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HVL LESSON TITLE:

ON THEIR BACKS

DEVELOPED BY: ERIN COGGINS

ON THEIR BACKS

GUIDING QUESTION:

**What did art have to do with the
Mighty Eighth Air Corps?**

OVERVIEW:

Each squadron in the U.S. Eighth Air Corps used art on the back of their military-issued flight jackets to build crew morale and to establish their brotherhood. This lesson will educate students on the history of flight jacket art, and allow them to create their own flight jacket art utilizing basic art skills.



SUBJECT(S):
Art and Social Studies



WWII Veteran:
Howard Polin



DURATION:
60 minutes

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“I was too tall to be a gunner, therefore I was eligible to take some classes with the Air Corps. I went through other types of classes like radio before learning about meteorology.”

WWII Veteran Howard Polin

OVERVIEW:

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OBJECTIVES:

At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be able to

- Analyze primary sources
- Utilize art skills to show the understanding of the history of flight jacket art

HISTORICAL CONTEXT:

The U.S. Eighth Air Force, nicknamed the Mighty Eighth Air Corps, was the strategic bomber force in the European Theater during World War II. It was known for its high-altitude daylight bombing missions against Germany and its immense size and bravery.

The Mighty Eighth Air Corps suffered heavy casualties, losing more men than the U.S. Marine Corps, with a 1-in-5 chance of survival for a bomber crewman in 1943. Over the course of the war, the Mighty Eighth Air Corps became the largest armada in the world, capable of sending more than 2,000 heavy bombers and over 1,000 fighter planes in a single mission.

STANDARDS:

Art Literacy: Create an original artwork using the appropriate tools of the arts discipline.

Analyze the purpose and function of specific works of art and synthesize that information to infer artist intent.

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MATERIALS & DOCUMENTS

[Howard Polin HVL Video](#)

Video Slip (Doc A)

The Story of the Flight Jacket (Doc B)

Flight Jacket Examples (Doc C)

Flight Jacket Art Activity (Doc D)

Drawing Paper & Art Supplies

Internet Connection

PROCEDURES

ACTIVITY 01

- Inform students that they will watch a video on World War II veteran, Howard Polin.
- After the video, instruct students to complete the Video Slip (Doc A).

ACTIVITY 02

- Point out that Mr. Polin was a member of the Mighty Eighth Air Corps, was the nickname for the U.S. Army Air Forces' strategic bomber force in the European Theater during World War II. It was known for its high-altitude daylight bombing missions against Germany and its immense size and bravery.
- Distribute The Story of the Bomber Jacket (Doc B). Give students time to read the excerpt and pose the following questions: What does the article teach you about the significance of the art painted/drawn on the back of flight jackets?

ACTIVITY 03

- Distribute the Flight Jacket Examples (Doc C). Discuss these with the students. NOTE: Teachers can place the examples in a presentation format for the class discussion. Instruct students to answer the questions on the hand-out.

ACTIVITY 04

- Distribute the Flight Jacket Art Activity (Doc D). Go over the directions with students. Give them time to brainstorm their ideas before distributing the art supplies for the final activity of creating their flight jacket art.

ON THEIR BACKS

VIDEO SLIP

DOC A



DIRECTIONS: After watching the video on WWII Veteran Howard Polin, write down at least three things from his story that resonated with you.

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and extend across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

ON THEIR BACKS

THE STORY OF THE FLIGHT JACKET

DOC B



Directions: Read the excerpt from “World War II War Paint: How Bomber-Jacket Art Emboldened Our Boys” to better understand the role art played in the U.S. Army Air Corps.

The “men” who fought and died for the United States in World War II, were just barely out of adolescence, as young as 18 years old—the same age as guys obsessed with Tik Tok and video games today. The WWII flight jackets painted with provocative pin-up girls, favorite comic characters, or lucky charms are a reminder of just how young these servicemen were.

At the beginning of the war, Army Air Corps members were issued the most jacket in the military, the leather A-2—which had been the standard leather flight jacket since 1931. In WWII, these jackets became a canvas for teenage fliers to express their rugged individuality. They’d get the backs painted, and often these images included the plane’s nickname and little bombs to tally how many missions the crew flew. On the front, personalized patches would often indicate one’s squadron or bomb group.

On the bawdiest of these jackets, scantily clad babes adorn the backs. On others, cuddly cartoon characters charge forward, bombs in tow, driven by a testosterone-fueled determination to kill. Some jackets depict caricatures of Native Americans or Pacific Islanders, usually drawn with bones in their noses. Even rarer are those showing Hitler being humiliated—while the number of bombs designated missions flown, swastikas represented German aircrafts destroyed.

Some of the jackets are very individual, portraying iconography that’s personal to the soldier, such as his girlfriend’s name or the outline of his state. Others repeated phrases or symbols adopted by the group or squadron, like the nickname of their aircraft, which itself could be a play on the skipper’s name or the name of his wife or girlfriend.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION FROM A HISTORIAN

“Again, you’re talking about guys who were 18, 19 years old. And this was the first place they’d ever been besides home. They tended to cling to things that were familiar to them. A lot of those guys read comic books and the comic strips in the newspapers when they were kids, and that stuff just stayed with them. They listened to popular radio shows like ‘The Lone Ranger’ and ‘The Shadow,’ and then they would visualize characters from those programs and paint them on the aircraft.

“In the ’30s and ’40s, being a sign painter with some artistic skill was probably not all that unusual because every little American city and town needed somebody who could paint a sign. They’re almost industrial-grade skills. Their work is very mono-dimensional and not too artistic in a technical sense but it got the job done.”

ON THEIR BACKS

ANALYZING THE ENEMY ACTIVITY





[LINK TO JACKET PICS](#)

What does the art on these jackets tell you about the airmen in World War II?

How do these jackets support the information in the “World War II War Paint: How Bomber-Jacket Art Emboldened Our Boys” article? Cite two examples.

If you were to design a flight jacket for today’s airmen. What art might you include?

ON THEIR BACKS

BOMBER JACKET ACTIVITY

DOC D



Directions: You are a member of a WWII Bomber Crew, and are in charge of designing the crew's flight jacket. Use the space below to brainstorm three ideas for your jacket's message and art. You will then create your final design the provided art supplies.

IDEA ONE

IDEA TWO

IDEA THREE