

**CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

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INTERVIEWEE: Laura Brandon

INTERVIEWER: Mai-yu Chan

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Laura Brandon

Interviewed 16 August 2005

By Mai-yu Chan

INTERVIEWER: Canadian War Museum Oral History Program Interview with Dr. Laura Brandon, Curator of War Art, Canadian War Museum on 16th of August, 2005 at the Canadian War Museum, in Ottawa, regarding the exhibition in the John McCrae Gallery: Shared Experience, Art and War. Interviewer: Mai-yu Chan.

Laura, we have both signed the Oral History Interview Release Form – is that correct?

BRANDON: Correct.

INTERVIEWER: Tell us the story behind the organization of this exhibit.

BRANDON: Well, it began when we sent an exhibition to Australia in 2001 called Battle Lines. The Canadian High Commission in Canberra approached us for an exhibition to commemorate the centenary of Australian federation in 2001. We had toured Battle Lines to England and, therefore, we knew it was a comprehensive show and capable of travelling. So, we sent it to the Australian War Memorial in Canberra in 2001. I went with it to give lectures and interviews and the usual stuff. Sometime after the show was hung, and I think before it opened, I had coffee with the director of the Australian War Memorial, Steve Gower, and he asked the question that is so often asked of one, “What next?”

At the time, we had Canvas of War travelling around Canada and I knew that the sixtieth anniversary of the Second World War was fast approaching in 2005. I said that I thought that the First World War collection had had its time in the sun and it was time that the Second World War collection garnered more attention. Now that we had experienced doing international shows, wouldn't it be wonderful if three art collections—the Canadian War Museum, the Imperial War Museum and the Australian War Memorial—got together and produced a Second World War commemorative show that showed that they were allies both in war and in art. And that this be an experiential show in that it showed that artists and soldiers were also allied in terms of how they experienced war and how they reacted to it.

This theme had really come about in terms of what I had discovered of how people wrote about Canvas of War and how they reacted to it. That they very much saw Canvas of War as a side of memory. That they very much empathized with the experiences that they saw there. That made it abundantly clear that the war art collection was more about experience than it was about documenting the conduct, the strategy of the war. So, that's where it started.

I pointed out to Steve that the War Museum would probably not be able to do this on its own because we were busy building a new building and he immediately said, well, they had the resources. That's basically what happened, is that he approached the two institutions and said that, as it had come up, he'd like to go with it. The Australian War Memorial was prepared to take on the project management of it and that's where it started.

INTERVIEWER: Tell us the selection process.

BRANDON: Well, when the project was taken on board, the three curators of the three institutions—the art curators—were hauled in to decide what should be included. We all made preliminary selections of about seventy works each—a fairly significant number. I should point out the three curators at that time were in, fact, myself in Canada, Lola Wilkins in Australia and at that point, Angela Weight, the long time keeper of art at the Imperial War Museum. We met in London with copies of the images we had selected and a rough approximation of where we were going with the themes, which were a little bit more extensive than the ones we ended up with, but still basically the same—work, service, and so on.

We laid all our images down on the floor of the boardroom at the Imperial War Museum—a carpeted boardroom – it was rather fun—and tried to put them into the themes that we had established in advance. We found out that the themes we'd established in advance didn't work, necessarily, and the works themselves determined the themes to a far greater extent. We basically chucked out sixty, seventy percent of what we'd brought over, and ended up with the seven themes, in the end, which we went with and basically didn't change.

The selection didn't change until we had a second meeting in Australia where it was pointed out that we had left out the biggest theme, which was battle. So, battle was put back in and we found that from our selection, we could basically put battle back in. It was rather a major gap, in retrospect. I think we were trying so hard to develop a new approach to looking at the war that we left out all the traditional ways of looking at it in our efforts to try and forge a new path.

Other things came into the selection that are probably very critical—if not more critical. One was the issue of excellence. We all agreed that we would not put any work in that we did not consider outstanding. That was a criteria that we weren't going to put to one side in the interest of balance. If we didn't have enough for a section, we weren't going to just balance it out with bad paintings.

The second criteria was that we weren't going to try to be even-handed in terms of artists. We knew that this would bring criticism if we put more than one work in by certain artists – that would show a certain favouritism, perhaps. But as we put the criteria of excellence above all, this would unfortunately result. Another criteria was the issue of the balance of events. While I think we were going for experience, we also were very well aware that the show had to work within the ambience of a conflict that had been pulled across the globe and had involved many different theatres.

This meant that, when you were looking at, say something like Belsen, we didn't want to go with more than three works. As it turned out, we had one from each country. But in balancing the theatres of war, that was one of the reasons why you sometimes ended up with many works by one artist in that their work was the best of that theatre for that – to be used. So, for example, Alex Colville turns up in more than one place as he produced some of the major works in different theatres.

The other criteria was that we decided we weren't going to limit ourselves simply to oil paintings. In most cases, we all recognized that oil paintings tended to be done after the fact and some of the more immediate and experiential works were done in the field. So, watercolours and works on paper were included. This was particularly important in the case of the British and the Canadian works where studies in the field, (particularly those of the British?) were their most major works and the most experiential that we could select from of those particular theatres.

Anyway, our selections didn't change a great deal. Anything that tended to change, things with works were sort of slid away into other projects as thing went along. Angela Weight was replaced by Roger Tolson. He basically worked with her selection and only made a few changes. He ended up writing the text for her selections.

INTERVIEWER: Tell us something about each of the paintings and their artists from the Canadian War Museum collection.

BRANDON: OK. Starting with Harold Beament. Harold Beament was a senior naval artist in the Second World War collection, because he had served in the First World War Canadian Navy. The work that was selected, *Ordnance Depot*, is extremely unusual for Beament and I don't think, unless you read the label, most people would really think it was a Beament, because most of his paintings were of ships – all events at sea. But one of the things that becomes clear in Beament's work as a whole is that he's fascinated by the effect of light. So, a number of his works show lightning over the sea or star shells bursting in the night sky at sea—northern lights at sea, for example.

So, the exploding ordnance depot is Beament working with a different form of light to make something dramatic of a subject that, in fact, wasn't at all dramatic when he started. The original sketch, which we weren't able to find, but was a photograph of it, shows the ordnance depot, with nothing exploding at all. I guess it was done in Newfoundland before he even went to sea or returned from sea. It's just a sort of rather boring landscape of a hut with some debris lying around it. But by adding the light from the explosions, Beament gives it a drama and an intensity.

The note on the description of the work says that he actually painted it in order to try and give the idea of an explosion in an ordnance depot because that was something that was experienced – something that was experienced in the Second World War. The artist received instructions from the historians. They were encouraged to paint certain things. Quite clearly, this was a subject that Beament was asked to paint in order to document that particular kind of Second World War experience.

Molly Lamb Bobak is represented by two works. Molly Lamb Bobak did not go overseas until after the Second World War ended. She was the only official woman war artist. She had been in the Canadian Women's Army Corps, so she was an experienced soldier. She was very much in tune with women's experiences in wartime, which pitted her in an exemplary fashion to depict their overseas, and in Canada, experiences. The two works that are included is—one is the portrait of *Private Roy*, a black woman canteen worker that may or may not have been painted in Halifax or may or may not have been painted in Hamilton. It shows Private Roy, her arms crossed, behind a counter in the canteen. It's one of the best portraits we have in the war art collection.

The other one is a painting of the last—the first – wedding in Apeldoorn of the Kit Kat Club. One of the interesting things that comes up with putting these paintings on display is that more history emerges. At the moment, there is evidence that has been presented that identifies who the couple were that were being married in this particular wedding. We're waiting to find out how they respond to reproduction of the painting for a final confirmation that it was indeed their wedding, because one of the problems we have with the war art collection is that you get an awful lot of oral testimony in terms of the subjects of the paintings, which is sometimes hard to substantiate through other sources. So, to add it to the record—it is not taken as substantial evidence until we have a secondary piece of evidence.

Miller Brittain was a bomb aimer in the RCAF and became a war artist with some of the – later on in the war, but in a different way to Molly Bobak. He experienced it as a serving airman, [which] influenced how he approached his war art subsequently. He did three paintings and a series of drawings. The series of documents document his [muffled comment] own feelings of being in a bomber crew, and record being woken up early, going off and the relief of coming home again safely and the reaction to hearing of colleagues going down. It's a remarkable record of service.

But the painting on display is *Airmen in a Village Pub*. It shows a scene of pub life. There's a woman serving beer, another woman stroking a cat and the airmen sitting behind. But there's a tension in the scene which belies the atmosphere, and that's what makes it a great painting, is the contrast between the jocularity of the pub and the etched tension on the faces of the airmen who are sitting in the pub, supposedly having a jolly time. The drawing that we included is *Home Again*, which is a scene of returning airmen, relieved to get back—tired, but together and alive.

Miller Brittain was another bomb aimer and another official war artist—and I just realized what I've done. Never mind. I'm reading this and realizing I've just been talking about Miller Brittain. But here is a third Miller Brittain painting and it's *Night Target, Germany*. That is a painting of experience—retrospective experience—of dropping bombs over a city in Germany. What makes it a very compelling painting is the fact that Miller Brittain knew of that which he depicted.

Very few of the actual war artists actually got to fly and many of them complained bitterly that they were very restricted in what they could paint because they weren't allowed to do

operational sorties. Goodridge Roberts and Edwin Holgate, for example, had a great deal of difficulty in the RCAF, in part because the man in charge, whose name I've temporarily forgotten, was very, very restrictive in where they could go. So, Miller *Brittain's Night Target* is a very rare painting in the collection because it is done in the air. It again shows the sort of tension between what was happening and what was experienced that I talked about in the pub scene. In that, while there's a bombing going on and there were search lights of the aircraft going down—that clearly a lot of damage has been done judging by the smoke and light below—there's also a fairy tale quality to the whole thing. It's a very beautiful painting and that gives it its tension—the contrast between what's happening in reality and how the painting looks.

Moving on to Leonard Brooks—now this time, I'm going to make sure to do Leonard Brooks. There are two works by Leonard Brooks on display and they both show an aspect of ship life that has absolutely nothing to do with fighting, avoiding submarines, picking up people who have been dumped at sea after their ship has gone down. In fact, they're both related to cooking.

One of them is *Potato Peelers*, which shows two sailors peeling potatoes on deck with the ocean beyond, and the other is a scene of a corvette galley, with the crew visibly creating supper for what was probably a very substantial crew. These paintings are important that we have of this kind, because one tends to focus very much in thinking of the war as scenes of action, scenes of major events, scenes of battles, and so on. In fact, all of that work was supported by an army. I use that word knowingly, of enlisted people who also – who didn't do that kind of work—the actual cooking and cleaning and just keeping the ship afloat. By talking about an army and a crew and keeping a ship afloat, you realize the extent to which the language of the military informs how, and discusses this kind of support in a wartime situation.

Leonard Brooks was not a particularly well known artist at the time he became an official war artist, but he was an established one. His later career ensured that he became very little known in Canada, because he basically moved to Mexico – his wife, a photographer, having been subject to anti-Semitism which made him very uncomfortable about continuing in Canada.

Paraskeva Clark was not an official war artist. She was an immigrant from Russia to Canada and an established artist—or established painter—of sorts when she came, although her career was made in Canada, in Toronto. One of her greatest claims to fame was that she was the mistress of Norman Bethune, which also demonstrates that her political affiliations were to the left. She felt very strongly that the story of war should include the story of women who stayed at home, and watched, and waited, and worried, and so on. But in the end, she did not produce that story herself. That was left to Pegi Nicol MacLeod, and unfortunately not in Canada, but in New York City.

Paraskeva received commissions to paint women—service personnel—which was basically the only way women entered the artistic war record and that wasn't through the official program. It was because the National Gallery identified that gap and commissioned artists to

fill it. The Director of the National Gallery, H.O. McCurry, who [was] on the War Artists' Committee and also, Director of the Gallery – so well aware, and able to change things.

The *Parachute Riggers*, which is on display, is one of the most compelling of Paraskeva Clark's paintings and it is one of the more modern of the works in the Second World War collection. It shows women basically rigging parachutes before they get packed. It's an exercise in diagonals with the women sort of themselves and their arm movements going diagonally across the canvas. Then, the whole perspective on the painting is upended, so that you get a diagonal of the benches and their tables on which they're working, as well, which makes for a very dramatic and dynamic composition.

Alex Colville is represented by four paintings—the most in the exhibition. He is probably the best known of Canada's Second World War artists, as well. Again, he was a soldier before he became a war artist, but there had been some doubt when he was appointed a war artist because he wasn't considered very good. Which just shows how, when you do any analysis of war art or history of art, you see how easy it is to be wrong at different times and how attitudes to art change over time. What is good in one generation is considered bad in another. Vermeer is probably the most celebrated artist of any time to have fallen from grace for a couple of centuries. He was resurrected again at the end of the 19th century.

Anyway, Alex Colville's work is represented by two watercolours and two oils. Obviously, the famous *Bodies in a Grave, Belsen*, is the best known in many respects. It's the archetypical image of Belsen that we have by a Canadian artist—a very gentle scene of emaciated bodies lying in a pit. It doesn't suggest quantity. That's one of the interesting aspects of this particular painting because in fact, Colville did produce a watercolour of one of the pits full of bodies, but at a distance, so you cannot really tell that that is what is on the view.

This Belsen affected Colville massively in his later career. The imagery and the way he treats the bodies in the grave reoccurs frequently in his later paintings of people lying down. He references that, the grace of this painting of something quite horrible in his later work.

The other oil is *Tragic Landscape*, which again pictures a dead body. Dead bodies are not that frequent in the war art collection. In this instance, Colville had sketched, in Holland, the dead German paratrooper, the orchard scene behind with the farmhouse and the sign and the cow at different times and he put them together into this composition after the war when the artists were producing their oil paintings. Rather, like the dead bodies in the grave, it's a sort of [?] painting in that you have the tranquility of the landscape which is emphasized by the indifference of the cow who turns its back to the viewer and the dead body that looks quite peaceful lying on the ground.

Much like Brittain, there's a tension between the environment in which the scene is being portrayed, which is really quite gentle and beautiful and the balance of the subject, which is a dead person. But there's no apparent balance. You don't see blood. You don't see gore. It's a totally different image of dead people than you might see on television today. But for all that, it's still extremely powerful because the difference between Colville's image of a

dead person and something you might see on television is that he creates a tragedy by emphasizing the beauty and the lyrical qualities of the landscape in which the body is lying, whereas on television, the background is destruction and fear/terror, [which] is horrible in its own right. In order to emphasize the destruction of the body, you had to show even more destroyed images and acceleration of imagery. Colville wasn't required to do this to get his point across.

The two watercolours, *Before Zero Hour*, shows Colville working with light. He contrasts the landscape, which is almost black against the light of the sky, and a very common way of working on the battlefield—used a lot in the First World War—the idea of the silhouette. Colville is an incredible watercolourist and gave it up basically after the war. So the war art collection of watercolours, that numbers in the hundreds, is a remarkable record of his early work.

In *Shattered Landscape, Cleve*, he returns again to a First World War common motif—the shattered tree standing in for destruction, and here, gives a kind of a quality to the trees with their bent crookedness and sharp pointedness, which speaks to a kind of a destroyed state but also to their indestructibility. That they survive against all odds. So, the landscape is being used as a metaphor for the destruction of war.

Moving on to Charles Comfort. He's also represented by three paintings. Charles Comfort was the senior army artist—well established Canadian artist/teacher – much appreciated by his own generation and much respected his own generation and by the other war artists – an exemplary war artist in that he made copious notes about absolutely everything that he depicted on the backs. So, you'd know what the weather was like, what the climate was, what he's looking at, where it is, which makes research extremely easy in terms of his work.

The oil painting is the *Via Dolorosa, Ortona*. It's interesting because it's probably based on a photograph. Comfort was also a prolific photographer. If you go into Zone 3 in the permanent historical galleries, you will see a photograph which could well be one of the inspirations for this painting. It has the same perspective of the street in Ortona – the same rubble – and what looks eerily similar to the same buildings. But what Comfort has done with this subject is, he has exaggerated the colour and light in the painting to emphasize how Ortona was destroyed with shelling and what the result was—a lot of rubble and a lot of destroyed buildings and dead bodies. In this painting, there's a there's a baronial [form of pete?] in the foreground. The yellow stone of the buildings in Ortona is emphasized by the use of the black cloud that fills the sky behind.

There are four Charles Comforts. The most celebrated of his paintings is *The Hitler Line*, which was based on a sketch of the landscape, but into which he interjected his rather strange automaton figures, with their very elongated neck, which represent the indestructible Canadian soldiers. In a way this is Comfort's hymn of praise to the Canadian Army because everything is destroyed—the weapons, the tree. There's burning and smoke in the background and in the foreground of this depiction, but there are no dead bodies. There's just these extraordinary Canadian soldiers looking like something out of a Star Wars movie, marching through, towards what was eventually victory.

Out of the watercolours, *Night Air Raid* is one of two very interesting watercolours that Comfort completed in the field. His description, which is in the catalogue, suggests a fairly formal analysis of what it was that he saw, but it's in the technique that he uses that makes the painting interesting, because he scratches the paper. The flak firing all over the place is done by basically scratching the end of his paintbrush across the wet paper so that the surface of the paper lifts and you get a kind of dotted surface where the paintbrush end doesn't always lift the paper completely up. What it does is it scratches. It reveals the white support underneath and this totally animates the paper.

It gives it an immediacy and an energy, because you can so easily see the relationship of this composition to the actions of the artist. So, it's rather like looking at an abstract expressionist painting that shows the relationship between artist and subject. But earlier than this was really appreciated, that Comfort might have been slightly aware of these kinds of developments. But this is very much an action painting in that the technique of creating the composition is so clearly apparent and so clearly feeds into the mood of the subject.

The *Wrecked Me 210* is, in fact, a wrecked Me 410. The label in the exhibition is correct. This is an example of where the detail of Comfort's notes made it possible to identify the subject. Because at the time that Comfort painted the painting, it was very unlikely that the Canadians would have had any idea that there was a different model of Messerschmitt flying above them that had only been recently introduced. But it was questioned by a former art curator, Hugh Halliday, and I think also by Wodehouse as to whether this is a Me 210, even earlier. But we were able to go back into the records and through quite a lot of energetic volunteer labour to find out exactly what happened at the precise time that Comfort said he painted this painting. The German records indicate it was a Me 410 that crashed on this spot at 7:31 or whenever it was, which I guess the internet has helped in that perspective. So much material is now available that previously would not have been available.

The next painting is a British painting by Richard Eurich. After the Second World War, the British art program donated works that were considered art to municipal and county museums across Britain and to allied collections, so that Canada also gained some British art from the British war artists' program. This work by Richard Eurich is a spectacular composition of a ship being blown up at sea. Quite clearly the major influence was James W. Turner and paintings like *The Fighting Temeraire*, which also is a ship blowing up. The right quality of dark and light is important in that composition.

Eurich also knew the sea very, very well. He knew the effects of light and different sea conditions, so he was able to incorporate his close knowledge of the sea into this romantic view of the ship blowing up. And it is a romantic painting. Eurich's work fits into the romantic visionary tradition of British art that was particularly strong in the 19th century in the works of people like Samuel Palmer.

Moving on to Michael Forster, who is represented by two works. He only worked on paper. Forster, like Jack Nichols, who is not—oh, yes, he is represented in this exhibit—had painted officially for the Merchant Marine originally and then, moved on to Europe after D-Day and

was attached to the Royal Canadian Navy. The painting of *Submarine Pens at Brest* is an after-evacuation painting in that the submarines are gone and they are not going to come back. So, this is a submarine pen that will not be re-used by the Germans. The Germans are moving out of France quite rapidly. So, it's a rather sad and creepy painting that owes much to the influences of British artists that influenced Forster – in particular, in this instance, John Pyper and Graham Sutherland, who produced very similar work. Forster was not Canadian-born and had spent a lot of time in Britain [and] so, was well acquainted with British art at the time.

His painting of *Wreckage on a Beach near Newhaven, England*, is another post D-Day work on paper. Newhaven is on the south coast near Brighton. It was a major ferry port. Given the amount of military activity taking place in the town, it's not surprising that its coastline would be littered with wrecked ships. But he makes them almost into iconic equivalents of wrecked bodies. They are very human looking wrecks. They are very animated.

The thing that makes Forster's work particularly interesting is how far he removes himself from what he's actually looking at and makes it into something else. He makes it into an interesting painting. So, both the *Submarine pens* and the *Wreckage on beach near Newhaven* are more than their subjects. They are interesting exercises in the artist working with watercolour, gouache and paper and trying to make a good composition—a composition that conveys more than the sum of its parts. Am I saying enough?

Moving on to Charles Goldhamer. Goldhamer is interesting because he's the only artist who was able to paint portraits of people that had been wounded in wartime – in this case, specifically, the victims of air crashes who were substantially burned and who were being treated in the special plastic surgery unit at the Queen Victoria Hospital in East Grinstead, in England.

This group of patients became known as the guinea pigs because they were subjected to a new plastic surgery technique that had been developed by a Scottish—a Dr. McIndoe and who worked with a Canadian specialist called Tilley—T-I-L-L-E-Y. They developed techniques that enabled these airmen who had often lost half their faces or large parts of their limbs and usually skin and muscle removal. They rebuilt them by attaching skin from other parts of their bodies and reconstructing noses and fingers and so on and so forth.

This is a portrait—a very dispassionate portrait of Goldhamer – of one of these men who had suffered badly. The hospital was very interesting because they recognized that the damage was not only physical but psychological. These were young men, scared to go to pubs and scared to be seen by women and so on and so forth. Part of their treatment was that the local people and people who were in the hospital were encouraged to go out with them and take them out, so that they got used to looking at them and being with them and seeing them and so forth, so that the men themselves slowly became accustomed to being stared at and slowly became accustomed to dealing with people without feeling absolutely terrible about how they looked.

The “Guinea Pig” Club was made up of people who had been at this hospital—the guinea pigs—and it existed until relatively recently—when it’s down in Canada to just a few members, they decided to disband it.

Moving on to E. J. Hughes. E.J. Hughes is probably the best known of the West Coast artists who are in the collection. He and Paul Goranson and Orville Fisher had worked together as artists, painting murals in British Columbia before the war and all three were desperate to become war artists. The minute war broke out, they were bombarding the powers that be with letters saying that they wanted to be war artists, inspired of course, by the war art of the First World War that had made a huge impression on them all. Slowly, they were taken on board as artists. But as service artists, they all had to enlist first, and it wasn’t until 1943, when the program really got going that they became official war artists.

E.J. Hughes was particularly prolific and has a substantial body of work in the war art collection. His work is quite interesting because of the stylistic change that occurs. His early drawings are very, very meticulous—very, very carefully observed. Slowly, as his career develops during the war, he becomes more folk art like—and you can see the movement towards the kind of art that he became better known for, which has a kind of primitive quality to it.

The painting on display is *Early morning PT* and it’s based on sketches that he did at Petawawa, which was a camp north of Ottawa. Basically, it’s exercise time at the camp. But he’s made it into a kind of dance and he’s put a very unusual perspective on the scene, of a bird’s eye view from above looking down, so that he creates a kind of patterning of the subject across the canvas. He’s also interested in light. He uses the light streaming from a slightly open doorway to illuminate the scene which otherwise would be completely dark.

T.R. MacDonald was an Army artist. He went on to run the Hamilton Art Gallery. He painted a number of works of just scenes in wartime, in Italy and elsewhere. His most famous work is of a train carriage, which shows tired and exhausted soldiers—both men and women—on a train going somewhere or coming back from somewhere in wartime. It was this painting that was used to get him his appointment as an official war artist.

The painting on display is called, *You’ll Get Used To It*, which is based on a scene from one of the Army shows. The woman is singing a famous song for the period, “You’ll get used to it.” But it’s also an emblematic work in that it’s about the fact that Army life is something you have to get used to. The war is something you have to get used to. As a result, the work has become quite well known because it very simply gives a sense of one very common experience of war, which it was something you had to get used to.

It’s a very simple composition. It’s divided basically into three, with the spotlight dividing the front of stage and the back of stage. In the spotlight stands the singer, illuminated by the spotlight, cut in half at the waist by the spotlight, so that her lower half is fairly light and then, her light upper half, which is the expressive part with her arms up as she sings is illuminated against the dark background. It really doesn’t matter what she’s singing, but her gestures actually support the idea of, “you’ll get used to it” because it’s almost like she’s

shrugging her shoulders and saying, “That’s just the way it is.” It’s the kind of automatic human gesture that you make when you actually say words like that. So, it’s a very, very tight composition in that the subject and the title are so closely connected.

INTERVIEWER: End of Side 1.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1

INTERVIEWER: [Canadian War Museum] Oral History Program Interview with Laura Brandon. Tape 1, Side 2.

BRANDON: Pegi Nicol MacLeod’s *CWAC Beauty Parlour #1* is an important work in that she was commissioned by the National Gallery, like Paraskeva Clark, and depicted the women’s services in Ottawa. But this work is important as evidence of the kind of view of military life that encouraged women to enlist, because films of the period and documentary evidence in the form of advertisements and so on, makes it quite clear that women in uniform were expected to be attractive and they were basically encouraged to join up because being in uniform would make them attractive. There was a whole social issue going on, in terms of how the propaganda that enabled women to join up was conducted. So, here you have evidence of what was made available to women in the services in that beauty parlours were made available to them. They were encouraged to look their best and resources were given to them.

Moving on to Jack Nichols. Jack Nichols originally served in the Merchant Navy, like Michael Forster. His art is very much based on experiential. He doesn’t seem really to be particularly interested, as an artist, in what he was painting, where he was painting, what the ship was or any of that kind of detail. He was very interested in how humans behaved in conditions of war. All his works support that conclusion.

In *Mess Deck*, he’s showing what it’s like to be below decks and how crowded it was and how everything was either hanging from the ceiling or very carefully wrapped up. And how you had to do all the normal business of daily living in very crowded and probably claustrophobic conditions. The other aspect of this work which is quite interesting in that it shows the fact of what interested Nichols was the human body, and so he depicts the human body with grace and with detailed attention. He’s interested in the interrelationship of figures.

He got interested in this because, as a young man, he spent a lot of time at the Louvre. He was fascinated by some of the pictures that he came across there, particularly from earlier periods where quantities of people were managed in this little two dimensional picture surface and how every gesture connected one figure to another and how the gestures were moving back and forth in the space. So, *Mess Deck* is as much about below-decks life as it is about managing a large number of people in a small confined space. Which is symbolized, I suppose, in terms of the picture surface itself. You’ve got the crowded deck – below deck

space – as the subject, but also you have the crowded picture plane and the restrictions of the frame of the work. So, one is almost a metaphor for the other. [inaudible comment]

OK. Will Ogilvie is represented by three works. Will Ogilvie, after Charles Comfort, was one of the significant Army artists and he, in fact, painted Canadians in wartime from 1941 to 1947. He was the longest standing of the Canadian war artists, a senior figure in Canadian art, as well. His reputation has not really kept pace after the war with the reputation he enjoyed during the war. He is best remembered for the works that he did in Sicily. He was the only artist there, and he landed with the Canadians in July 1943 and followed them through. He kept a detailed diary and detailed sketches, which basically form a visual chronology of Canadian experiences in Sicily.

Two of the works here are about Sicily. The refugees, called *Bombed Out*, is one of the rare paintings in the collection about refugees in which you can actually see their faces and their gestures. Quite often, refugees sort of appear in the background. One of the problems of the war art collection is, quite often, people were not in the right place at the right time nor did they did they have the opportunity to paint particular subjects. Given that Will Ogilvie was with the Army, on the move the whole time, where he's way up the Italian peninsula from Sicily, the refugees were normally behind, quite often. But in this instance, in Italy, they were also in front, as they were also fleeing the conditions that they had been left in by the occupying force. So, refugees are a large part of the Italian experience, but rarely painted, and not with as much clarity as here, by Ogilvie.

A total contrast is his *Soldiers Bathing*. Again – you find this almost consistently in war art – is the contrast between the conduct of war and then, its total opposite. These are soldiers refreshing themselves in a lake. The minute you put them into a lake or a river, it becomes a different subject. It becomes a sort of a sybaritic scene of luxury and leisure and not soldiering at all. So, these paintings tend to sort of stand out.

Yet, if you think of any kind of task like that and I think – this is slightly off the point – of my son who had just come back from tree planting. Their idea of bliss was to plant trees near a lake or river so that when they finished planting, they could leap into the water and recover. Again, it's the contrast between arduous work and leisure. But when you depict it in a painting, we're so accustomed to associating something with a leisure activity that we see it as a leisure activity before we see it as part of Army life.

Bombed Houses, Caen, Normandy, is one of several paintings that Ogilvie completed, of the destruction of this Normandy town after D-Day. In many respects, it's Ogilvie taking the destroyed tree that was so familiar to the Group of Seven, and which they used so frequently, as an icon of the destruction of human life. Here, Ogilvie is taking bombed buildings and translating them into an iconography of not only the destruction of the city but the destruction of life, as well. Some of the shapes – and it's not as apparent in this work as in others of the same subject – the destroyed shapes look like the barrels of guns, suggesting a connection between destruction and weaponry.

Three to go.

Moe Reinblatt didn't go overseas. He was associated with the RCAF and largely painted scenes of bases in Canada where repair work was being done on aircraft. That being said, he was emotionally acutely involved in the war and did a lot—not a lot—but a significant number of works outside of his war commission which depict his reaction to events happening in Europe. I'm thinking in particular of works we've acquired since and I've forgotten the name of the—Lidice—the destruction of the – or the massacre at Lidice was one subject that he drew. He was absolutely horrified by what happened there.

He also painted a couple of works about a plane crash in Mont Joli, contrasting again the sudden presence of war, so to speak, in a peaceful Quebec community and how that brought home the reality of what was happening overseas to Canada, where there was no actual conflict taking place.

But Reinblatt's work, as expressed in *Weighing Down The Tail*—this painting—it shows the very dynamic use of form and line—expressive form that he uses in all his paintings. No line is ever straight, so even when he is painting a propeller, it's got crooked bits. He uses this to show movement. He recognizes that he is limited and that he is painting in a totally static medium—paint on canvas—but he uses line to give a sense that these people are just suddenly caught in an action that is much more dynamic and much more speedy than that which the medium allows him to do.

The same applies to Frederick Taylor's *Hull Riveting*. Again, painting, by its very nature is a static medium in terms of what the viewer sees. But Taylor, in *Hull Riveting*, twists the torsos of the two men to give an idea of the fact that they're not only strong, but they're also involved in a multiple movement action in order to fire the rivets into the ship's hull. Like Reinblatt, Taylor uses exaggerated light and dark to exaggerate the motions of his subjects.

Goodridge Roberts was attached to the RCAF and painted in Europe but was, like Holgate, one of the artists who was rather disappointed in what was made available to him. In fact, he eventually quit as a war artist—got so sick of just sitting on the ground, never being allowed to fly, never being able to get close to any action—just watching planes on the runway, planes on dispersal, planes being repaired, a few airmen, and that was it.

This work, though, is an interesting work—*Canadian Airmen in a Park*—and very unusual in the collection because it gives some sense of what life in wartime was like in England and how Canadians participated in it, because you have very little sense of war. It just looks like a small English city with people lounging around on a nice day in the sunshine. But muddled up with it are Canadian airmen who are also enjoying the weather.

It shows the degree to which the reality of wartime England was life going on much as usual, but with this added element of soldiering and the military presence – the military presence, in its own areas—the bases and so on—being very military, but within normal domestic life and social life, mixing in – just add another colour to the mosaic of everyday experience.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you very much for telling us about each of the Canadian paintings. What was the experience like, working with two other curators?

BRANDON: It was a very, very good experience. I guess there were three other curators, because we started with Angela and then got Roger. We all got to know each other very well and I think we sort of balanced each other's strengths. I very much remember when we did the hang, being very impressed by Roger's eye. When it came to intractable solutions where we couldn't agree about quite how to hang something, Roger would say, "Well, why don't you try this?" And then, Lola and I would go, "Wow! He's absolutely right." And that's what we went with.

It was a very harmonious relationship and it has stayed a harmonious relationship. I think the show here in Canada looks excellent. I like going into the space. I like its tranquility. I like its serious nature but I also like the colours and the mood and the atmosphere of the exhibition. I like the fact that we have the central part, which the Australians and the British will not be utilizing, where you learn about what the artists wore and what they did – like, they wrote letters, poems – what their instructions were, what they carried with them in terms of equipment, both artistic and soldiering.

I think it provides a very interesting context for understanding the paintings, not just as art, but as products of the military experience, which was one of the themes of the exhibition. You can't really say that the art is a product of military experience if you don't show that military experience. That section also connects very nicely into the permanent historical galleries and provides links and shows how art is reported into the war effort of the Second World War.

The reaction, to date, as far as I know, has been entirely positive. Probably the volunteers who are working in the space over the summer have a better idea of public reaction, but I certainly haven't picked up any negative reaction. But it would be interesting to have interviews done with some of those that have been working there all summer long to find out what have been the strengths and weakness in terms of public perceptions. Because that would help us to design exhibitions which provide entry ways for the kinds of things that visitors are most interested in knowing about and how they learn about art. What are the ways in which they learn about art, and what is the most effective way of displaying it and contextualizing it to ensure a good learning and understanding experience?

INTERVIEWER: Thank you.

BRANDON: You're welcome.

INTERVIEWER: End of interview.

TRANSCRIPT ENDS