

WWII museum displays Nashua soldier's 'visual diary'

By Kathleen Burge Globe Staff, October 17, 2015, 6:00 p.m.



Charles J. Miller's sketches of soldiers during World War II, at the Wright Museum in Wolfeboro, N.H. PHOTOS/WRIGHT MUSEUM OF WORLD WAR II/WRIGHT MUSEUM OF WORLD WAR II.

During the 3½ years he fought in World War II, Charles J. Miller sketched nearly 700 scenes of a soldier's life. He drew the familiar horrors — the firefights, the destruction, the wounded carried back from battle — but also the less documented moments: the boredom, the distraction, even silliness.

Miller, who lived in Nashua and died in 1994 at 88, spent much of his service in the South Pacific. One of his drawings, now on exhibit at the [Wright Museum of World War II](#) in Wolfeboro, N.H., shows soldiers dashing for cover after an air alert. Miller and his battery had been warned that an unidentified aircraft was flying toward them. “The sergeant tells us to dive in the first fox hole we come to, we ain’t got time to look for our own,” Miller wrote on the drawing.

It was a false alarm; a US Navy pilot forgot to radio ahead. Later, Miller draws soldiers drinking “hooch” they mixed in an empty keg with swiped raisins, grapes, and coconut milk from trees in the Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands. The officers, mystified by the drunk men, eventually located the moonshine by its smell and dumped it into the ocean.

Miller’s art — he sketched, and later filled in his drawings with watercolors — has been on display only once before, on a smaller scale, at the [Currier Museum of Art](#) in Manchester, N.H. The Wright Museum is showing 83 of Miller’s sketches through Nov. 15. Miller wrote descriptions of what he witnessed on the sketches, creating a “visual diary,” as well as historical documents, said Michael Culver, the museum’s executive director, who transcribed Miller’s writing.

“He pictures moments of sheer terror, and then those moments in between when you’re just sort of waiting around,” Culver said.

Miller did not formally study drawing. He never made any money from his paintings and sketches. But art was the passion of his life.

In elementary school, he would later say, according to his family, his teachers sometimes chided him for drawing when he should have been working on math and history. He had to quit school after sixth grade to work in the cotton mill in Nashua with his parents, Lithuanian immigrants, to help support his family during the Depression. He taught himself to draw with art books he checked out from the public library. He never married, worrying that he would lose his freedom.

Miller sketched and painted six days a week, taking only Sundays off. He never charged for his work. During the war, he gave away his drawings to men who expressed interest. After he returned from the war, he spent time at Eisenberg's Deli on Nashua's Main Street, where he drew a seascape wall mural. He drew comics for customers.

"He came home and took menial jobs," Culver said. "As long as he had time to go and do his drawings, he was perfectly happy."

His family says he was friendly but not much of a talker. When he wasn't working as a janitor or sweeping streets, he was home painting. He didn't use fancy tools. After his death, his family found a child's watercolor set among his belongings.

For a while, his sister, Anna, held onto his sketches. When she died, she left them to Miller's nephew and niece. Miller's nephew called Culver and asked him to look at the work.

The sketches had not been matted or framed, but the family had kept them away from light, so Miller's brilliant colors were preserved. The museum had the sketches they displayed matted and framed.

Miller drew himself in some of his sketches, walking into the Army and Navy YMCA in Honolulu, the center of the soldiers' social life — "The place is almost jammed all day long," he wrote — or sitting in a foxhole beneath a palm tree in the South Pacific.

"You see what I saw," he said about his drawings.

He drew men — boys, really — lounging aimlessly, bare-chested, on the sunny deck of the USS Monrovia, an attack transport, as they headed to war, destination unknown. He drew the unlucky few who didn't move quickly enough out of the way of the sailors who hosed down the decks.

"There was no please will you move if you didn't move quick enough, you get it, like this bunch of guys did," he wrote on one sketch.

The soldiers arrived at the Marshall Islands, and began to file off the ship for the beginning of the successful assault that would later become known as the [Battle of Kwajalein](#).

“I noticed the embarkation officer most of the time had a grin or smile on him, mabe it was to make the boys think that its’ not that bad out there!!” Miller wrote.

Culver transcribed Miller’s writing, keeping his spelling as it was. The original spelling — he always spelled “invasion,” for instance, “invation” — preserves Miller’s voice, he believes.

Culver would like to see Miller’s work offered to other museums around the country, in exchange for a fee that would pay for the rest of his sketches to be matted and framed. Miller’s drawings and his descriptions skillfully show how soldiers in all wars try to bring normalcy into their lives in a deeply abnormal situation, he said.

“They don’t speak to just that generation,” he said. “They speak to every generation.”

The World War II Art of Private Charles J. Miller

At Wright Museum of World War II, Wolfeboro, N.H. Through Nov. 15.

603-569-1212, www.wrightmuseum.org

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