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Evan Macdonald Camouflage Artist

Laura Brandon & Jeff Noakes

What did Canadian enlisted artists do if they did not become official war artists during the Second World War? The military career of Guelph, Ontario, artist Evan Macdonald (1905-1972) is a case in point. A well-respected Ontario painter and illustrator, Macdonald trained in Toronto at what is now the Ontario College of Art (1923) and in London, England, at the Chelsea Polytechnic, the Putney School of Art, and the Royal Academy Schools (1926-1931). After his return to Canada in 1931, Macdonald worked for eight years as a commercial artist and illustrator in Toronto before returning, upon the death of his father, to Guelph to run the family department store, D.E. Macdonald Brothers.¹

Correspondence in his Army personnel file indicates that he inherited a struggling business rendered close to bankruptcy by the Depression.² Macdonald restored the store's viability prior to the outbreak of the Second World War. This commitment, along with his age (he was 34), may have discouraged his immediate enlistment. He painted for the war effort, however, in 1942 completing a portrait of a wireless air gunner who had been a participant in a short course at the Royal Canadian Air Force Wireless School in Guelph.³ It is a sensitive, accurate portrayal of a young recruit, George Smith, seated informally in his flying suit. The picture was exhibited in various parts of Canada but exactly where and whether for artistic reasons or recruitment purposes is not known.⁴

Why did Macdonald finally enlist at London, Ontario, on 15 January 1943, at the age of 37? It



was probably because Prime Minister Mackenzie King had approved a war artist program the month before after an extensive lobbying campaign on the part of Canadian artists.⁵ With his extensive connections to Toronto's art community, Macdonald undoubtedly was aware of these efforts. Moreover, he was already favourable to the idea of being a war artist as there are references to this possibility in his enlistment papers. He likely also knew that serving soldiers were preferred.⁶ Certainly, it was Colonel A. Fortescue Duguid, director of the army historical section at National Defence Headquarters, whose preference this was, who put his name forward.⁷ However, it was not to be. Evan Macdonald did not become a war artist.

Nevertheless, Macdonald's military employment reflected his personal artistic interests. The interview notes in his Personnel Selection Record conclude: "He would like to use his ability as an artist in the Army either in making illustrations for publicity or for lectures. Also, he would appear to be admirably suited to become a camouflage officer." This latter, then, is the recommendation noted at the bottom of the form. Evan Macdonald was well suited to a career in camouflage. His personnel record lists making scale models of ships and trains as a hobby. Furthermore, while he studied and worked in England he taught draughting, a useful camouflage skill.⁸ The owner of two cameras, Macdonald also enjoyed photography – an important consideration in understanding and implementing camouflage, since many of the techniques he would learn and teach



Evan Macdonald, *Self-Portrait, School of Camouflage*, 1943. Collection of Evan Macdonald Estate.

focused on making it more difficult for aerial observers to make sense of what they saw and photographed.⁹

After enlistment, Macdonald stayed at the No.1 District Depot in London, Ontario “doing portrait work and sketches.”¹⁰ In the aftermath of his failure to become a war artist, the army assigned him to its first other ranks’ camouflage course in Vancouver in June 1943. Even before his assignment, he had produced a recommendation for ship camouflage, a clear indication of his interest in the subject.¹¹ In Vancouver, he took the course with another Canadian artist, Clare Bice.¹² Subsequently, the school retained Macdonald on its instructional staff until September 1944, during which time he was sent to a field security course at the Royal Military College in Kingston, Ontario. The death of his business partner uncle and subsequent problems with the family business led Macdonald to apply for a compassionate discharge in July 1944. This was denied but he was granted compassionate leave without pay beginning in September 1944. Macdonald again requested discharge in March 1945, which was granted in May.¹³

We know the details of Macdonald’s military career because Library and Archives Canada has

Track discipline, an essential camouflage technique for minimizing the risk of detection by aerial observation, was taught at the Camouflage School. This reminder of its necessity was photographed in the Vancouver or Victoria area.

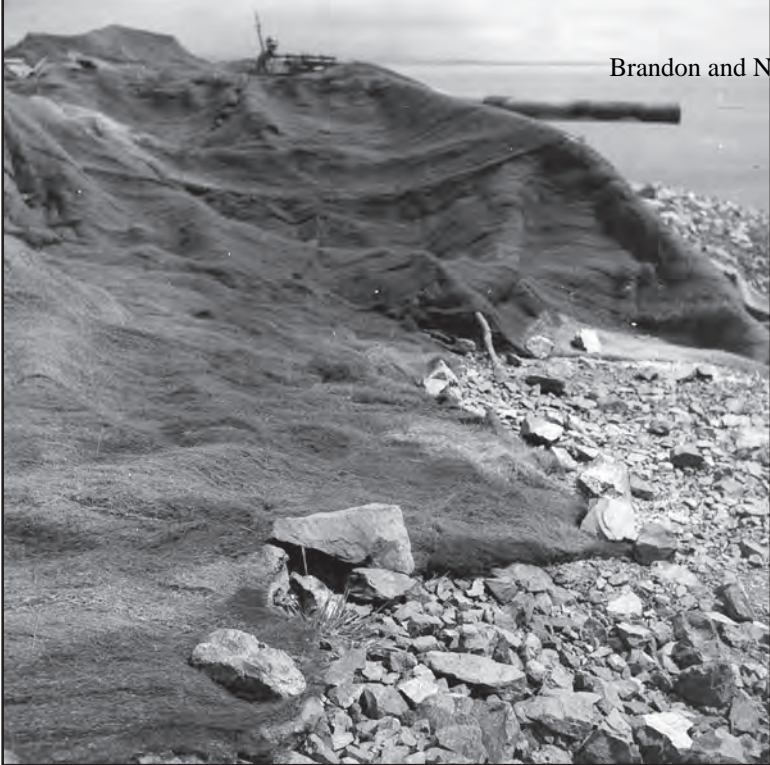
retained his military personnel records. But how do we reconstruct his work with camouflage? Fortunately, his descendants have preserved a number of paintings from this period along with an illustrated notebook that he may have retained from his own studies but probably developed for use as an instructional aid as it is not marked as other students’ notebooks are.¹⁴ The wirebound sketchbook contains detailed notes on camouflage techniques and, on every page, exquisite renderings in coloured pencil of camouflage theory supplemented by examples. Probably little is truly original in the book. The Canadian War Museum has custody of the No.1 Camouflage School papers of Cleeve Horne, a well-known Canadian sculptor and portrait painter.¹⁵ The many photographs and manuals, marked exercises, and course notes in this collection show where Macdonald got his material. Examples from the course outlines and exercises in Horne’s papers, for instance, are reproduced in the sketchbook. Macdonald also used local defence installations as subjects for his sketches, since the camouflage of coastal defences formed part of the courses taught at the Camouflage School.¹⁶ The drawings illustrate the general principles of camouflage for these defences, while Horne’s photographs record the application of these techniques to specific installations in and around Esquimalt. The photographs, manuals, and exercises in the Horne collection, however, are not as engaging as Macdonald’s colourful and sometimes quixotic renditions. His notebook is an exceptional product of this school.

Evan Macdonald clearly enjoyed camouflage. His portrait of *Corporal Hudson in Camouflage*



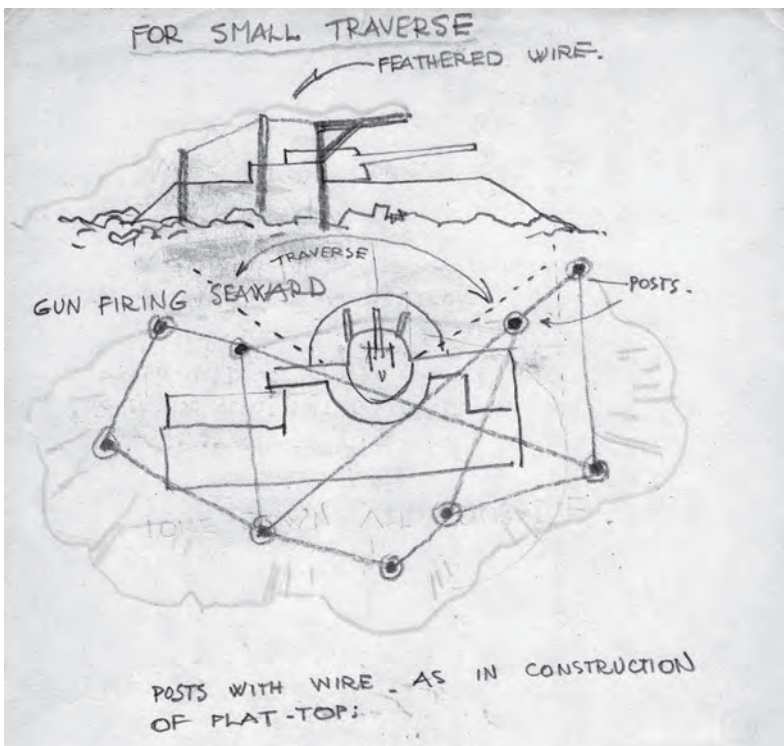
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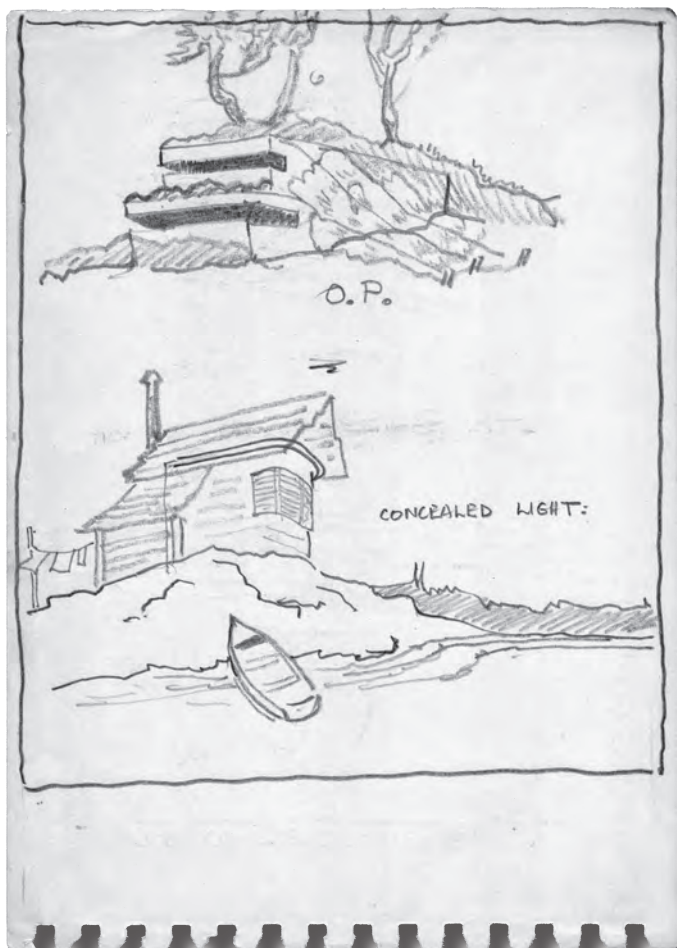
Above left & Above right: A camouflaged 6-inch gun, probably at Mary Hill Battery, Esquimalt, from the Horne Collection. Camouflage of coastal defences formed part of the curriculum at the Camouflage School.

Right: This drawing by Evan Macdonald depicts the installation of camouflage netting for a coastal defence gun. Evan Macdonald, *Camouflage notebook illustrations*, Collection of Evan Macdonald Estate.



Below: An unidentified installation, possibly the central Fire Command post at Triangle Mountain in the Esquimalt area. Less probably, this is the Battery Command or Observation Post at Christopher Point.

Left: Camouflage for observation posts and searchlights, as depicted by Macdonald. Evan Macdonald, *Camouflage notebook illustrations*, Collection of Evan Macdonald Estate.



CWM 20010021-016 #7





Evan Macdonald, *Corporal Hudson in Camouflage*, 1944.
[see front cover for full colour image.]

Collection of Evan Macdonald Estate.

from his time in Vancouver shows the sitter in camouflage paint surrounded by greenery, his uniform supplemented by an extensive “garnish” of leaves. A 1943 self-portrait completed in the same city speaks to different aspirations. In this painting, the influence of one First World War artist he admired is very evident.¹⁷ The bravura paint handling, the arrangement of the figure in the composition, and the artist’s direct gaze owe a debt to the great Irish portraitist, Sir William Orpen. Looking at this painting, one can only wonder what Evan Macdonald might have achieved had the Canadian War Records Committee appointed him a war artist rather than send him to camouflage school. We will never know.

Notes

The authors would like to thank Judith Nasby, Director and Curator at the Macdonald Stewart Art Centre, Guelph, for bringing Evan Macdonald’s sketchbook to their attention, as well as Dawn Owen, Assistant Curator, Macdonald Stewart Art Centre, for her assistance with obtaining scans of the sketchbook and providing other references. They would also like to thank Flora Macdonald Spencer, Evan Macdonald’s daughter, for her assistance and support, and Dr. Roger Sarty of Wilfrid Laurier University for his assistance with identifying the locations and subjects of the photographs from the Arthur Edward Cleeve Horne Collection at the Canadian War Museum.

1. Department of Veterans Affairs Service Interview Summary, 18 May 1945, Evan Weekes Macdonald personnel file; Flora Spencer, “Evan Macdonald: from Memory,” in *Evan Macdonald: A Retrospective* (Guelph, ON: Macdonald Stewart Art Centre, 1986), 9.
2. See, for instance, Macdonald to Officer Commanding, Camouflage Wing, A-6 CETC, Vancouver, BC, 10 July 1944, Macdonald personnel file.
3. Ingrid Jenkner, “The Painter from Guelph,” in *Evan Macdonald: A Retrospective*, 2-3.
4. *Ibid.* Evan Macdonald, *George Sydney Smith, the Air Gunner*, 1942, oil on canvas, 111.8 x 86.4 cm (44 x 34 inches). Gift of the Members of the 1944-45 Short Course, Wireless School, RCAF, Guelph, 1945, University of Guelph Collection at the Macdonald Stewart Art Centre.
5. In a 7 January 1943 letter to a Captain Bowser for the attention of Major-General P.J. Montague, the senior officer at Canadian Military Headquarters in London, England, Canadian High Commissioner Vincent Massey’s private secretary, George Ignatieff, attached an undated

Evan Macdonald, *George Sydney Smith, The Air Gunner*, 1942. [see back cover for full colour image.]

Collection of Evan Macdonald Estate.



- memorandum that confirmed that Prime Minister Mackenzie King had agreed to the formation of an official war artist program. Ignatieff to Bowser, 7 January 1943, Library and Archives Canada, RG 24, vol.12184, file 1/artists/1 (War Artists – Policy).
6. Memorandum, Major-General R.O. Alexander, Inspector General (Army) to Adjutant General, 20 March 1943; Memorandum, Brigadier D.J. Macdonald, District Officer Commanding Military District No. 1, to Secretary, Department of National Defence, 29 March 1943, Macdonald personnel file.
 7. Memorandum, A. Fortescue Duguid to Chairman, Canadian War Artists Selection Committee, 29 March 1943, Macdonald personnel file.
 8. Personnel Selection Record, 20 January 1943, Macdonald personnel file. It is worth noting that in addition to recommending Macdonald for consideration as a war artist, Duguid had also suggested he be considered for the Camouflage School.
 9. See materials in the Arthur Edward Cleeve Horne Collection, including “Camouflage Notes for R.C.A.S.C.,” and “M.T. Concealment Camouflage wing A5,” 15 February 1943. 20010021-006, 58C 3 19, file 7, George Metcalf Archival Collection, Canadian War Museum (CWM).
 10. Personnel Selection Record, Macdonald personnel file.
 11. Major-General H.F.G. Letson, Adjutant-General, to District Officer Commanding, Military District No. 1, 10 April 1943; Brigadier D.J. Macdonald to Secretary, DND, 29 March 1943, Macdonald personnel file.
 12. CGS to various recipients, “3rd, 4th and 5th Courses – Camouflage,” 28 April 1943, Macdonald personnel file.
 13. Personnel Selection Record; Dunbar, Goetz, and Dunbar to Private Evan W. Macdonald, 3 May 1944; Application for Discharge, 11 July 1944; Major-General H.F.G. Letson, Adjutant-General, to GOC-in-C, Pacific Command, 14 September 1944; Major-General A.E. Walford, Adjutant-General, to District Officer Commanding, Military District No. 1, 8 December 1944, Macdonald personnel file.
 14. Evan Macdonald, *Camouflage notebook illustrations*, 1943, Graphite and coloured pencil on paper, 9.0 x 15.0 cm (3 1/2 x 6 inches). Collection of Evan Macdonald Estate.
 15. Arthur Edward Cleeve Horne Collection, 20010021-003, George Metcalf Archival Collection, CWM.
 16. See, for instance, entries in “Lieut. J.A.E. Bennett, Camouflage Course,” 20010021-006, 58C 3 20, file 28, George Metcalf Archival Collection, CWM.
 17. Evan Macdonald, *Corporal Hudson in Camouflage*, 1944, oil on canvas; Evan Macdonald, *Self-Portrait, School of Camouflage*, 1943, oil on board 61.0 x 50.8 cm (24 x 20 inches). Collection of Byron and Flora Spencer.

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Evan Macdonald: A Painter's Life
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Evan Macdonald, *Farm In Guelph Township*, c. 1950 (oil on masonite, detail)
Gift of Ron and Janet Mullin, 2003, Macdonald Stewart Art Centre Collection.