

# IF THIS GUN COULD TALK

by David Albert



Ensign (Later Lt.) James C. Hoisington Jr., circa 1942

My father-in-law recently passed away and we inherited some family guns, including a Smith & Wesson (S&W) Victory Model .38 revolver that my wife's grandfather carried as a Navy pilot in the Pacific during World War II. Her grandfather's name was Lt. James C. Hoisington Jr. In 1999, I was fortunate to briefly meet him while he was still alive. As soon as he learned of my interest in firearms and World War II history, he went to his closet, pulled out his "U.S. Property" marked S&W Victory revolver with its original M3 holster with cartridge loops, and began to tell me about World War II. He then pulled out a VHS tape, onto which he had transferred original gun camera footage showing him shooting down a Japanese Zero in 1944. He piloted a Dauntless dive bomber and shooting down an enemy plane was not common in that aircraft. I am very glad I have this memory of him, because no one else in the family who is now alive experienced it, except for his son, my father-in-law, who just passed away.

The next part of the story will make you mad. When my wife's grandfather passed away a few years later, one of his daughters who lived nearby threw away the holster and gave the pistol to my father-in-law. My father-in-law took it back home to Texas, and it sat for several years. Then it was stolen. Damn, I was really upset to hear that. A couple of years passed, and then my

father-in-law was contacted by a local police department. The pistol had been recovered. Great news! He got it back. However, more bad news. The thief who stole the pistol painted it with thick black paint. What the hell? The original grips were also missing. When I heard this, I immediately found some grips on eBay, and sent them to him. We decided that the next time I was down to visit in Texas, we would work on restoring the pistol. That never happened.

My wife and I flew down to Texas in December 2021 and went through the house. Her brothers had found all the guns except for the S&W Victory. I soon found the grips that I had sent him, which were never installed. I guess he had really wanted to wait for me to visit to return the pistol to its original condition. We all kept looking around for the pistol, when I found a heavy paper bag up on the back of a tall closet shelf. The S&W Victory was in it. Probably the same bag in which it was placed from the police evidence room to take it home. The black paint had flaked off in places, but was caked on very thick in others. You could not pull the trigger, cock the hammer or do anything but get the cylinder open. It could not be fired in that condition.

We brought the pistol back home to Ohio, and a buddy and I got most of the paint off in about an hour with an ultrasonic cleaner followed by a carefully applied chemical stripper. More bad news. Someone had messed with the pistol's finish. A few more hours of carefully scraping the remaining paint off using my finger nails and the paint was gone. The thief had apparently tried to "bling it out" by using a Dremel polishing wheel on parts of it. At least that's the only explanation I can muster. It doesn't really make sense, but at least they stopped using the polishing wheel, perhaps when they realized it would not achieve the desired effect. That's when they painted it black. Anyway, it is now as close to original as it can be without refinishing it. I put the grips on it, and they didn't fit exactly, so I ordered another pair, and they fit better.

I am the current caretaker of the pistol, with intent to leave it to our son, who is only 10 years old. I also have my wife's grandfather's Navy Officer's sword, which is a very nice item. I plan to do a display of the items at the next American Society of Arms Collectors meeting that I am able to attend.

So, the moral of the story is to keep your guns locked up, otherwise a punk may try to bling out your family heirloom and use it in a crime. All in all, I'm very happy to have it back in the family, in as close to original condition as possible. I know that my wife's grandfather carried this pistol during all his flights as a Navy pilot in the Pacific during World War II. I seek an original M3 holster for it in the meantime.

The S&W Victory model pistol was a variation of the venerable S&W Military and Police (M&P) Model. The U.S. Navy was the first U.S. military branch to purchase M&P pistols in 1900, and other branches also purchased it. With the 1930s depression, S&W almost went bankrupt, as their attempt to market their new .357 revolvers met with little success. When Europe went to war



in 1939, Britain turned to S&W to produce the Model 140 Light Rifle, but became unhappy with the product, and asked for a return of their advance. S&W had already spent the money, so they made a deal with Britain to provide much needed revolvers to pay back the advance. This resulted in the World War II version of the M&P revolver, which for Britain was chambered in .38-200 caliber. Production for the British led in 1941 to S&W also producing the weapon in .38 Special, which resulted in U.S. Navy, and later Army contracts.<sup>1</sup> The pistols adopted the name “Victory” model went along with the war theme, and was prompted by the fact that S&W reached a million serial numbers, so at that point they became prefixed with a “V” for Victory to enable a new sequence.

Since posting this story online, more information came forward about Lt. Hoisington’s World War II history. Unfortunately, we have not located the gun camera videotape, and believe it was likely tossed by the daughter when Lt. Hoisington passed. Somewhere in my father-in-law’s house, there is a bio for him that details all his military history. We have not found it yet, but my wife remembers reading it. I only have a newspaper snip from around late 2001 about Pearl Harbor remembrances, where he indicated that after a year of training, he ended up in an Air Group commanded by Butch O’Hare, for whom they named Chicago’s airport (Bombing Squadron Twelve of the United States Pacific Fleet as of 9 January 1943).<sup>2</sup> He indicated that he flew a dive

bomber (Dauntless) in the summer of 1943, and they were given a mission to attack Pearl Harbor at dawn, just for practice, with no armaments. He said during the mock attack, they were intercepted by Army Air Force P-40’s. They returned to Maui with no losses. He said, “For me, that was my safest attack during World War II, but nothing compared to the December 7th attack.” He indicated that whenever Pearl Harbor was mentioned, he visualized it from their diving altitude of 12,000 feet. This pistol accompanied him on that mission.

*“According to orders dated September 17, 1943, October found Butch O’Hare as Commander Air Group (CAG) commanding Air Group Six, embarked on the famous USS Enterprise (CV-6).”<sup>3</sup>*

He did a stint teaching at Annapolis after the war. Two references about Lt. Hoisington were subsequently found online in a military genealogy resource.<sup>2</sup> The first indicated he was an Ensign with VB-12 in January 1943. He would have been flying the Douglas Dauntless dive bomber with that squadron. A second reference from the same source indicated he flew the F4U Corsair with VBF-6 as a lieutenant in January 1945. I did not realize that in addition to a Dauntless, he flew a Corsair, which is my favorite World War II aircraft. He spoke about the Dauntless with me, and I don’t think he mentioned the Corsair, because I would have really clued in on that. In hindsight, now I wonder whether he might have shot down the Zero in the Corsair.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Pate, Charles W., *U.S. Handguns of World War II*, Andrew Mowbray Inc. Publishers, 1998, pp. 127-128

<sup>2</sup> fold3.com

<sup>3</sup> Wikipedia, “Butch O’Hare”

