First in a Three-Part Series

After deploying for a year to Afghanistan, Sgt. Cole LaRocque has turned his artistic talents toward recapturing his war experience. From life-threatening moments to everyday scenes, he guides his paintbrushes to create watercolor paintings that tell his personal story of combat. With each brush stroke, he seemingly wipes out the demons that have haunted him since an IED attack in October 2006. Behind LaRocque are three of his paintings: "Wreckage," "IED Attack" and "Moqur."

Below is a detail of "IED Attack," a rough, dark emotional piece, and at right is a detail from "Moqur," a landscape done to the tone of Winslow Homer, a 19th century painter.

The Art of War

Soldier Conquers Demons Through Watercolor

"It felt like a hammer hit me and smoke just blew up all around me. There was ringing in my ears. It was just surreal."

But now it's real. Tangible. In color. Permanent, not fleeting.

Condensed to a 21-by-29-inch watercolor painting, "IED Attack" by Sgt. Cole LaRocque preserves the moment of a powerful IED attack in Afghanistan. There on textured paper, it will stay for decades to come, long after the nightmares and flashbacks from that night in October 2006 have gone.

NIGHT FOR NIGHTMARES

On that night, LaRocque stood in the Humvee turret, manning the .50-caliber machine gun, while Spc. James W. Grote III drove and Sgt. 1st Class Joshua Roller served as the truck commander. Their interpreter, Sail, sat in the backseat. The security forces patrol of the 1-188th Air Defense Artillery, North Dakota Army National Guard, had spent the latter part of the day meeting with villagers in the Qarabagh District and was on its way to the District Center. The local Afghan National Police (ANP) accompanied them, leading the patrol on the way back. One ANP truck and then another passed over what was quickly discovered to be a land mine. The 5-ton Humvee didn't tread so lightly.

"It was really strong and powerful,"

STORY BY SGT. AMY WIESER WILLSON / JOINT FORCE HEADQUARTER

LaRocque said of the explosion.

The left front side of the vehicle took the bulk of the blow, leaving a few tangled pieces of metal where the voltage regulator and part of the engine once operated. All of the occupants received injuries, and the Soldiers were later awarded Purple Heart medals.

"That IED attack in particular was a strong emotional event for me," LaRocque said. "It was the angriest I'd ever been."

There was no place to target that anger. They were hit. It was over. There was no firefight to target the insurgents in return. The anger stayed for a long time before it found an outlet.

EMOTION BECOMES ART

The post-Impressionist 19th century painter Paul Cezanne once said, "A work of art which did not begin in emotion is not art."

"IED Attack" began with emotion, emits that emotion, and certainly causes an emotional reaction.

"Pictures can only show so much, that's why I had to take this to the next step to convey that through how I worked with the medium," LaRocque said. "I had to rethink how to work with the medium of watercolor. It's not as polished as other work I've done but that's because I wanted to show the feeling."

Standing in front of the dark, rough piece brings the moment to life. A concussive pressure on the chest following an explosion. The unsteadiness of being knocked around a turret. Fearful anxiety of what's out there beyond the thick smoke and night's darkness.

"I had to paint that in particular to tell my story and to be a metaphor for what happened," said LaRocque, who deployed from December 2005 through March 2007.

LaRocque's professors at North Dakota State University, where he majors in art, encouraged him to paint from his deployment. He knew they were right.

"I wanted to do that for a long time to help deal with it," he said. "It was a way to conquer some of my demons."

TRAUMA RESPONSE ILLUSTRATED

LaRocque's war-inspired art does not end there. He takes a different approach to the same attack by painting the Humvee's remains as a still-life. Small pieces are carefully detailed

and worked into the whole in "Wreckage." Immobile, meticulous, composed, detached — it's much the opposite of "IED Attack."

Spanning 4-by-3 feet, "Moqur" presents a light, stunningly detailed landscape of a normal day in Afghanistan. Much like Winslow Homer relayed the mundane parts of the Civil War through oil on canvas, LaRocque wanted to take "a relaxed view" of his war experience, presenting it in a realist manner.

In the soft expanse of the painting, Humvees used by the International Security Assistance Force sit idle in a compound in Ghazni Province, where LaRocque and his fellow Soldiers would spend three to four days at a time working with the Afghans. Four men take a break in the painting's foreground, smoking cigarettes and talking as the light of the overcast day reflects from their boot tops. In the building behind them, LaRocque said, the North Dakota Soldiers often joined the Afghans for tea.

The paintings are displayed at ecce art + yoga in downtown Fargo. Mark Weiler owns the gallery and represents LaRocque, calling him "one of the most talented student artists to come out of North Dakota in recent years."

"The first detail that the viewer notices about Cole's watercolors is his ability to precisely represent a scene," Weiler said. "Cole successfully captures the essence of objects in a photorealistic, life-like fashion. People always comment that his watercolors look very similar to photographs. But beyond being just representative or photographic, LaRocque uses subtle color changes and shading to imbue his scenes with a complexity of character and subtle emotion. What is also appealing about Cole's work is the evidence of his profound knowledge of art history. Cole pays homage to the masters through his artistic technique and in his language when discussing his artistic process."

An acute observer also will notice the stages of trauma response play out on LaRocque's watercolor paper. First, a powerful emotional state: "IED Attack." Then, numb and disconnected, not fully realizing the intensity of the event: "Wreckage." Finally, a broader view with greater understanding of the experience as a whole: "Moqur."

Now, two years after his deployment ended, LaRocque can view the mission with the variety of emotions that such an experience would warrant.

"It's a little bit of both (positive and negative)," he said. "I feel so many different ways toward Afghanistan."

No matter what emotions drive LaRocque's art, he always strives to approach the subject the same way, "honestly, philosophically and artistically." His paintbrushes continue to narrate his deployment in that same way.

"I've taken my time on it, and I hope to eventually paint all or most of my experience there," he said.

And one by one, LaRocque conquers a demon.

LaRocque and 151 other North Dakota Army National Guard Soldiers deployed in December 2005 with the 1-188th Air Defense Artillery Security Forces. Four Soldiers were killed in action before the deployment ended in March 2007; they were Sgt. Travis A. Van Zoest, 21, Cpl. Curtis R. Mehrer, 21, Cpl. Nathan J. Goodiron, 25, and Cpl. Christopher K. Kleinwachter, 29.

LaRocque's work is displayed online at www.ecce216.com.

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