

Soldier Art of World War II

By PETER HARRINGTON



Arawe, New Britain (December 1943)
by David Fredenthal.

The Life Collection of World War II Art, U.S. Army Center of Military History

full range of combat operations on land, at sea, and in the air.

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor thousands of men enlisted in the Armed Forces, including many artists. Assigned to camps and bases across the Nation they applied their talents to painting murals which transformed drab barracks, day rooms, mess halls, and service clubs. This soldier art was fostered by the Office of War Information's

Bureau of Publications and Graphics which issued a pamphlet entitled *Interior Design and Soldier Art* on how "to surround military personnel with a cheerful and attractive environment, reflecting the traditions, accomplishments, and high standards of Army life." Among its larger projects were those carried out at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, and Keesler Field, Mississippi.

Interest in war-related art also took root outside the Armed Forces. By February 1942 the Office of Emergency Management had organized an exhibit at the National Gallery in Washington in which 2,582 works on the theme of war and defense were submitted by over a thousand artists. Soldier art competitions were held around the country and in April 1942 *Life* magazine announced a competition whose entries were to "relate

to scenes connected with the artist's experiences while on active duty with the Armed Forces." This was the first time that a national magazine had taken an active part in promoting soldier art. In fact, *Life* had commissioned artists in 1941 to represent how America was preparing for war. The artists involved were Tom Lea, Floyd Davis, Fletcher Martin, Byron Thomas, and Paul Sample. The subjects of Lea's works, for instance, ranged from soldiers in training to scenes of North Atlantic naval patrols. Military pictures by other artists such as Griffith Baily Coale of the Navy and Barse Miller were also reproduced in *Life*.

The first service art program was established by the Navy in September 1942 when Coale, along with Dwight C. Shepler, William F. Draper, Albert K. Murray, and Mitchell Jamieson, were commissioned to "record dramatic incidents in combat areas." Within months the Army began to plan a similar program. In November the Corps of Engineers started to compile the names of those artists deemed suitable to work in theater. This program, organized under the auspices of the War Department Art Advisory Committee (WDAAC) to supervise war art units, was "taken over" by leading artists and museum administrators in 1943. The committee included artists George Biddle and Henry Varnum Poor and the writer John Steinbeck, who suggested that writers accompany artists in the field to describe events. Some 23 soldier-artists and 19 civilian artists were selected, and by early May the first units were in the Pacific and Alaska. Greeted with enthusiasm by theater commanders, including Generals Eisenhower and MacArthur, they started to document fighting as well as other

Peter Harrington is curator of the Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection at the Brown University Library and author of *British Artists and War: The Face of Battle in Paintings and Prints: 1700-1914*.

aspects of military life, while on the home front WDAAC geared up for exhibits and publications to showcase their work. Unfortunately, this enthusiasm was not shared by members of Congress who cut off funds for the program effective August 31, 1943. Nonetheless, the six-month program resulted in 2,000 pieces of art representing wartime activities around the world.

News of the cancellation of the Army program was a devastating blow to artists, many of whom did not learn about it until late July, and triggered disparaging editorials in art journals. In "Congress Fumbles the Ball" (*The Art Digest*, August 1943), Peyton Boswell admitted that while no enemy soldier had been killed by an artist's brush, "it is also true that the country was in line to receive a lot of good art reporting for its comparatively small outlay—paintings that would have constituted an irreplaceable pictorial history of the war."

In North Africa artists discovered that George Biddle had decamped for Sicily where he was enjoying a new role as a *Life* artist. The executive editor of *Life*, Daniel Longwell, had visited Assistant Secretary of War John McCloy on hearing of Congress's decision and offered to employ some artists. Seventeen civilian artists, including David Fredenthal and Aaron Bohrod who had been in the Pacific, were recruited on relatively cheap contracts by the magazine while the military provided their transportation and billeting. *Life's* action in effect saved the program and for two years these artists produced an extensive assortment of paintings and drawings at the front. Only one artist, Lucien Labaudt, was lost when his plane crashed en route to China in late 1944.

For artists not hired by *Life* there were alternatives, and several continued to create images of the

war while serving in units. One joined *Collier's* while others like Henry Varnum Poor just went home. Jack Levine spent 20 months on Ascension Island with Special Services as a sergeant responsible for movies and books. Edward Reep no sooner arrived in Algiers than he got orders from Eisenhower giving him command of five artists attached to Fifth Army in North Africa and Italy. Similarly, after the Southwest Pacific unit had been told of the end of the Army program, MacArthur decided to keep the artists. Based in Manila, the unit was comprised of Frede Vidar, Sidney Simon, and Barse Miller, who traversed the Philippines, China, Japan, and Korea. Other veterans of the 1943 program, including Manuel Bromberg, Olin Dows, and Albert Gold, made up the nucleus of an Army combat art program under the Historical Branch, Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, authorized by Congress in 1944 after the worth of soldier art had been revisited. They covered D-Day preparations and the Normandy invasion as well as the drive into Germany and other operations. The program was terminated by the Military Appropriations Act of 1945.

While some programs were ended due to the liquidation of the Section of Fine Arts in the Graphic Division of OWI, Congress could not stifle artistic creativity, and war-inspired art exhibits continued to draw large crowds. In July 1943, 125 eye-witness war paintings done for *Life* went on show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York prior to a national tour. Earlier a wartime organization of art groups, Artists for Victory, Inc., announced a contest entitled "America in the War" in which artists could compete for prizes of \$800 in war

bonds. The competition closed in August and its fruits were exhibited in 24 cities beginning that autumn. *Life* was not the only private employer of wartime artists. Abbott Laboratories of Chicago, in collaboration with the Office of the Surgeon General, commissioned 12 artists, including Robert Benney, Howard Baer, and Joseph Hirsch, to cover efforts of the Army Medical Staff. Previously Abbott had contracted for several artists to depict naval aviation.

On Pearl Harbor Day in 1960 Henry R. Luce gave the *Life* war art collection to the Nation. Consisting of 1,058 paintings done by 27 artists, it was valued at more than a million dollars. The collection was added to paintings from other programs and works commissioned by Abbott Labs. There are around 6,000 original pieces of art depicting World War II in the Army Art Collection today which is held by the U.S. Army Center of Military History, and the Navy Department has some 8,000 works. Although the Marine Corps did not have an official art program, several artists were commissioned to paint combat scenes. While some of this work belongs to the Marine Corps Historical Center, a number of artists retained their pictures. The Air Force art collection has the smallest graphic representation of the war since many paintings done by members of the Army Air Corps became part of the Army collection, though a number were later transferred to the Air Force.

Overall these works provide vivid impressions of the millions of soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen who we remember during this 50th anniversary of the end of World War II. **EQ**

Convoy by Ben Oda.

U.S. Army Center of Military History