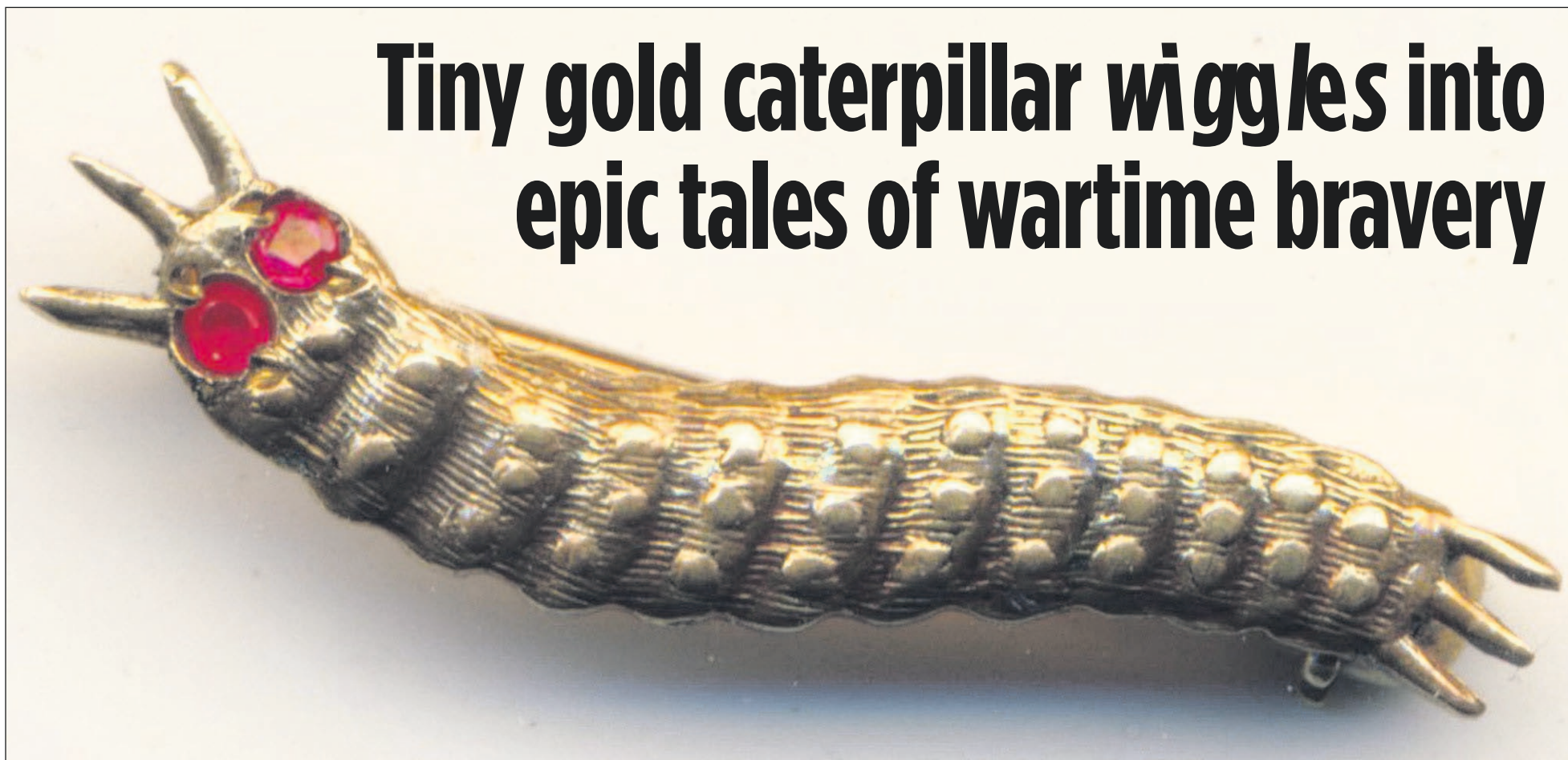
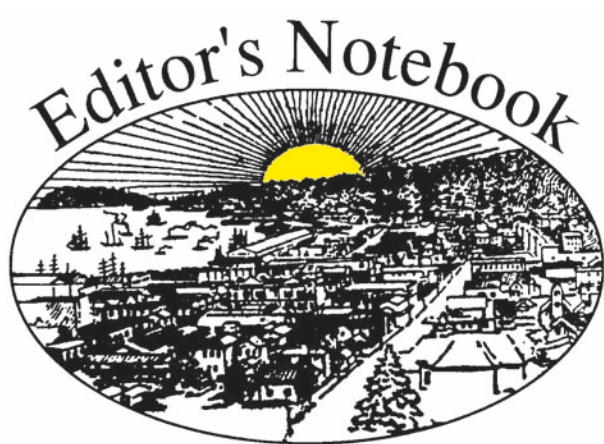


# Tiny gold caterpillar wiggles into epic tales of wartime bravery



Matt Winters/EO Media Group

Caterpillar Club pins were issued by the Irvin company to fliers whose lives were saved by their parachutes. The caterpillar represents a silkworm, which create the threads from which many World War II-era chutes were made. The pin's actual size is about 1 inch in length.



**Y**ou've got the flames, you've got the fear, the confusion, the shells exploding around.

"Your aircraft is on fire and then you simply have to dive out.

"You're diving out into the unknown, trusting your life to your parachute and then floating down into enemy territory," a retired Royal Air Force gunner told the BBC in 2011 in a story marking the final meeting of the Caterpillar Club's London chapter.

Established in the early 1920s by Leslie Irvin, inventor of the modern parachute, the worldwide Caterpillar Club is an informal corporate-sponsored entity recognizing fliers who survived thanks to parachutes. "The name comes from the fact that parachutes were made from silk, produced from the caterpillar cocoon," the Smithsonian Institution explains.

By 1939, there were 4,000 members. Another 30,000 joined during the course of World War II. Members include Gen. Jimmy Doolittle, Charles Lindbergh and astronaut John Glenn.

After one crash, Doolittle is said to have telegraphed Irvin, "Airplane failed. Chute worked." An unidentified club member wrote, "Dear Leslie, I'd like to thank you for the sweetest moments in all my life, when my parachute opened and I realized I was not going to die. Your chutes are so good I am going to name my son (when I have one) Irvin as it was due to one in particular that I am alive enough to woo, marry and get me a son."

**A**mong my mother-in-law Betty's estate was a silkworm-shaped pin, a humble object mixed among 1940s pearl-bordered sorority pins from UW and Wazoo. In 2010, a similar little piece was appraised on a TV show I watch, the British version of Antiques Roadshow. Finally, just a couple weeks ago, I put two and two together, turned my mother-in-law's pin over and found almost-microscopic words showing it is a fascinating official Caterpillar Club insignia. Hoping to find it dedicated to my father-in-law, Don Couty, a magnifying lens instead revealed the name R.C. Hughes — probably one of Betty's ex-flames. The engraving indicates a parachute saved his life on July 22, 1942 — 73 years ago this week.

This raises the question of who Hughes was, the circumstances of his jump and how the war ended for him. During several days of research, I ha-



Matt Winters/EO Media Group

The back of a pin issued by the Irving Air Chute Co. (In the early-1940s, for some reason it went by "Irving" even though its owner's name was "Irvin") is engraved "Pres. by Irving | R.C. Hughes | 7/22/42." Hughes may have been a U.S. Army Air Forces flier from Washington state.

ven't managed to find out. After mergers, Irvin is now Airborne Systems, a division of HDT Global. Their website demonstrates continuing affection for the club: Two years ago, they conferred a pin on a Washington state veteran whose P-38 aircraft was shot down over Germany in 1944. However, club records are considered private; details are only made available to family members — not the sons-in-law of former girlfriends.

Mid-1942, when Hughes bailed out, was a time of rapid expansion for U.S. Army Air Forces. Its operations were gearing up in Europe, initially supporting English missions against Germany. In the Pacific Theater, Doolittle raided Tokyo in April 1942. On June 4 and 5, naval aviators played a major role in the Battle of Midway. The foremost historical event on July 22, 1942, was the start of Nazi deportation of Jews from the Warsaw ghetto to the Treblinka extermination camp — a quarter-million men, women and children died in the first seven weeks.

I continued my pursuit of his story with the Washington State Secretary of State's Office, where historians John Hughes and Lori Larson looked for possible matches. A possibility is Robert C. Hughes — apparently no relation to John. Robert served as a technical sergeant in the USAAF during the war, surviving the conflict but dying in 1950 at age 30. He is buried in the Cascades mountain village of Index.

Maybe some reader will read this and tell us the story of Hughes' near-death experience in the war. Chances are good he was saved by his parachute during a training flight. I'll let you know.

**B**ack at the Secretary of State's office, where safeguarding history is a passionate mission, staff members are striving this year to archive lasting memories of all from Washington state who served in World War II. Secretary of State Kim Wyman's family has deep military roots. Lori Larson and John Hughes, together with Legacy Washington team leader Trova Heffernan,

are publishing a series of veteran profiles at [www.tinyurl.com/Washington-Remembers](http://www.tinyurl.com/Washington-Remembers). Hughes, former editor and publisher of *The Daily World* newspaper in Aberdeen, is now the state's chief historian; he is the nephew of an 8th Air Force B-17 crewman. These profiles are a prelude to the new Legacy Washington exhibit, "Washington Remembers: Their Sacrifice. Our Freedom," opening Aug. 20 in the front lobby of the Office of Secretary of State at the state Capitol in Olympia.

People are encouraged to send in photos of World War II veterans to be featured in an online gallery called Faces of Heroes. Digitized photos can be submitted using this link: <http://1.usa.gov/1xiqZKP>. (I sent in service photos of my dad and uncle, who had dramatically different war experiences after growing up in Bellingham.)

All the profiles make for poignant and sometimes riveting reading. The first was done of Joe Moser, a 93-year-old from Ferndale, imprisoned in the Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany after his plane was shot down over France in 1944.

In the profile, Moser describes the day of liberation by the Allies from a POW camp on April 29, 1945, near Moosburg, Germany. "I was right close to the gate when a big American tank came and run right over the gate. Come in and they took down the German flag and raised the American flag. You're a prisoner. Your life isn't your own. And all of a sudden, you're free. The joy is tremendous. It's something that is hard to describe because we're a free nation; we can do just about whatever we want. And to have all of that taken away. And to have all of that given back to you. I think we all just cried. ...No feeling like it, really."

The last of Moser's generation of heroes is rapidly passing away. Preserving their stories is noble work.

—M.S.W.

Matt Winters is editor of the *Chinook Observer* and *Coast River Business Journal*. He lives in Ilwaco, Wash., with his wife and daughter.



Matt Winters/Family Photo

A World War II flier (Matt Winters' father-in-law Don Couty) wears an Irvin parachute. Developed by Leslie Irvin just after World War I, the chutes have saved tens of thousands of fliers forced to bail out of crashing or burning aircraft.

## Open forum

### A little off the top, please

We have all read many viewpoints regarding moving sand along the beaches. Admittedly, I subscribed to a strong and vocal opinion that the dunes are lovely and should remain. Like many things in my life, I've learned that having a one-sided opinion is ... well, one-sided.

I now have a unique vantage point regarding this issue. I accepted a part-time position in the office at Breaker's Point last September. Frankly, I was concerned that my stance would be frowned upon. So

I either "tactfully" stayed out of any conversations on the subject or explained nicely that, "I like the dunes."

But amazingly, I was never argued with about it. They simply shared their stories of how it used to be, and how much they miss it. I stayed out of the politics. As time passed I became knowledgeable of some things that softened my heart to their plight.

Being a relatively new resident of Cannon Beach (11 years), I assumed the large dunes had been a part of

the landscape for eons. A conversation with a city official made it clear that the bloated dunes have never reached the heights that they are now. The prevailing southern winds that literally blasted us the last two winters have piled up 15-20 feet of sand along our coastline, including in front of Haystack Rock, where I personally live.

But the sand is naturally dissipating where I am, because there isn't any imported beach grass planted there. Besides Breakers' beach front being the end of the line for the sand

that blows from the south, the grass collects it and grows taller, grabbing more sand, etc., 'til you have mountains made out of what should be mole hills.

I can appreciate that people may feel safer having a giant dune on the beach in their neighborhood. But if it does — if it truly does — then why aren't we creating massive dunes from Chapman Point all the way to Arcadia? Why just this one patch of beach in front of Breakers? Besides. If they are scraped, "they'll be back."

In conclusion, I have found that

by and large, the residents at Breakers are good, kind, nature loving, generous, taxpaying citizens who support the town and businesses with pleasure.

We all live in a potentially risky area. But being able to view it in all its magnificence makes it worthwhile. They have lost views dear to their hearts and souls. They just want a portion of what they once had. Ain't nothin' unnatural about that. Peace out.

SUSAN NEUWIRTH  
Cannon Beach



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