

1994

In Memoriam: Charles Comfort: War Artist — 1900–1994

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Recommended Citation

Brandon, Laura "In Memoriam: Charles Comfort: War Artist — 1900–1994." *Canadian Military History* 3, 2 (1994)

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In Memoriam

Charles Comfort

War Artist - 1900-1994

Laura Brandon

As the current Curator of the War Art Collections, it is sobering to reflect on the very real achievements in the area of war art that are associated with the distinguished artist, Charles Comfort, who died on July 5th.

Comfort's war began in October 1939 when he became a rifle instructor with The Canadian Officers' Training Corps. In February 1943 he was commissioned as a lieutenant in the Canadian Active Service Force to serve as an official war artist. He had supported the idea of a war art programme from the beginning in the full knowledge that Canada had successfully pioneered such a scheme during the First World War.

In England, Comfort depicted the Corps of the Royal Canadian Engineers and the 16th Battery, Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment. In Italy he joined the 1st Canadian Infantry Division painting principally the Ortona and Liri Valley battles. The artist later published his war diaries in a volume entitled *Artist at War* (1956).

From 1960-65 Comfort served as Director of the National Gallery of Canada. While the National Gallery had had custody of the War Art Collections since 1946, it was only under Comfort that a Curator of War Art was appointed. During that time Comfort's commitment to war art showed itself in the funds



Major C.F. (Charles) Comfort
Self-portrait, June 1944
CWM #WA 487. Photo by Bill Kent.

made available for the proper storage and care of the collections and in the many important acquisitions in which he was personally involved.

Some of the most popular Canadian paintings of the Second World War are Comfort's. These include *The Hitler Line* (below), a dramatic subject drawn from the artist's experiences in the Italian campaign which hangs permanently in the Canadian War Museum. The artist's careful reconstruction of the events of the ill-fated Dieppe raid is another well-known composition.

It is, however, in the many watercolour sketches that were completed near the field of battle that we see the artist's response to war. In Italy, the landscape dazzled him, and many lyrical sketches pay homage to this civilized land being torn apart by conflict.

Always striving for accuracy in the depiction of the men and machinery of war, frustration sometimes emerged. Then, the artist's brush exploded over the paper as a series of painting all entitled *Battle Scene (Fantasy)*. In these works we sense the artist's awareness of the fragility of human life in wartime and sense his anger at the sometimes senseless destruction that he witnessed.

Comfort could be inspired by a particularly stirring scene, as his painting *Spitfires Flying Low over Raviscanina*, (inside back cover) shows. In this watercolour the felled tree-trunk acts as a counterpoint to the pair of speeding aircraft above. The landscape is forced into the background in the face of the urgency of war.

With the death of Charles Comfort, Canada has lost an important artist and a living link with our military past.

The Hitler Line by Charles Comfort

CWM No. 12296: Photo by Bill Kent

