STRANGE WEAPONS

by

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Class of 2014

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors from the College of Social Studies

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2014
STRANGE
WEAPONS

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PREFACE

“These men were warriors who carried strange weapons—rolls of canvas, tubes of precious turpentine paints, brushes, pencils and notebooks.”

— John Hersey, Life Magazine, 1943

“Strange Weapons,” is a chronicle of my efforts to uncover the story of American combat art. A two-pronged project, the first part of this thesis is a historical analysis of official military combat art programs, in the form of an essay. The second portion of “Strange Weapons” explores combat art through a collection of original, content-driven, documentary poetry. These sections can be read independently or in cooperation.
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INTRODUCTION

The images that hold the eye the longest are neither glamorous nor glorifying. They are heart-wrenching depictions of the price paid in human lives and suffering, sobering studies of soldiers engaged in the art of war.

— Brian Lanker, They Drew Fire, 2000

On the outskirts of Washington, DC, there is a fluorescently lit, climate-controlled storage space that holds 16,000 paintings and sketches. A series of traditional 1840s paintings of the Mexican War, a cubist abstraction of corpses in India, impressionist works from the Vietnam War, four World War II oils by Norman Rockwell—they hang on sliding metal racks and lay stacked in the flat files that line the room.* Owned by the United States Army Center of Military History, these powerful works have all been produced by American combat artists—service members and civilians commissioned by the United States’ military to draw and paint in warzones. Indeed, from John Trumbull, the Revolutionary War artist who sketched plans of enemy positions for General Washington, to Sergeant Kristopher Battles, the current artist-in-

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1 Brian Lanker and Nicole Newnham, They Drew Fire: Combat Artists of World War II (New York: TV Books, 2000), 139.
* See poem entitled “The Artist and the Gunner,” based on Norman Rockwell’s questionable approach to combat art. This poem considers the documentary accuracy of combat art as a form.
residence at the Marine Corps, the United States has a long tradition of sending artists to the front lines to record their war experience in pencil and in paint. And yet, despite the expansive archives held by all five branches of the U.S. Armed Forces—the Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard—combat art has received scant attention from historians and curators, and is virtually unknown to the public.

When I explain to people that there are contemporary artists working from canvas tents and trenches, with paintbrushes and rifles, watercolors and canteens—I am usually met with interest, but I am unfailingly met with surprise. What is combat art? Who are combat artists? How many of them are there? Where is their artwork? And most of all, why? How does the military understand the purpose of combat art, and why does it continue to support such an antiquated form of documentation in an age of photo and video-journalism? This was clearly a story that had gone untold.
COMBAT ART:
What It Is and Is Not

There are few comprehensive sources that unfold combat art as an art form. This is, in part, due to confusion about the very definition of combat art. Scholars diverge in their understanding of the genre—while some see only those works created by first-hand experience as combat art, others cast a wider net, including works that are informed by war, even if the conflict was not directly observed. The military institutions that commission artists show similar variance—while the Marine Corps and Army require their official combat artists to be service members in good standing, the Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard all employ civilians. This thesis relies on the definition of combat art provided by former Marine combat artist Colonel H. Avery Chenoweth in his 2002 book, *Art of War: Eyewitness U.S. Combat Art from the Revolution through the Twentieth Century.* Chenoweth’s text is the first and only exhaustive history of combat art that includes both textual information and reproductions of artwork, and Chenoweth himself has had the longest career in combat art of any civilian or service member. Chenoweth’s career began when he became a Marine artist in the Korean War, he then volunteered his services again during Vietnam, and then re-enlisted in 1990 as a combat art field coordinator during the Persian Gulf War. Serving as both an artist and a combat art program coordinator, Chenoweth combines the unique perspective of a veteran combat artist with an official military position on combat art programs.

By Chenoweth’s definition, combat art is any type of traditional artistic media (including painting and sketching, but excluding photography) that is created based on
the artist's firsthand observations of war. According to Chenoweth, if the image does not come from the experience of the artist, it is not combat art. Without military experience, “The spark of authenticity of the actual observer is absent.” As the coordinator of the Marine Corps’ six-man combat art program during the Persian Gulf War, Chenoweth told his artists: “It is imperative that your work be firsthand and original. The distinctive way that you as an artist see the activity and record it is what makes combat art valid.” Such a definition eliminates a great deal of famous works, including major war pieces like Guernica by Pablo Picasso and The Night Watch by Rembrandt van Rijn, as well as compositions produced by recognized fine artists like Peter Paul Rubens and Francisco Goya (FIG.1). What makes combat art distinct from the broader category of war art is that whereas combat artists are informed by personal combat experience, illustrations of combat produced by war artists are often imagined renderings. While all combat art can be considered war art, not all war art can be considered combat art.*

As Chenoweth suggests, those characteristics that eliminate artistic work from the genre of combat art are what fundamentally inform this mode of chronicling war. Indeed, perhaps his most stringent criteria for combat art is the exclusion of photography as a medium. Chenoweth writes:

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4 Ibid.
5 Chenoweth, *Art of War*, 17.
6 While Picasso did create Guernica in response to the bombing of the village in northern Spain, he did not in fact witness Guernica’s destruction—therefore eliminating the piece from the genre of combat art. Similarly, Rembrandt’s The Night Watch is an artistic interpretation of a shooting company led by Dutch Captain Frans Banning Cocq, but is not an example of eyewitness artwork.
* See poem entitled “What It Is Or Is Not,” a piece that begins my collection and reflects on the definition of combat art.
Monocular, or single-lens vision, such as that of an ordinary camera, does not capture the perception of depth; in fact it often distorts it... The artist, with his binocular vision, is able to instantly register depth and to focus on whatever he is analyzing, while his mind interprets, selects, rejects, or enhances either the details or the overall picture. Mostly because we become enamored of and ultimately trust all things mechanical, we tend to forget that the human eye and the human mind are the superior instruments.  

For Chenoweth, the photograph is inferior both technically and emotionally. While the camera literally warps images, its depiction of war also provides an incomplete representation of the scene’s emotional depth. Therefore, combat art, while often supplemented by photography—contemporary combat artists frequently use cameras to record quick action that can then be translated to paper or canvas—is never solely photographic.

For Chenoweth, an equally important exclusion in the genre of combat art is of those works that romanticize war. In the “Marine Combat Artists’ Standard Operating Procedures Memorandum” that he issued to his artists covering the Persian Gulf War in 1990, Chenoweth instructed that, “Marines will look good and Marines will look bad, depending on the circumstances. You depict what you see and don’t pull any punches.” Indeed, Chenoweth views combat art as a “valid form of recording with its own integrity and form of human expression.” However, despite Chenoweth’s insistence that combat art be an accurate and realistic lens through which to chronicle war, the history of

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7 Chenoweth, Art of War, 26.
9 Ibid.
combat art reveals a tension between the impulse to romanticize and the impulse to document.

With *Art of War*, Chenoweth is primarily concerned with codifying a method of documentation that is slowly fading away. Aside from offering a succinct definition of combat art (used by curators, scholars, and artists), *Art of War* is the first book to compile the combat artwork of the entire United States Armed Forces.\(^\text{10}\) It also serves as a starting point for further research—establishing combat art as a valid historical record and tool, and providing an appendix that lists combat artists (specifying both place of service and military branch). Chenoweth notes that the number of surviving combat artists is dwindling fast—World War II veterans are in their nineties and Vietnam veterans are in their sixties and beyond. Meanwhile, contemporary combat art programs have been reduced in size, with each branch of the military only employing one or two official artists. The worry here is that, while combat art and its focus on first-hand documentation diminishes, unrealistic and popular portrayals of war will prevail. As the nation’s collective memory of war is replaced by the distorted depictions of Hollywood, Chenoweth writes, “Personal interpretations of combat by eyewitnesses might begin to lose their resonance with the public.”\(^\text{11}\) His book, then, is an attempt to recognize the significant achievements of combat artists, to memorialize their art, and to commemorate the service members who acted as their subjects.\(^\text{12}\)

For the outsider, combat art is an evasive genre and mode of documentation. It is simultaneously accessible and inaccessible: On the one hand, all artwork commissioned by official military programs is funded by taxpayer money. This means

\(^{10}\) Chenoweth, *Art of War*, 16.

\(^{11}\) Ibid.

\(^{12}\) Chenoweth, *Art of War*, 356.
that it is owned by the American people and unrestrained by copyright. On the other hand, combat art is physically hidden away from the public eye, kept on military bases and in basements, as is the case with the 16,000-piece Army Art Collection. Indeed, when I contacted the curators at the Army, Marine Corps, and Navy art collections, it became increasingly clear that in order to learn more about combat art and to view the work itself, I would have to visit the collections. Rather than viewing the pieces in a museum, I would have to be brought behind the closed doors of military storage facilities.

In August 2013, supported by Wesleyan’s Olin Fellowship, I embarked on a ten-day trip to Washington, DC, where I visited the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of American History Armed Forces Division, and took day trips to the Army Art Collection (in Fort Belvoir, VA), Marine Corps Art Collection (in Quantico, VA), and Navy Art Collection (in the Washington, DC Navy Yard). At each branch’s art collection, I met with the curator at their storage facility to view the combat art collection and interview any combat artists home from assignment. With the assistance of these curators and artists, as well as the print resources gathered during my visit (including official military documents and pamphlets), I constructed the story of American combat art, from its inception in the Revolutionary War to its contemporary role as a military institution.
THE ORIGINS OF COMBAT ART

Early American combat art was seen as the independent activity of the industrious and creative civilian or service member. While it was encouraged by the military, it was certainly not institutionalized or subsidized. Service members (both those with talent and without) documented their combat experiences for personal use, or for loved ones back home. One example is Union soldier Charles Wellington Reed, a Boston native, enlisted in the 9th Massachusetts Light Artillery on August 2, 1862. For much of the war, he served as a bugler—responsible for the telling of time and duties in camp, as well as guiding action on the battlefield. But in periods of downtime, Reed sketched. A gifted artist, especially talented at capturing the everyday life of his army camp, Reed documented his combat experience in sketchbooks, diaries, and letters sent home. The resulting archive, held by the Library of Congress, is complete with a first-hand sketch of Abraham Lincoln walking amongst Army tents, entitled Lincoln’s Midnight Thinks (FIG.2). So, while Reed was not commissioned by the military to create documentary artwork, his collection of sketches offers a comprehensive pictorial retelling of Civil War experience.

16 I had the opportunity to view the Charles Wellington Reed Papers during my visit to the Library of Congress. I found Reed’s diary to be particularly impressive. Bound in black leather and engraved with the year “1864,” it details Reed’s day-to-day experience through quick sketches and text. When I flipped open to Wednesday, December 14, I found pressed flowers and leaves—still intact from the end of the 1800s.
* See poem entitled “The Battlefield in Gray Scale,” an ekphrastic piece that uses an untitled Charles Wellington Reed sketch as reference.
While most early combat art was executed during a soldier’s free time, there are some instances of early military commissions. For example, the “painter of the American Revolution” John Trumbull is generally considered America’s first official combat artist.\(^{17}\)

At the outbreak of the war, Trumbull abandoned art school, enlisted in the Continental Army as a private, and marched to Boston with the First Connecticut regiment. Trumbull’s sketches attracted the attention of General George Washington, who requested that Trumbull be appointed as his aide-de-camp, responsible for drawing plans of the enemy position. Trumbull was known to sneak out onto the battlefield at night to survey the number and placement of enemy guns (FIG.3). Indeed, unlike most of the art that has been archived prior to combat art’s institutionalization, Trumbull’s work can be considered official combat art—not only eyewitness artwork, but artwork commissioned by superiors in the military.

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\(^{17}\) Lanker, *They Drew Fire*, viii.
WORLD WAR I: The Institutionalization of Combat Art

Combat art did not become institutionalized until World War I, when the United States military began officially commissioning artists. The British government established official combat art schemes in 1914. These programs appear to be the primary impetus for the institutionalization of American combat art. Interested in building up a similar documentary archive of United States military action, in July 1917 the Army’s Committee on Public Information recommended that official artists be sent to France to “make a pictorial record of the terrain, uniforms, equipment, and actions of the war.” The Army chose eight civilians from the New York City Society of Illustrators to record the activities of American Expeditionary Forces. Dubbed the “Army Eight,” the group of civilian correspondents included established fine artists like Harvey Dunn, William Aylward, and George Harding. As professional artists, the Army Eight were accustomed to the methods used by contemporary illustrators, who traditionally took extended trips to remote sites in order to conduct research and illustrate their experiences. However, with no military training or even basic orientation, the Army Eight were largely unprepared when they were assigned as captains and sent off to the western front. Due to their lack of combat training, the Army Eight were often disregarded by those in the higher echelons of the military, who had difficulty

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19 At the end of the war, the team’s artwork was donated to the Smithsonian Institution. During my August 2013 visit to the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, I arranged a private viewing of the Division of Armed Forces History collection where I saw original artwork from the Army Eight, as well as Harvey Dunn’s original sketch kit.
20 Chenoweth, *Art of War*, 16.
* See poem entitled “The Artist Goes To War,” a piece that reflects on the unpreparedness of many combat artists, using the experience of World War II artist Franklin Boggs.
comprehending the relevance of their mission. The artists were seen as dead weight, tagging along in the front line with no proper military conditioning.

**The Reluctant Critic**

In addition to being received with skepticism by those in the military, combat art produced during World War I was either ignored or denounced by art critics.* An article written in the January 12, 1918 edition of *The Literary Digest* includes scathing remarks from Boston critic William H. Downes:

> Artists, as a class apart, found some sympathy from the gullible *bourgeoisie* in piping peace times, but the old role is faded now, and one of the first to recognize this changed condition of things is an art critic. Mr. William H. Downes, critic of the Boston *Transcript*... says, “those of them who are worth their salt will not claim any exemption from the sacrifices that are demanded of all classes.” Pictures and statues may wait—“they would be of small value in a world dominated by Germans, anyway.”

Downes found combat artists to be ridiculous and frivolous—an excuse for upper class soldiers to stay out of harm’s way. For Downes, the selfishness of taking a combat artist position outweighed any potential merits of a pictorial documentation. Aside from condemnations in publications like *The Literary Digest*, World War I combat art was inexplicably ignored. This was surprising, particularly because the (also recently established) British combat art program had received significant attention across the ocean. Colonel H. Avery Chenoweth suggests that World War I combat art was

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* See poem entitled “Mission Creep,” a piece that reflects the skepticism of critics like William H. Downes.

overlooked due to America’s brief participation, as well the public’s desire to “forget the horror of war.” In fact, the pieces produced by the Army Eight garnered little publicity until the mid-twenties, when their work began to be published in books.

In the years since, curators have come to consider the Army’s World War I collection as one of the most exceptional samples of combat art. This is undoubtedly due to the high level of artistic technique demonstrated by the group of professional illustrators. Harvey Dunn’s famous color sketch entitled The Machine Gunner has, perhaps, gained the most recognition of those pieces in the collection (FIG.4). Depicting “the soldier of the new century”—Dunn’s sketch has long been used as an emblem of the broad-shouldered, sharp-jawed fighter with his hands on his hips and gun at his side—a trope of the soldier that remains iconic even today.

23 For an example of a combat art book published in the 1920’s, see John W. Thomason, *Fix Bayonets!* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1926).
WORLD WAR II:
The Expansion of Combat Art

During World War I, the Army was the only military branch with an official combat art program, but by World War II programs were established in every branch of the Armed Forces. The Navy’s program was introduced in 1941 due to the efforts of World War I veteran Griffith Baily Coale. Coale had served in the Navy from 1917 to 1918, after which he moved to New York and painted portraits, decorative paintings for buildings, and murals. In 1941, with the sense that the American entry into the war was imminent, Coale approached Admiral Chester W. Nimitz with the request of starting an official Navy art program. With his experience in the military and interest in using art to document war, Coale encouraged Nimitz to send artists on board navy ships and have them record their experiences through painting. In justification of his request, Coale explained, “Artworks could go beyond the photographic image and written document in providing a different perspective of the experience of war.”

Admiral Nimitz agreed to Coale’s proposal and set the Navy Combat Art program into action. On August 8, 1941, Coale was commissioned as a combat artist to serve as a Lieutenant Commander in the Naval Reserve. In his career as an official combat artist, Coale eventually documented the wreckage of Pearl Harbor (FIG.5).

The United States Coast Guard Art Program was built in collaboration with that of the Navy. There are conflicting reports regarding when the U.S. Coast Guard established an official combat art program. Some scholars consider the Coast Guard’s World War II artists to be in the service of the Navy Art Program. This would suggest that an official, separate program began in

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always be transferred to the U.S. Department of the Navy at the command of the President. While the Coast Guard operates under the U.S. Department of Homeland Security during peacetime, with the primary responsibilities of maritime law enforcement, boating safety, sea rescue, and immigration control—during wartime all of the Coast Guard’s resources can be called on for military action. To date, this has happened twice—once in 1917 and once in 1941. It was during this wartime transfer of powers in World War II that the Coast Guard began a program of artists. Scholars consider Coast Guardsmen to be the “unsung heroes” of World War II.27 Coast Guard vessels were frequently responsible for rescuing survivors from torpedoed ships, shadowed by the constant perils of sudden explosions from U-Boats, frigid temperatures, and rough waters. Artists like Lieutenant Commander Anton Otto Fischer witnessed these harrowing conditions and created artwork like Brief Encounter—a piece that depicts the victory of the American cutter Campbell, and the capsizing of an unidentified U-boat (FIG.6).

The Marine Corps established an art program of its own at the same time as the Navy and Coast Guard. The Marine Corps had begun an informal association with art in World War I, when Colonel John W. Thomason Jr. began producing a series of detailed battlefield sketches (FIG.7).* Thomason, a company commander with the 5th Marine Regiment and lifelong artist, had a strong personal desire to document his war

[1980 when the Navy phased out its Navy Art Cooperation and Liaison Committee and the Coast Guard adopted a similar project.  
27 Chenoweth, Art of War, 169.  
* See poem entitled “The Artist’s Small Delights,” a piece that reflects on Colonel John Thomason’s tendency to sketch and paint on odd scraps of paper. Curators have had a difficult time preserving Thomason’s work because he so frequently used both the front and back of his paper—covering the sheet in drawings and notes.}
experience. Infamous for his commitment, Thomason is said to have positioned himself on the edge of a shell hole during a pause in the Battle of Belleau Wood, so that he could sketch the scene on a chocolate wrapper with the tip of a burned matchstick. Indeed, Thomason was often frustrated by a lack of art supplies in the field, as there was no established program. He lamented, “Never in all my life have I so vastly wished for drawing materials…If I just had a bottle of India Ink—or a few water colors!” It wasn’t until 1942, using the foundation established by Colonel Thomason, that Brigadier General Robert Denig initiated the official Marine Corps Combat Art Program. With the expectation that Marine combat artists must witness what they paint, Denig’s mission was to use fine art in order to keep Americans informed of the Marines’ actions overseas. The program he developed came to include several well-known American painters, including Tom Lovell, John Clymer, and Harry Jackson.

The United States Air Force, only made a separate branch of the military in September 1947 (prior to and during World War II it had been a part of the Army), began its art program in 1950. In recognition of the Air Force’s newfound autonomy, the Army transferred 800 works of art documenting the early days of the Army Air Corps. In 1951, in order to establish an official combat artist program of its own, the Air Force commissioned 30 artists from the New York Society of Illustrators, the same organization that had provided the military with the Army Eight. However, unlike the other military art programs, the Air Force’s fledgling project was explicit about its

intention to produce domestic and foreign propaganda. Indeed, the growing collection of Air Force art was managed by the Secretary of the Air Force Office of Information Services—the very office responsible for public information programs. While Information Services historians have suggested that the central purpose behind the art program is to document the “Air Force story,” it is undeniable that the program’s original intention was to present American military action in a positive light.  

Meanwhile, the Army’s program, reestablished in 1942 as the Army War Art Unit, remained the most robust of the combat artist projects. In fact, the Army sought to expand its program—creating a project far broader than the one established in World War I. According to Army Art Collection curator Sarah Forgey, the Army’s World War II artists went through an extensive vetting process. All applicants, civilian and service member, had to be nominated to the unit by the War Art Advisory Committee, an elite group of civilian art experts. Ultimately, the committee selected 42 artists: 23 active duty military, and 19 civilians. The group included artists like Captain Edward Reep who, unlike most combat artists (who made preliminary sketches in the field and then further developed their work in safety) always carried his pen and ink, watercolors, tempera, brushes, and paper (FIG.8). “Wherever he went, [Reep was] sketching and painting constantly—in rear echelons and right on the front lines, often under intense German artillery and sniper fire. One of his best watercolors was done in the back of a jeep

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31 Ibid.
32 Lanker, They Drew Fire, 2.
33 Sarah Forgey, Interview with author, Army Combat Art Collection, Fort Belvoir, VA, August 8, 2013.
during a heavy downpour.”

Captain Reep’s intrepidity has made him a legend for those in the combat art community. *

And yet, despite the commitment of Captain Reep and the 41 other Army artist-correspondents, Congress ended the program in July 1943, not even a year after its inception. It has been reported that the $125,000 appropriation for combat art was discontinued following the complaints of an Alabama senator, who vehemently objected to “durn fool things like art!”

While the active duty artists were easily reassigned, civilian artists were left without a commission. Fortunately, civilian publications, most notably Life Magazine, approached the military with an offer to employ the civilian artists, so long as the Army continued to organize the logistics of their service. A deal was made. All but one of the civilian artists opted to proceed in their service. During the war, the artists’ work was regularly published by Life Magazine in multi-page spreads. After the war, Life Magazine donated the resulting artwork to the Army’s Center of Military History, where it continues to be held today.  

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34 Chenoweth, Art of War, 137.

* See poem entitled “Etymology,” based on Captain Edward Reep’s willingness to enter dangerous combat situations in order to sketch. Of his experience, Reep wrote, “Many times I painted and sketched while a battle raged. I was shelled, mortared, and strafed… At Monte Cassino the earth trembled and so did my hand… At Anzio I innocently waited for the monstrous German cannon "Anzio Annie" to lob its shells into the harbor so that I could study and record the gigantic geysers of water shooting skyward. At this point it didn't occur to me that one might do me in. More willing than knowledgeable, I almost destroyed myself on two occasions through my own stupidity.”


35 Sarah Forgey, Interview with author.

36 Chenoweth, Art of War, 134.

37 Sarah Forgey, Interview with author.

Combat Art as Advertisement

In addition to being supported by publications like *Life Magazine*, World War II combat art was also put to commercial use. While conducting my research, I primarily examined those artists commissioned by the U.S. military. However, in the midst of reviewing scholarship, a name kept surfacing—Abbott Laboratories. Abbott, a private firm, seemed to be commissioning artists to draw and paint in war zones. I found this to be perplexing, particularly because I was only able to find very limited information about Abbott Laboratories, and absolutely no information about its association with combat art. It was not until I visited Joan Thomas, curator of the Marine Corps Combat Art Collection, that I was able to uncover the company’s role.

According to Thomas, Abbott Laboratories was a global pharmaceuticals company, and the primary provider of medical supplies to the U.S. military during World War II. The company hired civilian artists as war correspondents with the intention of supporting the war effort *and* producing artistic material for company advertisements. In cooperation with the military, Abbott sent artists to document medical officers and hospital corpsmen. And while Abbott artists were encouraged to prioritize authenticity, the company used only select pieces for their magazine advertisements—suggesting a level of censorship. A great deal of the Abbott artwork looked similar to *Life in Death*, an oil painting by David Stone Martin—military doctors surrounding an operating table (or, often times, a stretcher) (FIG.9). The role of an institution like Abbott Laboratories

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39 Joan Thomas, Interview with author, Marine Corps Combat Art Collection, Quantico, VA, August 9, 2013.
41 This particular image depicts U.S. Navy medical officers and corpsmen practicing an “operation” in an underground operating room, similar to the one on Guadalcanal.
suggests that there was also a commercial incentive to establish combat art programs. That said, the Abbott Laboratory program was unique, the only one initiated by a private firm. In addition, it is important to note that after the war Abbott donated all of the resulting works to military art collections.

**The Newly Interested Critic**

In contrast to the lackluster reception of World War I combat art, artists sent to observe World War II received significantly more recognition from curators, the press, and the public. Even if the art garnered skepticism, at the very least it generated interest. An article entitled “The Artist and the War,” written by Robert M. Coates, and published in the May 8, 1943 edition of the *New Yorker*, offers a look into the critical reception. “For some time now,” Coates writes, “I’ve been nibbling at the subject of what the artist can do about the war.” Coates identifies three possibilities:

He could do straight propaganda...in this case, and in most others like it that I’ve seen, the results were frankly disastrous. He could do morale-building work, such as poster designs...[but] to do good poster designs a man must have some knowledge of modern poster techniques to begin with. Third, he could engage in the kind of art reporting the British have been doing, going out with the troops, the fliers, and the naval forces, and sketching or painting what they see. This is something we in this country are only just beginning to do, and the results are not in yet. If the artists are selected with any intelligence, however, the works they bring back should provide a new and very effective documentation on the conduct of war.42

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Coates provides an intriguing window into the public’s perception of combat art. His conclusion suggests that, even to the viewer, eyewitness combat art had a documentary value, distinct from the propaganda art that was produced during World War II. In addition, Coates’ article reveals the extent to which American combat art programs were inspired by similar projects conducted by the British military. 43

The institutionalization of combat art programs also reopened a long-standing debate among critics—the rivalry between painting and photography as modes of documentation. Could sketched and painted representations provide the American people with the type of facts they demanded? Rosamund Frost, of the magazine ArtNEWS, considered this debate in an article published September 22, 1945, just after the conclusion of the war. Of World War II combat art programs, Frost said:

A vast and somewhat quixotic experiment has, in the end, paid off. Among the things it has taught us is to recognize the kind of thing the painter can do that the camera can’t… The artist, for instance, can set the general scene, can give the atmosphere and show prevailing conditions. He can be a subtle propagandist through whom we see and smell and hear and understand a situation. 44

The artist’s ability to “make his audience feel with him” put him in a unique position to record the war for both documentary accuracy and emotional depth. While Frost recognized the distinct capabilities of photography—the ability to see an event just as

43 Unlike the Army’s program, Britain’s project explicitly required its artists to produce propaganda, and strictly censored all resulting work. This is confirmed by the fact that Charles Masterman, head of the British War Propaganda Bureau, conducted Britain’s World War I combat art program. The British program would shift towards a more documentary function during World War II.


the photographer saw it, to view the exact nature of the explosion, the battle, the sinking ship—she also admired the level of subjectivity that can be achieved through traditional art media.
THE VIETNAM WAR:  
The Golden Age of Combat Art

The Vietnam War was the golden age of combat art. All five of the U.S. military’s active combat art programs were disbanded after the conclusion of World War II, and while efforts were made to revitalize military art programs during the Korean War (a very small archive of work exists), the projects were largely left dormant until the Vietnam War, when they would ultimately reach their peak.45 As early as 1965, the military branches prepared to send artist-correspondents to cover the escalating conflict. The Marine Corps was first to jump to action, sending three dozen uniformed artists to Vietnam in 1965. The Navy followed suit by sending its own personnel, including artist R.G. Smith, known for his depictions of aircrafts and use of contrasting lights and darks. The Army reestablished its program in 1966, sending out fifty uniformed artists and twenty civilians. Grouped in teams of four or five, the Army’s Vietnam artists observed and sketched their activities for 60 to 90-day shifts, then returned home to execute their finished works.46 Finally, both the Coast Guard and Air Force sent civilian artists to Vietnam.

The New Face of Warfare

The Vietnam War combat art archive is unique not only in its volume, but in its new portrayal of war. The combat environment in Vietnam was unlike that of previous wars—tropical, with jungle, piedmont, savanna, and mountain terrain. Furthermore,

45 For example, the Army had only two artists documenting the events of the Korean war—one artist commissioned by Life Magazine, and one civilian described by Army Art Collection curator Sarah Forgey as “a very poor painter.” Likewise, the results of the Marine Corps Korean art program were marginal at best.
46 Chenoweth, Art of War, 245.
American troops were facing a new type of enemy: not a large land army, but a resistance of evasive guerrillas. This new backdrop required massive alterations in war technology, since a main line of resistance would no longer be sufficient. The U.S. military developed air-mobile operations, short small-unit engagements, river patrols, search-and-destroy missions, and defoliation chemicals. But even great strides in technology could not disguise the U.S. military’s unpreparedness from the American public. The Vietnam War was unpopular and scrutinized by the media and American citizens alike.

These changes in the nature of American warfare were reflected in the work of Vietnam’s combat artists. Army art curator Sarah Forgey describes the branch’s Vietnam collection as “notably more dramatic and chaotic.” This is to say that Vietnam artists seemed to take greater artistic liberties in their work in efforts to inject their pieces with emotional impact. For example, Army artist (and former Marine) Horatio A. Hawks interpreted the warfare of Vietnam with semiabstract watercolor paintings. His piece entitled *Hot Village* uses a muddle of primary colors to depict a soldier entering a Vietnamese town (FIG.10). Sergeant James A. Fairfax of the Marine Corps broke convention with his materials. While most combat artists used sketchbooks and canvases, Fairfax was known to use unusual surfaces, such as woven rice-drying baskets. This ingenuity is reflected in his work entitled *Point Man*—the painting’s

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47 Sarah Forgey, Interview with author.

* See poem entitled “These Are Some of the Things the Artist Can Paint,” a piece that reflects on the combat artist's freedom to create his or her own interpretations of war.


50 Chenoweth, *Art of War*, 257.
stucco-like surface adds an element of static to the image of the unfortunate Marine who must lead a patrol toward an unseen enemy (FIG.11).

The degree of emotional impact generated by the Vietnam War is especially evident in the work of Sergeant Henry Casselli (FIG.12). According to an interview with scholar John R. Kemp, Casselli credits his experience in Vietnam, where he served as a Marine artist from 1967 to 1968, with forming his distinctive and emotional artistic vision. After fourteen months moving from one battle to the next (including the 1968 Tet Offensive), Casselli produced 680 sketches and paintings depicting his service.

I learned to cry out there, how to hurt. I learned to express my feelings. I was fortunate; I had a piece of paper to put it down. Lots of guys couldn't do that... It's coming right from the gut and scribbled on the page. Once on a medevac I literally stuck my hand into red paint and smeared it to indicate the blood and the guts of this mad human rush to get this wounded Marine out. It says all I need to say. It says it all to me.

Casselli’s account simultaneously reveals the merit of painting as a documentary method, and the raw horror of being the artist who must utilize it. While Casselli’s experience as a combat artist certainly shaped his artistic voice, it also cast a dark shadow over his career as a fine artist. When I reached out to Sergeant Casselli to arrange an interview, his written response exposed this tension: “While I’m very proud of my time in service as a Marine, I have never promoted or attempted to ‘showcase’ my work or the experiences from which they originate. I have painted a president, Mohammed Ali, and I have walked with men who have walked on the moon, but the first thing I’m always asked

about when being interviewed is, the doing of combat art." For Casselli, military service both defines and detracts from the reception of his art.

Vietnam combat art also reflects developments in military technology and tactics. Army Specialist Fourth Class Michael Crook’s watercolor *Search and Destroy* illustrates the military strategy that came to prominence during Vietnam—search and destroy missions sought to enter hostile territory, search out the enemy, destroy them, and immediately withdraw to safety (FIG.13). Many other artists portrayed the frequent patrols of Vietnamese rice paddies and rivers. Army Private Stephen H. Sheldon’s watercolor entitled *Paddy Patrol* depicts a patrol executed from a military helicopter—a technology that was first introduced in Vietnam (FIG.14). Indeed, the use of air cavalry, a new form of warfare, was thought to be ideally suited to countering the Viet Cong’s guerrilla jungle warfare. The helicopter’s importance in fighting the Viet Cong is obvious from the volume of artwork in which it is portrayed.

**Art and Protest**

Also present in Vietnam combat art is a clear undercurrent of protest. While many artists who were against the war remained committed to producing relatively objective, documentary work, other artists were more explicit in their disapproval. Army demolition specialist Richard Russell Yohnka’s disturbing pastel painting, entitled *I’m Hit*, depicts an injured soldier being assisted by his fellow service members (FIG.15).

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53 Sergeant Henry Casselli, Correspondence with the author, Conducted Remotely, July 9, 2013.
Rather than creating a classically accurate piece, Yohnka created visceral images of the men with exposed veins and muscles, as well as monstrous faces. Of the piece, Yohnka has said, “I am both the victim and aggressor in my work. I tried to use the medium to its maximum brutal effect.”  

Indeed, the ghoulish faces of Yohnka’s figures reveal the agony and pain of warfare. Air Force Sergeant Cleveland Wright voiced his protest of the war in his oil painting entitled *We Regret to Inform You…* (FIG.16). While the piece is certainly less macabre than Yohnka’s *I’m Hit*, its simple depiction of a mother being informed of her son’s death makes a grave and powerful statement. While artists certainly created protest art during World War I and World War II, such works were far less common. The immense volume of Vietnam protest art could easily constitute an independent collection.*

**Art and Propaganda**

Critics have attacked combat artists who portrayed the Vietnam War in a positive light. Indeed, some scholars argue that combat art is a form of propaganda—romanticizing war with images of sacrifice and heroism. Art historian Laura Brandon accuses combat art programs of encouraging the painting “of non-violent and rather parochial scenes…intended to inspire people to protect their countryside and ways of life.”  

Works like *American Doctor Examines Vietnamese Child* by Samuel E. Alexander

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59 Sgt. Cleveland Wright, ”We Regret to Inform You….” Oil, Vietnam, 1979.
* See poem entitled “Rah Rah,” a piece that reflects the anti-war sentiments of many veteran Vietnam artists.
support Brandon’s assertion (FIG.17). 61 This particular image depicts an Army doctor holding a stethoscope to the belly of a baby, with Vietnamese mothers and their children standing in line, waiting for care. While such humanitarian efforts are a key part of American military operations, and certainly deserve documentation, critics like Brandon feel that these types of images are overrepresented in the existing archive of combat art.

Some Vietnam combat artists, on the other hand, insist that they have been given full artistic freedom in their work. Their representations of war are often gruesome and disturbing, and frequently cast the American military in a poor light. 62 James Pollock, who served in the U.S. Army Vietnam Combat Art Program, describes his experiences in an essay. He writes, “Soldier-artists were encouraged to freely express and interpret their individual experience in their own distinct styles. The artists responded enthusiastically to their artistic free reign, and the resulting products were wide-ranging and comprehensive.” 63 Pollock himself was most interested in the day-to-day experience of the ordinary soldier (FIG.18). He never sought to romanticize war, only to provide the most sincere depiction of the soldier’s life. If the unit was on patrol, tramping through rice paddies and jungle, that is what Pollock illustrated. 64 If they were handing soap to Vietnamese locals, it was expressed in his watercolors. Pollock’s statements suggest that American combat artists have the artistic freedom to express their impressions of war,

62 For example, Thomas Lea’s World War II painting entitled The Price portrays a Marine who has been directly hit, ripping open one side of his body. Thomas Lea, "The Price," Oil, Peleliu, 1944.
which complicates the claim that propaganda was the primary motivation behind the establishment of combat art programs.  

LATE 20\textsuperscript{TH} CENTURY ENGAGEMENTS: Art and the Smaller Conflict

After the Vietnam War, the U.S. military focused on smaller conflicts on the margins of the Iron Curtain and elsewhere. However, U.S. military action in the Dominican Republic (1965), Lebanon (1983), Grenada (1983), and Panama (1989) went largely undocumented. Because many of these operations were initiated hastily, combat artists (who, at this point, were mostly inactive reservists) could not be sent to cover the event.\textsuperscript{66} Consequently, pictorial representations of these operations are often after-the-fact reconstructions. While these works still offer an excellent historical record, they are not, by definition, works of combat art, as they are not based on eyewitness experience.

The Revitalization of Combat Art

When the Persian Gulf War began in fall of 1990, U.S. military combat art projects were revitalized (with the exception of the Coast Guard and Air Force programs), albeit much smaller in size.\textsuperscript{67} The Navy was first to organize its program—Dr. Dean C. Allard, Director of the Naval Historical Center, quickly recalled Naval Reserve Commander John Roach to active duty.\textsuperscript{68} A week after Iraq invaded Kuwait, Commander Roach was on his way to Saudi Arabia, the first military artist to arrive in

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{66} Chenoweth, \textit{Art of War}, 311.
\textsuperscript{67} Most combat artists refer to the Persian Gulf War by its military code names. Operation Desert Shield began on August 7, 1990, five days after Iraq invaded Kuwait. Operation Desert Storm began on January 17, 1991.
\textsuperscript{69} While Commander Roach was first to be sent to the Persian Gulf, later on the Navy would also dispatch Reserve Commander William G. Beck in February 1991.
\end{footnotesize}
the Persian Gulf. Having served as an artist-correspondent during the Vietnam War, Roach was experienced and prepared. He was also committed to the idea of combat art as a valuable institution: “There is value in having an artist participant with military men and women deployed in the field. It is the artist’s responsibility to speak for the soldier or sailor, to show the things which must be painted, to serve as the spokesman for those who endure the trial of war.” For Roach, service as a combat artist was both a privilege and a duty. Roach set high expectations for the documentary validity and emotional authenticity of his work—his art would be serving as a voice for an entire generation of service members. In an interview with Katie Couric, Roach spoke of his Operation Desert Storm artwork, “I wanted one person in my work in this collection to speak directly to the flesh and blood—real live young men and women over there” (FIG.19).

The Marine Corps followed suit by sending a small group of its own artists to the Persian Gulf, including Colonel H. Avery Chenoweth, and Sergeant Charles C. Grow. A document entitled “Marine Combat Artists’ Standard Operating Procedures Memorandum, December 1990,” issued by the Marine Corps, demonstrates the vision of combat art held by those military officials responsible for the program. In a section entitled “Artistic Guidelines,” the document instructs:

> It is imperative that your work be firsthand and original. The distinctive way that you as an artist see the activity and record it is what makes combat art valid…If you should witness or participate in combat, depict truthfully what you saw. Do not create heroic imaginary…that would not be believable… No rules or limiting criteria are

70 “Art Imitates Life,” *NBC Today Show*.
71 In addition, the Army would send two artists to Saudi Arabia—Sergeant First Class Sieger Hartgers and Sergeant First Class Peter G. Varisano.
being set. You create your own artistic expressions as you see them.\textsuperscript{72}

This document supports the idea that combat artists were given full artistic liberty, and that their final works went uncensored. The Marines sent to document Operation Desert Storm would, indeed, both witness and participate in combat. When the ground war began on February 24, 1991, the small Marine Corps combat art team was attached to the 1\textsuperscript{st} Marine Division. Of the experience, Colonel Chenoweth writes that the soldiers “came under hostile fire and witnessed the blitzing Marine attack, the incredible numbers of prisoners taken, and the astounding burning of all of the Kuwaiti oil fields by the retreating Iraqis.”\textsuperscript{73} His description reveals the degree to which Marine artists came in contact with direct combat.

After the conclusion of the Persian Gulf War, U.S. military combat art programs continued to dwindle in size. Simultaneously, combat art programs reinvented themselves, reorganizing in order to document a wider range of military efforts, extending beyond circumstances of direct combat. In many cases, this meant the documentation of American humanitarian efforts. For example, in 1991 the Marine Corps sent a single artist to northern Iraq in order to document Operation Provide Comfort—a Marine Corps effort to provide aid to the indigenous Kurds being persecuted by dictator Saddam Hussein’s Iraqi army.\textsuperscript{74} Similarly, in 1993, the Marine Corps sent artists to observe Operation Restore Hope—an international effort to provide relief in civil war-torn Somalia.

\textsuperscript{73} Chenoweth, \textit{Art of War}, 317.
\textsuperscript{74} Chenoweth, \textit{Art of War}, 341.
**Women at War**

One of the Marine artists sent to Somalia was Colonel Donna J. Neary—the very first female, active duty, uniformed artist in history to document a combat operation (FIG.20).\(^7^5\) Neary began her military art career by painting illustrations for the Marine Corps uniform regulations manual.\(^7^6\) However, her position as a combat artist would put her in contact with active warfare. While Somalia was not a “bona fide” combat zone, Operation Restore Hope, without question, occurred in a hostile military environment.\(^7^7\) Neary received no special accommodations during her thirty days of service—she was required to train, patrol, and use the facilities alongside her male peers.* Colonel Neary’s appointment was monumental for the genre of combat art—opening the possibility for female artists to have their hand at documenting war. Today, the Army’s only resident combat artist is a woman—Sergeant First Class Amy Louise Mills Brown (FIG.21).\(^7^8\)

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\(^{75}\) Joan Thomas, Interview with author.


\(^{77}\) Ibid.

* See poem entitled “When Sitting Between Two Marines,” a piece that considers the position of female artists in war zones, particularly in relationship to their male peers.

Since the Vietnam War, combat art programs have steadily declined in size. For the last 15 years, each branch of the military has employed no more than two combat artists. All applicants must submit a portfolio to the art curator of their respective branch. Joan Thomas, curator at the Marine Corps Art Collection, explains that a qualified applicant will show a sophisticated knowledge of the human body. She often evaluates this skill by looking at the artist’s ability to draw hands—a difficult part of the body to render, but essential to making a subject appear expressive. Both the Marine Corps and Army programs require their artists to have some official art instruction. In addition, contemporary Army and Marine Corps programs insist that their artists be trained service members, while the Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard have chiefly employed civilians. This transfer of responsibility to civilian artists has resulted in an archive of combat art that is increasingly composed of non-combat scenes. This is not to say that recent artworks have been any less compelling. Rather, the turn of focus away from combat has allowed artists to document a far wider range of military action.

Morgan Wilbur, a civilian currently serving as one of two Navy combat artists, has focused his attention on documenting military medicine (FIG.22).* Wilbur had the opportunity to twice visit Iraq to document Navy Medicine’s support in Operation Iraqi

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79 Joan Thomas, Interview with author.
80 Sarah Forgey, Interview with author.
* See poem entitled “The Artist and the Shrapnel,” based on Morgan Wilbur’s experience viewing the removal of shrapnel from a service member’s knee at Fleet Hospital 3 in Iraq. Also see poem entitled “The Artist as a Child,” based on Wilbur’s lifelong desire to paint ships and planes, as well as his experience documenting life on board a Navy aircraft carrier.
Freedom, which included time at Fleet Hospital 3 in southern Iraq.\textsuperscript{81} In our interview, Wilbur recalled his experience at the Fleet Hospital as both enormously inspiring and deeply disturbing.

At the field hospital I got all suited up and went in and one of the nurses said, ‘Okay, have you ever seen this before? Is it new? If you feel like you’re going to pass out, fall backwards. Don’t fall into the patient.’ In the hospitals it’s fascinating to see what their mindset is for treating the patients—their ability to fix people—that made a huge impact on me.\textsuperscript{82}

Wilbur has appreciated the opportunity to pursue his interest in medicine, and explains that his desire to visit military hospitals has been supported by the Navy Art Collection curators who arrange his assignments. “Before I’m assigned, I request places to be sent, talk with [the curators], and further develop a subject area. I often choose subjects that aren’t already well documented in the Navy’s collection.”\textsuperscript{83} In addition to having control over the content of his work, Wilbur is also given freedom to select his medium. In past assignments, Wilbur has done studies in pencil and watercolor while in country, and then transferred his images to oil and canvas once he returns home. Moving forward, Wilbur would like to attempt to do his oil painting in the field—a method that is challenging in the fast-paced environment of military operations.

Richard Johnson, a civilian artist who has been embedded with both the Marine Corps and the Army, has also had the opportunity to specialize during his career—Johnson has been particularly observant of the technological developments in both Iraq

\textsuperscript{82} Morgan Wilbur, Interview with author. Navy Combat Art Collection, Washington Navy Yard, DC, August 6, 2013.
\textsuperscript{83} Morgan Wilbur, Interview with author.
and Afghanistan. Just as the technological advancements of the Vietnam War were reflected in the work of combat artists, contemporary combat art displays the new face of a highly computerized warfare. Johnson’s collection of work is largely composed of detailed pencil sketches that place service members in technical backgrounds. For example, a 2012 sketch depicts the Tactical Operations Centre at Kandahar Air Field, in Kandahar Province, Afghanistan (FIG.23). In this composition, uniformed men work at computers and talk on phones, coordinating a mortar team in support of soldiers out in combat. Wires lace the control room. Cans of soda sit idly on the desks. This is an image of warfare that is vastly different from those produced in any previous war. A look through Johnson’s portfolio of artwork reveals variations on the same theme.

Perhaps the most compelling expansion of combat art results from the impulse to document the experiences of wounded service members. The Joe Bonham Project, founded by Chief Warrant Officer 2 Michael Fay, a Marine and former combat artist, sends artists (both service members and civilians), to Veterans Affairs hospitals to draw and paint recuperating soldiers. The result has been a powerful collection of work, documenting the often-ignored struggle for veterans once they have returned from war. Specialist Derek McConnell, drawn by artist Victor Juhasz, is a particularly powerful piece of

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86 The Joe Bonham Project was named for the limbless narrator in Dalton Trumbo’s 1939 antiwar novel Johnny Got His Gun. Established in February 2011, artists have visited veterans at in-patient surgical shock-trauma wards.

work (FIG.24). Sitting in his bed at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland, McConnell, who had been hit with an improvised explosion device, asked artist Juhasz, “Do you want to see everything?” McConnell then proceeded to take off his shirt, revealing the extent of his injuries. “It’s important for people to really see what we go through,” McConnell said. “I have scars all over my body. I have a colostomy bag. I have one leg, and it’s only about 10 inches. This is what happens.” Indeed, today service members are surviving the most catastrophic wounds imaginable. Yet, even as medical science advances to accommodate increasingly devastating injuries, our nation often forgets about this new generation of wounded warriors. Participants in the Joe Bonham Project seek to bring attention to their experiences.

The Argument for Contemporary Combat Art

The existence of contemporary combat artists like Wilbur, Johnson, and Juhasz raises the question of whether the U.S. military should continue to maintain a program that facilitates drawing and painting, rather than photography or video-journalism. Despite those who are skeptical of using public funds to support traditional artistic mediums like oil and watercolor, modern-day military officials firmly advocate for the continuance of their military art programs. Anita Blair, chief strategist at the National Security Professional Development Integration Office, explains, “It’s the pact we make.

* See poem entitled “Also the Color of Ghosts,” a piece that considers the service members who go undocumented—those who sacrifice their lives in the name of war.
with the warrior: You will live forever and we will remember you. And the best way to do that is through art. We can’t give him his life, but we can give him that immortality.”

Current Marine Corps artist Kristopher Battles echoes Blair’s sentiments, “As artists, we have a calling to render what we see, and to be faithful to the reality that is before us. As American citizens, we have a sacred obligation to honor the stories these warriors have to tell.”

Both Blair and Battles suggest that combat art fulfills a duty to memorialize service members—an obligation that is both necessary and sacred. However, it is difficult to use such an argument to justify the existence of five military combat art programs. A second justification for combat art highlights the merit of traditional artistic media, and its ability to translate a degree of emotion and intimacy that cannot be achieved through other forms of documentation. In an artist’s statement for his 2007 exhibition entitled *Fire and Ice: Marine Corps Combat Art from Afghanistan and Iraq*, former Marine Corps artist Chief Warrant Officer 2 (CWO2) Michael Fay argues that fine art allows for a level of subjectivity that is both necessary and beneficial in the documentation of war. He writes:

It is…my hope that this experience, though grounded in realism, is more poetry than prose, and more art than journalism. I do not want my presence in these pieces to be distilled away. I was there, in the heat, watchful and tense at the beginning of a dawn raid, surrounded by children at the edge of a soccer field littered with unexploded mortar rounds, and bounding down an

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Afghan highway pocked with shell holes and bordered by minefields.\textsuperscript{91}

For Fay, his personal experience in Afghanistan is inextricable from his depiction of war. Fay has no desire to present himself as an objective viewer—rather, his direct participation in warfare is what lends his artwork its emotional validity.

This level of subjectivity can certainly be achieved in other forms of documentation—particularly photography and video-journalism. However, certain technical elements of fine art can further contribute to the emotional impact of documentation—particularly composition and color. This is reflected in CWO2 Michael Fay’s work entitled \textit{Lance Corporal Fuller Mourns} (FIG.25).\textsuperscript{92} Drawn during Fay’s 2005 trip to Iraq, where he documented Marines fighting insurgents along the Euphrates River, this watercolor portrays a Marine reacting after the death of a fellow service member. In order to highlight the grief of Lance Corporal Fuller, Fay has placed the subject in the foreground, with a body being carried away in the background. In addition, Fay uses muted colors—mainly grays, blues, and greens, to set a somber tone. Indeed, this choice of composition draws the viewer’s eyes straight to the figure, to the tear running down his face, highlighting the deeply intimate relationship that forms between service members. Without such freedom in composition, \textit{Lance Corporal Fuller Mourns} would be a vastly different piece of artwork.

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\textsuperscript{91} Michael D. Fay, \textit{Fire and Ice: Marine Corps Combat Art from Afghanistan and Iraq} (Quantico: Marine Corps University, 2007.)

In many ways, combat art is a lesson in contradiction. The history of American combat art and its institutionalization reveals a series of tensions—between art and war, documentation and romanticization, protest and propaganda, and painting and photography. However, these same contradictions make combat art a dynamic method of chronicling war—one that requires its creators (and its viewers) to critically engage with the history of United States military action.

It is these contradictions that have inspired my collection of poetry.
A NOTE ON FORM

According to poet Joseph Harrington, author of the collection Things Come On, documentary poetry “designates poetry that (1) contains quotations from or reproductions of documents or statements not produced by the poet and (2) relates historical narratives, whether macro or micro, human or natural.” This is to say that documentary poetry draws directly on primary documents, creating a patchwork of historical information.

The decision to write this thesis in the form of documentary poetry was made with intention, and after a great deal of thought. Had I chosen to write the entirety of my thesis in academic prose, I am certain I could have successfully illustrated the lives of combat artists—using primary documents to articulate and analyze their experiences. However, placing this material into the unorthodox format of poetry expands the possibilities for thoughtful analysis. In his essay “Art as Technique,” Soviet writer and founder of Russian Formalism (an early 20th century school of literary criticism) Viktor Shklovsky introduces this artistic concept as “defamiliarization”—presenting common subjects in an unfamiliar way in order to alter perception and make them new again.

Shklovsky writes, “After we see an object several times, we begin to recognize it. The object is in front of us and we know about it, but we do not see it—hence we cannot say anything significant about it. Art removes objects from the automatism of perception.”


94 Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," In The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary
To be unfamiliar with a form is to provoke a new level of thought—one that goes beyond the presented material. An unorthodox form inspires the reader to stay alert and to reframe ideas.

I believe that poetry, as a genre, can fulfill this role. Documentary poetry, in particular, is well suited for the technique of defamiliarization. Indeed, the content presented in documentary poetry, because it is drawn from primary sources, is always historical in nature. However, while the social scientist is most accustomed to reading history in the form of academic scholarship, documentary poetry makes the familiar unfamiliar by reimagining history in an unexpected form. It forces the reader to consider concepts at the level of the line—broken into fragments, stanzas, phrases, and words.

Documentary poetry, as a form, has had a long and turbulent history. We can identify a documentary method in the work of Virgil and Lucretius, Alexander Pope and John Dryden. However, documentary poetry has not always been widely accepted. Documentary work contradicts Romantic poetry in particular. Emerging in the middle of the 18th century, Romantic poets like William Blake, William Wordsworth, Percy Shelley, and John Keats were primarily concerned with expression rather than documentation. Romantic poetry was to be autonomous—a complete work in itself, with no need for reference outside of the verse. Documentary poetry, in contrast, is fundamentally reliant on the chronicling of history, and sources outside of the poem. “Thus a poetry of externals, of historical fact, of groups rather than individuals, is a contradiction in terms for the Romantic poet,” writes Harrington. While Romantic poetry prevailed until the mid 19th century, documentary poetry had little chance of being recognized as a valid

95 Ibid.
96 Harrington, “Docupoetry.”
artistic discipline. The conflict between these two schools of poetry mirrors a similar tension in combat art—the artist’s obligation to document war and to resist the urge of romanticization.

As documentary poetry moved into the 20th century, it faced new criticism. Critics of the 1930s insisted that new documentary poetry was too journalistic. For example, one critic in the books section of the New York Herald-Tribune wrote, “Journalism is one thing, poetry quite another; documents belong in the former, but the latter collapses under their weight.” For such critics, there was a distinct boundary between poetry and reportage—a boundary that, in their opinion, documentary poetry explicitly disobeyed. Documentary poetry did not fare any better in the 1940s and 1950s with the rise of literary New Criticism. Members of the New Criticism school, including Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and T.S. Elliot, argued on behalf of the self-contained, self-referential poem. For New Critics, the poem was “to be considered as an organic whole…it must cohere on the page, quite apart from biography or history.” This position threatened the success of the documentary poem—a style dependent on external history.

Since the 1950s, the documentary poem has become more widely accepted. “The documentary impulse in U.S. poetry has become more widespread,” Harrington confirms—referring to the popularization of other genres, like documentary film. However, many critics continue to see documentary poetry’s inclusion of political advocacy and historical material as replacing, or minimizing, poetic craft. Poet Nada Gordon, in her 2009 article “On Docu-Poetry: A Febrile Meditation,” writes that

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97 Tim Dayton, Muriel Rukeyser’s Book of the Dead (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 119-120.
documentary poetry is “grasping for mimesis and reportage at the expense of verbal imagination.” As primary documents are prioritized, poetic elements like lineation and sonics are sacrificed. In addition, the poet must engage in linguistic repression and exclusion. Like an archivist, the documentary poet must prevent documents from leaving the poem, but must also keep out those that don’t belong. These decisions often end up being political, repressive, and destructive, even if they are made with the intention of preservation. Gordon raises an important question: does the poet have the authority to make these choices?

An essay written by poet and literary critic Philip Metres responds to critics like Gordon. Metres argues that, “The successful documentary poem withstands the pressure of reality to remain a poem in its own right.” Indeed, the success of documentary poetry resides in its power to “negotiate between language of evidence and language of transcendence.” This is to say that documentary poetry is not just a piece of historical “evidence,” but a “dynamic medium that informs and is informed by the history of the moment.” Metres’ argument is that critics like Gordon create a dichotomy between poetry and reportage that is based on both a very static conception of poetry and a normative interpretation of reportage. Why must poetry be thought of as an invariable mode of writing, bound by formal technique and rhyme scheme? Alternatively, why must reportage be so inflexible that it cannot be adapted to a new format? Are the boundaries of genre really so unyielding? Harrington says it best when he writes, “The

100 Ibid.
101 Ibid.
best way to collapse boundaries, then, is by chasing—pushing—them farther, to the point at which they become stretched so thin as to become meaningless... This formal stretching and blurring, rather than any particular content, is the real promise—and pleasure—of a (non)poetics including documents.”

For Harrington, an ideal world of literature would have no genres—no preconceived ideas about the function of poetry or prose or anything in between. Rather, writers would write what they desired—incorporating any resource, mixing any form.

Those authors who have composed the most successful collections of documentary poetry seem to live in Harrington’s genre-less utopia. Notable among them is American poet William Carlos Williams, perhaps one of the most recognizable names in poetry. Williams is known for his simplest work: “I have eaten / the plums / that were in / the icebox / and which / you were probably / saving / for breakfast / Forgive me / they were delicious / so sweet / and so cold.” However, less recognizable is Williams’ magnum opus—a five-book collection of documentary poetry entitled *Paterson*.

Published book by book from 1946 to 1958, *Paterson* is a poetic monument to the city of Paterson, New Jersey. Deeply interested in America as a subject—devoted to understanding his country, its people, and its language (or what he called “the whole knowable world around me”)—Williams wanted to write about the prototypical American industrial community. Paterson was just this—a city familiar with both the progress and tragedy that accompanies the mechanization of society. Williams conducted extensive research, collecting newspaper clippings, engaging in correspondences, and

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102 Harrington, “Docupoetry.”
frequently conducting interviews with Paterson citizens. He explained, “I started to make trips to the area. I walked around the streets; I went on Sundays in summer when the people were using the park, and I listened to their conversation as much as I could. I saw whatever they did, and made it part of the poem.” For Williams, a poem should “use the same materials as newsprint, the same dregs…facts, facts, facts, tearing into us to blast away our stinking flesh of new. Bullets.” In this vein, Williams created *Paterson* with a mosaic structure in alternating passages of poetry and prose, objective facts and subjective musings.

The result is a collection of vibrant, engaging poems—enlivening the story of an ordinary city. In the opening of Book I, Williams writes:

> Paterson lies in the valley under the Passaic Falls  
> its spent waters forming the outline of his back. He  
> lies on his right side, head near the thunder  
> of the waters filling his dreams! Eternally asleep,  
> his dreams walk about the city where he persists  
> incognito. Butterflies settle on his stone ear.  
> Immortal he neither moves nor rouses and is seldom  
> seen, though he breathes and the subtleties of his machinations  
> drawing their substance from the noise of the pouring river  
> animate a thousand automations.

In this poem, Paterson, chosen for its very un-remarkability, is brought to life. Quite literally, it is personified—given a “back” and a “stone ear,” as well as the ability to breathe and to dream. By presenting Paterson in the form of poetics, Williams is able to cast the city as a tangible being—self-aware of its own mechanization.

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107 Ibid.  
Contemporary writers continue to expand the boundaries of documentary poetry, consistently challenging the distinction between poetry and reportage. Maggie Nelson’s collection entitled *Jane: A Murder*, is a particularly compelling example. In *Jane*, Nelson uses verse to chronicle her investigation of the 1969 murder of her aunt. Nelson threads primary sources right into her collection—utilizing newspaper accounts, police records, and old photographs to reconstruct a haunting and tragic historical moment. Particularly interesting is the way in which she incorporates her research experience into her poetry. This is illustrated by the poem “Mail Order,” in which Nelson describes the jail card of her aunt’s supposed killer:

I order a copy of Collin’s jail admission card,  
made when he was twenty-three.

Prisoner number, right thumbprint.  

Religion: C. Term: LIFE,  
for Murder, 1st Degree.

I wish it did, but none of it seems  
all that extraordinary to me.  

Nelson expands the boundaries of documentary poetry by explicitly referring to her research process. The discovery of primary documents related to her aunt’s case is intensely personal and emotional. By describing the moment in which she obtained the killer’s jail card, she is able to express a level of intimacy that would otherwise be lost on the reader.

Poet and classicist Anne Carson’s collection *Nox* offers an excellent example of documentary poetry that incorporates diverse sources from multiple time periods. The

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collection begins with a piece in Latin: Catullus’ poem 101, an elegy for his brother. For the remainder of the collection, the left-hand pages are occupied with lexicographical entries—definitions of each word in Catullus’ poem. However, the right-hand pages are composed of Carson’s original poems, pasted-in photographs, collages, paintings, letters, and stamps—all a meditation on Carson’s brother, who died in 2000. Carson defies temporal boundaries by creating a connection between her grief and the grief of Catullus. By including old and new sources, formal and informal, distant and personal, Carson creates a complex narrative of love, loss, and mourning. Her narrative is rooted in history, and yet, by illustrating the universal nature of these emotions, it transcends time.

Contemporary documentary poetry has also expanded to include the author’s political commentary. In fact, few modern documentary poets seem to remain neutral on the issues they explore in their work. Edward Sanders represents an extreme example of partisan poetics in his nine-volume collection America: A History in Verse. Sanders moves through American history, year-by-year, recording events in choppy sections, each page littered with small illustrations and photographs. His inclusion of events is largely determined by his radical left-wing perspective and aggressive critique of capitalism. Sander’s overpowering commentary is illustrated in his poem for 1912:

The Progressives supported suffrage
while wince-minded Wilson
would not come out for it!
feeling it was an issue for the states!

111 Anne Carson, Nox (New York: New Directions, 2010).
Sanders challenges the historian’s position as an objective authority, providing a narrative that highlights the fight for equality and justice in the face of a repressive American government. While Sanders’ historical framing is perhaps a bit excessive in its bias, his work still exemplifies the way in which a creative form can document an alternative history. Indeed, documentary poetry offers the unique opportunity for neutral analysis and individual interpretation.  

It is this prevailing documentary poetry that has informed my own collection. Inspired by William Carlos Williams’ Paterson, “Strange Weapons,” is a meditation on what it means to be American—in this case, what it means to be an American service member and an American artist. In following Maggie Nelson’s Jane: A Murder, I incorporate my research process into my verse—detailing my experience interviewing artists and curators throughout the collection. Like Anne Carson’s Nox, I tell a story that transcends temporal constraints by incorporating combat artists from diverse time periods—from the Revolutionary War to contemporary conflicts. And finally, similarly to Edward Sanders’ America: A History in Verse, I use the form of documentary poetry to insert my own perspective on combat art and the nature of American military action.

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114 Sanders, America: A History in Verse, 112.
115 For another example of documentary poetry that provides political commentary, see Mark Nowak, Coal Mountain Elementary (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2009).
A NOTE ON THE COLLECTION

How do I justify this stanza?
These feminine rhymes? My wrinkled muse?
This whole passé extravaganza?
How can I (careless of time) use
The dusty bread molds of Onegin
In the brave bakery of Reagan?
The loaves will surely fail to rise
Or else go stale before my eyes.
The truth is, I can’t justify it.
But as no shroud of critical terms
Can save my corpse from boring worms,
I may as well have fun and try it.
If it works, good; and if not, well,
A theory won’t postpone its knell.

—Vikram Seth, The Golden Gate, 1986

During my time at Wesleyan, my greatest pursuit has been to relentlessly challenge my writing skills—both in the rigorous, academic setting of the College of Social Studies, and in the four, equally rigorous poetry classes I have completed since my admittance. In Spring 2013, when I began to consider the prospect of writing an honors thesis, I imagined a project that would be a culmination of my academic experience—one that combined my commitment to both academic and creative writing. It was with this vision in mind that I began to construct the idea of a thesis project that combined essay and poetry in a way that allowed each to be independent, but also complement the other form.

The subject of this thesis was less premeditated. As a fine artist with a distinct interest in watercolor painting and drawing, I have long been interested in the ways in which people document history through art. While standing in the shower one night, considering universal conscription (as one does in the shower), I wondered how an artist, required to serve in the military as a result of a draft, might chronicle their experience? After conducting some preliminary research, I discovered that not only was combat art a genre of documentation, but that it was an institutionalized program in the American military. There were contemporary artists whose purpose in going to war was to create art. And so I began work on “Strange Weapons.”

The collection of poetry that follows is organized in the form of an interview. Each section is marked by a question: “What is Combat Art?,” “Are You an Artist or a Soldier?,” and so on. The poems in each section should be read as a response to the question posed. These poems, as responses, draw on a variety of sources. Most of them are written in the third-person, following a character referred to simply as “the artist.” “The artist” is not, in fact, a single individual, but an amalgamation of the combat artists I encountered in my research both through their work and in personal interviews.

The decision to write these poems in the third-person was very deliberate. While I relate to my subject on the level of our artistic interest, I am not a service member, nor have I ever been situated in a war zone. It was my feeling that, to speak from the first person as if the combat artist’s experience was my own was to be disrespectful to the artist’s service, and to their unique ability to provide eyewitness accounts of war. Consequently, the only poems that utilize the first person are those that directly quote my subjects (the “Interview” series), and those that detail my experience as a researcher.
As a final word, I hope that you, as the reader, will not only enjoy this poetry for its documentary value, but as a piece of art in itself (much in the same way that combat art can be appreciated for both its documentary and artistic value). Despite the fact I have grown to love and respect the genre of documentary poetry, I am, first and foremost, in love with poetry as poetry—no justification necessary.
IMAGES

below FIG.1
“Guernica,” Pablo Picasso (1937)

group FIG.2
“Lincoln’s Midnight Thinks,” Charles Wellington Reed (1864)

center FIG.3
“Chart of New London Harbor Indicating Fire Capability from Four Fortified Positions,” John Trumbull (1776)

FIG.4 left
“The Machine Gunner,”
Harvey Dunn (1918)

FIG.5 above
“Japanese Sneak Attack on Pearl Harbor,”
Griffith Baily Coale (1944)
FIG. 6 top
“Brief Encounter,”
Anton Otto Fischer (1943)

FIG. 7 center
“5th Marines at Champagne,”
John Thomason (1918)

FIG. 8 bottom
“The Morning After,”
Edward Reep (1944)
FIG. 9 top left
“Life in Death,”
David Stone Martin (1943)

FIG. 10 top right
“Hot Village,”
Horatio Hawks (1970)

FIG. 11 center
“Point Man,”
James Fairfax (1970)

FIG. 12 bottom left
“Operation Napoleon”
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top FIG.13
“Search and Destroy,”
Michael Crook (1967)

left FIG.14
“Paddy Patrol,”
Stephen Sheldon (1967)

FIG.15
right “I’m Hit,”
Richard Russell Yohnka (1979)
FIG. 16 left
“We Regret to Inform You...,”
Cleveland Wright (1979)

FIG. 17 top right
“American Doctor Examines
Vietnamese Child,”
Samuel Alexander (1967)

FIG. 18 bottom left
“Waiting Interrogation,”
James Pollock (1967)

FIG. 19 bottom right
top FIG.20

left FIG.21
Army artist Amy Brown works in her Fort Belvoir studio (2014)

right FIG.22
**FIG. 23** top

**FIG. 24** bottom left
“Specialist Derek McConnell, 10th Mountain Division,” Victor Juhasz (2012)

**FIG. 25** right


"Artists in War-Time." The Literary Digest, January 12, 1918, 26.


Fay, Michael D. Fire and Ice: Marine Corps Combat Art from Afghanistan and Iraq. Quantico: Marine Corps University, 2007.


Thomas, Joan. Interview by Kayla Stoler. Personal Interview. Marine Corps Combat Art Collection, Quantico, VA. August 9, 2013.


STRANGE WEAPONS

KAYLA STOLER
STRANGE WEAPONS

KAYLA STOLER
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Don Moon, John Bonin, Peter Rutland, and Mickie Dame, as well as my classmates—for offering unconditional support in this project and in the CSS. Major Thesis—for being my talisman—you’ve officially been promoted to Lieutenant Colonel. Judith DeWoskin—for always leading me back to what I love most. Alec, Sean, and Amy—for living poetically and reminding me to do the same. Hannah—for being my other half, even after four years apart. 20B—for love, and support, and emergency chocolate, and book club, and crosswords, and strong woman-music, and for being there when shit hits the fan, and for being there when…shit. Shelly, Bobby, and Rebecca—for being the greatest of all trifectas. Elizabeth Willis—for reminding me that poetry can be a magnifier, in more ways than one. Victoria Smolkin-Rothrock—for always keeping me on my toes, and for picking up the loose ends—I am forever grateful. And, finally, Wesleyan—for being my sanctuary.

This project was supported by the Olin Fellowship, Department of English, Wesleyan University. These funds allowed me to visit DC and Virginia to conduct archival research and interviews in August 2013.
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INTERVIEWS
WHAT IS COMBAT ART?
WHAT IT IS OR IS NOT

All combat art is military art. Not all military art is combat art. It must be drawn from observation or experience. This means it is not Peter Paul Rubens or Diego Velázquez. It may be Francisco Goya, but we don’t really know if he saw los desastres de guerra or dreamt them.

It is sometimes censored or, rather, it is sometimes used as propaganda.

But not all of the time. It is not a lens shutter bound. It is tubes of oil paint and the pulse of turpentine in the sinuses. All combat art is grieving half stable half smiling mostly breaking. It is blood on a cave wall. It is the serendipitous beauty between ghastly events or the sudden revelation of some universal truth.

It is killing two Vietcong and then drawing them on tent canvas with a ballpoint pen.
THE ARTIST GOES TO WAR

The artist grew up on a farm
down in Indiana. They said

*get ready we’re gonna make*
*a war correspondent out of*

*youn*. He flew in the belly of a
B-25 bomber to the Southwest

Pacific. They said *here’s your*
*parachute and your kit, if you*

*go down in the jungle, you’ve*
*got everything you need*

*to catch fish and what have you.*
Then they said *by the way*

*here’s an automatic weapon*
*and here’s some hand grenades*

*you may need those.* The artist
looked down, thought of cornfields

and the curve of his mother’s hip.
THESE ARE SOME OF THE THINGS THE ARTIST CAN PAINT:

Battle scenes
and the front line,
the dying
and the dead,
prisoners of war,
wrecked habitations,
the nobility, cruelty,
boredom of war.

The artist may be guided by:
Blake’s mysticism,
Goya’s cynicism;
Delacroix’s romanticism.

A rumpled soldier
in line for French perfume.

The woebegone.

The hell and back.
MISSION CREEP

n. orig. U.S. Mil. slang a gradual shift in objectives during the course of a military campaign.

Unresolved conflict with ill-defined goals. When you tell one lie and then you have to tell another and then another.

Or, rather,

when the Marine becomes an artist. Or the other way around. And the mission becomes beauty or maybe wound. Because there is both. And the taxpayer is concerned about money spent on oil paints instead of bullets. A gradual shift in objectives. War to art. Art to war. The poetry to be found in a lost cause.
THE ARTIST’S SMALL DELIGHTS

On a piece of ledger, he draws a horse, a cavalryman, a man with a pipe, a large hat, and a rifle. On the other side, a showgirl, a boxer, details of a recent fox hunt. A map of Huntsville. Then the ledger torn in half, ink wash, watercolor, the cavalryman saturated turned into a character out of H. Rider Haggard.

The paper folded, a series of nautical problems:

*You are an officer of the deck in a heavy fog! You bear 1 long blast and 2 short whistles! You have been hearing it for some time!*
IN THE NAME OF RESEARCH

I have dreamed myself
in metal on horseback
with musket. The pulp
of bodies of soldiers
muddied under hoof.
And would the marrow
turn the battlefield green
again, maybe in a month?
Turn green, the richest
soil, the unraveling of
so many men and also
horses. Decomposing
cavalry. They say war
exists for poetic reasons.
If flowers were to
bloom here, they would
certainly be poppies.
ARE YOU AN ARTIST OR A SOLDIER?
HOW TO TALK TO THE ARTIST

My first interview is in Virginia
at a kitchen table. A cat braiding
around my ankles. The Vietnam vet
in a baseball cap. The younger one
in tie-dye. They say *stop calling us
soldiers we are Marines*. I want to
tell them about the playground fight.
The punches I threw. Like we would
have that in common.
INTERVIEW 1:

Are you an artist or a soldier?

The average service member
is trying to stay alive trying
to get some rest.

I didn’t think much about
staying alive. There was
too much to see.
THAT’LL GET YOU THE PURPLE HEART

A sliver of shrapnel
at the left wrist
non-drawing arm
dull throb quiet heat
hugged close
to the bone.

The ballistic goggles
a small crater
at the center
of the plastic
left lens shallow arc
sets a crosshair
on all things
seen by a painter.
I wonder

what would be worse?
To lose the hand
or the eye? To lose the
warrior or the artist?
THE ARTIST AND THE SHRAPNEL

When the artist goes to view the surgery
they tell him to
    fall backward if
    he faints.

A forward fall would land
    on the operating table

    the sedated sailor
    the lodged metal
    would it feel cold in the heat
    of his knee?

The surgeon is wearing a scrub cap
    spangled, and
    the artist takes notes
    on the plastic glove, how
    it should be painted smooth.
THE ARTIST AND THE GUNNER

Norman Rockwell asked if he could rip holes in the soldier’s shirt. The soldier said yes.

Norman Rockwell asked to streak the soldier’s face with mud. The soldier said yes.

Norman Rockwell asked to rub dirt on the soldier’s machine gun. The soldier said no.

The soldier is dirty. The gun is clean.
ETYMOLOGY

Painting the shells in a harbor. Smooth steel looks cold but is likely hot. Sometimes they name the cannon and this time it is Annie. Annie’s shells in the harbor.

All shells were once called grenades. Once called *grenate*. Once French for pomegranate. A many-seeded fruit is just like a powder-filled bomb. Annie’s seeds like jeweled bugs ripe and red.

The artist says the earth trembles and so does his hand. A shell drawn poorly or not drawn at all. Says he’s almost died on two occasions. Cracked open to show a ruby rind.
THE ARTIST AS A CHILD

My second interview is in the Navy Yard. The artist is talking about aircraft carriers.

You go out there on the flight deck. You watch people’s faces as the planes take off.

You’re warm. You’re sweating. The planes take off. Wet heat afterburner and a fighter in the air. This is his dream job. Childhood in color. Dirigibles and submersibles. Metal and bolts. All things we expect to find in oil.
WHAT COLOR IS WAR?
INTERVIEW 2:

What color is war?

Green

the color of money
the end game

why we are at war
to begin with

some of the green is
dark red dried blood torn

like the soul

like the soldier.
SOMETHING THE ARTIST HEARS IN THE HEAT OF COMBAT

When the gun is hot
the mouth is cold.
The GI whispers

*you know I can
never kill a man. I
aim over their heads
and hope that they
surrender.*

His breath is
evergreen.
The artist paints
in blue.
THE BATTLEFIELD IN GRAY SCALE

This is the body
caught knotted
mid breath. A
swollen abdomen
curled to protect.
So close to the
dying horse it
can feel its pulse
through soil.
Their two little
rivulets they
approach each other
in the dried grass.

This is a battlefield
turned flame and
then ash. A film
to blanket the decay.

Perhaps this is why
the artist works in
black and white.
INTERVIEW 3:

What color is war?

Brown

muddy brown

so jumbled
and mixed

like in pigment

mainly monotonous.
THE SMELLS HAVE COLOR TOO

The artist says this is
the smell of war:

A wood plank with
four round holes
resting on
four big barrels
filled with shit

mixed with gasoline
stirred, lit on fire

acidic plumes the
dust in thick film
a wiped brow

leaves a sleeve
stained brown.

Also,
the smell of yeast
in a mess hall.
ALSO THE COLOR OF GHOSTS

Some of them are ghosts painted
India ink a wash so thin it is hardly
even there. The paper is bowed and
crystal grain. Like salt. Like sweat.
White ringed and glistening. Uniform
in gray scale. The unknown soldier

bleeding through fiber. The blood
is clear. It is sweet. It is glucose on
a horsehair brush. So difficult to

wash away. The artist holds a ghost
in his palms. Lays it at the window
to dry. To undress itself in the sun.
IS DOCUMENTATION A DUTY?
INTERVIEW 4:

Is documentation a duty?

I don’t find it a duty,
but a personal need.

I express feelings
that I don’t talk about.
THE ARTIST OBSERVED AT BREAKFAST

In Quantico there’s a diner
next to the train station. The

Marines sit at circular tables,
uniforms colored by rank.

Coffee mugs look small in
their hands. I drink juice with a

straw. I am aware of my posture
my dull shoes. The whiteness of

my thighs under a floral dress.
I order breakfast and they eat

their steak and eggs. One of them
is surely an artist. Watches me

eat a stale bagel and draws me
as civilian.
INTERVIEW 5:

Is documentation a duty?

I have witnessed death. I haven’t put it on canvas. I won’t, either.

Death is intimate.

I will not give insurgents a reason to seek revenge. I will not work their mangled bodies into a piece of my artwork. It has remained with me.
0815 IN A DUSTY FARMYARD

Five dead eleven wounded
and the battlefield flushes red
blood and gunfire a
roiling the medevac finishing
or maybe just starting.

The artist finds a momentary
sanctuary in the splintering frame
of a barn. Stiff salt hands
grasping at a discolored bag
rifle flung aside. Pulls out
a sketchbook by blighted binding

and he photographs each page.
To retain something. Should the
dust settle in sixteen hours.
Should he be allowed to curl and

rest in his own blood and paint.
SACRED SACRIFICE

Both words come from saklais
or shaklaish. A common root.
A branch wrapped round the throat.
Death can be dignified like that.

So elemental is the human need
to endow the shedding of blood
with some great
and even sublime

significance.
THAT THOUSAND-YARD STARE

The Marine in crosshatch.
Weight measured in line
  like the pursed lip
  drawn out from a ghost.

A whisper
  pulled thin horizon.

    And his eyes
    two black pearls

they say this is the
  definitive dead end.

Surely the artist’s
  greatest work
    bar none.
WHEN HAVE YOU FELT MOST PATRIOTIC?
INTERVIEW 6:

When have you felt most patriotic?

I looked forward to going. It was real life cowboys and Indians.

I remember talking to my friends when I was young. Hoping for a war we could be heroes in. I never told my family that I volunteered, although my father would have expected me to. I was ignorant before I went.
RAH RAH

Did any of them
say hurray I died
for decency and
I’m happy

see how I sing
even though my
mouth is choked
with worms?
WHEN SITTING BETWEEN TWO MARINES

I wonder what it would feel like
to be fertile on a battlefield. To

feel a greenness in the belly.
To be a woman pregnant with

country. An instinct to protect
that is biological. That is humming

from the inside. To be in oiled eden
and feel there is life.
STRANGE WEAPONS

If I saw you on a battlefield if
I saw you running glazed-eye and heaving. If I
wanted to paint you wheat field.
If I ever could.
IF YOU WERE TO WRITE A POEM, WHAT WOULD BE THE TITLE?
INTERVIEW 7:

If you were to write a poem, what would be the title?

*Sketchpad Warrior* — Kristopher Battles, Marine Corps

*Greed Kills* — Martin Cervantez, Army

*What Every Soldier Should Know* — Brian Turner, Army

*What the Fuck Am I Doing?* — David Fairrington, Army

*Message in the Public Interest* — Michael Casey, Army

*The Missing Year: 1969* — Nicholas Dalrymple, Army

*The Wound-Dresser* — Walt Whitman, Army
NOTES ON THE COLLECTION

COVER PAGE

2 WHAT IT IS OR IS NOT


Chenoweth writes, “Combat art tends less to portray gore and death than it does the in-between moments—the serendipitous periods of beauty between ghastly events, the sudden revelation of some universal truth—that offer us insight into the great yet fragile forces of life and death.”

Michael D. Fay, Interview with the author, Fredericksburg, VA, August 3, 2013.

“It is killing…with a ballpoint pen” is drawn from a personal interview with Chief Warrant Officer 2 Michael Fay, the official Marine Corps combat artist from 2000-2010. Fay described this old tale of a Vietnam artist-correspondent. I contacted Joan Thomas, curator of the Marine Corps Art Collection, in order to verify this account, but she was unable to cite a specific artist.

3 THE ARTIST GOES TO WAR

This poem is drawn from an essay by Franklin Boggs. Boggs began his service as an artist-correspondent for Abbott Laboratories in 1944. Abbott Laboratories, the military’s medical supplier during World War II, commissioned artist-correspondents. It is one of the only private firms to host a combat art program. Boggs documented the work of the Army Medical Department in the South Pacific on behalf of Abbott Labs.

4 THESE ARE SOME THINGS THE ARTIST CAN PAINT
This poem borrows language from George Biddle, chairman of the War Art Advisory Committee, which sent 42 civilian and military artists to document WWII. “Any subject is in order,” he told the artists in his instructions.

5 MISSION CREEP


“Unresolved conflict…and then another” is the definition of mission creep provided by John Ayto’s book *Movers and Shakers*.

6 THE ARTIST’S SMALL DELIGHTS


This poem reflects on Colonel John Thomason’s tendency to sketch and paint on odd scraps of paper. Curators have had a difficult time preserving Thomason’s work because he so frequently used both the front and back of his paper—covering the sheet in drawings and notes.

7 IN THE NAME OF RESEARCH


This piece was inspired by Atwood’s poem, which reads, “I have walked on many battlefields…all of them have been green again by the time I got there.”


“War exists for poetic reasons” is a direct quotation from Chief Warrant Officer 2 Michael Fay.

9 HOW TO TALK TO THE ARTIST


10 INTERVIEW 1

David Fairrington, Interview with the author, Conducted remotely, January 22, 2014.

Lineated, and with some words reordered or omitted, this poem is composed of direct quotations from an interview with David Fairrington of the Army.

11 THAT’LL GET YOU THE PURPLE HEART

This poem is inspired by CWO2 Michael Fay’s experience serving in Iraq, documented in the five-part New York Times article entitled “Drawing Fire.” This series chronicles his time spent with the Marines in Operation Steel Curtain, fighting against insurgents along the Euphrates River. When an I.E.D. exploded while Fay was rooftop hopping in New Ubaydi, a sliver of shrapnel dug into his arm, just above the head of the ulna. Another piece of shrapnel dented the lens of his ballistic goggles.

12 THE ARTIST AND THE SHRAPNEL

Morgan Wilbur, Interview with the author, Navy Combat Art Collection, Washington Navy Yard, DC, August 6, 2013.

This poem is drawn from the experience of official Navy combat artist Morgan Wilbur. In both 2003 and 2005, Wilbur traveled to Iraq in order to document Navy Medicine’s support in Operation Iraqi Freedom, which included time observing Fleet Hospital 3 in southern Iraq. Wilbur recalls a nurse requesting that he fall backwards if he felt light-headed while watching surgery.


Wilbur’s oil depicts three Navy doctors removing shrapnel from a service member’s knee.

13 THE ARTIST AND THE GUNNER


This poem is based on a story, told by Army art curator Sarah Forgey, about famous fine artist (and artist-correspondent) Norman Rockwell. However, it is unconfirmed. Ultimately, Rockwell’s machine gunner painting was designed as a war poster called Let’s Give Him Enough and On Time, about the need for war material.

14 ETYMOLOGY


This poem is based on Captain Edward Reep’s willingness to enter dangerous combat situations in order to sketch. Reep, who served as an Army artist during World War II, said of his experience: “Many times I
painted and sketched while a battle raged. I was shelled, mortared, and strafed… At Monte Cassino the earth trembled and so did my hand… At Anzio I innocently waited for the monstrous German cannon ‘Anzio Annie’ to lob its shells into the harbor so that I could study and record the gigantic geyers of water shooting skyward. At this point it didn't occur to me that one might do me in. More willing than knowledgeable, I almost destroyed myself on two occasions through my own stupidity.”

15 THE ARTIST AS A CHILD
Morgan Wilbur, Interview with the author, Navy Combat Art Collection, Washington Navy Yard, DC, August 6, 2013.

17 INTERVIEW 2
Martin Cervantez, Interview with the author, Conducted remotely, January 22, 2014.

Lineated, and with some words reordered or omitted, this poem is composed of direct quotations from an interview with Martin Cervantez of the Army.

18 SOMETHING THE ARTIST HEARS IN THE HEAT OF COMBAT
Brian Lanker and Nicole Newnham, They Drew Fire: Combat Artists of World War II (New York: TV Books, 2000.)

19 THE BATTLEFIELD IN GRAY SCALE

This is an ekphrastic poem, using an untitled graphite sketch by Charles Wellington Reed as reference.

20 INTERVIEW 3
Kristopher Battles, Interview with the author, Conducted remotely, January 23, 2014.

Lineated, and with some words reordered or omitted, this poem is composed of direct quotations from an interview with Kristopher Battles of the Marine Corps.

21 THE SMELLS HAVE COLOR TOO

When asked about the smell of war, Major Jack Dyer, a Vietnam veteran, recalled the smell of four-holers—the hand-made contraptions that the Marines used to relieve themselves.
24 INTERVIEW 4

Nicholas Dalrymple, Interview with the author, Conducted remotely, January 20, 2014.

Linedated, and with some words reordered or omitted, this poem is composed of direct quotations from an interview with Nicholas Dalrymple of the Army.

25 THE ARTIST OBSERVED AT BREAKFAST

This poem is composed of observations made at S&G Restaurant in Quantico, VA, home of one of the country’s largest Marine Corps bases. I visited Quantico on August 9, 2013.

26 INTERVIEW 5

Martin Cervantez, Interview with the author, Conducted remotely, January 22, 2014.

Linedated, and with some words reordered or omitted, this poem is composed of direct quotations from an interview with Martin Cervantez of the Army.

27 0815 IN A DUSTY FARMYARD


Of his experience serving in Iraq, CWO2 Fay wrote:

“At 0815 on November 16, 2005, I was standing in a dusty blood-soaked farmyard with a rifle in my hands and an artist’s bag across my shoulder, heading back to the fight. Five Marines of Fox Company had just died. Eleven more had been wounded. There was still combat raging 270 degrees around where I stood, and another 16 hours of battle, of sketching and photographing lay ahead. In the midst of machine gun fire and explosions, while the medevac was finishing up, I pulled out my little sketchbook and quickly photographed the drawings I had done over the past two weeks. No telling what would happen in the next hours and I wanted to increase the probability that something I had created from all of this would survive should the worst happen.”

28 SACRED SACRIFICE


“So elemental is the…sublime significance” is a direct quotation from Martin Van Creveld’s book The Transformation of War.
THAT THOUSAND-YARD STARE


In 2002, CWO2 Fay sketched Lance Corporal Nick Ciccone in Afghanistan after a “12-hour mission that became a nine-day ordeal.” After Fay provided the sketch for a 2007 BBC article, he was contacted by Ciccone’s stepbrother, who informed him that the Marine had committed suicide in 2003. Fay’s sketch had “made him alive” for his family.

The “thousand-yard stare,” “two-thousand-yard stare,” or “thousand-mile stare” is a term used to describe the unfocused gaze of a battle-weary service member. It is a characteristic of post-traumatic stress disorder.

INTERVIEW 6

Nicholas Dalrymple, Interview with the author, Conducted remotely, January 20, 2014.

Lineated, and with some words reordered or omitted, this poem is composed of direct quotations from an interview with Nicholas Dalrymple of the Army.

RAH RAH


This poem is composed of quotations from Dalton Trumbo’s 1939 anti-war novel Johnny Got His Gun.

WHEN SITTING BETWEEN TWO MARINES


This poem was inspired by my interview with CWO2 Fay and Major Dyer, in which Fay explained, “War is man-Eden.”

INTERVIEW 7

Kristopher Battles, Interview with the author, Conducted remotely, January 23, 2014.


Martin Cervantez, Interview with the author, Conducted remotely, January 22, 2014.

Nicholas Dalrymple, Interview with the author, Conducted remotely, January 20, 2014.
David Fairrington, Interview with the author, Conducted remotely, January 22, 2014.


INTERVIEWS

SERGEANT KRISTOPHER BATTLES

Sergeant Battles is the current official combat artist of the United States Marine Corps. Of his work, Battles has said, “I’m not here to pursue an agenda, or to paint a pretty picture of war or military life. As a combat artist, I paint only from experience.” He has served in the billet of combat artist since September 2006. Battles’ first deployment to Iraq was from October 2006 to January 2007. His second was September to November 2007. He then deployed short-term to Afghanistan from June to July 2009. Sergeant Battles has also participated in two Humanitarian Assistance operations: Operation Unified Response in Haiti in February 2010, and Operation Damayan in the Philippines in November 2013. When Battles is not deployed, he works on his art at Marine Corps Base Quanitco. Prior to his service, Battles was a fulltime artist, doing portraits, landscapes, faux finishing, logos, and murals.

MASTER SERGEANT MARTIN CERVANTEZ

Master Sergeant Cervantez served as the official combat artist for the United States Army from 2008 to 2011. He deployed twice to Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom—from September to December 2008, and from February to April 2011. Cervantez was also deployed to Haiti in support of Operation Unified Response from January to February 2010. Cervantez has minimal artistic training—limited to public school art classes, Advertising and Design at a vocational school, and time spent observing in artists’ studios.

SPECIALIST FIFTH CLASS NICHOLAS DALRYMPLE

Specialist Fifth Class Dalrymple served as a Vietnam artist-correspondent for the Army from January 1969 to January 1970. He served in Pleiku, Vietnam, and along Highway 1 South to Qui Nohn, Vietnam. While in-country, Dalrymple operated radio direction equipment in order to locate enemy transmitters. This information was used to send troops on search and destroy missions, orchestrate bombing runs, and facilitate future planning. Dalrymple had no artistic experience prior to his service.

MAJOR JACK DYER

Major John “Jack” Dyer joined the Marines while studying at the Massachusetts College of Art. After graduating in 1960, he was commissioned a Second Lieutenant, and then went on active duty for three years. After his release, he worked as an illustrator at the Boston Globe. Upon learning of the Marine Corps combat art program, Dyer volunteered his service, and was accepted into the program. He went back on active duty in August
1966 and was sent to Vietnam that September. For six months, Dyer accompanied Marine divisions and a heliborne assault unit on field operations into the DMZ. After a brief time back in the United States, Dyer returned to Vietnam in February 1968 and served for another six months. After being released from active duty in 1970, Dyer returned to his illustration job. In November 1971 he was offered the opportunity to become curator of the Marine Corps Combat Art Collection, a position he held for 31 years. He is largely credited with making the collection what it is today.

**SPECIALIST FOURTH CLASS DAVID FAIRRINGTON**

Specialist Fourth Class Fairrington first heard about the Army’s combat art program while he was state side at Fort Sill, Oklahoma in 1966. The program required its artists to travel to Vietnam for two or three months before coming home and completing their artwork. However, at the time, Fairrington’s family did not want him to go to Vietnam, even for a few months. He decided not to join. A few weeks later he was sent to Vietnam for a year, on regular duty. Once he got there, Fairrington thought he might as well try to participate in the program. He sent samples of his artwork to the War Department and two months later he received a postcard saying he had been accepted. After being moved to Saigon, he was stationed close to a helipad where he could board any helicopter and travel all over Vietnam. When his assignment in Vietnam was complete, Fairrington was sent to a base in Honolulu, Hawaii to execute his final paintings. Prior to his service, Fairrington received a Bachelors of Advertising Art and Design from Texas Tech University and worked as an artistic director in advertising.

**CHIEF WARRANT OFFICER 2 MICHAEL FAY**

Chief Warrant Officer 2 Fay first enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1975, leaving in 1978 to resume his education. In 1982, he received a Bachelor of Science in Art Education from Pennsylvania State University. After re-enlisting in 1983, Fay served in Operation Desert Shield, Operation Desert Storm, Eastern Exit, and Provide Promise. In 2000 he re-enlisted with the Marine Corps Reserve to serve as a combat artist. As a Marine combat artist, he served two tours each in Afghanistan and Iraq, concluding his service in 2010. Today, he is one of the most active and vocal American combat artist veterans—exhibiting work, giving lectures, and organizing the Joe Bonham Project—a program that sends artists to draw service members in rehabilitation at Veteran Affairs hospitals.

**SARAH FORGEY**

Sarah Forgey is the curator of the United States Army Art Collection, located in Fort Belvoir, Virginia. Forgey maintains the 16,000-piece collection, housed in the Museum Support Center storage facility. She was responsible for overseeing the recent move of Army artworks from the basement of a Washington, DC office building to the
collection’s current location. Forgey also oversees the program’s official combat artist, a position that is currently filled by Sergeant First Class Amy Louise Mills Brown.

JENNIFER JONES

Jennifer Jones is the chair and curator of the Armed Forces Division at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History in Washington, DC. Her research specialties include 20th century U.S. military history, Japanese Americans in World War II, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. As curator of the Armed Forces Division, Jones is responsible for managing the department’s collection of World War I combat art. Indeed, the Armed Forces Division contains the work of the Army Eight—including original sketches and paintings from all of the artists, as well as Harvey Dunn’s original artist’s kit.

PAM OVERMANN

Pam Overmann, in collaboration with Gale Munro, is the curator of the United States Navy Art Collection, housed in a storage space in the Navy Yard in Washington, DC. Overmann and Munro are responsible for maintaining the collection, as well as overseeing the work of the Navy’s two official combat artists—civilian Morgan Wilbur and Commander Monica Allen Perin. Overmann regularly curates small art exhibits in the National Museum of the U.S. Navy, located close to the Navy’s art storage facility in the Navy Yard.

COMMANDER SKIP ROHDE

Commander Rohde has never held a position as an official “combat artist.” After serving in the Navy for 22 years, Rohde retired from the military and became a professional artist. Prior to retirement, he served in Operation Desert Shield/Storm in 1991, and Bosnian peacekeeping operations in 1996. After retirement, Rohde was deployed to Iraq (2008 to 2010) as a civilian reconstruction program manager with the State Department and Army Corps of Engineers. During his limited recreational time in Iraq, Rohde drew and painted. He continued his artistic practice during his 2011 deployment to Afghanistan, where he served as a governance advisor for the State Department. His duties “required frequent meetings with local government officials, elders, and villagers” who he would “surreptitiously sketch.” As for his artistic experience, Rohde explains, “I’ve been drawing since I was knee-high to a grasshopper.”

JOAN THOMAS

Joan Thomas is the head curator of the Marine Corps Art Collection, located in Quantico, Virginia. While Thomas is a civilian, she grew up in what she calls “an Army family.” Thomas is in charge of the Marine Corps Art Program’s particularly rigorous selection process. Applying artists must be vetted by her and by artists who preceded
them in the program. They must have art school entry-level ability. Applicants also must be Marines in good standing, with letters of recommendation from their commanders. Once artists are selected for the program, Thomas supervises their assignments. She is currently responsible for facilitating the work of Marine Corp combat artist Sergeant Kristopher Battles.

MORGAN WILBUR

Morgan Wilbur has served as civilian combat artist for the Navy since 1998. While Wilbur is not himself a service member, his father was a Navy pilot and artist, and Wilbur grew up in Virginia Beach. He traces his interest in ships and airplanes back to a very young age. As a Navy combat artist, Wilbur has had a variety of assignments. In 2002, Wilbur boarded the U.S.S. John C. Stennis, an aircraft carrier engaged in offensive operations with Operation Enduring Freedom. In April 2003, Wilbur traveled to southern Iraq to document Navy Medicine’s support in Operation Iraqi Freedom, which included time with Fleet Hospital 3. In 2005, Wilbur returned to Iraq to document the work of Navy medical corpsmen serving with the United States Marine Corps. In 2006 he documented Coalition activities in Baghdad. Most recently, in 2010 Wilbur observed Navy construction battalions (referred to as Seabees) in Kandahar, Afghanistan. Wilbur has no formal artisitic training—a fact that is shocking when one views his large, photorealistic oil paintings.