

Hank Porter: Disney's Go To Artist for Insignia Designs during WWII



(Walt Disney looks over the shoulder of Hank Porter working on the design of an insignia for the Navy's 104th Observation Squadron, to the right the finished insignia. Courtesy of the Orleans County Department of History)

One of the unsung heroes of Disney's WWII efforts is artist Henry "Hank" Porter who was a one man designer of many emblems and insignias during World War II. Porter was from the small town of Albion located in upstate New York west of Rochester. After graduating from high school, he went onto to study at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts for his formal art training. When Porter completed his studies in Chicago, he began his professional career as an illustrator and commercial artist first working for a newspaper in Albany, and then starting his own advertising/commercial art business in Buffalo, New York.

He was in Buffalo for nearly eight years and towards the end of that stint he had applied to the Disney studios in March 1936. He was invited to a tryout session at the RKO Building in New York City on April 15, 1936. Porter was hired by Disney on June 16, 1936 and then moved with his family to Los Angeles to work at The Walt Disney Studios.¹

Once at the studio, Porter worked in the animation department on the already in production feature, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). In December of 1937, Porter wrote to his father about his work on the film citing the scene in which the Dwarfs leave the mine singing “Heigh-Ho, Heigh-Ho, it’s home from work we go,” then suddenly stop, piling up on one another. He also mentions in his letter work on the scene of Grumpy being forced to take a bath in the water trough claiming it was “a loo-loo of a scene, was it tough! I worked six months on it.”

Porter eventually moved on to be a staff artist in the Disney Publicity Art Department where he drew some of the Sunday comic pages for *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Pinocchio*. But it was during the WWII era at Disney that Porter is noted as one of the most prolific artists at the studio. He is credited with creating more than a thousand insignia and emblems for the various branches of the military, other US Government agencies and charity organizations involved in the war effort.

¹ Information courtesy of David Lesjak

By far, the insignia designs were the biggest requests that came into the Disney studios during that period. The written requests may have begun in 1941 when Lieutenant E. S. Caldwell, then of the Naval Operations office in Washington,² wrote to Walt Disney asking for an emblem for the fleet of PT (patrol torpedo) boats, similar to the now famous PT-109 skippered by a young Lieutenant John F. Kennedy. Disney responded within days with a design of a mosquito-on-a-torpedo insignia. The image, created by Hank Porter, of a little mosquito, streaking through the water with a sailor's hat on his head holding a torpedo between its "many legs, made such a hit that every torpedo boat in the fleet soon had a Disney mosquito."³ The emblem was placed on the side of the charthouse where the boat was piloted from.



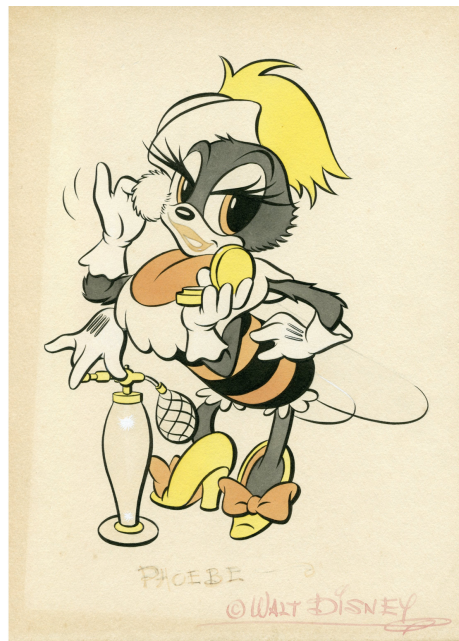
(Mosquito-on-a-torpedo insignia on the side of the charthouse of a Navy PT boat, known as the "Mosquito Fleet")

² Life Magazine, Walt Disney designs Army & Navy insignia; 1941

³ Life Magazine, Walt Disney designs Army & Navy insignia; 1941

After that, the Disney studios was inundated with insignia design requests for every military unit imaginable. Disney had assigned two artists, Roy Williams and Hank Porter, fulltime to satisfy the demands. Eventually two other artists were added to help , George Goepper and Van Kaufman.⁴ Before the U.S. even entered WWII, the Disney studios had produced hundreds of insignia designs.

In 1944, members of a California based U.S. Navy Construction Battalion, most commonly known as the Seabees, wrote to the studio asking for a “deliciously feminine queen bee, with rosebud lips, dewy bedroom eyes and an atomizer to make her deadlier than the male” who carries only a Tommy gun.⁵ From that description Porter created Phoebe the female Seabee.



(Original art of Phoebe the female Seabee. From the U.S. Navy Seabee Museum)

⁴ Information provided by David Lasjak

⁵ HANK PORTER-DISNEY ARTIST CREATES INSIGNIA FOR U.S. ARMED FORCES, A War to Be Won by Robert L. Schwartz Y2c

Porter not only spent time coming up with the concept for an insignia, logo or emblem, he then designed it. Often he created a water color version to give an indication of the color palette. It is the equivalent of a visual development painting or color script in animation terms. One of my favorite original paintings is The Rock Submarine Base at Pearl Harbor completed in 1945. The insignia has a striking image of a Rockfish, also known as a grouper, in sailor's hat with boxing gloves on its' pectoral fins. Porter was able to take a fish and give it anthropomorphic qualities that appear perfectly natural and well proportioned. The Rockfish has a tough-guy attitude that conveys the message he's ready to fight. The painting is finished off with a Walt Disney signature done by Porter.



(Original ink and watercolor of The Rock - Submarine Base - Pearl Harbor, 1945, which refers to the World War II Pacific Submarine Force based at Pearl Harbor, HI and tasked wreaking havoc on Japanese shipping and troop transports. Photo courtesy of Hank's Auctions)

The requests for designs wasn't just limited to insignia for military units, other areas of the U.S. Government and charitable organizations were also making requests for logo and emblem designs as The Walt Disney Studios turned into a war plant once the U.S. entered the war in December 1941. One of those emblem logos was for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Porter created the identification mark for United States food as part of the Lend-Lease act, which was enacted in March 1941. The Lend-Lease Act allowed the U.S. to provide military aid to foreign nations during World War II. It authorized the president to transfer arms or any other defense materials, including food, for which Congress appropriated money to "the government of any country whose defense the President deems vital to the defense of the United States."⁶

Prior to the Lend-Lease Act, President Roosevelt was prevented from helping Britain by the Neutrality Act of 1939 which required the U.S. to receive payment for any transfer of war materials. The Lend-Lease Act essentially circumvented the Neutrality Act of 1939 allowing Roosevelt to help the war beleaguered British without payment up front. Many isolationist politicians of the time were opposed to the Lend-Lease Act as they rightly believed it brought the United States closer to entering the WW II. Senator Taft noted that the Lend-Lease Act would "give the President power to carry on a kind

⁶ Lend-Lease Act, U.S. Government

of undeclared war all over the world, in which America would do everything except actually put soldiers in the front-line trenches where the fighting is.”⁷

The Lend-Lease food emblem was used on packaged food and cargo containers to identify anywhere in the world that the containers and individual labeled products were from the U.S. The emblem signified the economic might and generosity of the United States during one of the darkest periods in world history.



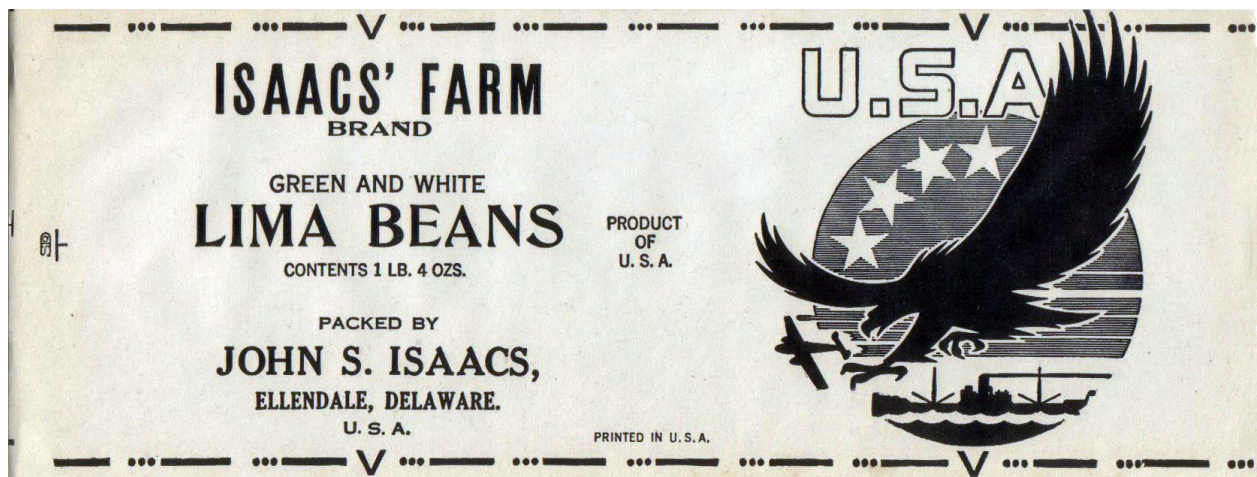
(Walt Disney presenting the emblem to Secretary Claude R. Wickard in recognition of the vital part U.S. food is playing on both the home and foreign war fronts of the world. Photo U.S. Government)

On January 28, 1942, Walt Disney presented the newly created Lend-Lease food emblem to the then to Secretary of Agriculture Claude R. Wickard. The emblem features a large silhouette of an eagle “poised on guard above a cargo ship”⁸ and fending off an enemy bomber. Roy O. Disney, Walt’s brother, suggested the use of the eagle as part of the emblem. The four stars on the emblem represent the four freedoms pledged in the

⁷ Lend-Lease Act, Congressional Record.

⁸ U.S Government press release; January 28, 1942

Atlantic Charter and later after the war by the United Nations. The stars symbolize freedom of speech and expression, freedom of every person to worship God in his own way, freedom from want, and freedom from fear.⁹ The emblem was made available for voluntary use by food packers and appeared in black and white, monotone color and two color.



(The two color label for canned Page Valley Apples and the Black and White label for Isaac's Farm Brand Lima Beans that also features the Morse code dot, dot, dot, dash and letter "V" incorporated as a border for the label design. From the Dave Bossert collection.)

⁹ U.S Government press release; January 28, 1942

Additionally, a number of dairy producers incorporated the emblem on milk bottles and added the letter “V” for victory to its bottles. Some of those bottles, as well as food labels, also carried the dot, dot, dot, dash Morse code symbols for the letter “V” reinforcing the victory mantra.

The Walt Disney Studios produced more than 1200 insignia and countless emblems and logos during WWII adorning every kind military vehicle, tank, planes, boats and ships. These insignia used many of the characters in the Disney stable and newly created ones. The images were made into decals, patches and iron-on transfers. They were modified for use on signage, published pamphlets, graduation programs and even mass produced matchbook covers and stamps. The insignias were symbols that boosted moral giving specialty military units an identity, more often than not a whimsical one. It also instilled in the men and women serving in those units a sense of pride and dignity. All of these insignia were produced at no charge for the U.S. military.

To Walt Disney, Hank Porter was often referred to as “the one-man art department.” Aside from having produced the bulk of the Disney insignia, Porter was one of the few artists at the studio who was authorized to reproduce Walt Disney’s signature for autographs. All of the insignias that Porter created are signed by him using Walt Disney’s name. It is also believed that Porter was responsible for crafting the iconic “looping D” that adorns Disney’s signature.¹⁰

¹⁰ Orleans County Department of History

I have often wondered if Porter would have stayed on at the studio for decades like many of the other Disney legends or would he have transitioned into Imagineering like some did to work on Disneyland. Sadly, we'll never know, Hank Porter's career did not last long enough to see where it might have taken him. Porter passed away on October 7, 1951 of cancer at the age of 50. An untimely death for an artist who was hitting his artistic stride and had already made a significant contribution to the Disney studios. His body was buried next to his mother at the Mt. Albion Cemetery in his hometown of Albion, New York.

©David Bossert