

TWO PAINTINGS

I saw a painting of my dad on Instagram. Well, maybe it wasn't a painting of my dad, but it could have been. In WWII, the Navy built 923 troop carriers called LCI(L), Landing Craft Infantry (Large), each designed to carry 200 soldiers at a speed up to 15 knots to land on enemy beaches. Foot ramps dropped down either side of the bow for soldiers to run down and engage defensive positions. In WWII, Dad had been a signalman and anti-aircraft gunner on an LCI(L) in the European Theater. He and his ship survived five invasions- Bizerte, Licata, Salerno, Anzio, and Normandy- one of two ships in the original flotilla to come home.

The Instagram painting showed an LCI(L) beached at Normandy, on fire, explosions in the water, soldiers running and falling down ramps at the ship's bow, a sailor blazing away with the ship's forward cannon. The sailor could've been my dad, but he never talked about it. I think the artist must have actually been there in order to show such detail.

Artist Harvey Dunn (1884-1952), born in Manchester, South Dakota, was an army combat artist in Europe during WWI. I went into the Army in 1966 at the same time the Army's Vietnam Combat Artist Program was established and sending soldier artists over for field assignments. I applied for the program, was accepted and assigned for duty in 1968. When my tour was over, I went home and all of my sketches and paintings were sent to the Center for Military History and the Army Art Collection.

Then, in June 2000, my wife and I were invited to the Indianapolis Art Museum for an exhibit and panel discussion of Vietnam War combat art. The curator met us at the door and led us down the hall to where my painting of a 199th Light Infantry Brigade firefight was included in the exhibit. It was just as I remembered painting it- big with vibrant colors, soldiers pictured fighting together in a group as one. I reached to touch it, and I was there again- walking with the platoon single file next to a rice paddy, incoming RPGs exploding at point, diving to the side for cover, scramble-crawling through the mud toward a makeshift firing line, using up my rifle clips and then feeding an ammo belt hand over hand out of a canvas bag up to the M60 gunner while wounded were carried by in ponchos, the Brigade photographer sitting next to me bandaged where he had been shot, all of us pressing into the mud as air and artillery support smashed the tree line ahead of us. The curator took my arm and my wife took my hand.

Two paintings separated in time. Different, yet the same. Recordings of military history. One recalling a deep personal memory, and both illustrating an appreciation for military service and sacrifice. Seeing them made me want to try to paint again.