from that moment on drawing scenes about his new military life.

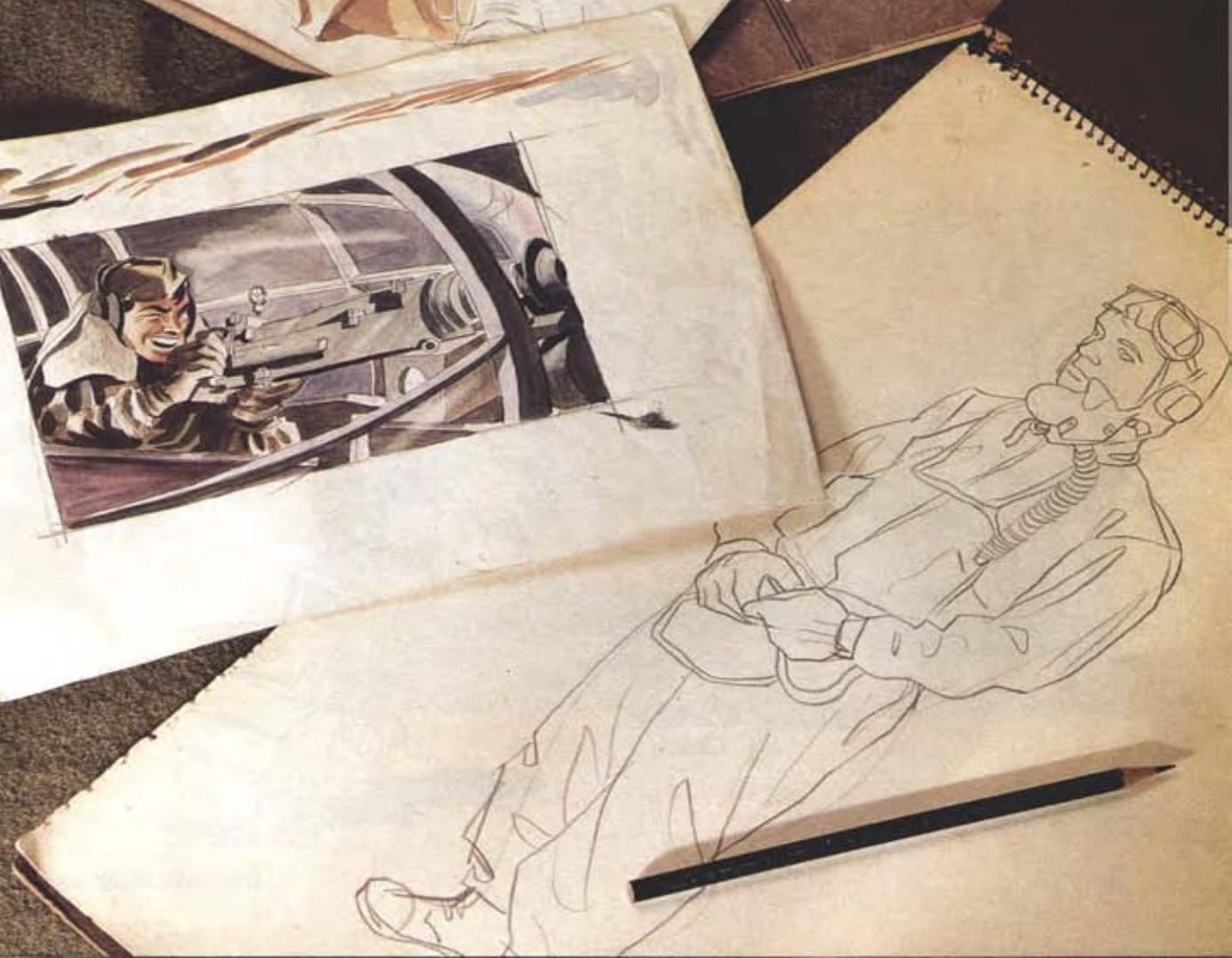


In volumes of sketchbooks and in letters and postcards home—even on envelopes—he chronicled the next two years of his life, creating a daily, visual record with his art.

Rarey, who disliked his given name and always went by his last name, picked up the nickname "Dad" because his peers considered him an old man at age 27. He was quickly assigned to preflight training at Maxwell Field, Ala., having shown the intelligence, aptitude, and physical skills necessary for flying. Between learning military routines and classroom training, he continued painting and sketching events in his life as a pilot trainee, often sending them to his fiancée, Betty Lou Hodge. Because she carefully saved the artwork he turned out so prolifically, these scenes of a World War II fighter pilot's experiences—showing both comical and serious viewpoints—survive.



Photos by Paul Kennedy





Rarey went on to join Class 42-J at Primary Flight School in Ocala, Fla. The class was among the first to allow aviation cadets to get married during training, and Rarey and Betty Lou did so in June 1942. Basic Flying School at Greenville, Miss., and Advanced Flying School at Selma, Ala., came next, followed by graduation and an assignment to Westover Field, Mass., where Lieutenant Rarey trained in P-47s as part of the 379th Fighter Squadron.

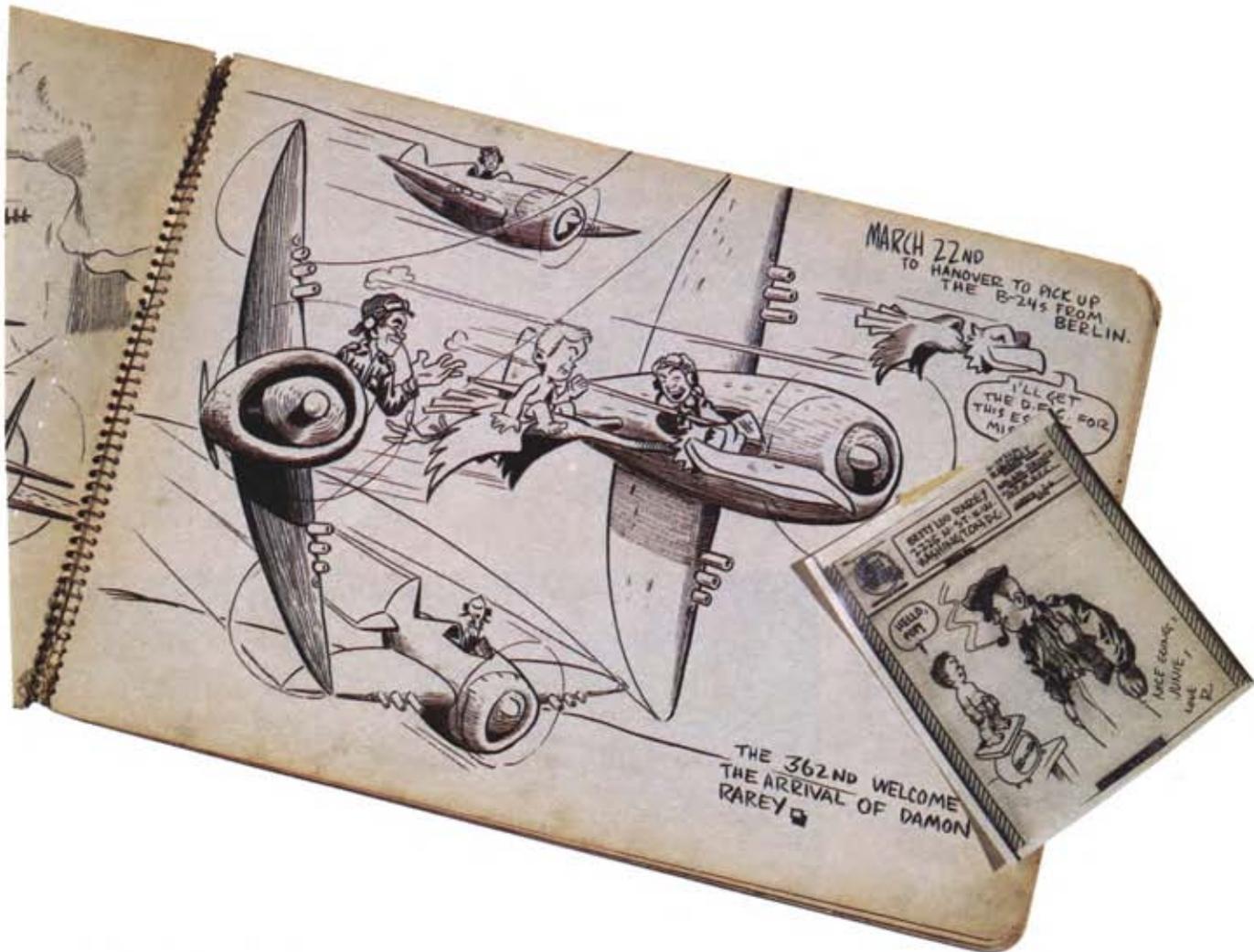
In November 1943, Rarey was sent to Wormingford, UK, with Ninth Air Force's 362d Fighter Group. His sketchbooks then began filling up with images of life during the winter in England, like the drawing at right, depicting his squadron mates at a bull session around a coal stove in one of the many Nissen huts that had sprung up to house the increasing number of Americans in the country.



THUNDER BOMBER AND CREW.



Even in the cartoon quality of this drawing of the largest single-engine fighter used in World War II, affectionately called "the Jug," there is still an air of intimidation around the imposing P-47.



Rarey's squadron waited for almost a month before their unit's first P-47s finally caught up with them at the end of December 1943. Then the London nightlife and two years of training gave way to real combat missions—sometimes two a day—over the English channel and into France, Belgium, and Germany. In March 1944, Rarey returned from a B-24 escort mission to Hannover and learned that he had become a father. The arrival of his son, Damon, fills pages in Rarey's sketchbook, and soon Damon's Demon appeared on the engine cowling of the fighter pilot's P-47. At right is a watercolor of the newly painted aircraft.





Death, disruption, and destruction happened around the clock when the Germans began launching V-1 guided missiles—"vengeance" weapons—against London in June 1944. At the very least, they could keep you awake at night. Rarey, now stationed in Headcorn, UK, captured one of these nights of interrupted sleep caused by a V-1 flying bomb (at left). Pilotless, the missiles were dubbed "nonunion aircraft" by one squadron member.

During World War II, anyone with artistic talent inevitably ended up with a cowling as a canvas. Rarey soon had his artwork on the aircraft of nearly everyone in his squadron. Along with his final design for a plane, he also painted a picture of the pilot. Some of these watercolors are shown at right.



SUNDAY  
-RELEASED FOR THE DAY  
-PAINTED COWLINGS.



Rarey never aborted a mission but found time to paint cowlings on days off. He drew himself at work during one of these moments. In a letter to Betty Lou, he once remarked on how colorful the squadron looked because of his art. "It sort of gives personality to an otherwise pretty cold collection of machinery," he wrote.



In late spring 1944, Lieutenant Rarey and his friends bought tickets for a ballet in London. The date for the event, June 6, 1944, turned out to be the same date of another, bigger show—D-Day. The unused ticket became part of the sketchbook, above.

A few weeks later, on a search-and-destroy mission over central France, the aircraft of the newly promoted Capt. George Rarey took a direct hit of 20-mm flak and exploded. Like so many, Betty Lou Rarey received official notification in a telegram, shown at right. While overseas, Rarey, shown in the photo at far right taken after graduation from flight school, drew from memory this portrait of his wife. Rarey's son, Damon, of Santa Rosa, Calif., graciously let Air Force Magazine photograph the contents of original sketchbooks from this important collection. George Rarey's legacy to his family and to those who served with him is in these several hundred pieces of art that document his life as a fighter pilot. ■

