

2010

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Recommended Citation

Laura Brandon "Canada Mourns the Loss of Three Respected War Artists." Canadian Military History 19, 1 (2010)

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Canada Mourns the Loss of Three Respected War Artists

Laura Brandon

Jack Nichols (1921-2009) Naval Artist

Jack Nichols, Canada's foremost Second World War naval artist, died on 23 October 2009 in Toronto. Born in Montreal on 16 March 1921, he was orphaned at an early age and received no formal education after the age of 15. In art, he was largely self-taught. His mentors were Louis Mühlstock, a Montreal artist, and Frederick Varley of the Group of Seven. In 1943, he joined the Merchant Navy, and served on ships both on the Great Lakes and in the Caribbean. Later that year the National Gallery of Canada commissioned him to produce some drawings of his Caribbean experiences which led, in turn, to his appointment as an official war artist in the Royal Canadian Naval Reserve (RCNVR) in February 1944. After training on the east coast, he sailed for England, arriving just in time to participate in the D-Day landings on 6 June. Before returning to England, he spent some time in the area around Caen in Normandy. By August 1944, he had returned to sea, and was present at the attempted evacuation of Brest. Here the Canadian destroyer HMCS *Iroquois* and several British vessels attacked and destroyed a German convoy attempting to make

an escape. At some point during this episode Nichols was injured and he subsequently spent time in England before returning to Canada. He was demobilized in October 1946 having produced an official total of 29 works on paper and nine oils on canvas for the Canadian War Records.

In an interview he commented that what impressed him greatly during his naval war service was the way in which a ship's crew could move about silently with no light, and without getting lost.¹ The artist was well aware that the restrictions regarding illumination and noise were related to safety and to survival, so how did he convey this in his work? Essentially what he did, especially in the case of the works on paper, was to remove colour altogether and, in the paintings, to darken his palette so much so that it is hard to identify details in the works. In other words, he sacrificed clarity in the interests of a truthful record of what it was like to be on board a ship in war conditions. In doing this, he produced work that is utterly different from that of his naval war artist colleagues.

Loading Gun during Action at Sea is a good example of a painting completed in this manner.² The

figures emerge only partially from an all-encompassing gloom fitfully illuminated by a misty full moon and the light of gunfire. The information about what exactly is going on in the composition is obscure for the viewer, but the imagery is compelling. One senses the tension, the fear, and the commitment to the task at hand. In an interview published in the *Ottawa Citizen* on 11 April 1998, Nichols remarked on his work of this time. He noted that he "could not imagine introducing sunlight."³

In his search for the essential experience of the war at sea Nichols also made use of his viewers' ability to reference other areas of knowledge as a route to understanding the human emotions associated with this experience. His primary tool was Christian iconography. In several compositions, it can be argued that any comprehension of the fear and agony of the protagonists derives in part from an understanding of these emotions as manifested in the visual subject matter of the Christian faith. The scene in his large-scale drawing, *Taking Survivors on Board*, previously titled by the artist *Rescue at Sea*, recalls images of the Descent from the Cross with the wounded Christ figure spread-eagled mid-composition, mourners, commiserators, and helpers around him.⁴ In Nichols's war-time paintings, many of the emotions of sorrow, fear, concern, and loss of life are intensified through

Canadian War Museum (CWM) 19710261-4294



Head of a Wounded Soldier Crying
by Jack Nichols

CWM 19710261-3129



Flight Lieutenant Charles W. Fox, DFC and Bar
by Robert Hyndman

CWM 19850388-003



Hornet Scramble
by Tom Bjarnason

CWM 19710261-4283



Action Aboard HMCS Iroquois

by Jack Nichols

closely to familiar masculine military stereotypes. Consider, for example, *Head of a Wounded Soldier Crying*.⁵ In this simple but emotion-laden small portrait drawing Nichols uniquely presents us with a sailor in pain. Here is no heroic stoicism, no romanticized endurance, but real and uncontrolled human agony.

Nichols's most powerful painting, completed in 1946, is *Drowning Sailor*.⁶ In this painting, which currently hangs in the Canadian War Museum, a terrified mariner clutches uselessly at the water as he is pulled down into its depths. His eyes bulge, his mouth is open in a scream, and his convulsed face is a portrait of abject terror. The glow that illuminates his contorted features is provided by light reflecting off the pools of oil on the water's surface, all that remains of the sunken ship.

It is apparent from these works that the artist felt that the rather abstract emotions of fear and pain needed to be recorded, and not simply the concrete details of a ship's structure and equipment, which might have been the accepted option for an official naval artist. It is this uniquely affective element, and the simple power of his imagery, that makes Nichols's war work unusual in comparison to his peers. Thus, that sailors feared death and drowning, and that an integral part of shipboard life was cold, misery, darkness, and claustrophobia, is awesomely evoked. The range of human psychological states not touched upon by more traditional artists, is carried in these works of art through solely and, sometimes, very familiar visual means. As such the works provide an important bank of evidence as

Taking Survivors on Board

by Jack Nichols

CWM 19710261-4312



a visual association with the Christian theme.

By showing men crying in the face of death and dying, some of

Nichols's work provides an important alternative to the more traditional portrayals of Canada's Second World War servicemen that conform more

to the emotions experienced in the everyday life of Canadian sailors in war time. In particular, unlike a majority of Canada's Second World War art works from any service, they address the issue of death as well as its surrounding effects. As such, Nichols's compositions are invaluable tools in expanding our understanding of wartime naval personnel's universe of experience.

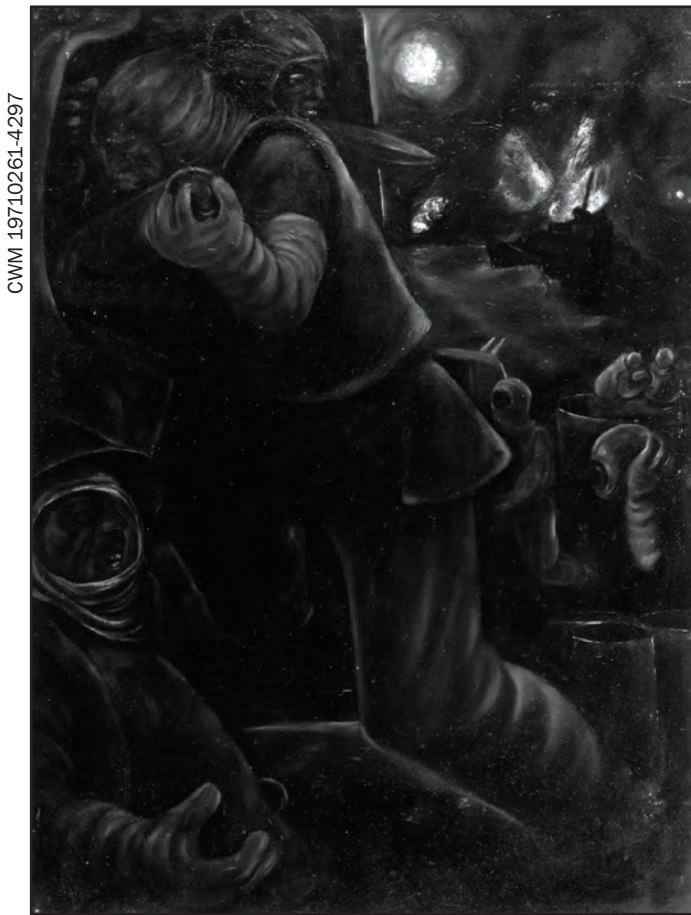
Nichols's Second World War work was well-received in Canada. Following the conflict, he applied for and won a Guggenheim Fellowship to study in Mexico in 1947. Consistent in his enthusiasms, he noted in his application: "My basic interest and subject matter is people . . . together with their environment."⁷ In 1956-7, a government grant enabled him to study lithography in France. Shortly thereafter, in 1958, his work was exhibited at the prestigious Venice

Biennale. In 1982, the Sarnia Public Library and Art Gallery organized a touring retrospective of his work. In a letter to the exhibition curator, Nichols wrote that he had ceased to paint and draw in 1964 and to exhibit in 1971.⁸ In 1998, the Canadian War Museum organized a touring exhibition of his war drawings entitled *Memento Mori*. Nichols attended the opening in Ottawa and viewed his wartime work for the first time since 1946. He never saw it again.⁹

Notes

1. Author's interview with Jack Nichols in Toronto, 2 November 1995, Canadian War Museum (CWM) Artist File, Nichols, Jack
2. Jack Nichols, *Loading Gun during Action at Sea*, undated, oil on canvas, 60.9 x 45.8

- cm, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, CWM 19710261-4297
3. Shannon Rupp, "Dark memories," *Ottawa Citizen*, 11 April 1998, H1
4. Jack Nichols, *Taking Survivors on Board*, 1945, oil on canvas, 122 x 101.5 cm, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, CWM 19710261-4312
5. Jack Nichols, *Head of a Wounded Sailor Crying*, 1945, graphite and oil wash on paper, 23.9 x 21.1 cm, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, CWM 19710261-4294
6. Jack Nichols, *Drowning Sailor*, 1946, oil on canvas, 76.0 x 60.5 cm, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, CWM 19710261-4288
7. National Gallery of Canada Archives, correspondence with War Artists, 5.42-N, Nichols, J, copy in CWM artist file, Nichols, Jack
8. Jack Nichols to Marie Snopek, undated letter circa 1981, copy in CWM artist file, Nichols, Jack
9. This obituary is drawn from the author's previously published work on Jack Nichols including *Art or Memorial? The Forgotten History of Canada's War Art* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2006)



Loading Gun During Action at Sea
by Jack Nichols



Drowning Sailor
by Jack Nichols

Robert Hyndman (1915-2009) Aviation Artist

I knew Robert Hyndman through his war art. Yes, I met him on occasion and yes, we talked on the telephone, but our link was his commitment to the events of the Second World War in which he had participated and to the art that came out of that experience that is in the collection of the Canadian War Museum where I work. I have been at the museum for nearly 20 years and I don't think that in all that time a working day has gone by when I have not looked at a Robert Hyndman painting. Two are currently on view in the lobby. These I look at several times a day.

Robert Hyndman was a professionally trained painter and worked as an artist and teacher all his life. During the Second World War, he was a pilot with the Royal Canadian Air Force. He flew a highly manoeuvrable tin can with wings - the Spitfire - that its designer graced with a superb engine, the Merlin. Designed to kill the foe before he killed you, the Spitfire's agility may have offered mental protection but its fragility provided none that was physical. Many of Robert's friends and many tens of thousands more lost their aerial battles with the enemy - shot down, burned, eviscerated - killed in ways I choose not to imagine today. Indeed, his own squadron leader's aircraft exploded mid-sortie before his eyes and, terrified, Robert watched the hundreds of pieces fall to the ground thousands of feet below. After 155 sorties over the English Channel and France, he told me once that his appointment as a war artist saved his life. That may be so, but those that survived, like Robert, lived with the memory of a lost generation who would never return

CWM 19710261-6450



Dive Bombing V-1 Sites, France

by Robert Hyndman

CWM 19710261-6664



Gun and Site Alignment No.3 (F) Wing

by Robert Hyndman

to the maple groves, icy mountain streams, unspoiled beaches, and prairie farmland that was their Canadian home.

Until a few months before he died, Robert visited the museum

regularly to see his paintings. Sometimes he brought friends - both male and female. Most of his war paintings are portraits but several, as you see here today, depict events in Normandy in France during the

Invasion of Europe in 1944. Looking at his some 60 portraits he would talk of his subjects and of his encounters with them – he was meeting friends – and then, looking at the paintings of aircraft and flight, he would talk about the events of the war. Moving from the portraits to the Normandy paintings, his mood would change from cheerfully reminiscent to sad. I think he visited his paintings to remember and to honour.

This was characteristic of a man who believed in giving – to family, to friends, to students, and to his community. He continued to give to the museum too. He would find portrait sketches from the war buried in papers in his studio and phone up, or write a letter in his characteristic scrawl, asking if the museum wanted them for the collection. We always did. And he always could tell us something about his subjects. His war experiences and the people he met were etched in his memory. Even in recent years, an obituary and accompanying photograph could inspire a new portrait. For nearly 70 years, Robert Hyndman honoured a wartime Canadian generation in paint.

He included his fellow war artists. One of the portraits in the lobby is of the late Carl Schaefer, who also worked with the RCAF. No Canadian painters died in the Second World War, but they did face danger. As we know from the very recent tragic death of a young Canadian journalist in Afghanistan, those tasked with reporting and recording war in words and images do not always survive their assignments. In the case of the Schaefer portrait, however, there was a double honouring. Carl Schaefer was Robert Hyndman's teacher.

I shall miss talking to Robert and I shall miss his old-world courtesy. "Dear Lady," he always called me. I shall miss him because of what he remembered and could tell me about an era that shaped the

country and society I live in. Today, of all days, the air force motto has special meaning. *Per ardua ad astra* – "Through Adversity to the Stars". Now that adversity is behind you, Robert, I hope you are enjoying the stars. I'm sure you are – they make a good subject.

Eulogy delivered at Robert Hyndman's memorial service, 15 January 2010, Ottawa, Ontario.



Air Commodore J.E. Fauquier

by Robert Hyndman



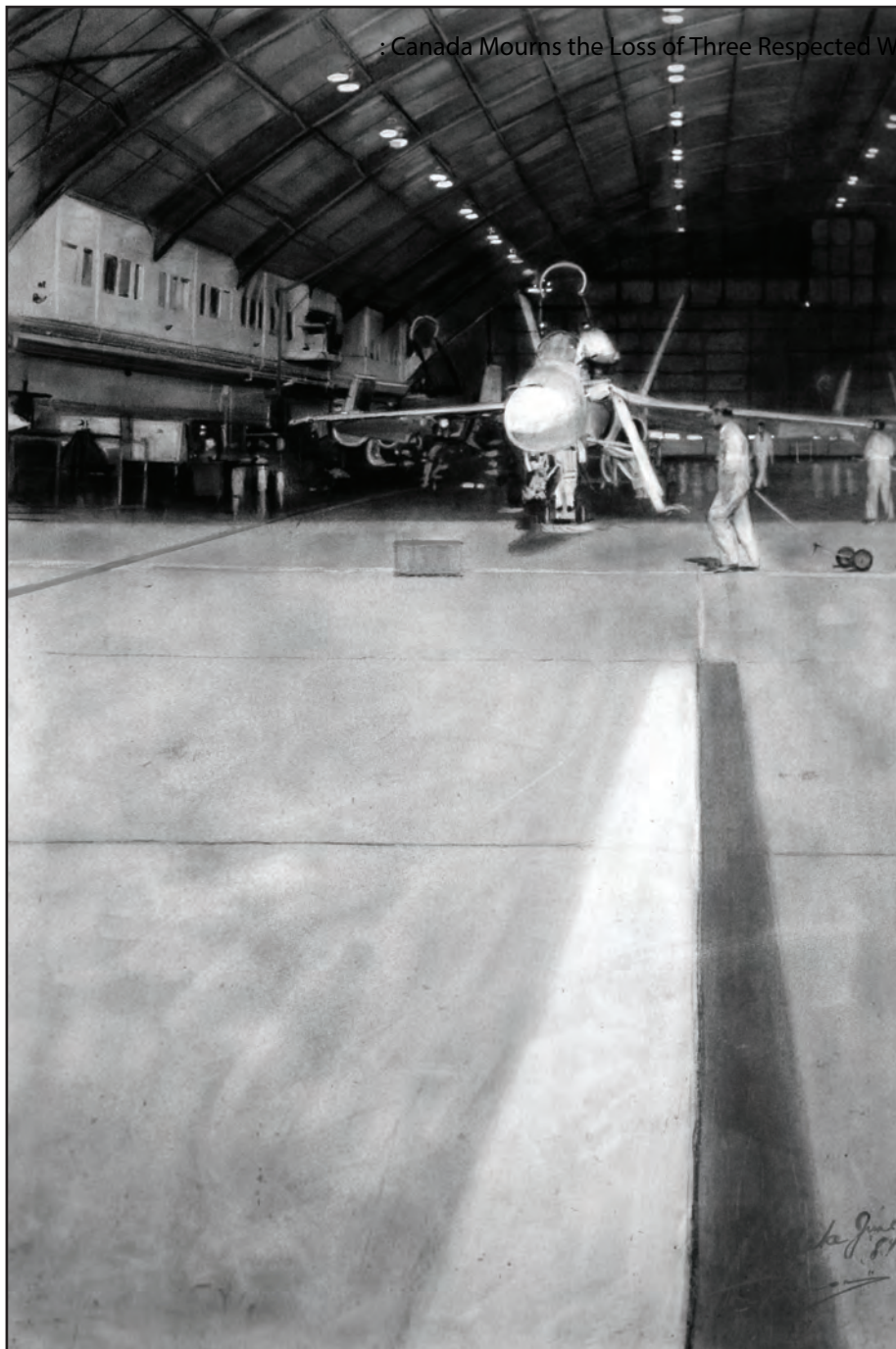
Leading Air Woman B.N.M. Stockton

by Robert Hyndman

Tom Bjarnason (1925-2009) Cold War Artist

Bjarni (Tom) Bjarnason, a two-time Canadian artist with the Canadian Armed Forces Artists Program (CAFCAP) died on 18 August 2009. Born in Winnipeg on 24 March 1925, he developed an enthusiasm for aircraft at the age of six, but his love of painting came from his artist mother. Poor eyesight made an air force career impossible so he joined the Canadian Army in 1943 and went overseas as a signaller in 1944. Following the war, he went to art school courtesy of Veterans' Charter funding and, subsequently, became a commercial illustrator. Regular depictions of aircraft published in *Weekend Magazine* brought his work to the attention of the CAFCAP program, founded in 1968 by the Department of National Defence in association with the National Gallery of Canada. In 1970, it sent him to West Germany to document Canada's air force presence there as a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO). His works from this assignment were completed in a distinctive mix of coloured inks and acrylic white paint. *CF-104 in Dispersal – Baden Soellingen* was one of his favourites "because it shows how these guys can fly no matter what kind of conditions there are."¹ In 1984, CAFCAP sent him on a second assignment to Cold Lake, Alberta where his preferred medium was pastel and his subject the CF-18 that had replaced the CF-104. "It was something I'll never forget," he said in a 2004 interview recalling his CAFCAP experiences. Remembering his introduction to aircraft at the age of six, he remarked, "touching the airplanes – that became a moment of magic." Three of Bjarnason's

CWM 19850388-001



Hornet Servicing

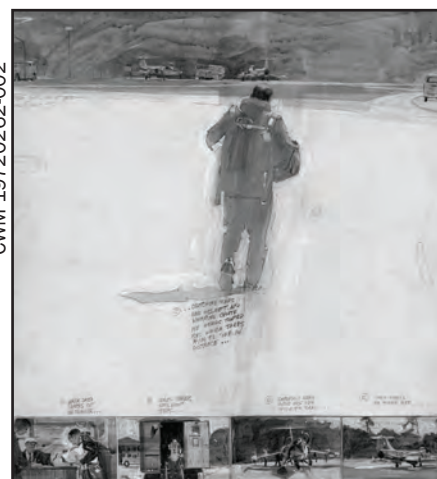
by Tom Bjarnason

CAFCAP compositions are included in the Canadian War Museum's current travelling war art exhibition *A Brush with War: Military Art from Korea to Afghanistan*.

Notes

1. Tom Bjarnason, *CF-104 in Dispersal* – Baden Soellingen, 1970, acrylic on cardboard, 46.7 x 68 cm, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum (CWM) 19720262-003. All the quotations are from an interview with Tom Bjarnason conducted by Mai-yu Chan on 1 Sept. 2004, CWM, George Metcalf Archival Collection, Canadian Oral History Program, 31D 5 Bjarnason.

CWM 19720262-002



Baden Soellingen 1970

by Tom Bjarnason

Laura Brandon is Historian, Art and War, at the Canadian War Museum. She is the author of *Art or Memorial? The Forgotten History of Canada's War Art* (University of Calgary Press, 2006).

A Squadron of CF-104's in Readiness

by Tom Bjarnason

CWM 19720262-001

