

Nosecone Jones, precis

In the history of aviation, few figures loom larger than Nosecone Jones. The third pilot to break the sound barrier. Seventeen altitude records. A brilliant solo intercept of two Soviet MiGs over the Baltic Sea. Not to mention the incredible story of how he'd come by his nickname: when the X-2 spy plane developed serious problems during its fourth test flight, things looked bleak. The pilot, however, one Matthias Elderidge Jones, somehow managed to get the bird back on the ground—though the base commander swore there wasn't much left of her but 'a nose cone and some fuselage'. The moniker stuck, and the test pilot was on his way to stardom.

And stardom is what he achieved. He retired a hero, but Nosecone Jones was here to stay. From the late-night talk show circuit, to hosting charity events, to cameos on the daytime soaps, the ex-military man became a national celebrity. He parlayed his fame into the next phase of his career as a headline-grabbing aerial daredevil and stuntman. His list of exploits went on and on, trumpeted from newspaper front pages and radio broadcasts. Breathless reporters covered his every thrilling move. He flew a decommissioned F-86 fighter under the Brooklyn Bridge. He piloted a German triplane through the Gateway Arch. He navigated between the arm and head of Lady Liberty in a Piper Cub. He guided a *Spruce Goose* replica across the faces of Mount Rushmore. No feat exceeded the mighty airman's skills.

Jones appeared on the Ed Sullivan and Jackie Gleason shows, and sat for interviews with Edward R. Murrow and Walter Kronkite. County fairs all over the nation sold toys bearing his likeness—plastic jets with red-white-and-blue paint jobs and a smiling Nosecone in the cockpit. That's how America saw him: the last of the flying aces, a revenant from the two world wars that had convulsed the fabric of society. The patriotic pilot embodied the spirit that had overcome German and Japanese aggression and would, in time, overcome the Red Menace as well. Children's eyes brightened, women swooned, and grown men went green with envy whenever he made an appearance.

That's why his death hit so hard. The unexpected is always more difficult to deal with, and Nosecone Jones seemed an eternal and invincible figure. That summer started with such optimism and hope, too: Elvis transfixed the world with his singing and dancing. The cinemas packed people in as a new crop of stars blossomed on screen to wild applause and critical acclaim. Radio dramas enraptured millions of listeners who tuned in religiously to hear the next episode. Television sitcoms and game-shows racked

up huge ratings, with advertisers flocking to buy airtime for their products. It looked to be another banner year for the greatest nation on Earth.

Then, with the enduring image of a burning parachute, everything changed...