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Orville Fisher, Official War Artist (1911-1999)

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Orville Fisher

Official War Artist (1911-1999)

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Orville Fisher passed away on 13 July 1999. His paintings of the Second World War are one of the most complete records of Canada's day-to-day role in that conflict. Perhaps his chief claim to fame is that he was the only Allied war artist actually to land in Normandy on D-Day, 6 June 1944. This achievement is all the more extraordinary given the fact that he almost never made it overseas in the first place.



Fisher worked as a service artist with the Canadian Army starting in February 1942, and a year later became an Official War Artist. He did not re-enter civilian life until July 1946. As a war artist, and undoubtedly as a person, Fisher was a determined and creative man. Nowhere is this clearer than in the preparations he made for the D-Day landing, when he strapped a sketchbook to his arm so that he could make quick sketches as he raced ashore. Unlike fellow war artist Charles Comfort's reconstruction of the August 1942 Dieppe Raid that was created four years after the event in the peace and security of a studio, Fisher's *D-Day- the Assault* was based on a real-life experience of action replete with all the turmoil and blood. Attached to the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division, Fisher landed on the beach at Courseulles-sur-Mer on 6 June 1944. For those who were not there, his experience can arguably be said to have been recreated in all its horror for today's generation in the first 20 minutes of Stephen Spielberg's film, *Saving Private Ryan*.

D-Day-The Assault was the sort of composition Fisher excelled at. A browse through the hundreds of works he completed in the collection of the Canadian War Museum show an artist whose interests lay in the action of war rather than in the ravaged landscapes that had typified the art of the First World War. His soldiers

are always doing something, his tanks and vehicles are always going somewhere, his vessels are always sailing resolutely towards shore. This determination always to move forward characterizes his history as a war artist. Obstacles were there to be overcome.

Before the war, Fisher's career as a working artist had been largely as a painter of murals for buildings and churches in the Vancouver area, in partnership with fellow future official war artists Paul Goranson and E.J. Hughes. Upon learning the news that war had been declared in September 1939, the trio determined that their artistic skills should be put to use in some sort of official military capacity. The example of the First World War art program, the Canadian War Memorials, was their inspiration. Within two weeks of the outbreak of war, they wrote to the director of the National Gallery of Canada, H.O. McCurry, seeking employment as war artists.¹ McCurry forwarded their applications to the Department of Defence in October, but at that time the military had made no provision for the employment of artists.²

With no response forthcoming, Fisher joined the Royal Canadian Engineers in August 1940. However, at some point his earlier correspondence appears to have come to the attention of the director of the Historical Section in Ottawa, A. Fortescue Duguid, who began to make use of Fisher and Hughes as war artists in Ottawa in the hopes that a more serious programme might develop. "The employment of selected members of the Canadian Army (Active) on the pictorial recording of Canadian participation in the current war is contemplated," he wrote to McCurry in March 1941. "For some time past two artists, Sergeant E.J. Hughes and Sapper O.N. Fisher have been under instruction



Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry Highlanders Advancing into Caen, July 8, 1944
by Orville N. Fisher

here with a view to testing and improving their capacity to function effectively as war artists in the field."³ Two years later, with a war artist scheme just announced, Fisher, along with artist Jack Shadbolt, was still pleading with McCurry for a chance at recording the action. "We are both determined to make every reasonable effort to be in a position to work effectively," wrote Shadbolt on behalf of them both.⁴

Possibly this letter never needed to be written, for one day later, on 5 February 1943, the Canadian War Artists' Control Committee in Ottawa recommended the appointment of Fisher as an Official War Artist. It was still not all smooth sailing. The artist was all set to go to England in September 1943 when the Canadian High Commissioner in London, Vincent Massey, wrote to McCurry that he and his advisory committee did not think Fisher was "qualified to perform the duties proposed."⁵ Massey's assessment was made on the basis of

reproductions of the artist's work that he had been sent. The Army's historical section in Ottawa responded, "that his talents [did] deserve employment."⁶ McCurry, the Chairman of the War Artists Control Committee in Ottawa, stood by the original February appointment made by his committee, and, despite Massey's reservations, Fisher set sail for England. We will probably never know whether he was aware of how close he had come to failing in his four-year goal. Suffice it to say that the energy and commitment that he had put towards becoming a war artist were now directed at producing a war record that not only told of the achievements of Canadians, but also moved his own art forwards. By the end he had reversed the opinions of 1943.

As an artist he worked indefatigably. Countless detailed sketches in the Canadian War Museum demonstrate that he earned his position as one of Canada's notable war artists through hard work. Innumerable detailed studies of



Recruits Wanted

by Orville N. Fisher

These are the works that veterans most admire, and it is probably through Fisher's paintings more than those of any artist, that they can best relive their own experiences. For this alone, his war art is an enduring achievement.

Notes

1. National Gallery of Canada Archives, Canadian War Artists, Orville Fisher, 5.42-F, Paul Goranson, Orville Fisher, Edward Hughes to H.O. McCurry, 2 October 1939.
2. *Ibid.*, H.O. McCurry to Orville Fisher, 24 October 1939.
3. *Ibid.*, A. Fortescue Duguid to H.O. McCurry, 8 March 1941.
4. *Ibid.*, J.L. Shadbolt to H.O. McCurry, 4 February 1943.
5. *Ibid.*, Vincent Massey to H.O. McCurry, 30 September 1943.
6. *Ibid.*, H.M. Thomas to H.O. McCurry, 2 October 1943.

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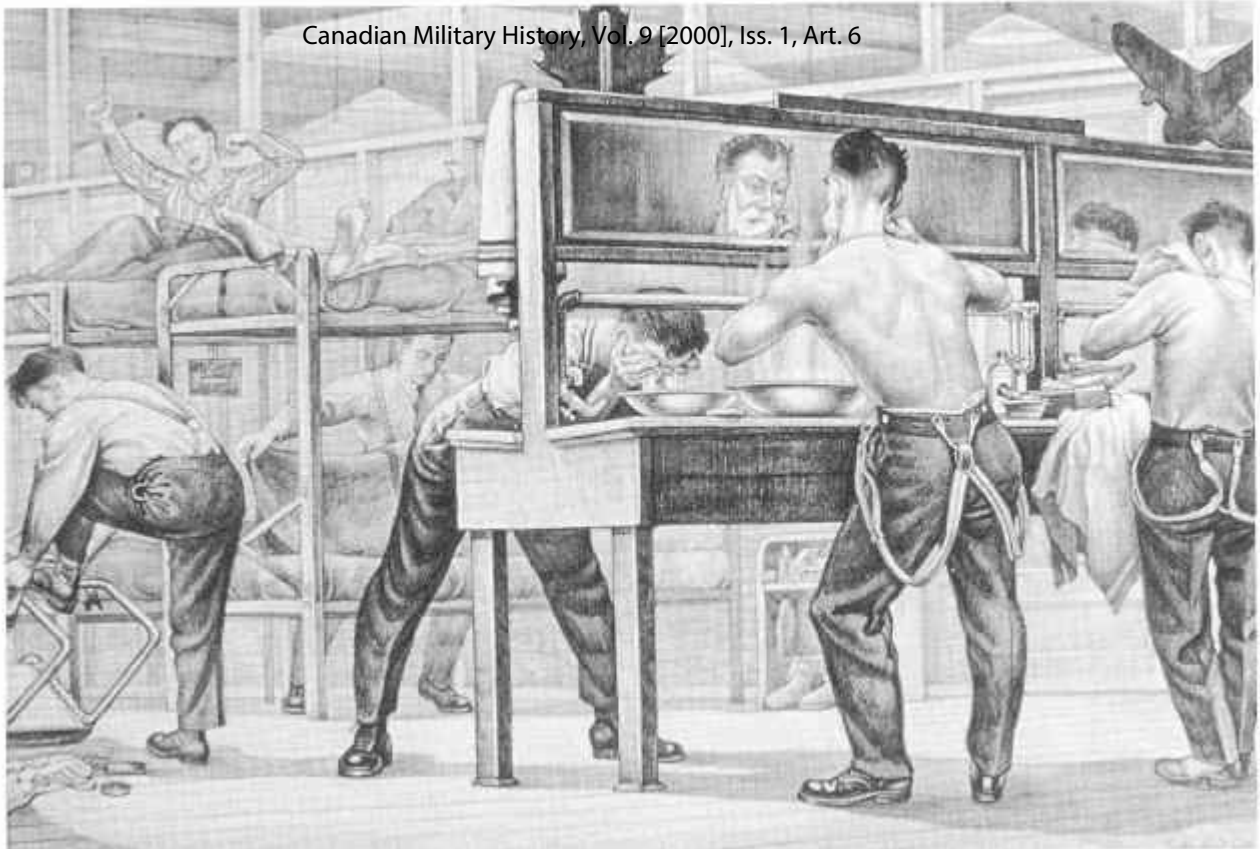
hands, of equipment, and of dress attest to an ongoing apprenticeship with the materiel of war that was to stand him in good stead when he crossed to France on D-Day and had to work fast and accurately to capture the action. From his cheerful 1941 recruiting image *Recruits Wanted* to the drama of his *Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry Highlanders advancing into Caen* his war art has remained popular. His best painting is probably the unusual work called *Battle for Carpiquet Airfield*. Here he combines his preferred grouping of soldiers on the move with an over-arching cathedral-like panoply of twisted metal. More than any other of his compositions it shows an artist who has moved beyond the mere documentary to a true engagement with his creative gifts.

Battle for Carpiquet Airfield is an exception because, over the six years that he was a war artist, Fisher largely rejected experimental art forms in favour of painting from the perspective of the ordinary soldier.

Battle for Carpiquet Airfield

by Orville N. Fisher





(CWM CN 11423)

Image 1: *Oh Reveille* by Paul Goranson shows a typical Manning Pool washroom scene; although this is a "fancy one" with individual basins. At RCAF Manning Depot No. 2, Brandon a long, open trough was remembered.



(CWM CN 11400)

Image 2: *Lunch Hour Alrmens Mess* by Paul Goranson is reminiscent of meals served during the construction of No. 14 EFTS, Portage la Prairie in 1940.