

1995

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Recommended Citation

Mackie, Mary "Charles Comfort: Soldiering Artist 1943–1945." Canadian Military History 4, 1 (1995)

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Charles Comfort

Soldiering Artist 1943-1945

Mary Mackie

Charles Fraser Comfort at 43 thought he was too old to go to war. "It's a little embarrassing...when lieutenants are usually 20 or 21," said Lieutenant Comfort after leaving University of Toronto's Faculty of Art to report to Stanley Barracks.

A younger, less enriched mind could not have created the hundreds of paintings now in the Canadian War Museum. Few military historians have brought to life the landscapes and sounds of battle as did Comfort in his book, *Artist at War*.

This book, created from his war diaries, is the subject of this tribute to Charles Comfort who died 5 July 1994 in National Defence Medical Centre, Ottawa. His book illuminates the Canadian Army's odyssey from England to North Africa; their landing at Taranto Bay, Italy; then the long dusty and/or muddy roads to Campobasso, the Liri Valley, the Moro River, Ortona – names that still invoke awe.

Let's join 1st Canadian Division as it hurtles along a two-lane black-top highway "not unlike No. 2 in Ontario" thought Comfort, standing like the other soldiers in an open truck. The grape harvest was on. Bunches, sweet and lush, were thrown to them as they came to Bari. In the Middle Ages, Bari was the point of contact between the Latin world and the Levant. "In the crypt of the cathedral is a madonna from Constantinople, said to have been painted by St. Luke himself," wrote Comfort. But the army convoy roars past this as

Opposite: Captain Charles F. Comfort painting in the ruins of a house near Ortona, Italy, March 1944.

NAC PA 128286

well as the ancient (216 B.C.) battlefield of Cannae where the Pincer Movement was used by Hannibal against the Romans; the same tactic the Canadians were hoping to use to reach Rome.

Youthful merriment died down as the trucks turned away from the sea to the Tavoliere plains, "as flat as Saskatchewan", its grainfields one of the Allied objectives. At Gambatsea, they heard enemy gunfire for the first time.

Near Riccia, they turned up a steep stony grade to a huddle of ill-kept farm buildings, now Main 40, headquarters of 1st Canadian Division. There, in a thicket of woods, Comfort discovered Sam Hughes, Canadian Army historian, in a tarpaulin lean-to, a rough sign stuck in the ground: "Hist. Sec." This was Comfort's unit.

First Canadian Field Historical Section (Officer Commanding, Eric Harrison) directed artists and historians in the recording of the events of World War Two. They came directly under Lieutenant-General Crerar, and later Lieutenant-General Burns. Of this period, Harrison wrote, "For weeks [Comfort] existed – more exposed on occasion than the fighting men themselves, sharing precarious space between mud and canvas with the sons of two famous fathers, Sam Hughes (historian) and Lawren Harris (artist). I found myself marvelling at his ability to stand still at his portable easel in weather too raw for me to do anything but move about in an effort to stir the circulation"

With the 2nd Field Regiment at Oratino, Comfort describes an "Uncle" barrage: a Divisional shoot in which every available gun fires 81 rounds and "the night cracks open." In only 30 lines, Comfort gives colours, sounds, human

imagery, Canadian history and biblical relevance until this scene makes understandable a following scene in which soldiers crumble into tears—not in battle—but on hearing a young Italian soprano with 'cello accompaniment sing “Ave Maria.” Comfort is a master of evocative contrast.

While still axle-deep in yellow mud at Campobasso, the artists are ordered by General Montgomery to show their paintings. And so on a wet cheerless morning in early November 1943, Will Ogilvie and Charles Comfort opened the first exhibition of paintings in a theatre of war, within sounds of battle.

Fifty-four paintings were hung in the re-christened “Beaver Club,” formerly a Fascist Youth Centre. Comfort was astonished when soldiers, who he thought would have other things in mind for a rest day, “simply surged in, in a great mob... The paintings were all field sketches in water colour covering the Sicilian and Italian campaigns to that date.” Knots of men assembled around the paintings, carrying on animated discussions, recalling personal experiences at a particular location, discussing the merits of the paintings. A total of 3,137 men of all ranks visited the show that day. One of the 54 paintings must have been “Stand Easy Following Crash Action, Northwest of Campobasso, Italy.”

The approach-march to the Ortona battle-line took the convoy three days, the men happily innocent that they were moving toward the grimmest action of the Italian campaign. Many times, Comfort would recall their “headlong optimism.” 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade had crossed the Sangro River so they thought a week, maybe 10 days, should see them at Pescara; then, with a pincer movement, through the mountains to Rome.

But the rains came. As they made camp in yet another olive grove, Comfort is filled with anger: German bulldozers had used centuries-old, *live* olive trees to block their advance. They were then one mile south of the epic struggle in the Moro Valley.

German artillery shells screamed over the artists' heads as they lay quaking in a shallow slit trench where they had “scuttled into the earth with the speed of frightened beetles,” staying there

until they felt “as grey as the dawn when it came.” “You guys still alive?” someone yelled. “Barely,” responded the artists. Comfort found it difficult to convey any impression of the frightening strain of continuous exposure to shell-fire.

Charles at his easel came under swift bombing attack one day. Within 90 seconds, four enemy fighters came over; then “Bofors, Oerlikons, Brens, tracers—everything—went up to meet them” and it was over. “I glanced about me and turned once more to my painting. But the physical and nervous exhaustion had dulled my perceptive faculties.” Normally, he painted in quietly intense communion with his subject. Now this was impossible. “As I worked, the fury of the bombardment opened up with renewed vigour... a violent accompaniment to painting.” Comfort is giving the first clue to his own battle injuries, hidden, as every soldier knows.

“But artists had painted war before, even if not from inside the storm itself as we were attempting to do. I felt equal to the task, in fact I felt supremely aware. But today I was tired... it was not inspired painting. It contained none of the feeling of holocaust which I associated with the location and of which I was most painfully conscious; it was empty, drained of content, even as I myself.”

The test of an artist is how fully he can open his mind to the subject he wants to paint. Amid violent surroundings, the artist has no defence. The full extent of Comfort's pain—and perhaps the vulnerability of all war artists—may not be known until the year 2019 when his complete diaries are released to the public. Nevertheless, Comfort's “Canadian 5.5 inch Guns” was painted on the eve of crossing the Moro River to San Leonardo.

Ortona gleamed in the distance as 1st Brigade led off, 48th Highlanders to the west, Royal Canadian Regiment to the east, through a bridgehead held by the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment. The artists, watching from a hedgerow, saw the pastoral scene erupt in “gigantic and preposterous sound... from warm sunlight into roaring darkness, as the Saskatchewan Light Infantry went into action just to the right of the artists, with German Schmeissers replying.”



Canadian Field Guns near Ortona

CWM 12246

Military histories equal the word-paintings of Charles Comfort describing firepower that “tossed earth and trees into the air” until that universal soldier’s prayer bursts from him: “Jesus Christ! How long can it go on!” Yet out of that terrible day came his “Canadian Field Guns Near Ortona.” To do it, he chose to stand 30 feet behind one of the medium gun sites as the gun crew under camouflage nets prepared for zero hour. As firing commenced, a “flower-like, pink-edged flame – a shocking, numbing sound and concussion” jumped Comfort’s equipment clear off the ground.

With Lawren Harris Jr., he spent two days with the heavy anti-aircraft guns and the penetrating shock of the 3.7 inch guns. After a two-hour barrage, Comfort found all sounds to

be feeble and vague. He doubted if he would ever hear normally again.

Christmas 1943 at Ortona is revealed, with the artist’s eye, in contrasts: foreground against background, with irony. The general scene is “life and its monuments which disappeared before our eyes as the deafening voice of guns beat a massive dirge like all the unmuffled drums of hell” while in the foreground are the Seaforths and Edmontons “in medieval, close-quarter violence, at the throats of the German paratroopers.” More quickly, he describes the jagged background noise of battle; foreground, “the sad throaty resonance of unaccompanied male voices singing ‘Silent Night.’”

Background repeated: only 300 yards away are active enemy machine-gun posts, mortar bombs, shells of every calibre; foreground: in the parish church near Piazza Vittoria, the Canadians eat Christmas dinner, a platoon at a time.

Again, even quicker: “Extra close shellbursts gave rise to defiant shouts and renewed carol singing.” Yet again, the detail finer: “Beer, plum pudding, orange nuts...then back to the battle.”

By request, he put on an art show for 15 doctors of 2nd Field Dressing Station. Lit by a powerful vertical ray on a white operating table, he propped paintings one by one against a pillow for his appreciative audience.

Italian mud changed to ice, a winter “uniformly miserable. The Abruzzi coastal plain has a penetratingly damp chill climate.” Then in late April 1944 after four months in Ortona, 1st Canadian Division moved into even more savage battles around Cassino and in the Liri Valley. Deftly, Comfort illuminates the Canadian soldier by this anecdote: “We were ordered to remove all identifying marks...to pass through Campobasso incognito” so that no enemy agents could report the Canadian withdrawal from the Adriatic.

“It will be recalled,” wrote Comfort, “that Campobasso had been liberated by the Canadians in October 1943 and for two months had been a Canadian rest centre re-named ‘Maple Leaf City’. Canadians...had been liked for their frank directness and honesty, for their generosity which had been expressed in so many ways.”

“The convoy descended the hill, passed under the great buttress of rock on which the Castello Monforte stands, and entered the town. Almost immediately, cries of ‘*Il Canadese! Buon Canadese!*’ rose from the populace and spread like wildfire through the streets. They waved from sidewalks, balconies and windows. It was a triumphal homecoming. For a while we remained silent. Obviously the cat was out of the bag and very soon we did the only thing possible—we waved and shouted back.”

Flowering trees, azalea, oleander, clematis lined the blacktop highway. Under a pitiless sun, mud is now hub-deep yellow dust as the 1st Canadian Division enters the Liri Valley via Monte

Cassino. Charles Comfort, now 44, was to look upon scenes which must have shaken the bedrock of his belief in art, human achievement, beauty.

“For sheer horror and utter devastation, I had not set eyes on its equal” he said of the ruins of the mountain-top monastery, Monte Cassino. “It resembled some imagined landscape on the moon...it had ceased to be terrestrial, the town itself was grotesque, stinking with unburied dead, desolation on all sides.”

The monastery, now a “lamentable ruin”, was to Comfort a lamp of learning which had burned for 1,400 years through the dark ages, only to be extinguished in the enlightened 20th century. The destruction of trees in full flower is used as a metaphor for young life suddenly cut off: the disaster of the human sacrifice taking place in the Liri Valley. No tree, shrub or bush escaped on the Cassino-Pignataro Road.

Some critics have commented upon what they see as a lack of psychological impact in his war paintings, which have a dignity, coolness, and beauty never muddied by fixations upon the grotesque. There is, in this cool sense of distance, subtle evidence perhaps that some form of mental, arm’s length protection was needed if the artist were to survive the war sane; for Comfort never flinched from his duty as he saw it, to be there, recording the agonies and triumphs of the Canadian Army in Italy.

The Adolf Hitler Line was a ragged line of poplars a mile from the artist’ vantage point. It was a series of powerful defensive points extending from Monte Cairo in the east, through the towns of Aquino, Pontecorvo, to Arunci in the west. Each point or Panzerturm was a miniature fort of concrete surrounded by intricate barbed wire, then minefields, tank ditches, and built-in machine-gun pillboxes sited to bring down interlocking crossfire on every line of approach. In addition, there were mobile anti-tank guns, mortar platoons and panzer tanks. “No one underestimated the power of the line we were attacking...it would be the toughest battle Canadians had ever faced in any war.”

When the entire 5th Canadian Armoured Division passed through to engage a full panzer division, the Hitler Line was breached. Comfort



Destroyed Panzertrum on the Adolf Hitler Line

examined one of the strong points. "One gun created a fantastic sight, sticking perpendicularly up into the air...memorializing the disasters of war. A direct hit had detonated its magazine...tearing the whole turret from its casemate, tossing it into the air...a vast, inert steel probe blindly challenging the heavens. All about the battlefield were derelict tanks...14 confronting this one weapon..." This scene near Pontecorvo is remembered in his "Destroyed Panzerturm on the Adolf Hitler Line." But the soldiers are more dominant in his best known painting, "The Hitler Line." It is shown on the cover of *Artist at War* (and in the Autumn 1994 issue of *Canadian Military History*, p.96).

Monte Cassino's ruin had shaken Comfort profoundly. He expressed his grief in metaphor: the dead of Pontecorvo "pressed into grotesque corrugations describing the dreadful shapes and pressures of the masonry that had crushed them...in a most depressed state of mind, I set

up my equipment to one side of the great Roman road built 2400 years before to connect south Italy to Rome, and sketched what was left of the town." Out of this came "Route 6 at Cassino." (On back cover)

The affable lieutenant of 1943 – now Major Comfort – was hurting. The Canadians had breached the fearsome Hitler Line but "many a wonderful and sensitive boy" had gone forever. Comfort had the added problem of having made pilgrimage to Italy's art treasures only five years earlier and, now, of seeing so much of it ravaged.

News on 5 June 1944 of the fall of Rome was received with quiet satisfaction, not the wild enthusiasm they imagined six months before in their merry, headlong optimism. But at 0800 hours on 6 June 1944, great excitement did break out as the German radio admitted the start of the invasion of Normandy.

Comfort went to Rome and among his insights, he gives us a wrenching portrait of the battle-weary survivors of the Royal 22nd Régiment, the famous Van Doos, their marching boots sending waves of sound up to the dome of St. Peter's Cathedral, as they attended a special Vatican High Mass. This Comfort also painted.

At this point, Comfort was ordered – like many other Canadian soldiers – to return to England and join the forces in Northwest Europe. It was “only a year” that he had been in Italy; “it seemed like a decade.”

For the last time, he sat in “E” mess. To the Divisional Quartermaster, he turned in his web, pistol, ammunition, helmet, and felt “shorn and naked.” Many warm friendly leaves included a visit to General Chris Vokes who mentioned the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal. He may have known that Comfort designed it.

Then, with subtle dignity, Major Charles Fraser Comfort drops a hint about his own battle exhaustion. The Dakota aircraft, at sunset, was carrying him out over the Atlantic toward England

and a new campaign. He looks down and simply says, “This same great ocean touches Canada's shores...there was profound solace in the thought.”

Sources

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Mary Mackie, a resident of Pender Island, B.C., has an avid interest in Canadian Military History, especially as it relates to the Dieppe raid.