

# Joe Scalzo's

## City of Speed and elsewhere

### Hughes and Petrali

**“Howard Hughes was the only man who had to die to prove he’d been alive” - anon**

**The traveling asylum accompanying Howard Hughes, the secretive, invisible billionaire, who in his early and middle years had been a brilliant pilot and flying hero addicted to aviation, but in his later years turned wildly eccentric and became a sure candidate for the loony bin, was a strange one, everybody devoted to giving the billionaire whatever he wanted: the Hughes Asylum was a strange one, including adult page boys, Mormons; yes-men; hatchet-men; bodyguards; lobbyists; barbers; cooks; doctors; chauffeurs; former agents of the FBI and CIA; plus a world-class Sicilian- American motorcycle race named Joe Petrali.**



**Before joining the Hughes Asylum, Petrali had been a multi-tasker; a hill-climber up the face of perpendicular cliffs; a timber-and flat track racer; a veteran of speed blasts across the beaches of Daytona; a winner of 49 championship races, a record which stood for 55 years;**

holder of the motorcycle world speed record; winner of marathons lasting three days and four nights; a winning chief mechanic of an Indy 500; and who belonged to the smallest club in the world – somebody who had seen and spoken to Howard Hughes.

Just like Hughes, Petrali was an aviation fanatic and apparently had been flight engineer for Hughes while the billionaire was setting his famous round-the-world speed record of 19 hours and 17 minutes.



Afterward Hughes and Petrali began establishing flying marks all across the western hemisphere, an activity which came to a frightening end in the Louisiana hamlet of Shreveport. First Petrali had had to bail Hughes out of the calaboose when constables mistook the richest man in the United States for common hobo. Not long afterward Hughes surprised Petrali by handing him a sealed envelope and ordering him to lather his hands with soap and water before unsealing it. Then he instructed him to repeat aloud the contents, and Petrali read Hughes's wavering handwriting thusly:

**“Do not convey, communicate, telephone, or telegraph any message from me to anyone unless I repeat it to you word for word ten consecutive times. And when I do tell you to call someone put your hands behind you and count on your fingers. If I tell you less than ten times, don't do it. After I have to told you to read it ten consecutive times, then do it - these instructions shall remain in force for as long as you live!”**

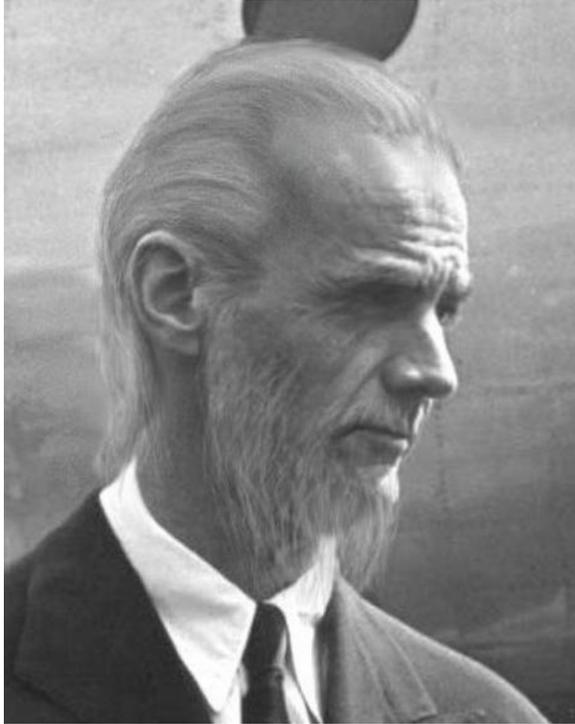
Horrified to learn that Hughes was going out of his mind, Petrali was forced to give notice and quit the crowded Hughes Asylum. However, upon leaving Hughes, Petrali realized that finding company as brilliant wasn't going to be easy. At first he thought he'd found it with bunch of colorful entrepreneurs who were busy converting big SBY seaplanes for sale to various banana republic jefes who were turning them into luxury bordellos.

But this activity soon paled, so Petrali, at the beginning of the 1960s, headed out to the Bonneville Salt Flats and, for the following 11 seasons, was official time-keeper of the Land Speed Record, living with all the fabulous LSR rats Thompson, Campbell, Breedlove, Arfons, and Gabelich.

Petrali, died in 1973, aged 69, on the Arizona leg of the Mobilgas Economy Run. Only three years later, in 1976, Hughes also died, aged 70, at 1:27 p.m. in the afternoon, on a private plane carrying him from Acapulco to Methodist Hospital in Houston, where he was born and was secretly registered as J.T. Conover. He wasn't recognizable. Before his barber had trimmed and shaved him for the last flight to Houston his gray hair had hung down his back

and his beard was reaching his chest . He was a comatose, 97-pound creature with sunken eyes; arms and legs like pipe stems; with bones protruding from his back that were clearly visible.

He needed a blood transfusion but refused because nobody would tell him whose blood he was getting. For years he'd slept only on his back and was covered with bed sores. His collapse, which may have begun with all the pain pills he was addicted to following a fiery plane crash in the 1940s, was so great that he barely could see without glasses or hear without a hearing aide. His pulse was so weak it was barely audible. And Hughes's paranoid passion for secrecy was with him until the very end. The pilot and co-pilot flying him from Acapulco to Houston had had to turn their backs while he was loaded aboard the private plane.



During his sane period Hughes was as handsome as a movie star and stood a towering six-foot-four wearing his trademark snap-brim Stetson. During the 1930s he set the world's speed record, 352 mph. He was aviator supreme and the owner of, among many other properties, Trans World Airlines and Hughes AirWest; was America's number eight defense contractor with Hughes Aircraft constructing for the Pentagon satellites for outer space and the moon; had built, entirely out of wood, the amphibian Hercules HK 1, the world's largest flying boat; built for the CIA the top-secret, failed, Glomar Explorer, which was supposed to drag the Pacific bottom and bring to the surface a sunken Russian nuclear submarine; owned at least five Las Vegas gambling casinos, although he never gambled; was the boss of RKO Studios, whose pictures won Academy Awards and where Hughes courted such starlets as Jean Harlow, Jane Russell, Ava Gardner and Jean Peters, who was briefly married to Hughes.



Hughes was insane but he was \$2 billion insane, and was quite possibly the richest man in the country – whatever he liked he bought. And Hughes's power was great: he walked out on two congressional hearings; befriended Somoza, dictator of Nicaragua; quite possibly bribed a president; spent \$500 million purchasing all

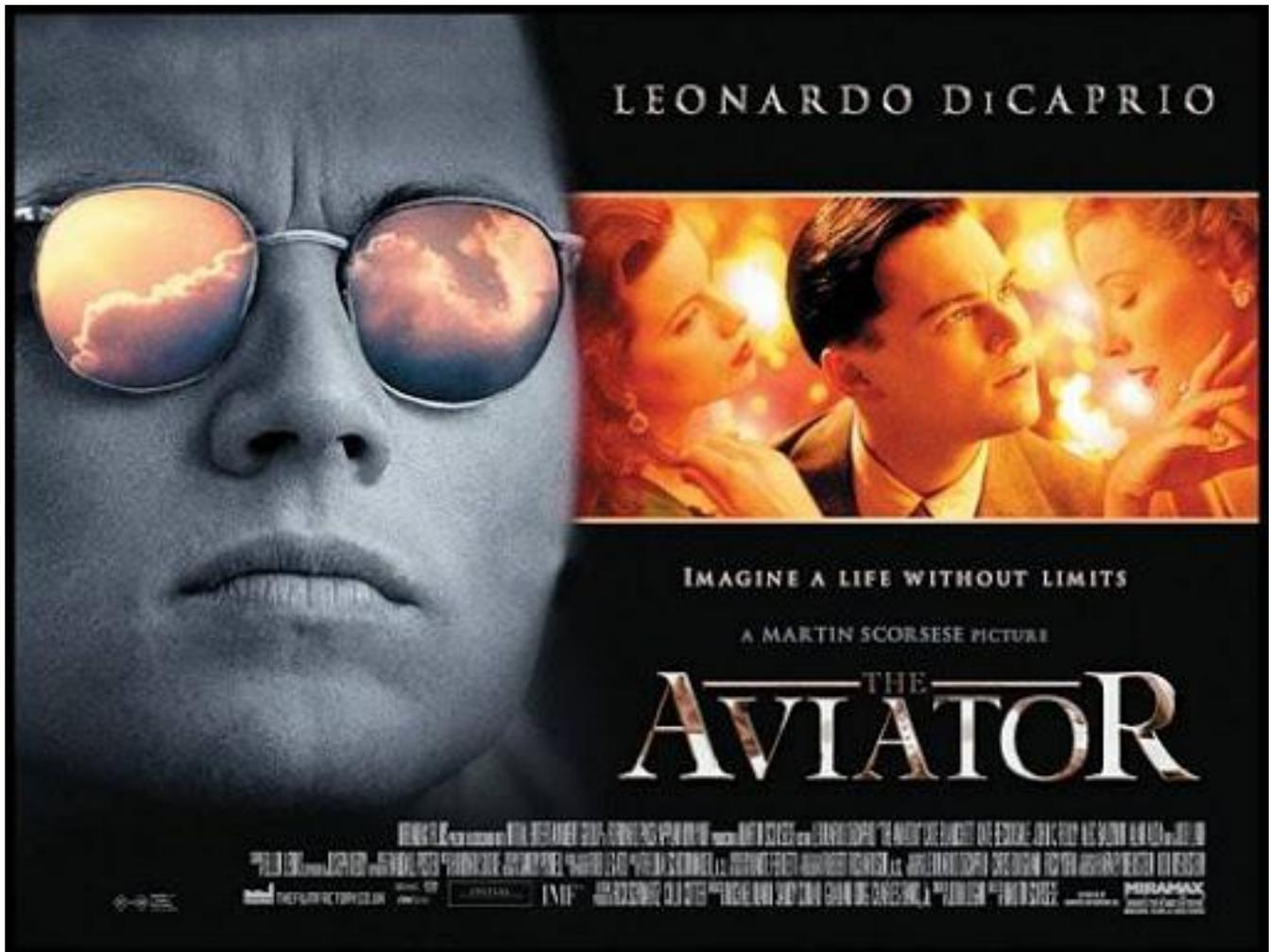
those Vegas casinos; then spent all his waking hours inside the top floor of luxury hotels operating his projector to screen over and over “Ice Station Zebra,” his favorite film.

He was terrified of germs, and his clothing and eating habits showed it. Toward the end of his life he wore nothing but draw-string shorts and then quit wearing anything at all; he nourished himself with cans of Cambell’s Chicken Noodle Soup and it took him an hour just to finish one can. Then he changed his mind and ordered his adult page boys to fetch him lots of Swanson TV dinners, and when he tired of them he switched to Arby’s and then to Baskin-Robbins Banana Nut ice cream – 350 gallons of it. The problem was, Baskin-Robbins no longer made Banana Nut.

So, under emergency secrecy, a refrigerated truck left Los Angeles and drove all night to Las Vegas and the Sands casino where it was refrigerated. Nobody had imagined what 350 gallons of ice cream looked like. Later Hughes reversed his choice and declared his favorite ice cream was Baskin Robbins French Vanilla.

James Phelan, the investigative reporter who authored the book, “Howard Hughes: The Hidden Years,” wrote, :”Howard Hughes’s greatest invention wasn’t the world’s largest flying boat, or flush-riveting for planes, or Jane Russell’s cantilevered bra, it was his Secrecy Machine.”

In the last six years the secrecy Asylum carried Hughes, at a cost of \$1.5 million, in and out of half a dozen luxury hotels in six different counties and states before settling on Mexico, and Acapulco. It was an odd choice. None of the Asylum spoke Spanish; Hughes had no passport; and Acapulco was in the middle of a heat wave overwhelming the air-conditioning. So Hughes had had to be flown to Houston, his last stop.



**“The Aviator,” Hollywood’s big, sad, Howard Hughes saga depicts Hughes as being a Momma’s boy whose mother turned him into a hypochondriac who was of scared of crowds. But “The Aviator” is marred by a fraudulent closing scene. With Hughes at its controls, the gigantic Hercules, “the flying lumberyard that won’t fly,” is shown climbing high into the sky, a great triumph for Hughes. But the one and only flight of the Hercules, which occurred in 1947, over Long Beach harbor, saw the Hercules able to fly only 20 feet above the channel, and then just for a mile. Hughes no longer had a pilot’s license but, ever vain about his flyboy skills, took off without a co-pilot. His only companion in the cockpit, as flight engineer, was the faithful Joe Petrali. Following the flight the Hercules was put back into its enormous metal hangar, guarded by barb wire and big German Shepherds and not taken out again until – when it was broken down into five pieces and trucked many miles north to Oregon, where it became one of the choice exhibits in an air museum.**



DOMESTIC