

THE BIOGRAPHY OF LEE JONES:

A PIONEER IN PHOTOGRAPHY

An Essay

Presented to
the California Pioneers
of Santa Clara County

By

Jeremy Braithwaite

1759 Guadalupe Ave

(408) 265-6152

Introduction

Having the privilege of shaking Neil Armsrong's hand and greeting the rest of his crew when they returned from the moon was just one of Lee Jones' many experiences during the time he worked with the National Advisory Space Administration. Jones' career is full of astounding achievements and collaboration with famous people, including John Wayne, Lee Majors, and Dan Rather. He also has been to intelligence school at the Pentagon, has photographed several presidents, and had his bronze bust put on display in the Rosicrucian museum. Jones also counts famous pilots Chuck Yeager and General Jimmy Doolittle among his friends. Excelling in the art of photography is why Jones repeatedly had opportunities to be a Pioneer in Photography.

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Chapter 1: Early Life

On July 12, 1921, in the town of Shattuck, Oklahoma, Lee Jones was born at an incredibly large size of twelve pounds and four ounces, with an inch and a half of thick black hair that testified to his Cherokee-Irish background. Jones' parents were farmers, and he lived on the farm for the first years of his life. When he started school at the age of five, Jones attended a one room schoolhouse that accommodated kindergarten through the eighth grade; he was the only kindergartner. At six years of age, Jones and his family, which by then had expanded to include two younger sisters, were forced to leave the plains of Oklahoma because of dust storms and they settled in San Jose, California.

In San Jose, Jones' father worked in a cannery to support the family, which had increased even further with the arrival of two new younger boys. On the east side of San Jose, where the children grew up, Jones attended school at San Jose High, the only high school around at that time. It was during this time in his life that Jones first began his photographic career. With a box camera and little instruction, he operated as the yearbook photographer and took the pictures for the school paper. In 1939 Jones graduated from San Jose High and then went on to pursue his college education.

Chapter 2: College and Military Schooling

Jones entered police school at San Jose State, and little did he know that during this time a very significant person would enter his life. Once, when he went to the creamery, Jones saw a gorgeous blonde serving milkshakes, and she stole his heart. He didn't talk to her that day, but she haunted his thoughts for a long time. Soon after Jones signed up for a folk dancing class to acquire extra credits in school, and discovered that Alberta, the blonde, was in the same class. Jones eventually developed a relationship with her and they dated for a long time.

In Jones's junior year at San Jose Police School, he was one of ten people selected to attend an FBI conference school to receive advanced police training, a high achievement. He was married to Alberta in 1941, and planned to continue his schooling. After the war started, however, he was drafted into the Air Force. When Jones left to enter the service, Alberta stayed in San Jose to finish her schooling.

After basic training in the Air Force, Jones went to a Mississippi Air Force Base to teach judo, which he had learned in police training, to the military police until he was called to go to photo school. When his call came, and Jones went to Denver, Colorado, where he received his photographic reconnaissance training. Upon graduating, Jones and four other graduates were asked to stay and become instructors; he accepted.

Teaching photography at a military school was by no means going to end Jones' career in the service though, because he and half of the instructors at the school were selected to attend a technical officers school for further advanced training in photography at Yale. Jones graduated as a second

lieutenant in photographic reconnaissance and was again sent off for more schooling, this time to the Pentagon as one of nine people nationwide that made up the elite of expert photography and intelligence. He found that the academic program there was the most difficult he had encountered in his career. Because he was in a highly classified intelligence program, Jones and the rest of the students could not take any notes, they had to memorize everything. On top of the total memorization, the students also had to learn the coded form of the material and how to translate all of the information they would be dealing with while in action. Five out of nine graduated, and according to Jones he barely made it through this difficult program.

Chapter 3: Military Action

Jones was assigned as a leader to a photo reconnaissance squadron in Oklahoma City, where he used his extensive knowledge to train flyers in the photographic reconnaissance skills they would need overseas. This was to be his last assignment in the continental United States before he was shipped out. Late in 1943, Jones's squadron received instructions to move to Los Angeles where they were to leave for India on a freighter. This event caused him and Alberta to be separated again, and she went to live with her mother in Woodland, California, while he was away at war. Neither of them knew that Alberta was pregnant, and Jones didn't find out until sixty-six days later when he had landed in Calcutta, India. Their first child, a daughter named Pat, was born during the war while Jones was away.

Jones spent his wartime service doing photo reconnaissance operations in Southern Asia. The phrase "Flying the Hump," refers to the route that pilots took over the Himalayas back and forth between China and India. Jones and his squadron flew over this route and many others, taking pictures of the whole area to help assist ground forces and lay out targets. Jones's squadron was on the lookout for Japanese movements, installations, bridges and other roadways, and for the Japanese army itself.

The photos that were taken were used to gain strategical advantages, the most important of which, though, was finding the Japanese army. When a bridge was located, the U.S. forces could knock it out with bombs, and afterwards they would check to see if the Japanese would try and rebuild it. If there was an attempt at rebuilding the bridge, the army would know almost exactly where the Japanese forces in that area would be hiding in the jungle. The

assistance of reconnaissance planes in the war greatly helped the U.S. military.

Reconnaissance was a very dangerous job; sometimes planes would return full of holes from bullets, and some planes took off to never return. It was also in this area that the famed Flying Tigers, a group of volunteer P-40 fighters, operated and then went on to fight against mainland Japan. Jones spent a total of four years in the military during and shortly after the war, and in 1946 he was discharged as a Captain at Santa Anna Air Force Base, finally reuniting with Alberta.

Chapter 4: Jones's Career with NASA

Once out of the military Jones was also left without a job, so he went job hunting when he arrived back in the United States. Considering his photographic background and thinking it could be useful, Jones put in an application to the Ames Research Center at Moffet Field. He was hired on the spot. They instantly put him to work on mounting cameras to the airplanes, so they could record data and flight information, such as the effect a maneuver has on the plane while flying. Although this technique was brand new to Ames, this was the exact same work that Jones had been doing while in the military.

Late in the 1950's, the Soviet Union put Sputnik 1, the first satellite, into space. This led to the creation of NASA, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, created from NACA, the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics, and Ames became a part of it. The main implement of Jones' work, the camera, was treated as a special instrument on planes, satellites, and also flight projects. So when NASA was created, Jones received a new assignment, he became a photographic instrumentation photographer, a big name for camera man. This new job kept him running all over the globe photographing space capsule recoveries, and the most time he ever spent at home was three months. Despite his travels, Jones had two more children, sons named Ken and Richard. With these new additions to the household, Alberta decided to go back to teaching school to help support the family.

Along with the new development of space exploration came the famous names of Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo, the names of the crafts used in outer space. Quickly moving up the ranks, Jones was soon assigned to the position of motion pictures prime photographer. His job was to photograph the splashdown

recoveries from beginning to the end, from when the capsules first came into view until everything was back on board the aircraft carrier and the astronauts were heading home. This is where his work really began to stand out, and Jones had the opportunities to work with people like Dan Rather, a currently well known newscaster.

There were nine Mercury shots, thirteen Gemini shots, and seventeen Apollo shots of shuttles into space, which Jones worked on. On the eleventh Apollo recovery, when Neil Armstrong and his crew came back from the moon, Jones shot a well-known picture of president Nixon greeting them on the Hornet aircraft carrier. The rest of Jones's career was full of classic shots, traveling the world, and meeting famous people in the forefront of the space science.

General Jimmy Doolittle, one of the greatest and best known pilots who fought in the second world war, and who was on NASA's advisory board, frequently gave seminars and classes to NASA's staff and personnel. During these seminars Jones photographed Doolittle, and they worked together so often that they became fast friends. Long after Jones left NASA, he ran into Doolittle at the Elk's Club, and while they were discussing the old days, Doolittle proclaimed that Jones was the best photographer he had ever worked with. Coming from a man of Doolittle's stature, this was a great compliment.

After thirty-seven years of working with NASA, Jones' last project arrived. His last assignment was to photograph the moving of the spaceship Challenger from Edwards Air Force Base to Cape Canaveral. The means of doing this was by using a modified 747 airplane, which would carry the shuttle piggy-back to the cape. This was the first time anything like this had ever been tried. There were many months of trial procedures, plans, and adjustments to be made before the actual moving, and Jones photographed all of the work. The move was successful, but when the time came for the shuttle's launch, it blew up in the

sky. The event was a shock to the nation and everyone was disheartened. This was Jones' last project, and afterwards he retired to live with his wife in San Jose, on the quiet street of Guadalupe Ave. Jones summarized his career with NASA with this, "It was the greatest and most exciting experience in my life to be in the NASA program. I was lucky to have the job I had-we were making tomorrows headlines."

Chapter 5: Crowning Achievements

Along with working for NASA and being one of their top photographers, Jones also made some outstanding achievements, ranging from inventions to making tremendous breakthroughs in technology, to being displayed in a museum, Lee Jones more than deserved the recognition he received.

One of the feathers in Jones' cap was totally unintentional. When he went out with the recovery teams in the helicopters from the carriers to monitor the splashdowns, he always had quite a bit of equipment with him. The power required to run his numerous cameras came straight from the electrical systems of the helicopter he was in. He required so much power that sometimes he blew circuits in the chopper which was a dangerous situation. To find a solution to this problem, he talked to one of his friends, Bill Ogles, in the department of instrumental design. Jones' friend said he would work on it and he designed and built for Jones a portable, battery operated power pack which was totally independent of the helicopter's systems. Jones told the captain of the helicopter he was in that he had an independent power source and that he would not blow any more circuits. This new battery pack helped everyone out, it gave Jones freedom of limits and the chopper was in no danger of losing its electrical systems. When news of this invention was discovered, some of the officials wanted to give Jones an award. He politely declined, saying that he had not invented it. After much talk and discussion, the director of research decided to give both Jones and Bill Ogles a plaque.

Jones's career was not limited to photographing space capsule splashdowns, though. He also filmed aerial projects with pilots. Jones's most outstanding aerial photos resulted from working with an Air Force test pilot, a Captain

named Chuck Yeager. At the Flight Research Station, Yeager and Jones worked on achieving high speeds in experimental jet planes. During the time when the team was working on the experimental test plane the X-1, the method they used to get maximum speed was for a high flying B-29 to drop Yeager in the X-1 and for Jones to fly alongside of him in a separate jet and on the way down photograph the flight. On an average test day for them, the unexpected happened. When Yeager was dropped and Jones was flying alongside filming the plummet to Earth, the X-1 achieved Mach 1, the speed of sound, and broke the sound barrier for the first time ever in recorded history. Yeager had the privilege of breaking the sound barrier, and Jones had the privilege of being the only man to film the first Mach 1 flight. Needless to say the men working on the project were ecstatic as the news spread around the world like wildfire.

Jones went on to continue filming great aerial achievements. Using the same methods and aircraft as before, Jones filmed the North-American test pilot Scotty Crossfield as he achieved Mach 2, twice the speed of sound, for the first time ever. But the aerial feats did not end here. Once again working with Yeager, Jones filmed his flight drop from a B-52 and this time it was Mach 3, three times the speed of sound, that was reached. The accomplishments of achieving these speeds for the first time ever were recognized world wide, and they were great fulfillments for Jones. The movie "The Right Stuff", the story of Yeager's Mach 1 flight, had a lot of flight footage of the actual flight; this was all Jones's work with the camera.

Advances in specific areas of science are often awarded, and this was the case with one of Jones's greatest accomplishments. During the late 1970's, the Rosicrucian Museum formed a committee to find people who had made

considerable advances in science, because they wanted to put these achievements on display and let the people be recognized. The museum created categories for ten men and ten women who would be displayed. After the categories were created, the museum discovered that they did not have a category for someone who had made advances in scientific recording, so they dropped one of the other categories and put it in.

The museum then made a survey and found that NASA had new photographic space requirements and was using new photographic techniques, which meant that they might have people qualified for the prize. Specifically, the committee was looking for someone who could be versatile and diversified in the field of photography, and after looking around in NASA's staff, Jones was chosen. Because Jones had worked on such varied projects, everything from recoveries to planes to working on movies with stars like Lee Majors and John Wayne, and because he was the single largest contributor of superb quality photographs in NASA's pool of pictures, he was given the award.

Jones considered this a great honor which flattered him greatly. The committee created a bronze bust of him that required six sittings before it was perfected, and when it was finished, it and some of his most outstanding pictures were put on display in the Rosicrucian Museum. In a news article about Jones that was in the San Jose Mercury in the 1960's, Jones explained his life-long good fortune as "Lucking out. That's the story of my life."

In March of 1992, Jones' wife Alberta passed away, and afterwards he became ill. Today he reads, spends time with his family, tends to his cabin in the Santa Cruz Mountains, and continues his relationship with the Willow Glen Methodist church which he has been attending for forty four years.

Bibliography

Jones, Lee, interviewed by Jeremy Braithwaite, at 1756 Guadalupe Ave., San Jose, CA, between March 14-April 26, 1993.

Willow Glen High School

Advisor: Mrs. Kathryn C. Philp