

## The Hollywood Stuntman - Captain Dick Virgil Grace

On 26<sup>th</sup> December 1944, 151 bombers were assigned to a number of different targets in Germany. The B-17s, of the 486th Bomb Group, were assigned Neuwied, Germany. However near Koblenz, Germany, B17 #43-37891 [OLD MAN'S FOLLY] was hit by anti-aircraft artillery. Two engines were damaged, as were the hydraulic and electrical systems and there were 156 flak holes all over the aircraft. The crew nursed their aircraft back to home base, Station 174, Sudbury, whereupon they crash landed on arrival. Lucky for them their pilot had a lot of experience with crashing aircraft. This landing would be number 50 in a series of crash landings for Captain Richard (Dick) Grace.



Richard (Dick) Virgil Grace was born 10<sup>th</sup> January 1898 in Morris, Minnesota to Richard and Elizabeth Grace. He had two younger brothers, Cyril and Alonzo. His father, Richard, was a North Dakota Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, who made substantial contributions to procedures. He managed to clear the court calendar of back cases that had dragged on for years. He helped to initiate reforms – advocated state-owned banks to stop usurious methods practised against helpless farmers.

Dick attended high school in Mohall, North Dakota where in the summer of 1914 he heard that there would be an airplane – a Curtis Pusher Bi-plane - at the county fair so he lost no time in getting a job selling hot dogs there. Dick, who was only a teenager, persuaded the pilot, Roberts, to take him on as a helper and they went touring together. Dick absorbed much aviation wisdom as he could, but it was all theory as the airplane could only carry the pilot so there was no flight instruction. Near the end of the summer, a landing accident resulted in a damaged airplane and a broken leg for Roberts. It took longer for the leg to heal than to fix the aircraft, so Dick at the age of 16, made his first flight solo (encouraged by Roberts) while testing the repaired machine.

In 1916 Dick attended the University of Minnesota. His plan was to follow in his father's footsteps and pursue a career in Law, but in April 1917, the US was involved in the First World War.



Dick tried to enlist in the Signal Corps of the Army as a pilot. He was turned down as being too young. The Marines also refused him. Dick had two other possibilities – the Royal Flying Corps and the U.S Navy. Dick decided to apply to the Navy. News reached him that twenty-five prospective pilots were to be picked for the First Unit of Dunwoody. By the time his application was in, there had been over ten thousand others. Twenty-four of the twenty-five had already been selected. Dick went to the Naval Recruiting Offices and despite the rips and laughter from other applicants and Navy staff of Dick's intention to become a pilot, Dick stood out from the crowd. They were sceptical about him but Dick persuaded them and they accepted him if he got permission from his parents. Needless to say, his father was understanding and gave Dick his blessing.

Dick carried out his basic training at Dunwoody then at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, after which he then transferred to Pensacola, Florida, for flight training.

After qualifying as an exceptional pilot, Dick was sent to France, and assigned to a bombing squadron that flew De Haviland and Handley-Page aircraft. One of the targets he bombed in 1918 was the German Navy Base at Heligoland. However, he didn't get his wish of bombing Berlin.



Whilst on temporary assignment with a pursuit squadron, flying S.P.A.Ds, his group was lured into a trap. While on patrol, they found nine German enemy aircraft cruising a couple of thousand feet below them. Dick's group peeled off and dived at them. The Germans broke and dived – not for cloud but out in the clear. This confused Dick's group until they saw, coming for them, more black crosses than they ever saw before. They twisted, turned, dived, and chandelled. Aircraft went down in flames. Tracers flew in all directions. Dick was on the tail of a D-7 but another D-7 was tailing him. A burst went through Dick's left wing. Suddenly his propeller splintered. The shaft whined and screamed, then broke. The motor cowling tore free, and the aircraft went into a vertical spin. Dick pulled the aircraft out of the spin and veered off towards the lines, nursing the aircraft along at an almost stalling speed.

Over German lines and without a motor Dick glided on. Suddenly he could hear machine guns. Shots were being fired at him. Dick continued over No Man's Land and then Allied lines but he was running out of altitude, and time. To stall now would be fatal. Dick headed for a small road. As he neared, the engine

gave out. Dick pulled back on the stick and waited. The belly hit the lip of a crater. The aircraft lurched, and swerved towards a tree. The wing sheered off. The aircraft hit, bounced and rolled around on the other wing. All went still. "Well, if you aren't hurt, stick around. Plenty of time yet" shouted a voice. With that Dick scrambled out. That was his first crash.

Shortly after, he was assigned to a flying boat squadron in Laga di Bolsena, Italy. He bombed Pola and important targets on the Dalmatian Coast.

After the Armistice in November 1918, Richard left the Navy. He didn't know what he wanted to do. He had no enthusiasm for school but after much thought he decided to continue with law. However, once there he realised it wasn't for him. Dick phoned Commander Colby Dodge (who had commanded the Navy training program at Dunwoody) and was invited over. They spent the night talking and reflecting. By the end of their chat, Dick, Colby and Clarence Hinck, (another trainee) decided to form Minneapolis based Federated Flyers.



In 1919-20, aviation was in the thrill stage. Many had never seen an airplane fly and so few had even been in one. It was seen as a fad and few believed there was even a future for airplanes. Dick tried to gain the interest of the railroads but was ridiculed. "Airplanes would never be competition for trains." So their main business became that of barnstorming. Dick met an array of people while taking

them for a flight. He took a grandmother of ninety who wanted to try the "Go-Devil"; a man who threw a fit when they took off and said he would jump if Dick didn't land the plane – Dick resulted to hitting him on the head with the fire extinguisher to calm him – he enjoyed the flight in the end. He took two nuns up and a young man who had just had an argument with his fiancée and he wanted to end it all. Dick had to use all his skills to jerk the man back into his seat every time he tried to stand up. He held the plane in a stall, kicked the rudder and went into a spin and did not come out until about five hundred from the ground. When they landed the young man was pale, his legs went and he was sick. His fiancée ran up to Dick shouting "You brute!" and she took the young man away. They made up, and she never knew the truth of what happened up there.

Dick even took part in a wedding in the air. The whole town closed down for the day to view this first. Dick flew the bride and groom while the preacher was

on the ground reading the ceremony. Dick was supposed to hand the ring over but as he tried to get it out of his pocket he realised he had no slits in his overalls to reach the ring. He had to take the overalls off. As he did, he lost control of the aircraft. He finally got the ring but the bride had to put it on her own finger as the groom had fainted.

Whilst doing their barnstorming acts, Dick received a letter from Omar Locklear - another pilot from the war - who owned a company with a contract to do stunt work for the movie industry. As barnstorming was slowing down in demand Dick decided to go west to meet Locklear. Dick took what he could fit in his plane and headed out. At first the journey over was great for Dick. He made a lot of money taking people up for a flight every time he landed. However he then hit the desert and trouble occurred. Dick was caught in a sand storm. The sand clogged his motor. It spit and blurted and choked. Dick cut the switch and waited. All was silent. Suddenly the wheels struck. Dick could hear wood splitting, wires snapping, linen tearing. The plane went on its nose and over on its back. Dick was thrown out and the plane exploded into a ball of flames. Dick's money was in the plane! All he had was his suitcase of clothes. Dick had no choice but to walk. He was eventually picked up by a passing rancher and taken to Phoenix.

Dick made it to Western Avenue and bumped into a friend of his, Dave Davis – who later pioneered air transport building an aircraft that could fly around the world. Needing to earn money Dave contacted his brother-in-law, Jack Blyston – who was a director at 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox - and Dick went to work as a prop man moving scenery, furniture, and other stuff around the sets.



Dick managed to meet up with Locklear but noticed his demeanour had changed. Locklear seemed unhappy, cynical and never smiled. Something was wrong. Locklear had just finished filming "The Great Air Robbery" (1920) but was not taken up on a second film – as stated in his contract - so he was suing the studio. He was then signed to star in the film "The Skywayman" but they didn't want to use

Locklear for all the stunts – opting instead to use models. On the night of August 2<sup>nd</sup> 1920 Locklear was filming a stunt. He took off in his aircraft and from five thousand feet entered a spin. Dick turned up as he was concerned and witnessed what happened next. Locklear continued to fall and fall and then a crash. The plane had fallen into the sludge pool of an oil well. Everything was on fire – the pool, the gasoline, the plane. That night stayed with Dick for a very long time.

Whilst Dick was assisting with the props for a movie, a stunt was being filmed. The stunt man was supposed to jump 40 foot into a net, however, the stunt man lost his nerve. Richard figured he could do it and he did. Thus, his career in stunt work began. Dick undertook all sorts of stunts from jumping off buildings, diving from cliffs into water, skidding automobiles, leaping from trains to trains and working along side dangerous animals such as crocodiles, leopards, lions, hippos. During one such film, he briefly met Chrystine Francis Malstrom (b.1903) who was starring in the stage show of Abie's Iris Rose. Dick's nickname for her was Rabbitface.



Dick was hired by the famous cowboy actor Tom Mix, for "Sky High" (1922) to fly an aircraft while filming a stunt that involved hanging from a rope over the Grand Canyon. Tom was impressed with Dick and continued to hire him for other films.

One Tom Mix film, "Eyes of the Forest" (1923) included a scene where an airplane crashed into a barn. The first attempt at filming the scene was done using models, but Tom thought it didn't look very realistic. He consulted with Dick to see if the stunt could be done with an actual airplane. After some considerable thought and very careful engineering Dick was able to do it. In setting up the stunt he had key parts of the barn built with balsa wood and the airplane structures weakened so the wings would shear off and absorb the impact. After this Dick had suddenly become an expert at crashing airplanes and became much in demand.



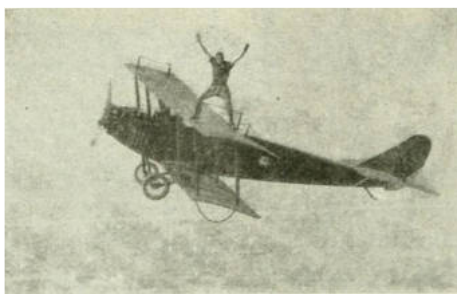
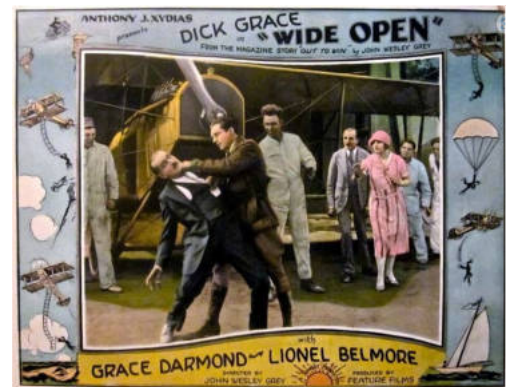
Dick continued with his other stunt work and it was around this time that Dick suffered serious injury during one of his stunts for a film. It was a fight scene where he was supposed to jump from a balcony while on fire. However something went wrong and Dick instantly went up in flames with flames leaping eighteen feet above his head. Dick was so badly burnt that he needed skin grafts on his arms, back and chest. He was told that he would

never be able to lift his arms above his head due to having webbing under them. This would, therefore, impede his ability to walk on wings or to make transfers. Dick was not going to let that happen. He discharged himself from hospital and using his razor blade, cut the webbing under his arms. It freed him and he could lift his arms. Nothing was going to stop Dick from flying.



In 1926, Dick starred in the film "The Flying Fool" where he walked atop moving vehicles as he raced to get to the church on time. He also performed aerial stunts including leaping from an airplane and walking on the wings.

Dick went on to star in "The Demon Flyer" (1927) and "Wide Open" (1927), where he performed a change from one plane to another without a ladder, jumping upside down so that he could grasp the plane with both his hands, and hang under the wings with his legs wrapped around the landing gear before jumping into the lower plane.

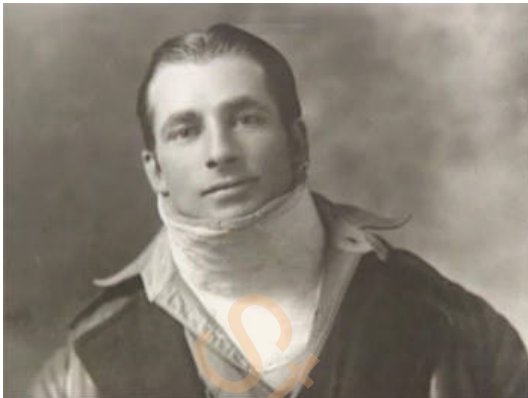


He was then hired to do stunt flying for the movie, "Wings" (1927) which won the first Academy Award for Best Picture. The aerial scenes were filmed with the assistance of the United States Army at Kelly Field in San Antonio, Texas. It was during the filming that Dick got to know the Army pilots, including H.H. (Hap) Arnold very well.

During filming, what should have been a simple crash resulted in injury. Dick exited the plane and posed for photos with director Wellman, before later collapsing. He felt pain in his neck and his chest was bruised. Major, Norman T. Kirk examined Dick. He had suffered a broken neck. The sixth cervical vertebra was dislocated and four others were crushed. Major Kirk operated on Dick and set him in a cast. Dick spent sixteen weeks in the Base Hospital at Fort Sam, Houston and another



six weeks at Hollywood Hospital before having his cast cut off and fitted with a leather and iron brace with chin rest. Yet again it looked like Dick would never be able to fly again.



Convinced that he had to give up crashes Dick looked for business opportunities. He invested in a Pasadena travel shop selling handbags. It was a success and Dick felt his neck was improving. He decided he was going to get rid of his brace and sold his business to fund his next mission. To fly again!

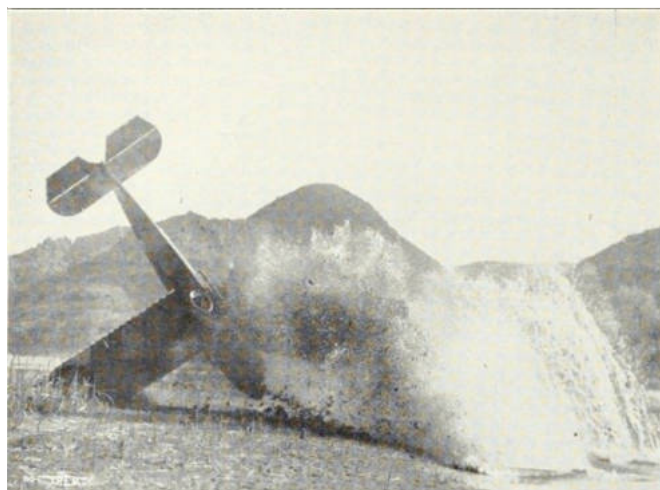
He decided to enter the 1927 Dole Flight from Hawaii to California, which would earn the pilot of the fastest flight from the islands to the mainland thousands of dollars. Dick made three attempts for the mainland, but was forced to turn back to the Hawaii after ferocious winds and conditions stalled the engine and almost crashed the gas-heavy plane. Losing most of his money, Dick had no choice but to return to stunt flying.

Dick met actress Alice White in January 1928, and by March 1928 she was his fiancée, but by May 1928 they had split.



Dick was hired to work on the film “Lilac Times” (1928) starring Colleen Moore and Gary Cooper. Dick formed the “Squadron of Death” with seven of his flying friends and they played the skeleton crew in Lilac Times. Dick was the technical flight commander and an actor, playing the role of an aviator in the film. However, after a controlled crash, he discovered that he had broken some ribs and damaged his neck again.

While Dick was convalescing he agreed to do some test piloting and wrote the book "Squadron of Death" until another movie offer came – which was "Young Eagles" (1930). Once again Dick planned aerial stunts and performed crashes himself, including flying a biplane into the edge of Lake Sherwood on one wing, bouncing end over end, and landed upside down in the lake. As Dick prepared for his next controlled crash, he saw a group of friends who came to see him and standing amongst that group was Rabbitface. It had been a while since they last saw each other. Again Dick suffered injuries from the stunts he performed. He had again broken several ribs and a rib had entered his lung, but he refused to let the director know so he could continue to work. Still suffering with his broken ribs he received an offer from General Tyre and Rubber Company (1930).



The advertisement, they had planned was to film a car being crashed into a wall. The car crash went as planned and Dick's ribs were spared any more injury. However Dick had now split his actual knee cap. He was taken to hospital for stitches.

Before his knee had the chance to properly heal, Dick was asked to do another crash for the "Young Eagles" movie. He took Rabbitface with him on the flight over. When he landed at Los Angeles he turned to her and asked "How would you like to be my co-pilot for life?"

In 1932 Dick's savings had dwindled again, so he wrote a fictional story about a director and a motion-picture pilot. It was called The Lost Squadron. Liberty Magazine loved it as well as R.K.O studios. With clever negotiations Dick received \$20,000 in fees and he was able to buy the ranch he wanted. He even flew in the film that was made. Following this he penned more stories, of which his 1936 fictional story, "Devil's Squadron", had was also turned into a film.







Dick and Rabbitface were married 9<sup>th</sup> June 1938. By the time of their wedding Dick had endured at least 47 crashes. He wisely decided not to do anymore crash work and live out a more settled, and somewhat safer, life.

At a reception in San Marino, Dick saw Ernst Udet. He was a Colonel General in the German Air Forces under Hermann Goering. He tried to convince Dick to join him and move to Germany ready for a potential war. Dick flatly refused. This meeting acted as a wakeup call to him, so Dick was now focussed on warning people of an upcoming war.

Unfortunately his warnings brought him accusations of war-mongering and he was told he had no business being involved in another conflict.

By August 1941, Dick knew the United States could not keep out of the war in Europe, and he wired Hap Arnold (by then a General and chief of the Army Air Corps), volunteering his services as a combat pilot.

*"The General was at sea with the President and Churchill when the Atlantic Charter was signed, but General Carl Spaatz asked me to come to Washington immediately"* Dick recalled.

General Spaatz offered Dick a Commission as a Major in the Materiel Division. This was not what Dick wanted. He wanted his wings and he wanted combat.

Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, December 1941, Dick headed for March Field and underwent medical examinations. The Surgeon General's Office in Washington D.C found Dick to be physically disqualified because of his previously broken neck. Dick disputed the outcome and two days later his orders came in. He was to be assigned to the test center in Yuma, Arizona to test the P39 and P51 fighter aircraft then in development.

REGISTRATION CARD—(Must have on or after February 17, 1937 and on or before December 31, 1937)

REGISTRATION NUMBER: 3049 Richard V. Grace ORDER NUMBER: 11980

PLACE OF RESIDENCE (State): L.A. Calif

3049 Ventura Blvd Sherman Oaks

DATE OF BIRTH: 10 1898

STATE AND ADDRESS OF PERSON WHO WILL ALWAYS KNOW YOUR ADDRESS: Christine Grace - 13449 Ventura Blvd Sherman Oaks Calif

REGISTERED NAME AND ADDRESS: Richard V. Grace - 3049 Ventura Blvd Sherman Oaks Calif

PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT OR BUSINESS: Same

I AFFIRM THAT I HAVE FURNISHED ABOVE ADDRESS AND THAT THIS IS MY TRUE

Richard V. Grace (Signature)

REGISTRAR'S REPORT

SEX	WEIGHT		COMPLEXION
	Actual	Apparent	
Male	5' 7"	135	Light
HAIR	Color	Black	Wavy
	Style	Short	Dark
EYES	Color	Blue	Clear
	Shape	Almond	Dark
NOSE	Shape	Straight	Light brown
	Color	Dark	Dark
MOUTH	Shape	Small	Dark
	Color	Dark	Dark
EARS	Shape	Small	Dark
	Color	Dark	Dark
TEETH	Color	Dark	Dark
	Shape	Small	Dark

Signature: Richard V. Grace

REGISTRAR'S NAME AND ADDRESS: Richard V. Grace - 3049 Ventura Blvd Sherman Oaks Calif

DATE OF REGISTRATION: 2/18/42

SELECTIVE SERVICE Local Board No. 179

Dick accepted the Yuma assignment, and asked to be commissioned as a Captain. He figured out that a Captain would have a better chance of eventually flying in combat than a Major. After 11 months of flight testing, Dick was able to get himself transferred to the Fourth Ferrying Group, Memphis, ferrying aircraft to Europe. Dick bemoaned the fact that Army Regulations prohibited him from flying as a Fighter or Pursuit pilot. *"I've kept myself in good condition all these years. So, why can't I fly a fighter?"* he asked *".....In the ferrying division, I will at least get planes up to the front line."*

*"I feel this war is more my battle than it is for these youngsters who are flying over Europe today" he declared in 1944 "We apparently did not finish Jerry good and proper 26 years ago and I am one for never leaving anything undone."*



Another acquaintance was the commander of the 8th Air Force, Jimmy Doolittle. After flying a B-24 to England, Dick contacted Doolittle and asked for a combat assignment. His crew didn't believe that he would get a chance for combat. They went to Prestwick, Scotland, where a C-54 was waiting for them. The hatches closed, the motor started when suddenly a dispatcher came running out and flagged the plane down. It was temporary orders for Dick.

He was assigned to the 486th Bomb Group as an Assistant Group Operations Officer and soon found himself on combat missions. His first mission was on 26<sup>th</sup> October 1944 with Lt. Patterson. In spite of engine failure and a shot-out oxygen system, the two men managed to bring the bomber back to England intact. Dick also found himself bombing the Heligoland Naval Base for the second time, 26 years after the first.



Dick usually flew with those beginning their missions or finishing them. He was known as "Lucky Dick".



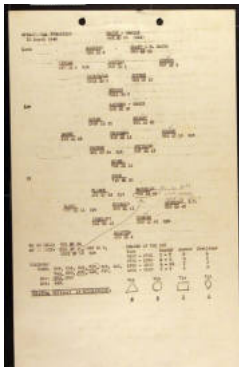
And so we find ourselves back to the mission of December 26<sup>th</sup> 1944. The crew were able to walk away from the wreck with just minor injuries. Dick had been wounded in the leg by a shell fragment, but he recovered to fly his next mission on January 10, 1945, his 47th birthday. This made Dick more than twice the average age of his comrades and almost three times the age of the youngest, the youngest recorded were just 16 years old. In fact, Dick Grace was the oldest pilot in the Air Force actively flying in combat. Dick had the piece of flak encased in a plastic four-leaf clover. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> February

1945 Dick also got his wish and bombed Berlin which he was unable to do during World War I.

Shortly after the February mission, he completed his tour in B-17s and was scheduled to go home to the States. However, Dick had other plans. Following a visit to Headquarters, he overheard someone saying that the 448th Bomb Group were looking for an Assistant Group Operations Officer. Without hesitation he volunteered, and was thus assigned to the 448th Bomb Group as Assistant Operations Officer where he flew B-24s until the war in Europe ended.



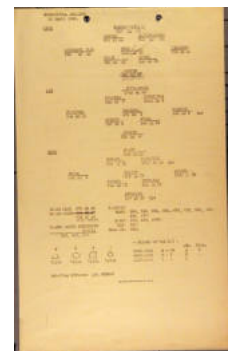
While researching Dick's missions with the 448<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, we managed to find four of the missions that he participated in.



**30<sup>th</sup> March 1945**, the target was the docks at Wilhelmshaven, Germany. Grace was flying with Lt. Sanders in A/C #44-48805 [LEADING LADY] leading the Low Squadron. They were faced with heavy flak and clouds over the target which made the bombing complicated. Despite this the crews released their bombs with excellent results. Everyone returned safely to Seething.

**April 5<sup>th</sup> 1945**, the target was an ordnance depot at Bayreuth, Germany. Grace was flying with Lt. Voigt in A/C #44-50084. They took off at 06:25 and assembled over Merville, France. However poor weather led to many crews being unable to locate the formation point and returned to Seething. Grace was one of those crews and they returned to Seething at 11:44.

**April 14<sup>th</sup> 1945**, the target was the Pointe de la Coubre, France. The object was to attack a stronghold along the Gironde estuary to convince the Germans held up there to surrender. Grace was flying with Lt. Cook in A/C #42-51745 and led the Low Squadron. Grace took off at 04:50 and returned at 13:47.



**April 21<sup>st</sup> 1945** was Dick's last mission. The target was the marshalling yards at Salzburg, Austria. Bad weather hampered the assembly with aircraft climbing through the thick cloud and suddenly burst into clear sky and narrowly missing other aircraft. The cloud caused them issues as they struggled to maintain formation. This same cloud cover obscured the target, and as there was no assigned secondary target, orders were received to recall the mission. The aircraft turned back with full bomb bays.

By the end of the war Dick had completed a total of 44 missions over Europe in B-17s and B-24s.

After VE Day, Grace returned to the US, in time to celebrate his seventh wedding anniversary. He received a reassignment from the A.A.F. Redistribution Station No 4 at Santa Ana. He was promoted to Major, and finally took the desk job. His decorations from two World Wars included the Distinguished Flying Cross, six Air Medals, and two Purple Hearts.



Dick Grace finished his career managing an airline in South America. Not just a flyer, he continued to author books such as *Crash Pilot* (1950) and many magazine articles. Rabbitface passed away in February 1952. Dick passed away June 25<sup>th</sup> 1965 and was buried in Holy Cross Cemetery, Hollywood, California.