



RUDY BELARSKI

Dean of the Aviation Pulp Illustrators

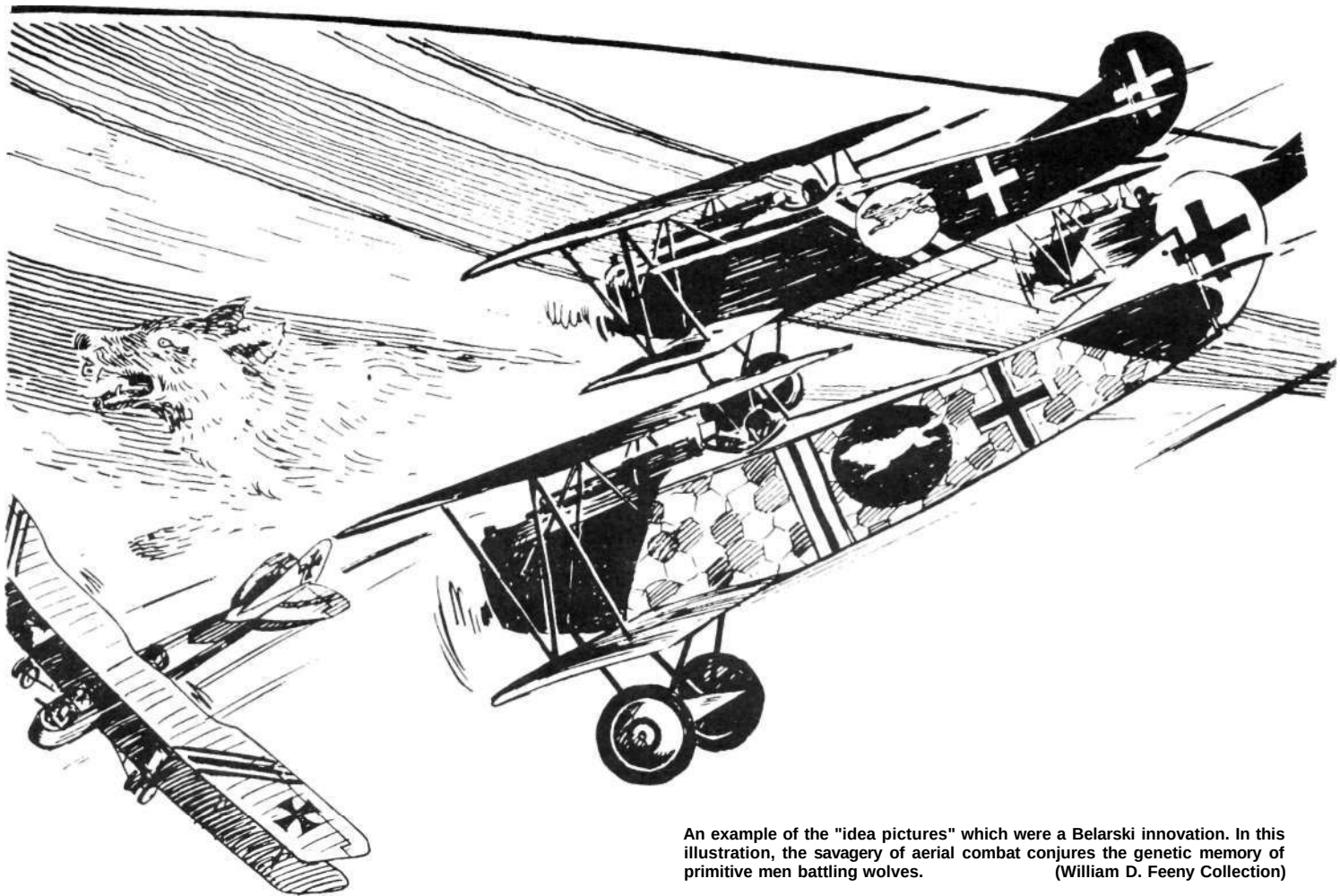
by William D. Feeny

In 1957, when I was just a fledgling aviation illustrator, I first met Rudy Belarski and worked with him daily for some six years. At the time, I was just beginning to be published in Flying, American Airman and the old Air Progress magazines, and had not yet launched my "In Their Honor" series. Small wonder that I revered this man who, two decades earlier, had achieved the reputation as the 'Dean of the Aviation Pulp Illustrators."

Of all the famous illustrators I have known, it was Rudy Belarski who exerted the greatest influence on me. He generously shared the wisdom of long experience, which showed me how far I still had to travel; yet always had words of encouragement, which made the distant goal seem attainable. His professional success aside, he was a man of true inner quality. Despite his reputation, I never heard him boast, for his quiet nature was not given to self centered indulgence or loud egotism. In times of stress he was solid as a

rock. In fact, I often thought of him in terms of the old-fashioned family doctor stereotype. Although he could look very stern when in deep thought, his eyes twinkled and the crow's feet around them crinkled and you knew that something you'd just said had tickled his funny bone.

After all, this man had been there before. In a highly demanding and fiercely competitive profession, he had done it all.



An example of the "idea pictures" which were a Belarski innovation. In this illustration, the savagery of aerial combat conjures the genetic memory of primitive men battling wolves. (William D. Feeny Collection)

Rudolph Belarski was born in Dupont, Pennsylvania, on May 27, 1900. He was one of seven children of Joseph and Margaret Belarski, who had emigrated from Poland some 10 years earlier.¹ At the age of 12, Rudy left school to work as a slate picker and mule driver in a coal mine in Dupont. One day, the mine officials noticed a picture he had drawn on a whitewashed wall near the mine entrance and put him to work painting safety posters.² This was the beginning of a long and successful career as an artist.

The mine company offered to send Rudy to an engineering school, but he demurred, wanting to go to art school instead. At 19, he was in New York waiting on tables, teaching art to settlement house boys, painting signs and sketching portraits to pay his way to Pratt Institute. During the summers, he returned to elementary school in an effort to fill the gaps in his education.³

After graduating from Pratt he stayed on as a teacher, simultaneously building a freelance art business. Being a lover of the outdoors, Rudy gravitated to the action and adventure pulp magazines of the day and soon had more work than one man could handle.⁴ Eventually, his health began to suffer and his doctor prescribed a long rest. Against the advice of caring friends, he embarked on a complete escape from civilization. Alone, with only the barest necessities for survival and a 16mm movie camera in his backpack, he disappeared into the Maine wilderness. His friends feared that they would never see Rudy Belarski again.

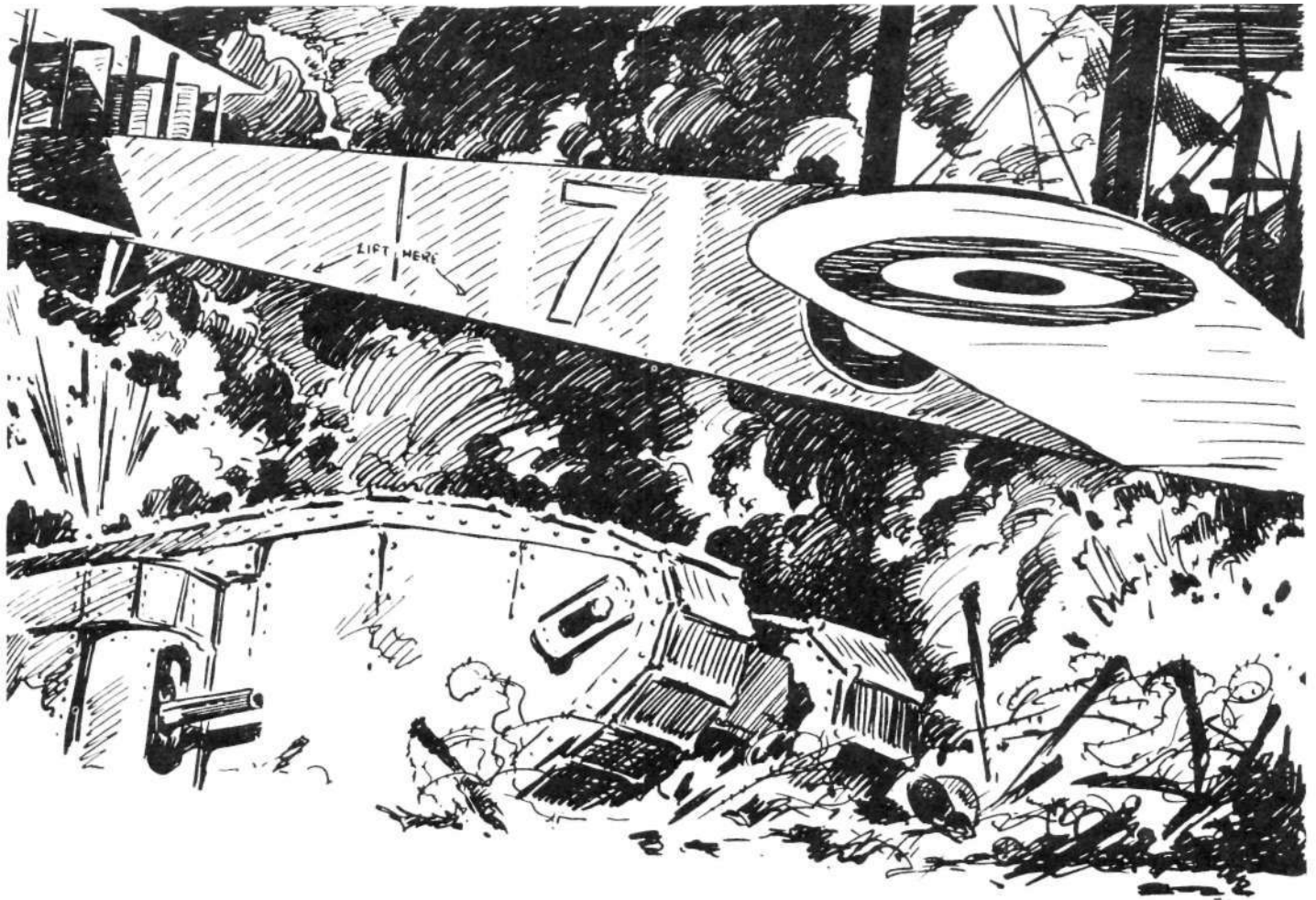
Six months passed with no sign of Rudy Belarski. Finally, a search party was dispatched into the wilderness to try to find him—or his remains. Instead, Belarski found *them*! He was on his way out with his health fully restored and an unusual film record of his survival.⁵ (Thirty years later Rudy showed me his films. They are truly remarkable.)

"It was a wonderful experience for me," recalled Belarski. "Not only did I get my health back, I fell in love with that way of life."⁶

Rudy returned to being a successful magazine illustrator, but now he divided his time between his New York studio and the wilderness areas of Maine, Quebec and Labrador. "I would go into the office and get five or six sketches okayed, and then I would go up into the mountains and paint them in a tent or cabin." The completed illustrations would then be mailed to the publishers in cardboard boxes. Rudy continued to live this dual existence throughout the thirties.⁷

Too young for World War I, Belarski was fascinated by the tales recounted by the pulp magazine authors, many of whom had been combat pilots during the war.⁸ Rudy began doing cover illustrations for the aviation pulps, so popular at the time, and soon was regarded as a specialist in this field.⁹

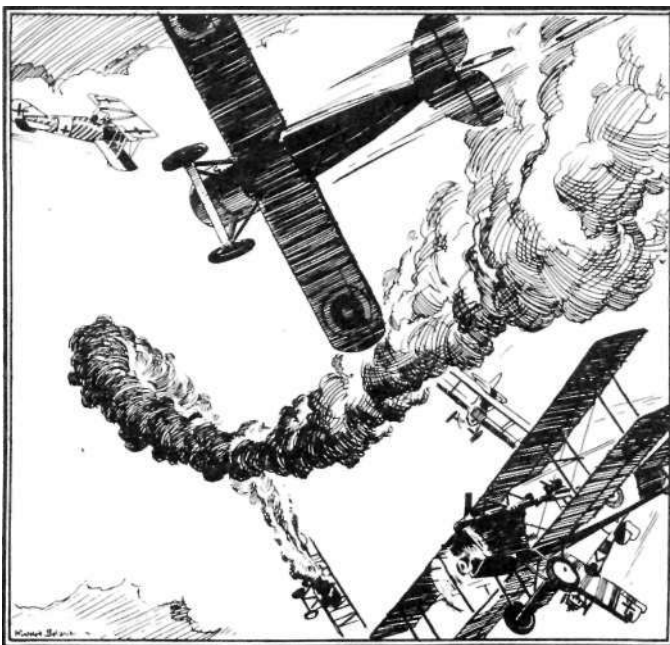
Belarski was an excellent draftsman and designer. He shunned tracing photographs¹⁰ and composed his accurately drawn aircraft in such a way as to create dramatic visual excitement. His rendering was characterized by a loose "paintie" technique rather than the slicker style of a technical illustra-



tor. Soon, his methods were being imitated by others.

In those days, air-minded readers were not particularly discerning about correct aircraft colors and markings, and Rudy took many artistic liberties with such details. Yet, to his credit, it must be noted that many of the aircraft in his paint-

Belarski achieved dramatic impact through careful placement of contrasting light and shade.
(William D. Feeny Collection)



Juxtaposition of aircraft and the trail of smoke create nice composition: a Belarski trademark.
(William D. Feeny Collection)

ings bore accurate unit markings and color schemes. Perhaps no one noticed, but the artist did his homework.

Rudy was an innovator in the pulp magazine illustration field. His "situation" covers for *Aces*, *Wings* and *Warbirds* were the first of this genre to introduce the concept of relating the cover picture to a specific action in the novel featured inside the magazine.

Belarski was also the first to do what cartoonist-illustrator George Evans calls "idea pictures rather than the endless Yank vs. Kraut."¹¹ One example is his cover of the September 1934 *Wings*: a Sopwith Camel is going down, aflame from wingtip to wingtip, superimposed on a background composed of the ghostly figures of German, French, British and American fliers.

During World War II, Belarski went overseas with the USO and entertained wounded soldiers in London hospitals by drawing sketches and portraits. Many of these grateful servicemen sent the artwork home and much of it survives today.¹²

In 1949, the economic position of the pulps was deteriorating and Rudy successfully transitioned to the more promising field of paperback books. His style was new to this field and his cover illustrations for Popular Library completely changed the direction of that publisher's graphic approach. During the next five years, Belarski contributed 50 covers to Popular



Library. Wrote Piet Schreuders: "It is impossible to think of Popular Library without remembering Rudy Belarski."¹³

By 1952 the paperback publishing industry was getting too complicated for Rudy's liking. No longer could he paint five or six illustrations in a row. Now he had to turn in sketches which art directors altered, submit revised sketches and eventually the completed painting which was often far from the original concept.¹⁴ Furthermore, he tired of the sexual orientation of the scenes he had to illustrate.¹⁵ He wrote and illustrated an account of his six months in the wilderness for *Cavalier* magazine in 1953,¹⁶ and continued to do illustrations for various outdoor magazines for a few more years before finally quitting the business.

In 1957, Rudy joined the faculty of the Famous Artists Schools in Westport, Connecticut, where he remained until his retirement in 1973. There he met Barbara Holzhausen, the school's receptionist, and they were married in 1960. The couple built a house in a heavily wooded area, a setting which Rudy loved.¹⁷

Rudy Belarski's talents were not limited to painting pictures. During the thirties when he was working out of a cabin in the north woods, he built a snow tractor to haul himself and his boxed paintings down the mountain to the post office, a distance of some 13 miles. This was probably the first snowmobile.¹⁸ The idea stuck in his mind and he continued to develop it over the years, but the snowmobile idea was eventually patented by someone else.

In his retirement, Rudy spent his leisure time hiking, fish-

ing, camping and building a boat of his own design.¹⁹

Rudy Belarski, the Dean of the Aviation Pulp Illustrators, died on Christmas Eve, 1983, at the age of 83. Such a generous person was he, not a single one of his original paintings was left in his possession. Occasionally, when one of his illustrations turns up, the finder knows that he or she has one of the best.



The reader's viewpoint is almost straight down in this illustration of an aerial attack on submarine pens. (William D. Feeny Collection)



NOTES

1. *Sunday Independent* (Wilkes-Barre, Pa.), January 8, 1984, Sec. 4, p. 15.
2. Frederick Drimmer, "Meet Your Instructor: Rudy Belarski," *Instructors Biographies*, Famous Artists Schools, Inc. (Westport, Conn.), c. 1960.
3. *Ibid.* (There is differing information regarding the dates and sequence of Belarski's early New York activities. In this and other cases, I have referred to the "FAS Bio Sheet" since I know it to be written using information obtained firsthand from Rudy Belarski.)
4. *Ibid.*
5. Rudolph Belarski, "I Went In Alone," *Cavalier*, Vol. I, No. 2 (January 1953).
6. Drimmer.
7. Piet Schreuders, "Rudolph Belarski," *Paperback Forum*, Vol. I (1984), p. 4.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Schreuders, *Paperbacks. U.S.A.: A Graphic History, 1939-1959*, Blue Dolphin Enterprises (San Diego), 1981.
10. Personal conversations with Belarski. I have several preliminary pencil sketches which he used to firm up construction and details of aircraft to be illustrated. Such sketches are not necessary when an artist traces a photograph and merely renders it in paint.
11. George Evans, letter in *American Aviation Historical Society Journal*, Vol. XVI, No. 2 (Summer 1971), p. 150.
12. *Sunday Dispatch* (Pittston, Pa.), January 1, 1984.
13. Schreuders, *Paperbacks, U.S.A.*, p. 5.
14. _____, *Paperback Forum*, p. 9.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
16. Belarski, "I Went In . . ."
17. Drimmer.
18. Schreuders, *Paperback Forum*, p. 4.
19. Telephone conversation with Bobbie Belarski, January 17, 1984.

SUGGESTED READING

1. Cole, Martin: "The Flying Pulp." *American Aviation Historical Society Journal*, Vol. XV, No. 4 (Winter 1970), pp. 244-247.
2. Schreiner, Herm: "From Pulp to Slick, Part I" *American Aviation Historical Society Journal*, Vol. XX, No. 3 (Fall 1975), pp. 212-214.
3. _____ "From Pulp to Slick. Part II," *American Aviation Historical Society Journal*, Vol. XXI, No. 2 (Summer 1976), pp. 145-147.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bill Feeny has been an AAHS member since 1957. His interest in airplanes began in early childhood on Long Island. "My parents would take Sunday drives which invariably ended at Roosevelt Field. In those Depression years they could not afford a \$5 airplane ride, so my first flight wasn't until age 17 in a J-3 Cub." He learned to fly in 1954 and has been a pilot ever since.

Professionally, Bill has combined interests in aviation and art. His articles and illustrations have appeared in *Flying*, *American Airman*, the old *Air Progress*, *Model Airplane News*, *Airpower Historian*, *Plane & Pilot*, *AAHS Journal* and Random House books. He is best known for his "In Their Honor" magazine series, which was also published in hard cover by Meredith Press.

Bill holds a Bachelor's degree from Adelphi University and a Master's in Film & TV from the University of Wisconsin. He lives in Middleton, Wisconsin, and is on the art faculty of Madison Area Technical College.



Rudy Belarski (r) relaxes at an artists' picnic in Westport, Connecticut, July 1964. At left is William A. Edwards, cover artist for Bantam Books, and in center is Roger Vernam, animal and children's book illustrator.
(William P. Feeny, Negative No. 64-8-14)