

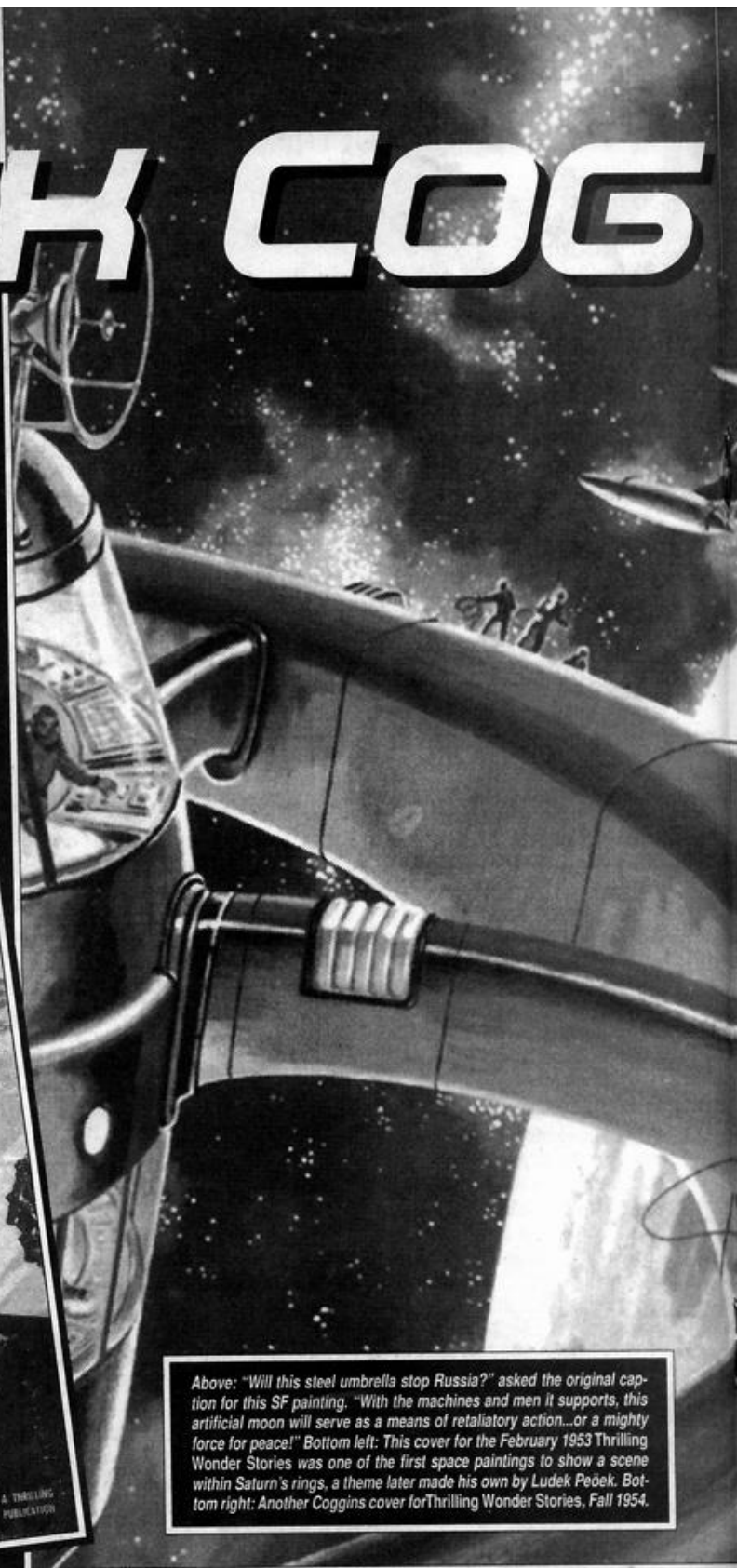
ART SPACE

JACK COGG

From the Fighting Front to the Final Frontier, this Artist always Captured the Spirit of Adventure!

Article and Interview by RON MILLER

Ask most Baby Boomer space enthusiasts which artists sparked their childhood interest the most, and two names rise to the top: Chesley Bonestell and Jack Coggins. If Coggins's name is the less familiar of the two, it's only because he was less prolific. Although he illustrated several books about rockets and spaceflight, his influence rests primarily on two now-classic volumes: *Rockets, Jets, Guided Missiles, and Space Ships* and *By Spaceship to the Moon*, both authored by



Above: "Will this steel umbrella stop Russia?" asked the original caption for this SF painting. "With the machines and men it supports, this artificial moon will serve as a means of retaliatory action...or a mighty force for peace!" Bottom left: This cover for the February 1953 Thrilling Wonder Stories was one of the first space paintings to show a scene within Saturn's rings, a theme later made his own by Ludek Pešek. Bottom right: Another Coggins cover for Thrilling Wonder Stories, Fall 1954.

GINS

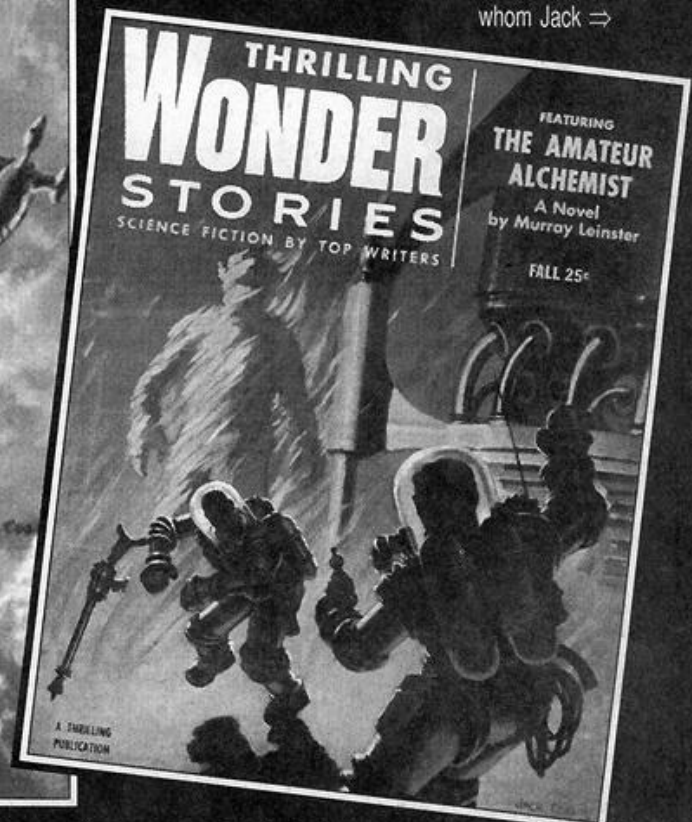


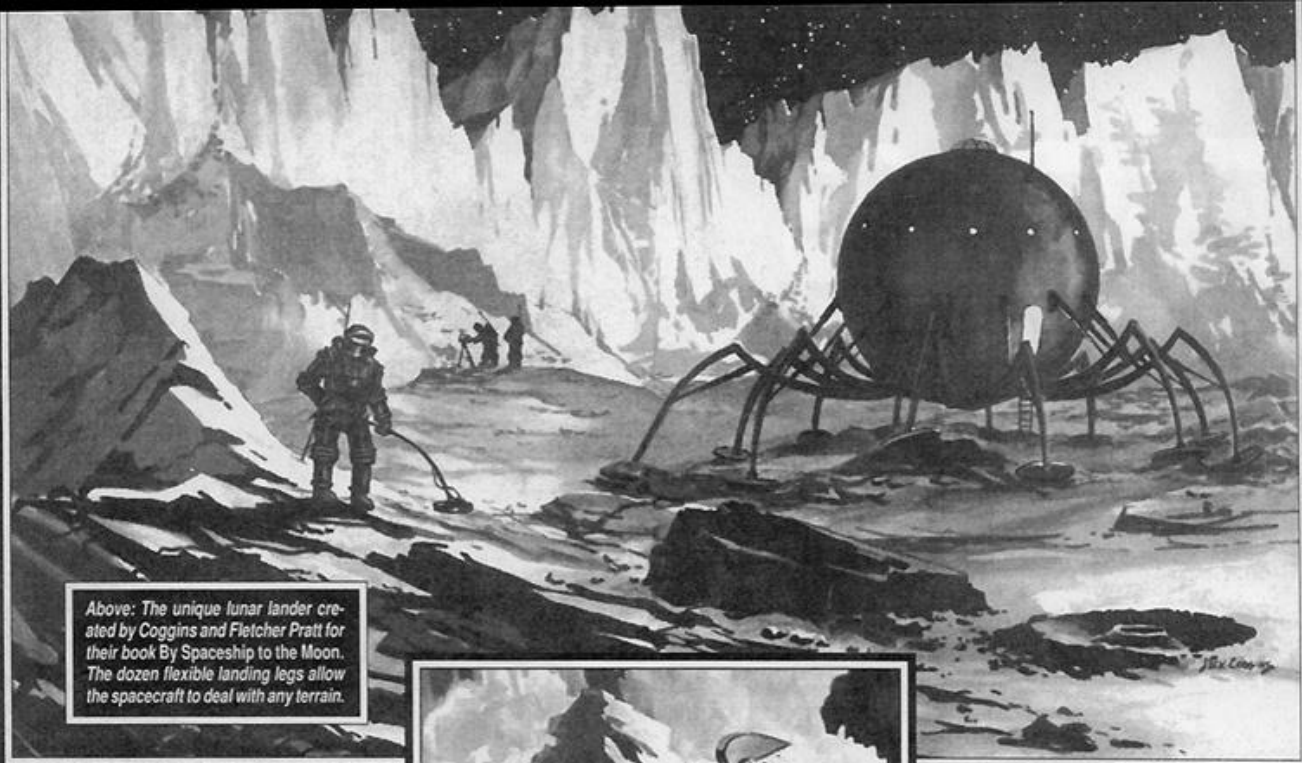
science fiction writer/historian Fletcher Pratt. What set these apart from Bonestell's books, and what is certainly a major factor in the fondness with which they are remembered, is that the Coggins-Pratt books were *intended* for children, unlike *The Conquest of Space* or *Across the Space Frontier*. Indeed, they were among the very first serious books about space travel ever to be published for young people...and they were certainly the very best.

Jack Coggins was born in London in 1911. His father was an officer in the Life Guards (not what it sounds like), which, for centuries, was the elite cavalry of the British Army—a sort of Green Berets of the past. Coggins still remembers sitting on the great piebald drum horse at age three, the stable-smells, and sounds of barracks life.

The regiment went to France in 1914, with Jack's father as Regimental Corporal Major, the senior non-commissioned officer. Meanwhile, the family moved to a grandmother's house in Foulkestone for the duration. Jack didn't see much of his father until 1919.

After attending several day-schools, Jack was sent to the Imperial Service College (which Rudyard Kipling had attended), where most of the students were military brats whom Jack ⇒





Above: The unique lunar lander created by Coggins and Fletcher Pratt for their book *By Spaceship to the Moon*. The dozen flexible landing legs allow the spacecraft to deal with any terrain.

remembers as being a "proper little bunch of snobs." His father returned from the war as a riding master, and the family moved to Windsor. Things seemed sunny, but they weren't destined to remain so. Beginning in 1923, Sir Eric Geddes began dismantling the postwar army in a wholesale reduction bitterly described as "Geddes Axe." The elder Coggins, only a junior officer after being commissioned in 1917, was discharged—a terrible blow after 25 years of loyal service.



Above: A moon explorer operates a remote-controlled tractor robot.

Jack had been living at home, but in 1939 he moved into the city to share a studio with an artist friend—a first-floor walk-up in an old Greenwich Village brownstone that cost the two artists only \$30 a month. When hostilities again erupted in Europe, Jack, who had long been interested in military subjects—particularly naval subjects—took a sampling of war pictures to Worthen Paxton, the art director of *Life* magazine, who commissioned a drawing illustrating an imaginary enemy landing on the English coast, similar to "Sea Lion"—Hitler's planned, but abortive, invasion of Great Britain. The \$250 which Jack received paid the rent for nearly five months! Taking advantage of his new specialty, Jack began providing war pictures for other magazines, including a series of double-page spreads for *PM* magazine, as well as a variety of advertising illustration.

Now well-known for his expertise in illustrating naval subjects, Coggins was invited to provide the artwork for a children's book about the U.S. Navy by Doubleday. The author was to be Fletcher Pratt, a well-known military historian, and the publisher sent the artist to meet him. "I had expected Pratt to be some burly seaman type," Coggins recalled, but he turned out to be a small, slightly built man with a reddish beard.

Fletcher Pratt (1897-1956) had come from the Hugo Gernsback school of science fiction, beginning his career translating and writing stories for *Amazing Stories* in the 1920s. He eventually devised a clever scheme for extracting payment from the notoriously parsimonious Gernsback—he would submit only the



Coggins cover for *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, April 1953

Subsequently, a fellow officer suggested that his wife, an American steel heiress, needed a secretary. Accepting the position, Jack's father moved his family to Long Island, New York in 1923, where young Jack was enrolled in Roslyn High School. Jack had always enjoyed "fiddling around with drawing" and his family had not discouraged him. After graduation in 1928, he was sent to the Grand Central Art School in New York City. In studios above the train station, Jack studied under such eminent painters as Edmund Graecen, George Pierce Ennis, and Wayman Adams, where he received a concentrated grounding in fine art techniques, before moving to the Art Students League. He painted constantly, but not professionally. To support himself, he painted signs (including once painting an enormous battery that covered the entire side of a building).

first half of a story and, after it was accepted for publication, refuse to send in the last half until he'd received his check. Pratt's reputation today rests primarily on his collaborations, in particular the series of classic fantasy novels and short stories he co-authored with L. Sprague de Camp, such as *The Compleat Enchanter*. In the late 1930s, however, Pratt was best known for his work as a military and naval historian. By the time Coggins was introduced to him, he had already written numerous volumes on the subjects—often researching and writing three or four books simultaneously. Many of his more than 50 books were illustrated by his wife, Inga Stephens.

Before coming to New York in 1920, Pratt had worked as a reporter for the *Buffalo Courier Express*, where he became a full-time writer in 1923. A genuine renaissance man, he impressed Coggins, whose own interests were nearly as wide-ranging as Pratt's.

He eventually introduced Coggins, who was an avid reader of science fiction, to the circle of New York-based science fiction writers, such as Hydra Club members Judith Merrill and L. Ron Hubbard, as well as the Trap Door Spiders, a rambunctious all-male "literary society," of which Isaac Asimov, L. Sprague de Camp, and Lester Del Rey were members.

This all came considerably later, of course. At the time of Pratt's and Coggins's first meeting, they knew only that they had a mutual interest in military—and especially naval—history. The result of this collaboration was *Ships of the U.S. Navy*, a still-handsome volume that described in text, and illustrated in full-color illustrations, every class of ship in the Navy, from sea-going tug to submarine.

Knowing that Coggins had a special interest in naval warfare, Pratt invited him to participate in his "Navy Game"—an elaborately worked out game played with tiny model ships on the writer's living room floor. It was based on a naval wargame developed by Fred T. Jane, the British illustrator and creator of the famous *Jane's All the Worlds Fighting Ships* series. As unlikely as it might seem, there is a thread of science fiction running through the history of war gaming in the first half of the 20th century. Pratt, of course, was a popular author of science fiction and fantasy, but it is a less well-known fact that Fred Jane was a science fiction illustrator. And prior to Jane's game-inventing, H.G. Wells wrote a book in 1913 called *Little Wars: A Game for Boys from Twelve Years to One Hundred and Fifty and for that More Intelligent Sort of Girl Who Likes Games and Books*. Wells, an ardent pacifist, apparently believed that his game would not only entertain, but would offer an alternative outlet for the natural aggression and bellicosity of the human being.



Below: The multi-antennaeed, mountaintop communications installation at a Coggins moonbase.

"submit to hefty questions"—sometimes brutally personal. An editor for *Reader's Digest* "went home in tears." Coggins once invited Worthen Paxton as his guest.

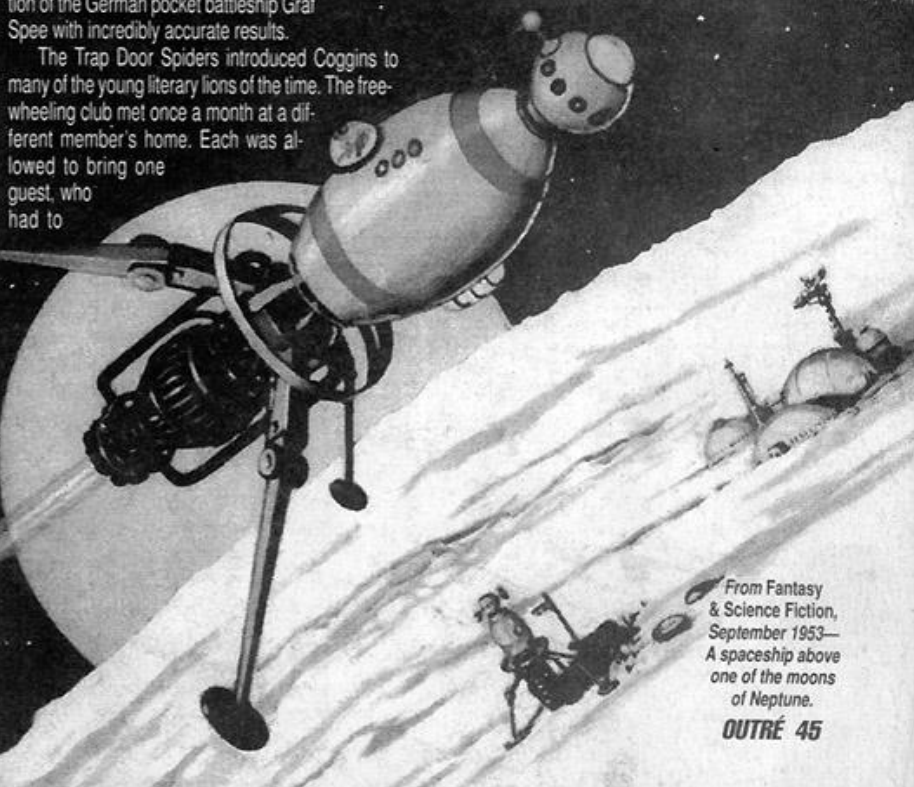
As the United States was drawn into the war, Coggins received his invitation from Uncle Sam to join the conflict. He was pulled from basic training before he could complete it, however, to work as an illustrator for *Yank* magazine. He had already ⇒

Pratt's game involved dozens of tiny wooden ships—built to a scale of about one inch to 50 feet—spread over the living room floor of his apartment. Their maneuvers and the results of their battles were calculated via a complex mathematical formula, with scale distances meticulously marked off with tape measures. Although many of the rules were arbitrary, they were based on such deep knowledge of the history of naval strategy that Pratt was able to reproduce the 1939 destruction of the German pocket battleship *Graf Spee* with incredibly accurate results.

The Trap Door Spiders introduced Coggins to many of the young literary lions of the time. The free-wheeling club met once a month at a different member's home. Each was allowed to bring one guest, who had to

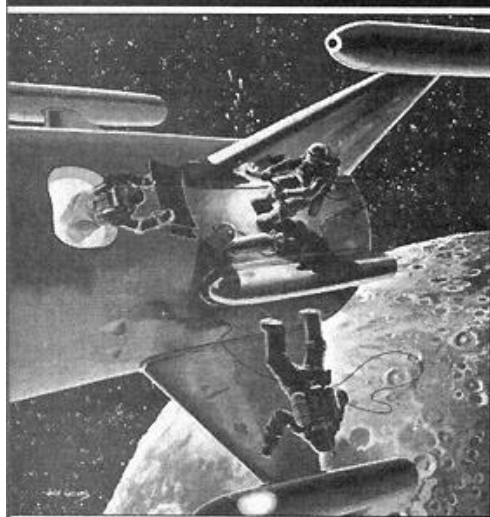


Above: A fleet of spaceships breaks orbit in this Coggins cover for *Thrilling Wonder Stories*.



From *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, September 1953—A spaceship above one of the moons of Neptune.

OUTRÉ 45



Above: A selection of Jack Coggins paintings from his children's books, illustrating astronauts mining asteroids and making repairs on a rocket in orbit above the moon.

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been introduced to the commanding officer and editor, Colonel Franklin Forsberg (who had been the editor of *Mademoiselle*), by Fletcher Pratt. *Yank* was a weekly magazine for enlisted men (*Stars and Stripes* was the daily). Coggins was ordered to report to the head office in New York. Pratt, meanwhile, because he was an acknowledged authority on military affairs, returned to newspaper work as the military expert for the *New York Post*.

Prior to his induction, Coggins had been working in Washington, contributing artwork to a new Army Air Force aircraft recognition system known as "W.E.F.T."

It was meant to identify aircraft by the shape and placement of its Wings, Engine(s), Fuselage and Tail—but which proved so ineffectual that the acronym was jokingly redubbed "Wrong Every F**ing Time." Drafted in 1942, Coggins was sent overseas the following year to join the staff of *Yank's* London office.

Jack's adventures in the European theater were many and varied. "I had fun in Europe," he reminisces. Through his connections with the Royal Navy, he spent a few days on convoy duty in the North Sea—the infamous "U-boat alley"—in a World War I vintage destroyer. He witnessed the bombing of St. Lo and flew over Berlin in one of 700 or 800 Lancaster bombers—seeing perhaps a little more of the city than he really wished, when it proved that his plane had arrived too early and had to circle its target until the time for its scheduled bombing run. Coggins remembers looking back at the flaming city and thinking, "Those poor people." His biggest disappointment was being "screwed out of" witnessing D-Day, which "annoyed the hell out of me."

Coggins was assigned to a Liberty ship due off Utah Beach on the second day of the invasion. "On D-Day," he remembers, "we were in the western end of the English Channel, watching our escorting destroyers depth-charge suspected submarine targets, listening to the German radio prophesying doom, and wondering when the mighty Luftwaffe was going to show up." Fortunately, the Luftwaffe had, by now, been so badly beaten that the invaders saw little of it. It did manage to send in a few bombers on night raids over the ships anchored off the beaches. One of these scored a direct hit, and sank a Liberty ship next to Jack's. Several days spent with the U.S. PT boat patrolling the beaches ended with a little "shore leave" which took Coggins and the PT's skipper to Cherbourg as the city fell, and then down the peninsula to what was then the "front."

In July, Coggins was back in Normandy, "glad to be missing the V1 'buzz bombs' which were making their noisy appearance over southern England." From the vantage point of a Piper Cub, he saw part of the massive saturation bombing of July 25 that preceded "Operation COBRA." Soon, a trip into Brittany with an armored column finished Coggins's campaigning in France.

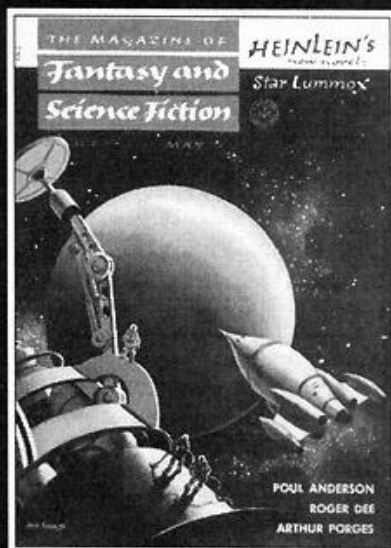
After returning to civilian life, Coggins found that many of the outlets for his commercial work had dried up. A friend at New York's Hunter College had resigned, and suggested that Coggins take his place

teaching watercolor. He did this, and at the same time took advantage of his interest in science fiction to begin doing covers for the pulp magazines. Although *As-tounding* was his favorite, he never did a cover for it, most of his work appearing on *Galaxy*, *Startling*, and *Thrilling Wonder Stories*.

All of the talk he had heard about rockets while in London had intrigued him, and his science fiction cover work must have started him thinking about them again. He had already illustrated some articles about rockets for *Yank*,

and because he "liked mechanical stuff" became interested in their history and possible future. Coggins doesn't recall who first suggested the idea, but he and Pratt were soon collaborating on a children's book to be called *Rockets, Jets, Guided Missiles, and Space Ships* (1951), soon followed by a sequel, *By Space Ship to the Moon* (1952).

These slim (60-page) books were landmarks in the then-nascent field of astronautical publishing. The first serious, accurate books about rocketry and space travel written for young people, they gained immeasurably from the specialized knowledge and talent of their creators, who took every pain to make them both meticulously accurate as well as entertaining. Both books boasted introductions by space expert Willy Ley. Fletcher Pratt's text is as good a summary of the history of rocketry up to the early 1950s as you are likely to find anywhere, even today, while Coggins's authoritative paintings bring vividly to life events such as the Chinese routing of the Mongols with a rocket barrage at the battle of Kai-fung-fu in 1232, the rocket attack on Fort Mchenry in 1814 that inspired the line in our national anthem "and the rocket's red glare," and the high-tech rockets used in World War II, such as the V1 and V2. The book's last chapter is called "That Trip to the Moon" and realistically discusses the problems that face the scientists and engineers planning to make such a trip.



Coggins cover for *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, May 1953.

By *Space Ship to the Moon* picks up where the earlier book left off—beginning with the question usually overlooked by spaceflight proponents: Who is going to pay for it? After discussing the possibilities of sponsorship by private corporations and governments, Pratt comes to the conclusion (all too prophetically) that it will probably be the defense departments of various countries who will foot the bill. The remainder of the book describes getting a spaceship to the moon in the same logical, step-by-step process that would be advocated shortly after by Werner von Braun in his classic *Collier's* magazine series. Pratt tells his readers that, following an unmanned satellite, a space station will need to be constructed (using as its core the upper stage of an unmanned rocket) and sustained by a fleet of manned supply ships. The station would be assembled by spacesuited astronauts. Pratt and Coggins proposed two different space station designs. Their preference was for a roughly cylindrical design similar to Skylab. The interior would be an open work area, with instruments and workstations on the walls.

However, if weightlessness should prove to be a serious physiological problem,



the space station could take the form of a rotating torus, much like the one in the later *Collier's* series.

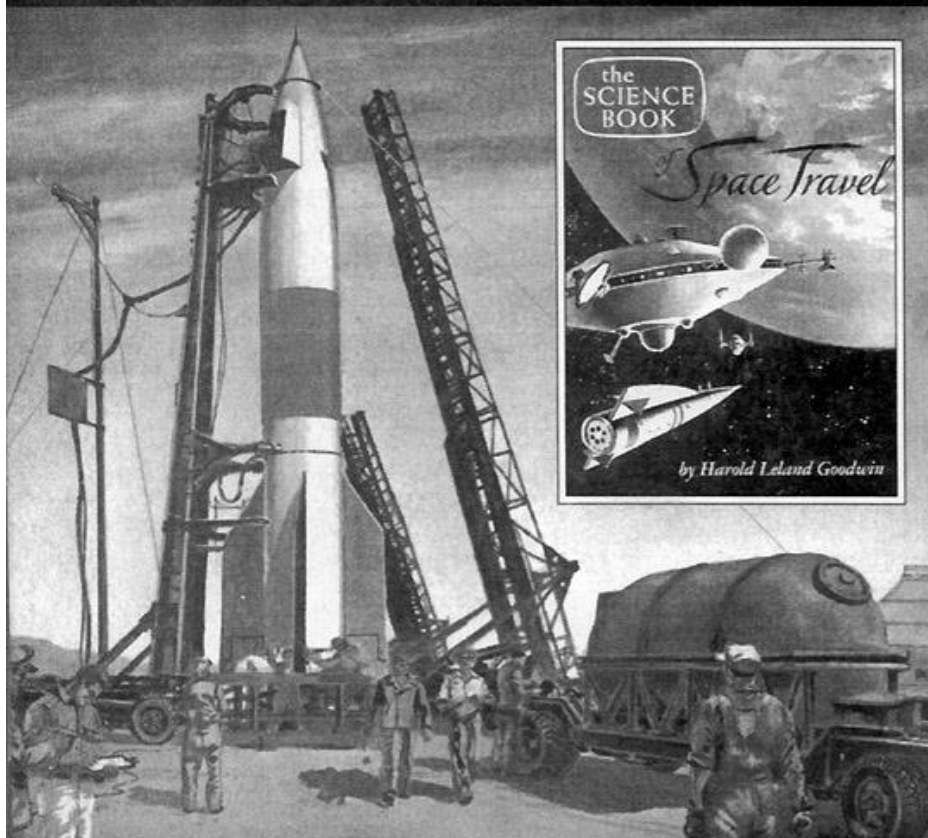
Once the space station is completed, work can begin on the moon rocket. Since this would never have to operate in an atmosphere, Pratt and Coggins came up with a spherical spacecraft. With 12 landing legs folded up against its sides, it looked for all the world like an enormous spider. After initial exploration was complete, a permanent moon base would be established. This would be self-sustaining, with greenhouses providing fresh air and food.

Given the space available, the level of detail that Pratt and Coggins were able to accomplish is astonishing; there is little that is pertinent to the exploration of space and the moon that they fail to consider—with a resulting realism that even von Braun and Chesley Bonestell were hard put to rival. While the artwork that Coggins created for these two books did not have the near-photographic realism of Chesley Bonestell's paintings—and nor were they meant to—they instead have a solid, nuts and bolts believability that make them look as though they were painted by an eyewitness. Coggins's spaceships have real mass and solidity, as though they were made of cast iron, instead of aluminum and plastic.

At about this same time, Coggins moved to rural Pennsylvania—where he lives to this day—and concentrated less on commercial illustration and more on his fine art, and on writing and illustrating. He illustrated a number of books for other authors, including Fletcher Pratt's *All About Rockets and Jets* and Harold Goodwin's *The Science Book of Space Travel*. His first solo book was *Arms and Equipment of the Civil War* (1962, reprinted 1999), which was followed by 14 others, including *Ships and Seamen of the American* →



Top center: Imaginative Coggins illustration of some tiny invaders. Bottom left: Landing on the moon, from *Rockets, Jets, Guided Missiles, and Space Ships*, now in the permanent collection of the National Air and Space Museum. Above: Astronauts net a giant "space medusa" on the cover of *Galaxy*, Aug., 1957.



Top: A beautiful example of Coggins's watercolor and pen and ink technique: the gunboat U.S.S. Erie, from *Fighting Ships of the U.S. Navy*, his first book, published in 1941. Middle, left: Cover artwork for PTs in Action—The Story of the U.S. Navy's Motor Torpedo Boats, a booklet published by Elco, the manufacturer of the Navy's famous PT boats. Middle right: Magazine ad for Elco, 1942. Above: Preparing a V2 for launch at White Sands, New Mexico—from *Rockets, Jets, Guided Missiles, and Space Ships*. Inset: Cover of *The Science Book of Space Travel* (1954), for which Coggins also provided b&w interior drawings.

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Revolution, which won the Revolutionary Round Table Award, and *The Marine Painter's Guide*, which was a book club selection.

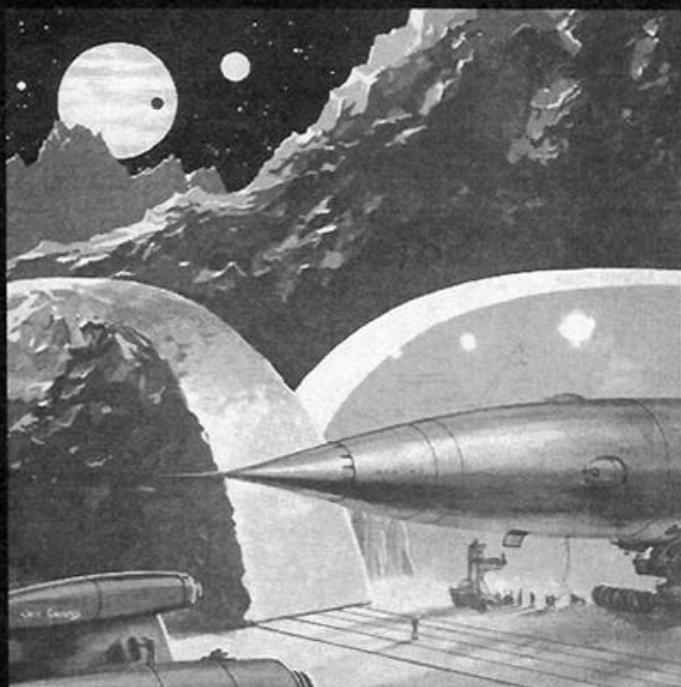
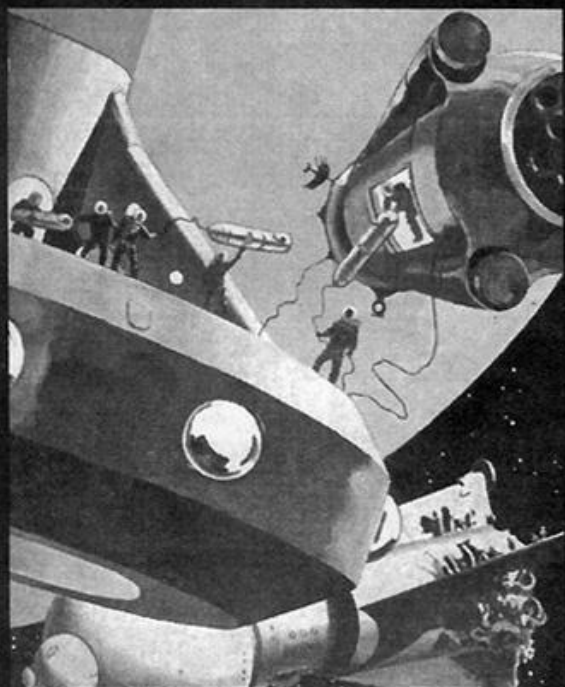
The continued popularity of the two space books he created with Fletcher Pratt—and the fondness with which they are remembered—astonishes the artist. "I had no idea," he says, "that the space books were still popular. Except for the books you have so kindly sent me from time to time, and newspaper accounts of doings in space, I had lost all contact with things extraterrestrial. When I am writing, I try to submerge myself in the subject almost to the exclusion of everything else. So I became a Civil War buff, then a horseman. Then, putting equestrian interests behind me (so much so that when, some 450,000 copies later, I was asked to do a revised edition, I refused; I couldn't bear the thought of immersing myself in "horse" again), I became a military historian for a while.

"I am delighted that our little 'Dollar Flats,' as they were known to the trade, have gained some fame. Also, very surprised!"

In recent years, Coggins has been teaching art at the Institute of Fine Arts in Wyomissing, Pennsylvania. His original paintings—mostly of marine subjects—have been exhibited internationally. Today, Coggins, at the age of 90, looks very much like a retired sea captain—burly, with white moustache and goatee. He is still working actively, his barnlike studio filled with paintings in every stage of completion. His wife of more than 50 years, Alma, has not lost any of the grace and beauty of her fashion modeling days. She turned to painting in the 1970s and has become an outstanding landscape artist in her own right, working almost exclusively in pastels. She and Jack often hold joint exhibitions. They are gracious hosts who have not lost an iota of sharpness, wit, hospitality, or memory and, fortunately, were kind enough to share these qualities with their appreciative interviewer. ☉

Credits & Awards: Jack Coggins has garnered numerous distinctions for his work, such as the Mystic Maritime Museum Purchase Award, the Americanism Award from the Daniel Boone National Foundation, and the Rudolph Schaeffer Award. Recently, he was accorded one of the first six Lucien Rudaux Memorial Awards presented by the International Association of Astronomical Artists "In appreciation of his lifetime contribution to the development, dissemination, and public awareness of astronomical art." His work is in private collections all over the world, as well as in such outstanding public institutions as the National Air and Space Museum (which owns one of the original paintings from *Rockets, Jets, Guided Missiles, and Space Ships*), the Philadelphia Maritime Museum, Brown University Library, the U.S. Navy, and the U.S. Coast Guard. His manuscripts and many of his original illustrations are preserved by the University of Southern Mississippi as part of their collection of outstanding authors and artists.

JACK COGGINS GALLERY OF SPACE ART



SPACE TRAVEL BY 1960? by WILLY LEY



Above: A mini-gallery of Jack Coggins imaginative space art, both science fact and fiction. Clockwise from top left: Spare parts are transported from an orbiting space station to a crippled ship in need of repair. Space warships are overhauled at a giant military hangar on one of the moons of Jupiter. The blast-off of a classic Coggins spaceship, from *By Spaceship to the Moon*. One of Coggins's many eye-catching cover paintings for *Thrilling Wonder Stories*. Another Coggins rocket launch concept, illustrating Willy Ley's "Space Travel by 1960?"