

*Before the colors fade. . .*



Photo by Ron Romanski

●  
*Author/Artist*  
**JACK  
COGGINS**  
*and his artist wife*  
**ALMA  
WOODS**  
●

**by Robert F. Zissa**

**It's said that oil and water do not mix, but they've** come together exceedingly well for Jack Coggins, Berks County's internationally-known artist and writer.

Marine paintings in oil have been Coggins' passion and forte in a life of art that spanned much of the 20th century and is continuing into the 21st.

Coggins has been at sea and has not been spared from seasickness, but he says the only times his painted waves make him sick are the times they don't sell. When they do sell, they do so at prices ranging from \$200 to \$4,000. He has lost count of his paintings on various subjects, but guesses there have been at least 550.

And he's been into more than oils and seas and ships. Born in his father's British cavalry barracks, he remembers, for instance, riding horses a little, which goes a small way toward explaining the success of one of his 18 illustrated books, *The Horseman's Bible*. Sales of that work, published by Doubleday

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& Co. in two editions, "must be around 450,000 copies," he estimates.

Of more pride to him have been *Arms and Equipment of the Civil War*, also published by Doubleday & Co., and *The Marine Painter's Guide*, published by Van Nostrand Reinhold Co.

"It seems strange," he wrote in the Guide, "that with so much of the globe covered by water, so few artists know how to paint it." That 1983 book was his last because he felt writing was taking too much time away from painting.

Horses aren't all of the "rest-of-the-story" either. If you simply enter the name *Jack Coggins* on the Internet you may find, among other things about him, 17 small color reproductions of the space art he did for *By Spaceship to the Moon* in collaboration with the late Fletcher Pratt, prolific writer and historian.

Don Seeley, designer of that Web page, writes in part of the Coggins' work: "In publishing them here as an educational resource with the goal of extending the recognition of Jack Coggins as a master of this genre of illustration. To my knowledge this collection is unique to the World Wide Web."

Seeley notes that although the work was published by Random House in 1952, *nearly two decades before the first moon-land-*

ing, the book “describes a massive multi-stage launch vehicle, an airplane-like orbiter, and moon lander with articulated legs supporting a central pod-shaped lunar module.”

Asked during an interview at his home near Hill Church in Pike Township this past fall, how he happened to be so far ahead of his time with space art that resembled what was to come, Coggins spoke about science-fiction writing of the 1950s and added:

“We were the first for this kind of thing, so I guess it was sort of pioneering, in a way. Present engineers at NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration] grew up on these books.” Many of his books were done for children and young readers, at the request of publishers and editors, although suitable for adults as well.

**Alma Woods (maiden and professional name),** Coggins’ wife, art partner and writing researcher, entered the conversation on this point with a revelation that was news to Coggins.

She said a NASA Engineer who happened to be in the Berks area a few months earlier called with a request to meet her husband. The meeting had not taken place. She said the caller told her that when NASA was trying to get funds from Congress for the space program, representatives of the agency showed Coggins’ book to Congressmen to illustrate their ideas.

The message hadn’t been passed on to Coggins earlier because of something else that came up at that time, his wife recalled.

The news prompted him to remember that “years ago I had done some [publication] covers for the Naval Institute. They wanted me to do a painting for the *U.S.S. Ranger*, a big carrier. They asked whether I’d rather work from photos or come down to Cuba.”

Coggins jumped at the chance to go to Cuba to do on-the-scene work. “I was on the bridge one night,” he recalled, “when one of the officers said, ‘you’re the reason I’m here.’ He had read one of my books as a child and that’s what started him on his naval career.”

The Berks artist started writing as well as illustrating books after doing outlines for his art work in three books written by Pratt, realizing he could do them himself. Outline writing – the lines of type placed under illustrations for explanatory purposes – turned out to be a good way to learn how to write concisely and clearly, he said.

He illustrated books written by Pratt beginning in 1941 with *Fighting Ships of the U.S. Navy*, released by Garden City Publishing Co. The other two Pratt-Coggins books were *Rockets, Jets, Guided Missile and Space Ships*, 1951, and *By Space Ship to the Moon*, 1952, both of which were published by Random House.

His own written and illustrated books after that included informative volumes on naval and military actions and equipment in wars in which America has been involved. Those were published by four other companies.

**The roots of Coggins’ interest and know-how,** aside from extensive research that he and his wife did together, go back to his early life and environments, in England and the United States.

He was born an only child in 1911 in a London cavalry barracks, where his father, Sydney George Coggins, was the



Jack Coggins’ illustrations for a 1952 book titled “By Space Ship To The Moon,” are today offered on the Internet simply because they are so prescient – giving views of matters only then dreamed of, i.e., man actually “walking” in space (above) and a two-stage rocket taking off for the lunar destination (left).

© Jack Coggins

riding master of the First Regiment of Lifeguards. That was the kind of well-costumed military unit that is seen today in televised processions through the British capital.

His mother was Ethel May (Dobby) Coggins. The parents were to spend their final years in or near Berks County. Today, Jack has only distant relatives, descendants of a grandfather, living in Australia.

Speaking of his childhood start in the art field, Coggins said, “I had always liked to scribble little pictures as a kid, and that carried over into high school.”

His father served with his unit in World War I. After the war, which took a great toll of British lives, the military was further cut back by consolidation of units. Riding Master Coggins apparently was open to change because, in 1923, he accepted a job that brought him to this country. One of the unit’s officers had married a woman who had an estate on Long Island, and Sidney Coggins became her secretary.

So young Jack Coggins approached his teens at Roslyn, Long Island, where he was exposed to a watery environment. Even in London, he had had some acquaintance with water craft by sailing his model yacht “on the famous Round Pond



Jack Coggins was a U.S. Army illustrator assigned to the European Theater. Early on he was on destroyer convoy duty on the North Sea, shown here at left with the First Officer, in Kensington Gardens."

In Roslyn – at the end of Hempstead Harbor, L.I. – he "acquired a succession of small craft, beginning with a sailing canoe." Because of that, he said, "I suppose it was natural that when I began to paint I should turn to the sea and ships as subject matter."

Of his recollections of growing up through the teens in his American home, Coggins said, "I suppose my feeling was curiosity and the excitement of any kid would feel about coming to a new country. We were very English and I did not become a citizen until I was in the (U.S.) Army in 1943."

Back in England he had attended a school in which most of the students were children in military families, so that military matters were not unfamiliar to him. But military

subjects he dealt with in later writing were not what he necessarily chose. They were likely chosen, he said, by publishers and editors who were trying to meet demands of young people about their own interests in those fields.

After graduation from an American high school he studied at the Grand Central School of Art in New York City under Edmund Graecen, George Pierce Ennis, Wayman Adams and others. At the Art Students League in New York he studied under Frank Dumond.

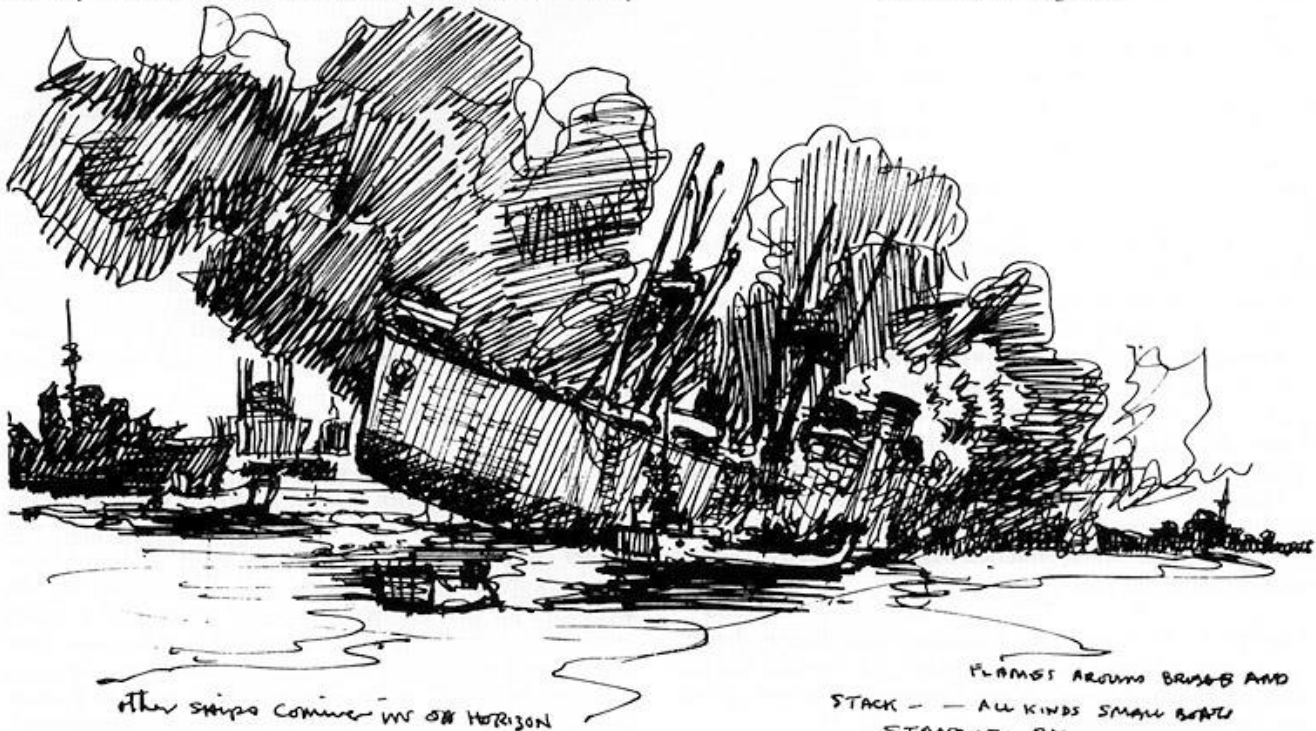
**As World War II began, he quickly became successful as a free-lance artist, doing several war illustrations for *Life* magazine and for the *P.M.* daily newspaper in New York, as well as commissions for the U.S. Army, Electric Boat Company, U.S. Steel, and many others.**

Then, from 1943 to the end of the war, he served as a U.S. Army artist-correspondent in the European Theater of Operations.

That service began with basic training at Fort Eustis, Virginia, for some weeks until he was pulled out to serve at the London office of *Yank*, the U.S. Army weekly. At Eustis he had been surprised to find some of his own art work, commissioned earlier by the Army, being used for aircraft identification studies in the anti-aircraft training that was beginning for him there.

"My assignments (in Europe)," he said, "came from the editors in the London office. They tried, through their connections, to cover as much of the war as possible. We, *Yank*, and *Stars & Stripes*, the Army daily, were staffed by enlisted men. War correspondents (from other papers or news services) had simulated rank of captains or majors; I forget which.

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Other ships coming in on horizon

FLAMES AROUND BRIGGS AND STACK - ALL KINDS SMALL BOATS STAND BY

This sketch of a U.S. Liberty ship burning and sinking at Omaha Beach on D-Day Plus One is from the Jack Coggins wartime

sketch book. The ship was bombed by German planes and sank in about 2 1/2 hours.

## Jack Coggins

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Also they made a hell of a lot more money. However, they never treated us as anything but equals." Coggins himself held the rank of sergeant.

"Several assignments which I particularly remember were several days on patrol in an old Royal Navy destroyer in the North Sea; a trip to Berlin in a Lancaster bomber of the R.A.F. on a big raid; arrival on the beaches of D-Day plus 1; a few days with a PT boat squadron off the beaches; a ride in a Piper Cub overlooking the great saturation raid on the Germans prior to the 'break out' from the hedge-row country (Operation Cobra). These are a few of the many."

Over Normandy beaches and the English Channel the day after the D-Day invasion of June 6, 1944, he observed from his "Liberty" troop ship the action of anti-aircraft guns like those he had started to train with back in the states. At night he was impressed by the ironic beauty of streams of anti-aircraft tracer bullets as they lighted up the sky like gigantic fireworks. AA gunners fired promptly at anything they thought was moving overhead, and many merchant ships were using 20-millimeter guns, he said.

On the Liberty ship Coggins became friendly with the ensign in charge of the gun crews. He remembered: "We were sitting together. There was a quickie raid. Our five-inch, or three-inch, guns went off. We hit the deck. The ship next to us (the *Morgan*, another Liberty) got one in the stern. She sank; her stern was on the bottom and they had to drag her off."

From that incident, Coggins added to his pen-and-ink sketchbook an illustration of the stricken *Morgan* for use in his art correspondent duty and, as it happens, for his memory archives of today.

Each of his drawings bears the stamp of the Navy censor. In one of his sketches, Coggins had indicated by a quarter-inch "squiggle" the presence of radar on top of a ship's mast. That squiggle had to go before the drawing was approved for submission to *Yank*.

**One of the artist's assignments on land** took him to the Brittany peninsula of northwestern France, where the plan was to take Brest and Lorient.

"There was a lot of resistance there," he said. "Drew Middleton (*New York Times* correspondent) and I, with a jeep driver, were in Brittany together. I had met him at the press camp and we tagged along with one of the armored divisions into Brittany.

"Outside of Vannes the division halted, and Drew and I and the driver went into the town. We always said we liberated the town. We were put up in a hotel, and there was a lot of singing and drinking. There was a meeting in some hall. I remember this big room lit by candles as we sat around tables drinking toasts even though there was a language barrier."

Coggins also shared a jeep several times with *Stars & Stripes* correspondent Andy Rooney, today known for his *60 Minutes* work on CBS-TV and for his syndicated newspaper column which appears in the *Reading Eagle-Times*.

"The last time I saw Andy," Jack says, "was a few years ago at a *Yank* reunion at the Seventh Regiment Armory in New York." Coggins also crossed paths with Ernie Pyle, probably the best known World War II correspondent; Robert Cappa,

the noted photographer, and "many others."

Of his nighttime experience on a Lancaster bomber over Berlin, "with a sizeable bomb load," Coggins recalled: "I did a picture afterward from memory, in color – the only color jobs we did in the English edition of *Yank*. It came out in the D-Day edition."

England was not only the country of his birth and his launching pad for the *Yank* activity, but it was the location of his first wartime experience – in World War I. As a child in the coastal community of Folkstone along the English Channel, he "could hear bombs going off" when German planes came across the channel to bomb London.

"We were all out in the street, looking up," he said. "It was stupid. We used to go up to the back windows and look out – kid's stuff, it was so exciting."

**After the war, from 1947 to 1952, Coggins was** a member of the faculty of Hunter College, New York City. In that period he met Alma Woods in New York, where she



Alma Woods, before she married Jack Coggins, was a well-known fashion model in New York (photo at left). In Reading, the couple took part in charity balls (see above), this one at the Abe Lincoln Hotel in the late 50s.

was one of the top fashion and photographic models.

"We were married in 1948," he said. "She became interested in drawing, partly I think from sitting-in on some of my classes, and showed a great deal of aptitude. We had our first exhibition together in 1973 and have had a joint show every other year since. Alma was elected a member of the Oil Pastel Association and the prestigious Pen and Brush Club."

Mrs. Coggins said in the interview that she became her husband's student after their marriage. "Jack told me," she said, "he could teach me all I'd need to know in a year. What I'd do with it was up to me."

Her pastel work is as familiar to many Berks Countians who regularly attend shows as are her husband's marine paintings. She likes oil painting equally as well, sometimes using pastels to design a scene that she'll then paint in oil. Her oils don't turn up often in shows because they sell too fast, she said.

When a subject came up regarding other female friends of Jack, Alma explained wittily, "I was the only girl he knew who knew the difference between barley and wheat." What she meant was that she had grown up on a farm in Bradford County, and could, in addition, milk a cow. "Later I milked goats for a goat dairy," she said.

But Alma Woods, daughter of Fred and Essica Ortha (Monahan) Woods, was doing more than milking cows or goats. Her economics teacher at school recognized a talent she had for designing and making clothes, and encouraged her to seek employment in the New York City garment district.

Alma went to the big city, found work, and, with her talent, natural beauty, and a little luck, quickly rose to become one of the top fashion and photo models while learning clothing design from the experts. Her success included a modeling tour of South America in a group billed, she recalls, as "the ten most beautiful women in the world." Her talent carried over into a continuing love for and practice of clothing making, and contributed to her knowledge of design as she entered the art field.

Jack and Alma have his-and-hers work corners in a large high-ceilinged studio in their hilltop home, "Crestfield." Nearby are walls of piled stone strung between fields, New England style. The couple's first home on property in the neighborhood was aptly named "Stonewalls." As for the name "Crestfield" – Alma's choice – he said: "Doesn't mean a damn thing."

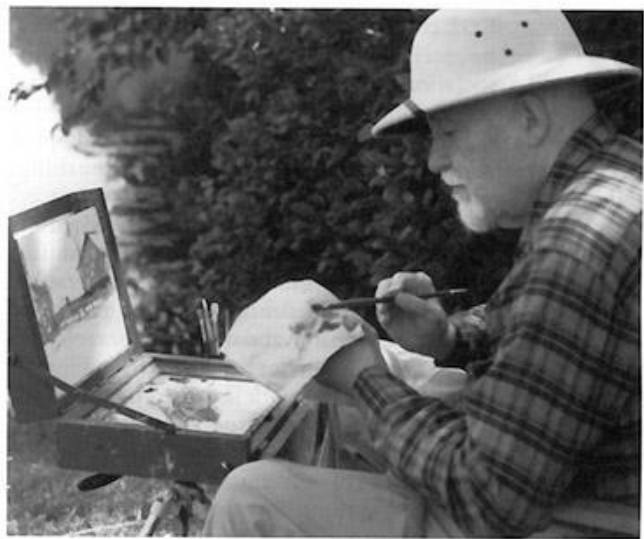
How did they get from New York to Berks, and to live for the next half century in Pike Township?

Coggins explained: "A friend of mine, an illustrator, and his wife were shopping for a summer place and she was brought here by a real estate man. I came out with them. I had never been here before, and in Pennsylvania only once. Then I came out on weekends. I had a gun collection, and I'd shoot my muzzle-loaders. Then a farm came up for sale. I bought the old farm in 1947 (the year before marriage)."

Alma was obviously speaking for both of them when she said: "I've always enjoyed being here. It's centrally located, close to New York, Washington, and the Eastern Shore of Maryland which we like, and still very rural."

While they have kept largely to themselves, their home and their art, they say they have not felt isolated. "You don't feel isolated unless you want to be," he said.

## The couple has long associations with area arts



Jack Coggins at work.

groups such as the Berks Art Alliance, which Jack recommended to Alma years ago as a place to put her early studies into practice. He served a term as Alliance president.

"There has been a marked increase in interest in the arts since I came to the Reading area," he said. "The Institute of the Arts [formerly Wyomissing Institute] due in great part to the leadership of its former director, Elain Bertolet, has flourished mightily, and the Alliance has grown from a handful to over 350 members.

"The newly-designed Reading Museum is a real gem, while the Berks Arts Council and numerous art galleries and local exhibitions show that Reading and vicinity is well represented in the visual arts field."

Nearing age 90 at the time of the interview, Coggins was still teaching ten three-hour painting sessions, spring and fall, at the Institute. And although handicapped in the past decade by the loss of his left eye from infection following an operation, he continued to "drift into the studio and do a little work whenever it suits me."

As for preferences in art styles, Coggins likes "a direct splashy type of realistic painting," although he said he does not necessarily paint that way himself. He admires the so-called New Hope school of Redfield, Garber, and others, and has "no liking for 'modern' art."

"Picasso and others leave me cold," he said, adding, "I'd trade a good Sargent for the lot of them."

Although Berks County is one state away from the sea, "there always seems to be an interest in marine subjects," he said. He prefers oil painting but works in various media.

Besides being in many exhibitions in Pennsylvania, Coggins' work has been accepted for exhibition by the American Watercolor Society, The Salmagundi Club, American Artist Professional League, Pastel Society of America, in which he won a purchase award in 1989's Mystic Maritime Gallery, International Maritime Exhibition, 1987-1990, in which he won the Rudolph Shaeffer Award.

The latter award and the Americanism Award he received in 1985 from the Daniel Boone National Foundation, plus the Revolutionary Round Table Award for his *Ships and Seamen of the American Revolution* are ones he particularly prizes.

Near the time of this interview for the *Historical Review of Berks County*, he received a new, framed award from the International Association of Astronomical Artists "In appreciation of his lifetime contribution to the development, dissemination and public awareness of Astronomical and Space Art." Commenting on that one, he said: "Evidently the things I did with Pratt influenced people to get interested in space."

Some of his paintings are owned by the Philadelphia Maritime Museum, National Air and Space Museum of the Smithsonian Institution, U.S. Coast Guard, and Atlantic Oceanographic and Meteorological Laboratories. For the latter group, he had accompanied an expedition aboard the *Discoverer* off Barbados to do a series of paintings for headquarters in Florida.

In Berks County, some of his work is owned by the Reading Museum, Polymer Corp., Berks Products Corp., Gilbert Associates, and numerous banks and private collectors.

A number of his original manuscripts and illustrations are in a collection of some 1,200 authors and artists at the University of Southern Mississippi, placed there at the university's request. Some of his books and biographical records are in the Berks Authors Collection at the Reading Public Library. That collection was initiated in 1995 by Chet Hagan, when he was editor of *Bookends*, the journal of the Friends of the Reading-Berks Public Libraries; he is, of course, the present editor of the *Historical Review of Berks County*.

Many of Coggins' original papers, however, remain uncollected. On a question put to him about whether some of them would be placed in this area in the future, he said simply: "No one has asked." He added in a regretful tone, "In fact, most



Jack Coggins and wife Alma Woods in a quiet moment in their rural art studio.

of the time we've been ignored back here on the hill."

At least part of the reason for that, he indicated, has been the lifestyle of him and his wife, whose emphasis has been on their rural home and work, largely out of the mainstream of the Berks community. Yet they have been active in the area art organizations as voluntary workers and exhibitors. Coggins has taught art for more than 40 years at what is now the Institute of the Arts.

**Among his activities was his service on the Fine Arts Board of the Reading Redevelopment Authority.** Experience with that board left him with memories of difficult decisions as to what was both financially possible, and desirable, in the selection of art work for redevelopment projects such as the sculpture created for the Gateway building at Second and Penn streets.

What was chosen for the various projects had to be sought from what was available "from the bottom of the market," he said. The board could not choose "a Rodin type of thing," for instance, because of the federal cost limit based on a percentage of the total cost of a redevelopment project. Another important consideration was that the art structure "had to be fairly indestructible" so that it could not be vandalized.

In studying hundreds of slides in Washington, the board would find some of the submissions "far out and some too expensive." While he liked some of the objects chosen, he recalled that the board "sometimes had to choose the lesser of several evils." The controversial "family" of box-like sculptures on the north side of the 800-block of Court Street, "was the only one I had second thoughts about," he said. "I don't think the people of Reading appreciate this too much, and we got criticism."

Under the financial limitations involved, Coggins would have preferred that the public money be designated for making "some nice area as a park, with a fountain for people to sit around." He added: "I think when the government starts messing around with art they waste a lot of money."

He was impressed, however, with the treatment of the 500-block of Penn Street when it was closed to traffic. "I was disappointed," he said, "when they took out the middle of Penn Street [for the return of traffic lanes]. I thought the closed square looked pretty good."

For a London boy with his model yacht in Round Pond of Kensington Gardens, the value of park space must have been indelibly impressed on the mind of the artist to come.

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