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Soldiers' Lives Depicted Paintings and Drawings by 'Unofficial Artists' in the Collection of the Canadian War Museum

Angela Marcus

The Canadian War Museum's collection of Second World War art, collectively entitled "The Canadian War Records," is primarily made up of artwork officially commissioned by the National Gallery of Canada on behalf of the Canadian Government. Through this scheme 33 Official war artists were given the sponsorship and protection of the three branches of the Armed Forces. The artists' objective was to illustrate Canada's role in the Second World War. This made it possible for them to travel around Canada to record activities at training bases and also to be sent overseas to record the military action in various parts of the United Kingdom and war-torn Europe. Many of Canada's official artists found themselves close to the thick of the battle, whether on land, on the seas or in the air.

There were also, however, many artists among the ranks of enlisted men. These 'unofficial' artists painted, sketched, and drew for their own pleasure, depicting what they liked as they liked without the thought that their works were destined for a Canadian heritage art collection. They drew and painted to hone their artistic skills, to record their experiences, to fill leisure time, and in the case of many, as a means of therapy, helpful in unfamiliar situations disconnected from everyday life. In recent years, many of these works have been donated by the artists and their families to the Canadian War Art Collection at the Canadian War Museum. The informality of the subject matter presents an



invaluable background to the official paintings of the war.

The Army officially approved of art as a leisure time activity among enlisted men, and held annual competitions and awarded prizes of Victory Bonds. In London, England in May 1942, the King and Queen had attended the opening of a high-profile army art exhibition at the National Gallery, which was sponsored by the Canadian Legion War Services. The senior Canadian officer overseas, General A.G.L. McNaughton opened the show and created the context for the artwork when he said that the Canadian Army encouraged the objective use of spare time.

In November 1942 the first Canadian exhibition of unofficial art, the Canadian Armed Forces Art Exhibition, was held at Hart House Art Gallery at the University of Toronto. Over 200 works from men and women in the Navy, Air Force, and Army were displayed at this first exhibition. The event was organized by the Art Committee of Hart House in co-operation with the three services. Artist Charles Comfort, then a professor at the University of Toronto, and later an official war artist, acted as Faculty Representative on the committee of fourteen.

In their Forward to the exhibition catalogue, the Toronto Art Committee referred to General McNaughton's comments from the London show, and added their own rationale regarding the importance of art as a practice in the armed

forces. They felt that the sense of accomplishment which "accompanies the successful completion of even the slightest caricature is of immeasurable value," and further, "the development of observation, the creation of initiative, and above all, the relaxation and replenishment of mind effected by such activity should be recognized as factors directly contributing...to the realistic problems of training."¹ After its period at Hart House, under the guidance of Sergeant C.K. Redfern, the exhibition visited bases, barracks and drill halls around Ontario where display spaces were improvised. On its various stops it attracted large and enthusiastic audiences and newspaper critiques in the centres where the works were exhibited. The army art project in general was discussed in the 3 April 1943 issue of *Saturday Night*.

Canadian Armed Forces Art Exhibitions continued to be organized until 1945 and gained great prestige. For example, after its opening in March by the Governor General at the National Gallery in Ottawa, the exhibition organized for 1944, was seen at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington in May, and later at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in August, through the sponsorship of the Canadian ambassador to the United States, Leighton McCarthy.

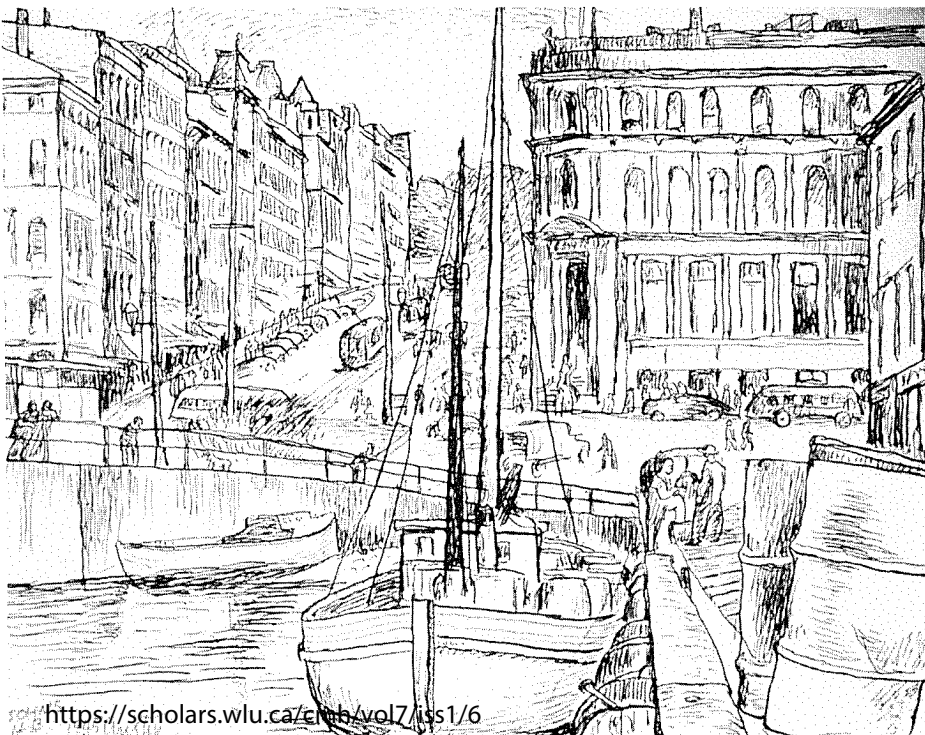
The following focuses on three enlisted 'unofficial' artists: Austin Taylor, Robert Bruce and Robert Buckham. Both Taylor and Bruce

exhibited in army art exhibitions, with Taylor's painting *Off Hours* winning a special prize in the Canadian Army Art Exhibition in 1945. Buckham's works are the drawings done while he was in a German prisoner of war camp and were not seen officially until long after the war.

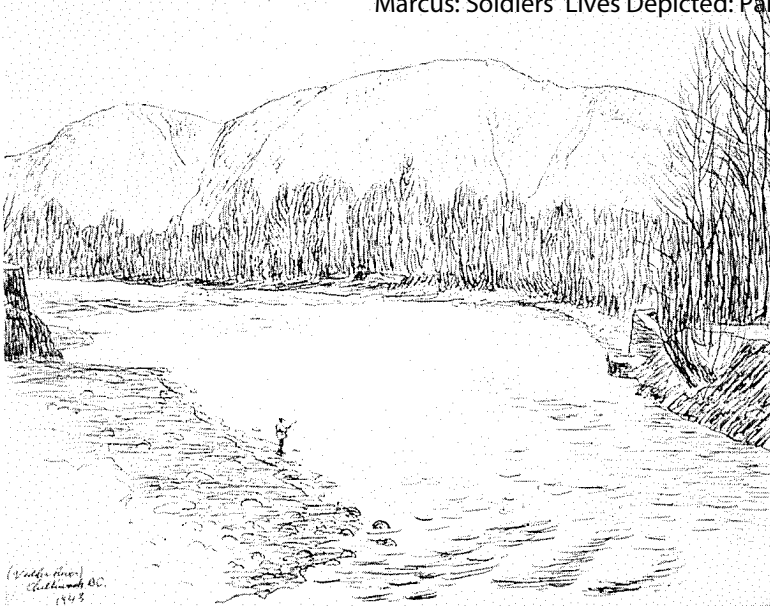
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Austin Taylor was a sapper in the Royal Canadian Engineers and served in Chilliwack, BC, and Saint John, NB. He was born in England in 1908 and came to Winnipeg when his father immigrated to Canada before the First World War. He attended the Winnipeg Art School and studied under the direction of Lemoine Fitzgerald. In 1948 a scholarship enabled him to study at the Art Student's League in New York. He subsequently returned to England where he married and settled down to the life of an artist. He died in London in 1992.

Taylor keenly observed and carefully depicted the individual soldier's accommodation to the routines of army life. The camp at Chilliwack was situated close to the Vedder River in a picturesque landscape close to the mountains of British Columbia, and Taylor took time to draw and paint the beauty of this natural setting. His artistic interests were no less engaged with the more urban setting of Saint John, and although life in the Saint John barracks continued with a certain predictability, his use of oblique perspectives gave added visual interest to these familiar scenes.



Untitled (View of Saint John)
Austin Taylor
ink on paper
23.0 x 30.0 cm
CWM AN19940045-089



Vedder River, Chilliwack, B.C.
ink on paper
27.0 x 34.0 cm
CWM AN19940045-040

Off-Hours
egg tempera on cardboard
77.0 x 60.0 cm
CWM AN19930074-001

Austin Taylor



Lecture
ink, ink wash on paper
19.0 x 24.0 cm
CWM AN19940045-017

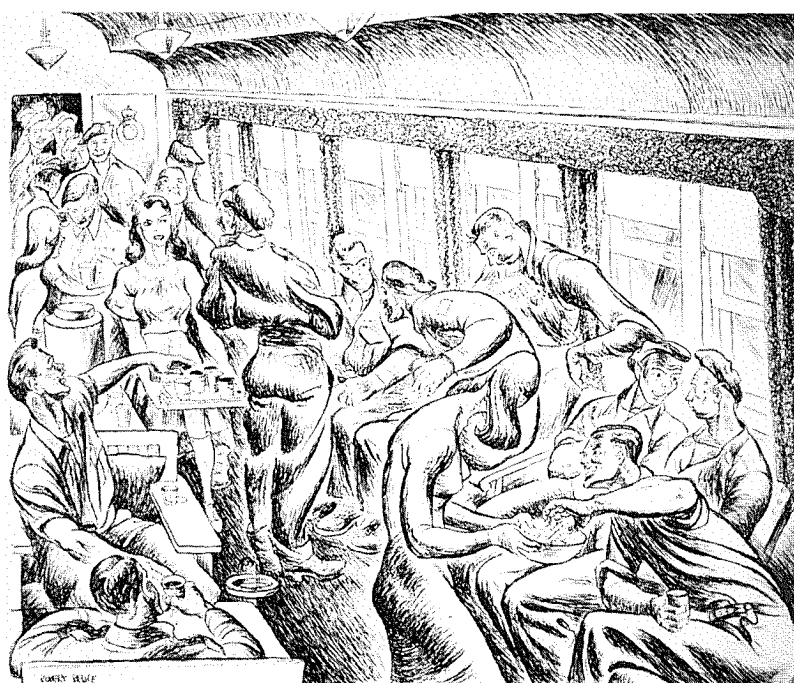
Writing Home, Sapper, RCE
ink on paper
24.0 x 19.0 cm
CWM AN19940045-002



Robert Bruce enlisted in the Canadian Army in 1943 and became a public relations staff artist producing popular cartoons of army life and designs for Victory Bond posters. He exhibited in the Canadian Army Art Exhibition in 1944 and won second prize. Bruce was born in Grandview, Manitoba in 1911. He studied under Lemoine Fitzgerald at the Winnipeg School of Art between 1928 and 1941. Between 1935 and 1937 he worked primarily with lithography and illustration. In 1938 a Massey Family bursary enabled him to study in England at the Central School of Art and in Paris at the Academy Grande Chaumiere. From 1941-1943 he was employed as staff artist at the Winnipeg *Free Press*. After the war he was Professor of Art at the Albright Art School in Buffalo, New York,

where he taught from 1949-1955. Bruce moved back to Canada to become Professor of Fine Arts at the University of Manitoba from 1955-1976. He died in Winnipeg in 1980.

Bruce's freely rendered pencil and ink drawings record the rambunctious activities and atmosphere of Canadian soldiers en route by train from Winnipeg to Halifax, and on board a troop transport ship in 1943. The rhythm of his pen conveys a sense of the flow, noise, and activity. Bruce's character types can be seen passing the time in various ways. We see the bored, the restless, the introspective, and the hyperactive brought together in the cramped spaces without privacy – a condition common to the ordinary soldier's life.



Above:
Legion Car
pencil, ink on art board
39.5 x 43.3
CWM AN19929909-012

Opposite Top:
Telegrams
pencil, ink on art board
34.3 x 38.5
CWM AN19920090-011

Left:
Sleeping Quarters
pencil, ink on art board
42.5 x 33.1 cm
CWM AN19920090-001

Opposite bottom:
Foleyet
pencil, ink on art board
34.4 x 43.4 cm
CWM AN19920090-016



Robert Bruce

Train Scene
pencil, ink on art board
34.3 x 40.2 cm
CWM AN19920090-008

Messing
pencil, ink on art board
39.6 x 34.3 cm
CWM 19920090-009

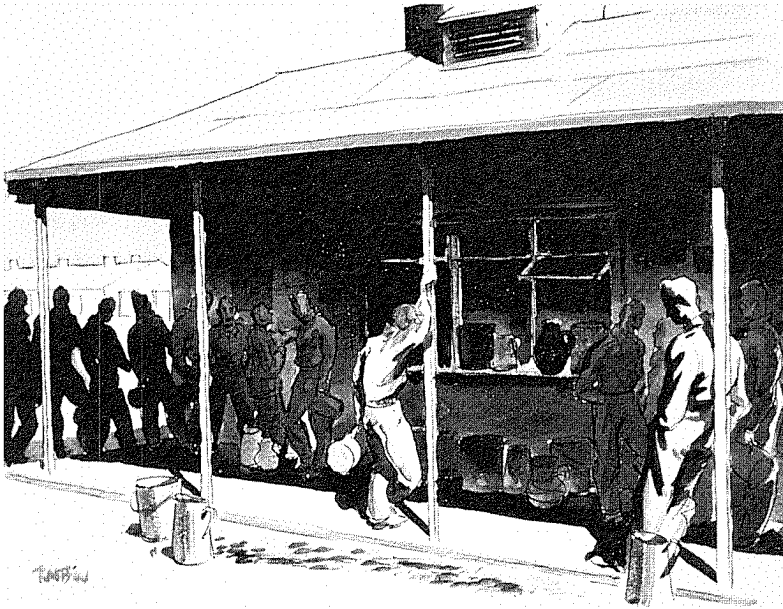


Robert Buckham's drawings which accompany his diaries give a rare view of the life and conditions of a Prisoner of War Camp in Germany and are reminders that imprisonment was part of many soldiers' experiences of the Second World War. Born in Toronto in 1918, Buckham's early career as an artist was spent in commercial art studios in Toronto and as art director of a Montreal advertising agency. He enlisted in the RCAF in 1941 and was posted to 428 Squadron based at Dalton, Yorkshire where he flew Wellington bombers over Germany and German-occupied France. He was shot down and taken prisoner in 1943, and imprisoned at the famous Stalag Luft III, Sagan, Germany. Buckham remained at Sagan until near the end of the war when forced marches, vividly described in his diaries, took him and his fellow prisoners to two other Prisoner of War Camps – Marlag M near Bremen and Stalag VIII B near Lubeck. After the war Buckham returned to advertising in Montreal.

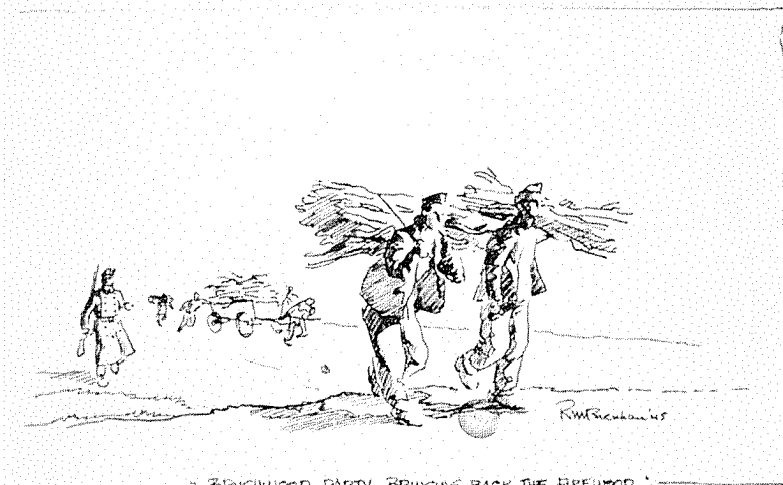
He later moved to Vancouver where he now resides.

In the horrific circumstances of his imprisonment, Buckham drew in two styles – one is straightforward and it appears was used to record actual scenes, the other tends toward the cartoon, used perhaps to describe general situations more lightly, when times seemed surreal and hopeless. Whatever the style, Buckham's drawings reveal that in spite of the fear, discomfort, and deprivation of a Prisoner of War Camp, simple life-sustaining rituals were maintained: water was fetched, tea was made, card games were played, food was handed out, rumour circulated, and for many, liberation finally came.

Robert Marshall Buckham



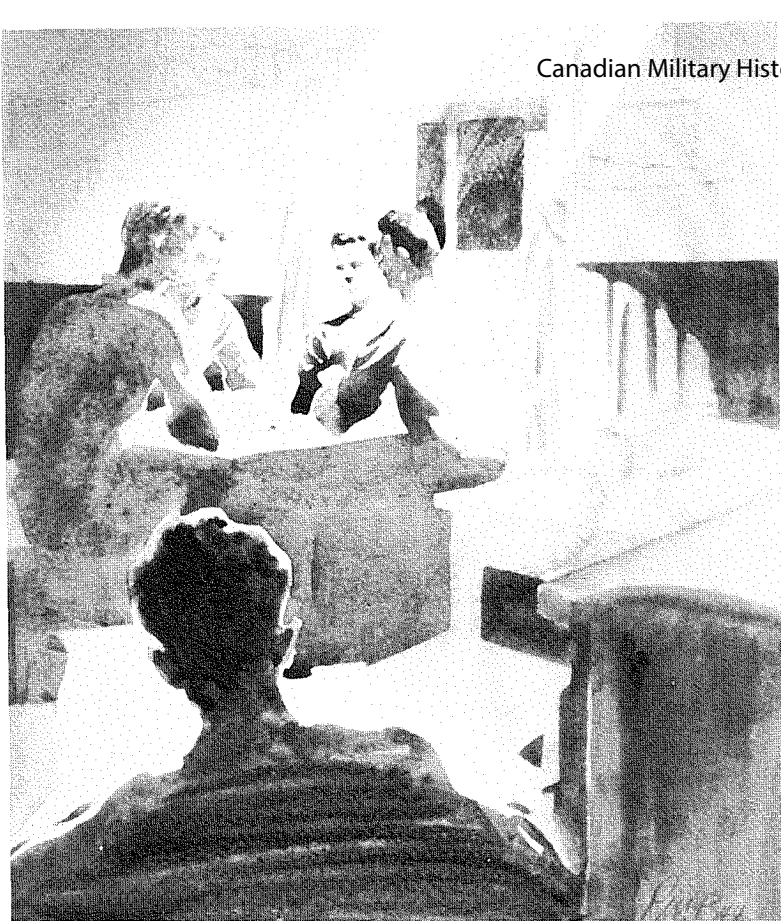
Waiting for Water at
Canteen, Sagan (top)
ink wash on paper
19.0 x 26.6 cm
CWM 86298



Brushwood Party
Returning to Camp,
February, 1945 (above)
ink on paper
18.0 x 24.5 cm
CWM 80081

Forced March Costume (right)
Robert Marshall Buckham
Crayon, watercolour on paper
36.5 x 19.0 cm
CWM CN80078



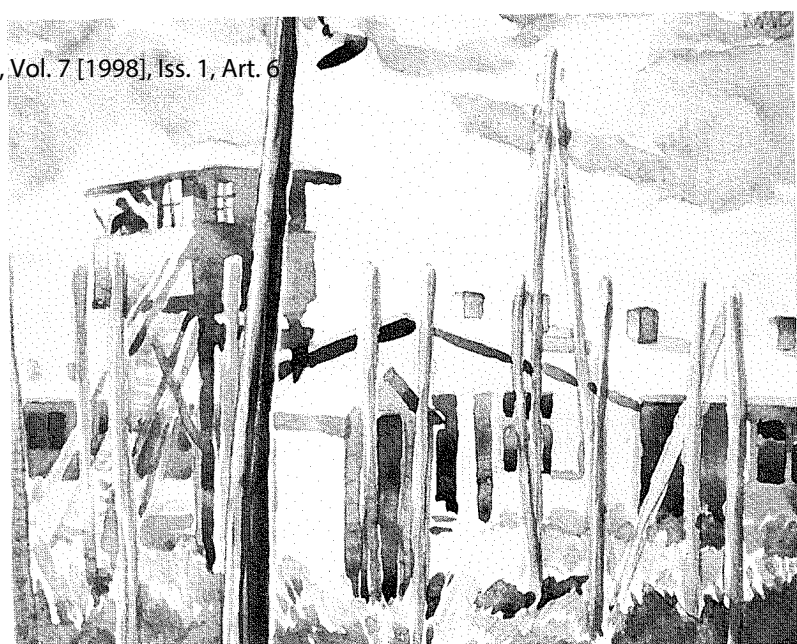


A Forty-Watt Bulb and a Deck of Cards (above)
watercolour on paper
37.5 x 29.5 cm
CWM CN80089

The Rumour (below)
watercolour on paper
22.7 x 18.3 cm
CWM CN86290



WHETHER IT'S TRUE OR NOT, YOU CAN TAKE IT
FROM ME IT'S A FACT!



From North Compound Towards the West Compound
watercolour on paper
9.0 x 26.6 cm, CWM CN80100

Robert Marshall Buckham

Unloading Red Cross Trucks, Lubeck, May 1945
watercolour on paper
20.5 x 24.6 cm, CWM CN80095



Notes

The Canadian War Museum does not have complete documentation on much of its "unofficial art" collection, done as it was in the circumstances already described. Anyone having background or further information on any of the scenes depicted here is encouraged to write to us. Photos for CWM by Bill Kent.

1. Canadian Armed Forces Art Exhibition Catalogue, November 1942, p.3.

Angela Marcus is an Ottawa art historian with an MA in Canadian Studies who does occasional work at the Canadian War Museum.