

2002

Obituaries: Paul Goranson, Michael Forster & Caven Atkins: Canadian War Artists

Laura Brandon

Canadian War Museum, laura@laurabrandon.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh>

Recommended Citation

Brandon, Laura "Obituaries: Paul Goranson, Michael Forster & Caven Atkins: Canadian War Artists."
Canadian Military History 11, 4 (2002)

This Canadian War Museum is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Canadian Military History by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Obituaries

Paul Goranson, Michael Forster & Caven Atkins

Canadian War Artists

Laura Brandon

Paul Goranson
(1911-2002)

Paul Goranson was one of a unique but rapidly diminishing group of Canadian artists whose chief claim to fame lies in their war work. In the annals of Canadian art history there is no other body of artists of equal substance and numbers whose subject matter is so focussed. For them, the subject of war in all its terrible beauty provided an extraordinary opportunity to paint and draw. In their greatest works, they were able to meditate on this most complex and contradictory of human activities and find both a visual and emotional core in what they observed. Their legacy is a record of the Second World War that not only describes what happened but what it was like.

Paul Goranson painted Canadians in the RCAF from 1941 until 1947. An accomplished artist with a growing post-war reputation and connections he might have been expected to stay in Canada to continue his pre-war career as a muralist, illustrator, and teacher in Vancouver. Instead, he to all intents and purposes disappeared. As late as 1978, Canadian War Museum art curator Hugh Halliday had no idea what had become of him. Even his former friend, partner, and fellow war artist E.J. Hughes did not know his whereabouts. Research begun in connection with the 1980 war art exhibition *A Terrible Beauty* produced an address and the mystery was solved. The artist had moved to New



York after the war because, as he put it, he "had probably stayed too long in the service."

Given the current interest in war art and war artists in Canada, it is hard to believe that being a war artist for too long could have been detrimental to one's career but quite clearly, in Goranson's case, he believed it to be so. In New York he became a display designer and then a scenic artist, joining the Metropolitan Opera in 1965. Here he worked under artists and designers such as Franco Zeffereilli, Sir Cecil Beaton, and Marc Chagall. But he remained a Canadian citizen and, upon retirement in 1986 at the age of 75, returned to Vancouver.

Six years as an RCAF war artist resulted in a varied geographical experience. The locations of Goranson's war art encompass Canada, the United Kingdom, North Africa, Sicily, the Italian peninsula, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany. The earlier works are meticulously rendered and sometimes delicate small watercolour and oil paintings of bases and personnel in Canada. *Posted to Newfie*, for example, is cheerfully ignorant, as indeed both he and his subjects were, of the brutal conditions and experiences that lay ahead. Even in North Africa, having survived an Atlantic crossing in which his ship sank, an affinity with the camaraderie of wartime remains evident in subjects such as *Via Box Car to Algiers* (11475). Six years service also exposed the artist to a

variety of wartime occupations. The drawing *Pigeon Loftman* (11427) attests to an enduring interest in the human side of war, an awareness that also found a grimmer translation in works such as *Graveyard at Anzio* (11375) and the ironic *The Last Post - Wyler* (11396).

Goranson made a significant impression on the airmen with whom he worked. Group Captain K.B. Conn, the chief of the RCAF Historical Records, wrote that he had "aroused the admiration of flying personnel of squadrons at which he has been stationed by his complete disregard for danger in making his paintings. Once when an airfield was being dive-bombed he continued to record his impressions in a slit trench with bombs bursting all around and shrapnel flying only inches above his head." Such close encounters with danger fuelled the subject

matter of paintings such as *Raid on the Airfield* (11434) and *Air Raid on San Giusto-Pisa* (11435). One of his last works, the latter is a rare depiction of a bombing raid as experienced from the air.

Shortly before he died, at the age of 90, Paul Goranson flew to Ottawa to see his paintings at the Canadian War Museum. It was a memorable event as he had something insightful to say about every work he was shown.

In Vancouver in the early years of the war, Paul Goranson, E.J. Hughes, and the late Orville Fisher, all future war artists, were known as 'The Three Musketeers of Art' in reference to the fact that they were artists who had enlisted. Paul Goranson painted to the end and on 3 August 2002 he laid down his brush for the last time.



Paul Goranson – *Pigeon Loftman* CN 11427



Paul Goranson – *Via Box Car to Algiers* CN 11475

Paul Goranson – *The Last Post – Wyler* CN 11396



Paul Goranson - *Air Raid on San Giusto-Pisa*Paul Goranson - *Raid on the Airfield*

Michael Forster (1907-2002)

Michael Forster, who died on 4 July 2002, aged 95, was one of a number of Canadian official war artists whose legacy resides in the paintings they made during the Second World War. While the onset of the conflict provided an extraordinary opportunity to work as a dedicated artist after the miserable years of the Depression, it also, ironically, made the postwar years quite difficult in many ways. Post-traumatic stress disorder blighted the lives of some former war artists while others either left Canada to seek remunerative posts elsewhere or turned to teaching and design work, their own art becoming increasingly a hobby. Very few artists found the exposure and attention of the war years replicated in their careers in the second half of the twentieth century. Most failed to become canonical figures in Canadian art history in any way and they remain marginalized to this day in most survey texts. The recent upsurge in

interest in Canada's war history, led largely by what can almost be termed a remembrance industry, has drawn attention to Canada's war artists once again. This has, coincidentally, initiated a process that will increasingly allow for a reassessment as to the role war art plays and has played in the history and art of this country. That being said, it is clear already, however, that it is the popular response to war art, as opposed to its canonical underpinnings, that will ensure its endurance.

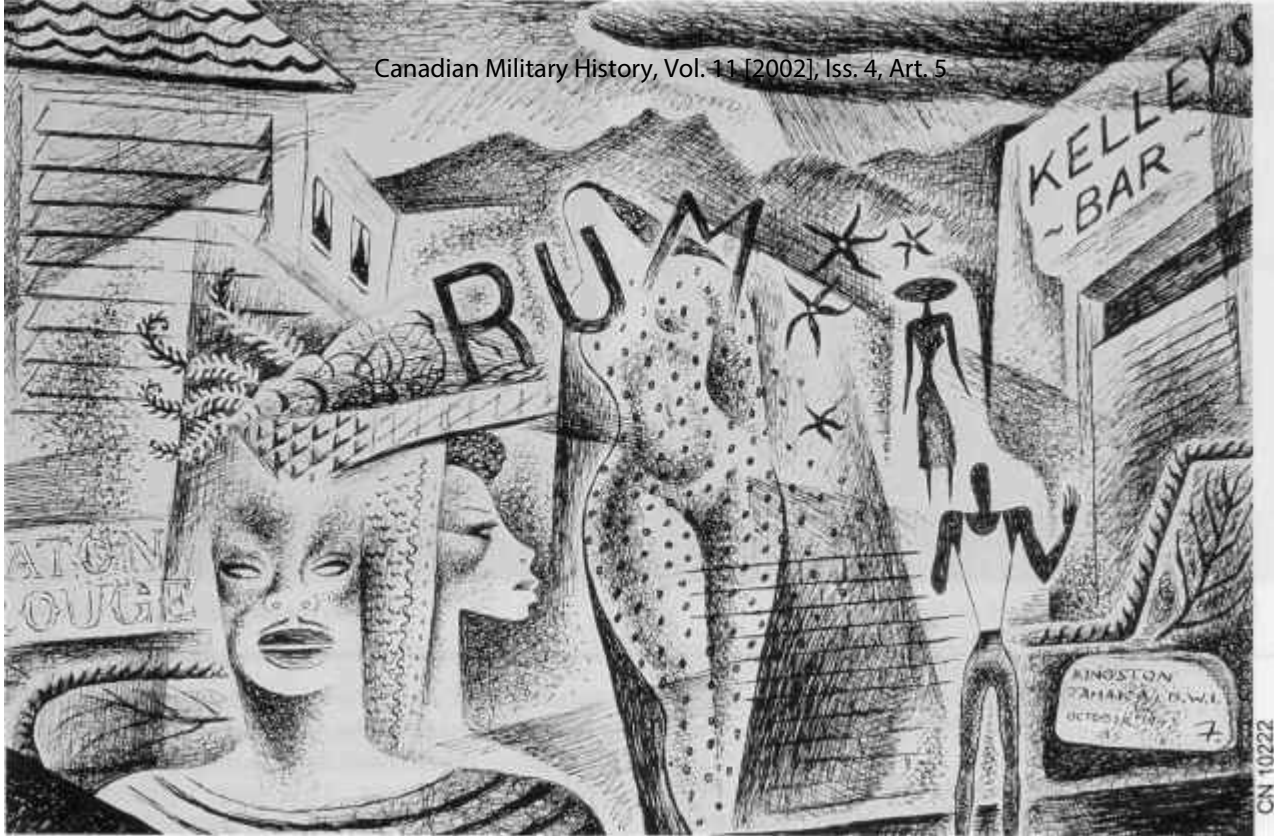
Michael Forster was born in India and died in England. The majority of his mature years were spent in Canada with sojourns in the United States and Mexico. Like many artists of his generation he scratched out a living as a painter of window display backdrops, and movie sets, and by writing art criticism and short stories. He painted and drew all the time and occasionally was rewarded with an exhibition. In his later years he painted for himself only and faded into obscurity.

Michael Forster- *Wreckage on Beach Near Newhaven, England*

CN 10230

Michael Forster- *Vestiges of Mulberry, Arromanches*

CN 10229

Michael Forster - *Shore Leave, Jamaica*

At the time he became a war artist, his style of painting could readily be seen to be in tune with the British *avant-garde*. He had, as well, trained with Bernard Meninsky and William Roberts, both British First World War artists who worked in a non-traditional vein. It was this modernist strain to his work that ensured his commission as an artist with the Canadian Navy. He had already proven himself to the National Gallery of Canada with a short-term commission depicting the activities of the Merchant Marine, a program he had himself initiated.

Forster joined the RCNVR in October 1944 and served until June 1946. He painted motor torpedo boats at sea, several English Channel ports, and the ruined harbour town of Brest in France. There, the wrecked remains of German submarine pens particularly inspired him and he imbued his paintings of them with a melancholic air that is in equal part beautiful and threatening. Clearly, he had found in the ruins of war an iconographic element that served him well. *Wreckage on Beach Near Newhaven, England* (10230) for example, or *Vestiges of Mulberry, Arromanches* (10229) also share the almost surreal brooding quality that is typical of all his RCN compositions. By the time he had returned to Canada after VE Day, Forster's

proposed list of final compositions had been accepted but he did not complete all he had suggested, the war's end likely shortening the length of time he could be kept on strength to do so.

The RCN works are far more traditional than the compositions Forster produced for the Merchant Marine commission, which also did not develop into final compositions - the RCN commission making this impossible at the time. Painted on a voyage between Halifax and Jamaica, these works have a strong affinity with much British contemporary wartime poster design with their emphasis on graphic rather than painterly elements and in their use of overlapping images. *Shore Leave, Jamaica* (10222) is one such example. However, the fact that Forster was not supplied with canvas on which to paint also determined the graphic nature of his output. In these Merchant Marine pictures the sailors and their regular shipboard and shore activities predominate as subject matter. In contrast, humanity is absent in the elegiac and somewhat funereal RCN paintings. The difference is telling and says much about the impact of the overseas war on the sensibilities of those who had had no prior experience of its brutal and destructive force.

Forster's war compositions stand out in the Canadian War Records collection because their style is so refreshingly different. When he first suggested the Merchant Marine commission on 16 June 1943 in a letter to H.O. McCurry, the director of the National Gallery of Canada and chairman of the War Artists' Advisory

Brandon: Obituaries
Committee, it was the difference in approach that his art represented that Forster emphasized as being of value. He may have been reclusive and leery of self-promotion, but Michael Forster knew what his art would mean for the Canadian war art program of the Second World War before he had put brush to paper.

Caven Atkins (1907-2000)

Born in London, Ontario and raised in Saskatchewan and Manitoba, Caven Atkins is a war artist by virtue of the paintings and drawings he completed of activity at the Toronto Shipbuilding Company in 1942. He donated 24 works on paper and a final large canvas, *Men at Work, Factory Interior* (14052) to the National Gallery of Canada in 1951. They subsequently became part of the war art collection prior to their transfer to the Canadian War Museum in 1971. Although, to his surprise, Atkins had not been offered an appointment as a Second World War official war artist like his friends Carl Schaefer and Charles Goldhamer, adding what he considered his own war work to theirs after the war was an appropriate gesture for someone who had supported the utilisation of artists in wartime. For its part, the gallery acknowledged the importance of his gift because of its home front subject matter, an aspect of the war that had not been explored within the art program to any significant degree.

Atkins's speciality was watercolour and from 1943 until 1945 he was President of the Canadian Society of Painters in Water Colour. Trained in Winnipeg by the latter-day Group of Seven member Lemoine Fitzgerald, he was later influenced by German Expressionism through his friendship with the Montreal artist Fritz Brandtner. In particular, he acknowledged a debt to German artists such as Max Beckmann, Otto Dix, and George Grosz. Their view of war as bleak, dehumanizing, and brutal is reflected in their war art and, to some limited degree, their view is reflected in Atkins's own wartime compositions.

In a 17 March 1979 letter to the director of the Canadian War Museum, Lee Murray, Atkins explained what had compelled him to paint war related activity. It was, he said, "pure and simply a sincere desire to show that 'war' requires workers to produce 'sinews' as well as 'soldiers'; for without these no war can be fought let alone won." This sentiment is perhaps best expressed in *Forming Bulkhead Girders* (14057) in which the workers are reduced to a quasi-automatonic state that makes them one with the tools they

Caven Atkins -
Men at Work, Factory Interior





use, the shop in which they labour, and the ships' parts they are constructing. Because Atkins wanted to contribute to the war effort, his works include some hint as to the purpose behind their labour. His compositions cannot be interpreted as left-wing paeans to the labouring class. In *Forming Bulkhead Girders*, the presence of a 'V for Victory' in the background reminds the viewer of the purpose of the activity depicted. *Hull 32 Vfor Victory* (14047) makes the point even more clearly as the ship's hull metamorphoses into a V-shape.

Atkins introduced drama into his war paintings by deliberately selecting night scenes in which he could exploit the effects of light and dark. In *Outfitting a Minesweeper at Night* (14055), light reflects off the vessel's hull and the clouds in the dark sky. This theatrical element to Atkins's compositions injects a unique aspect to the range and content of the war art collections at the Canadian War Museum.



Left: Caven Atkins - *Outfitting a Minesweeper at Night*

Above: Caven Atkins - *Forming Bulkhead Girders*

Like many artists, Atkins found employment in the immediate post-war period as difficult to find as it had been in the Depression years of the 1930s. In 1945, he moved to Birmingham, Michigan where he worked as an illustrator and designer for the Ford Motor Company until he retired. There, perhaps, he found some residual echo of his experiences at the Toronto Shipbuilding Company. Atkins never returned to live in Canada and, as a result, is not well known as an artist in this country.

An exhibition of his work organized by the Art Gallery of Windsor in 1979 documented his contribution to Canadian art but his death on 22 December 2000, just short of his 93rd birthday, went virtually unnoticed. Nonetheless, his "feeling and desire to contribute in some way" to the Canadian Second World War effort has a permanent legacy in the artwork he completed in the 1940s that now forms part of Canada's war art collections.

Material cited in these obituaries can be found in the artists files at the Canadian War Museum. The catalogue numbers are in brackets after the titles of works of art.

Laura Brandon is Curator of War Art at the Canadian War Museum.