Second in a Three-Part Series

Brush with GREATNESS

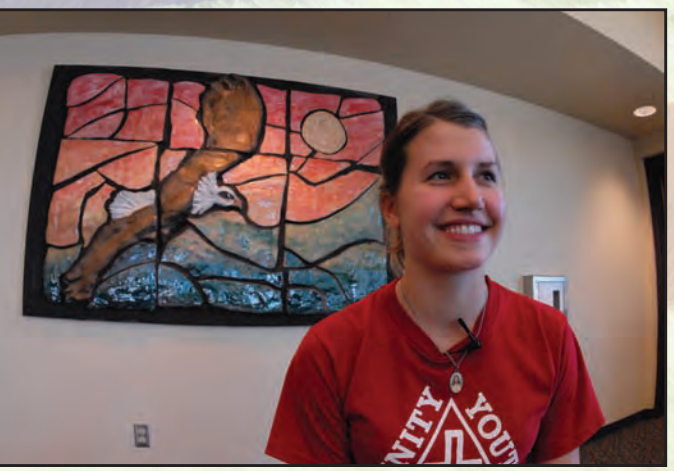
Guard Members Enhance Military Environment with Paint

The military tends to be a place where muted colors, such as OD green and shades of brown and black, thrive. North Dakota Guard artists have been changing that almost everywhere they go. From concrete T-walls in Iraq to conference rooms in Fargo, Guard members have directed paintbrushes to depict military life in less subdued shades.

Traveling from one Guard location to the next in North Dakota, Soldiers and Airmen encounter paintings, murals and other art pieces. Much of this art bears the signature of one of three Guard members — Air Guard Maj. Teresa Luthi McDonough, Army Guard Staff Sgt. Kate Naujokas and Air Guard Staff Sgt. Alexandra Knier. All three trace their art interest back to a young age, and those many years of experience are evident in their detailed, patriotic work.

★ MAJ. TERESA McDONOUGH

McDonough's love for art and the military first intertwined in 1994 as she completed her art degree at Valley City State University. Retired Maj. Gen. Michael Haugen, who was the Air Guard Base commander at the time, commissioned her to paint all seven jets from the Wing's history. The intricately detailed paintings now line the hallway leading to the base commander's conference room. Her eighth painting, of the C-21, was just added to the wall, and she'll paint the Predator next.



Staff Sgt. Alexandra Knier's mural "Soaring" graces the Air Guard's Aerospace Dining Facility in Fargo. "The eagle is in full flight. It looks towards the sun and flies higher than every other bird," Knier said. "The symbol of an eagle is appropriate for the military. I use it specifically to say that in order for us to soar like eagles, we must fix our gaze on things above and let go of the earth."

"I just really rely on the pictures," McDonough said of how she paints, "but I also look at the planes closely to not miss a small part."

What looks like a reflection in a photograph actually can be a small component, and McDonough won't risk making a mistake. She knows the pilots and crew members are sharp and would catch the smallest inconsistency. The lack of any complaints is proof of how meticulously she guides her acrylic-laden brush across the canvas.

There's more to the Air Guard than planes, though.

"The support group commander at the time, Col. Roger Larsen, said, 'Let's do a mural to honor that side of the house,'" McDonough said. So in 2001, she spent 72 hours in the hallway of Building 110 at the Fargo base painting a collage-style mural of Airmen at work in the support services. She used photographs of actual people. You'll see a current officer when he was a young senior airman and Master Sgt. Eric Johnson, the Wing's longtime videographer. Personnel, communications, services, firefighters, civil engineer, explosive ordnance disposal, security forces and multimedia all are represented.

McDonough has toted her brushes and acrylics to many other corners of the base, too. She painted shields and patches, as well as a small mural for the 119th Security Forces Squadron. But she didn't stop at the base's gate. A print of McDonough's painting of Heritage Park, where the Wing displays previously flown aircraft, hangs in Fraine Barracks in Bismarck. A Coast Guard base in Puerto Rico features two of her murals, as well.

★ STAFF SGT. KATE NAUJOKAS

Visitors to the Army National Guard's storefront recruiting office in Fargo can't miss Naujokas' work. A gigantic American flag fills the entire west wall. Opposite it, an eagle many-times-larger than life looks nobly across the room. A subtle glimmer in its eye reflects the flag, a detail people often delight in discovering after spending a few moments staring at the wall in awe. The deep black background offers a perfect canvas for the NCO Creed and Soldier's Creed.

"It seems like it's been pretty positive," Naujokas said. "New recruits are asking to have their pictures taken in front of the eagle."

While graphite portraits are Naujokas' forte — and have provided income on the side for the past 12 years — she's growing fonder of painting on a grand scale. Naujokas' first was a 10-by-8-foot mural in front of the dining facility at Balad Air Base in Iraq. Her next will be in Bismarck's storefront recruiting office.

She worked full time for about six weeks to complete the Fargo murals, devoting the most time to building the layers of paint on the flag rather than using her unique style to detail the eagle's head feathers.

"I guess you could say I kind of finger paint," Naujokas said, sweeping her palm as if to smear paint. "I use brushes, but I'll put the paint on the wall to get the right texture and mixture."

STORY BY SGT. AMY WIESER WILLSON / JOINT FORCE HEADQUARTERS

Maj. Teresa McDonough puts the final details on a painting of the N.D. Air National Guard's C-21 Lear jet. McDonough has painted seven other planes from the 119th Wing's history and will soon paint the Predator, as well. The paintings hang near the commander's conference room on the Fargo base.

Having majored in music with a minor in art history, Naujokas has no formal art training. But with a full-time job outside of the Guard and a baby at home, time may be the biggest challenge she faces. Nonetheless, art is something she thoroughly enjoys when she's able.

"I just love it. It's a fun thing for me to do," she said.

★ STAFF SGT. ALEXANDRA KNIER

As a traditional Airman, Knier finds that the contrasting worlds of art and the military bring a balance to her life.

"I'm proud to be in the Guard. When we have drill, I put on my uniform and serve with pride. Most of my days, however, I am arm deep in clay, teaching children how to throw pottery. I love the structure, discipline and high standards of military life yet I find that the gentleness and openness required for teaching is deeply gratifying, too."

"Soaring," a radiant mixed-media mural of an eagle that Knier completed last fall, joins those two worlds, she said, "and reveal how each can bring balance and meaning to the other."

The piece took "hundreds of hours," from providing preliminary sketches to bringing together the clay, glaze, wood and grout to finalize the piece at the Fargo Air Base's Aerospace Dining Facility.

Knier has served in the Air Guard for more than five years and has wanted to use her artistic talents to give something back.

"For several years it has been my goal to offer my art to the Airmen of the 119th Wing. I am honored and grateful for the opportunity to do so," she said.

McDonough and Naujokas echo her sentiments. While they all find personal enjoyment in art, it's the additional way they can serve others and serve their country that inspires them most.

Staff Sgt. Kate Naujokas "finger painted" this eagle in the N.D. Army National Guard's storefront recruiting office in Fargo. She has been preparing sketches and getting ready to paint murals in the new Bismarck storefront office, as well.

■ PHOTOS BY SENIOR MASTER SGT. DAVID LIPP / 119TH WING