

INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY OF WAR ARTISTS:



Ex Bellum ars

ART ON THE FRONT LINE

They are an elite of artists, men and women painters from Anglophone countries, who have two things in common: they have been on the front line of combat and have recorded their war experiences with brush and pencil. Together they form the International Society of War Artists, which for the first time includes a Spanish artist among its ranks, Augusto Ferrer-Dalmau who, after spending some time in the Afghan conflict with Spanish troops in 2012, recorded his experiences in a masterful oil painting entitled «La patrulla» (The patrol) and in a great many notes and sketches.

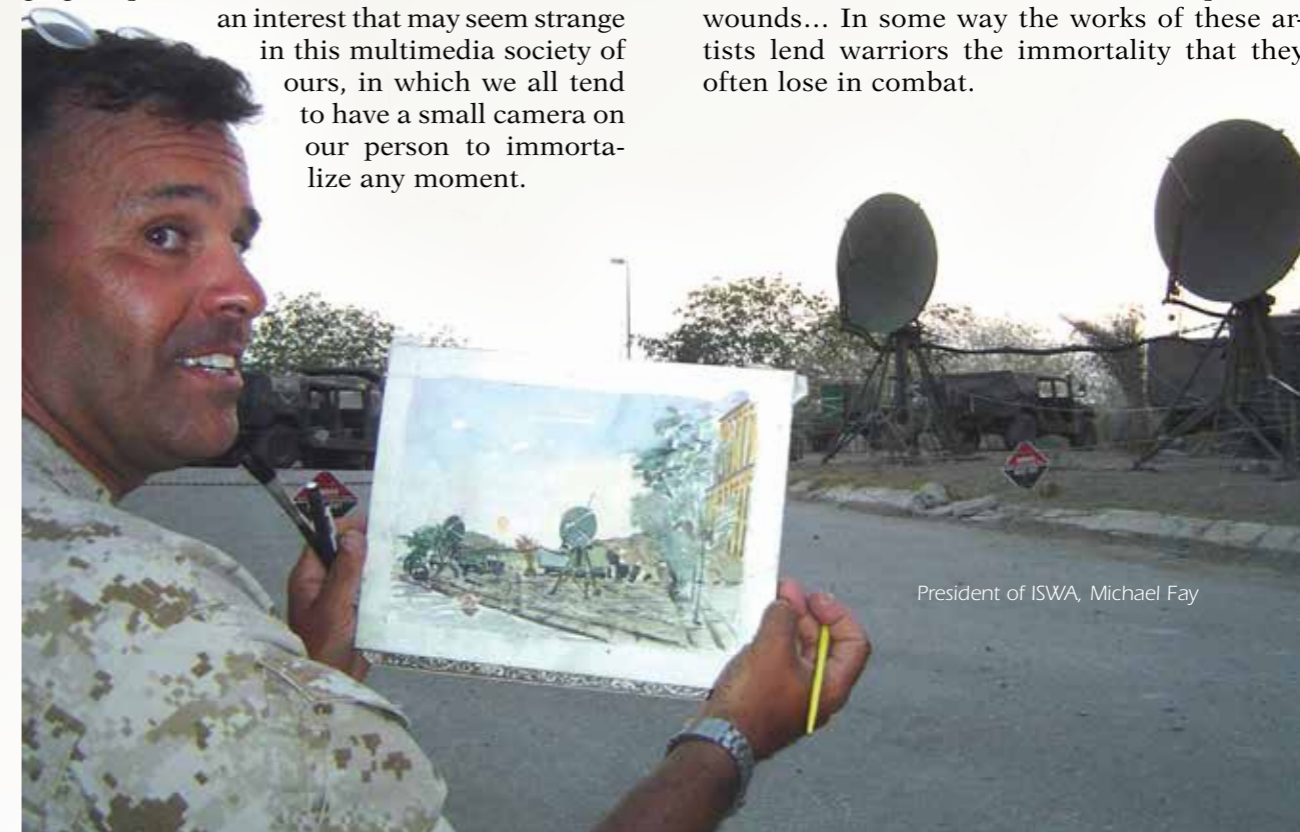
CARLOS MOLERO



This society, whose motto is «Ex bellum ars» (From war, art), was founded by two artists who combine their passion for painting with their military livelihoods: Conway Bown from Australia and Michael Fay from the USA. Over the years this peculiar association has admitted British, American and Canadian artists to its ranks and it now boasts some fifteen members.

There can be no doubt that the US Armed Forces has shown the most interest in encouraging the presence of artists in their combat units, an interest that may seem strange in this multimedia society of ours, in which we all tend to have a small camera on our person to immortalize any moment.

However, the men of «Ex bellum ars» provide more than just an image of warfare, as Michael D. Fay of the U.S. Marine Corps, the alma mater of the society, explained for Ares: «If I may make a comparison, photography is akin to prose, while our paintings are like poetry». For these military artists, a photograph captures a moment of reality, unlike their paintings, which are –in their opinion– a condensation of different unique moments expressed in an image. They capture the spirituality of the combatant, his fears, his aggressiveness, the tedium of watches, the boredom of routine, the pain of wounds... In some way the works of these artists lend warriors the immortality that they often lose in combat.



President of ISWA, Michael Fay

Augusto Ferrer-Dalmau In Afghanistan

Victor Juhasz, member of ISWA

As Fay says, all these artists are continuing a tradition that is rooted in cave-dwelling times, when men depicted hunting or battle scenes in cave paintings. Since then, every civilization that has left a mark on history, without exception, has left a record in its art, especially in its painting, of the phenomenon of war. «The Aeneid, the Iliad and the Odyssey, to cite some examples, tell us about wars and warriors», continues Michael Fay, «and without them it would be difficult to explain the western literary tradition».



Unlike other branches of the US Armed Forces which have reactivated their combat artists programs on the back of the Global War on Terror declared in 2001, the Marines Corps program has been in place without interruption since the First World War. Its central focus is on the combatant, the human being and his or her combat experiences. «In the Air Force they paint aircraft, in the Navy its ships, and the Army loves trucks. We paint Marines», explains Chief Warrant Officer Michael Fay.



In practically all cases, the members of this international society make use of mission deployments with their units to take notes, sketch and paint. Being just another member of the unit makes life easier for the unit in which they are deployed, since as Michael Fay recalls, at first the unit commanders were reluctant to have «outsiders» traveling with them, used as they were to being burdened with embedded media reporters.

However, as retired colonel Richard D. Camp of the Marines Corps museum recalls, «But once they find out these guys are fully capable of taking care of themselves, all that

In the case of the Marine Corps, there are more reasons for having its own combat artists program. As Fay explains, «It is true that the Marine Corps often conjures up an image of bravado and a stereotype that is radically removed from art and culture, and yet, for the top brass of the Marines at least, there is a great interest in placing emphasis on excellence and on the values on which freedom and democratic societies are founded. The combat art program enables the Marines to uphold and reinforce the values that are central to our republican constitution, and this is vital to an organization that, in many ways, is a closed shop and an anti-democratic establishment due to its very nature».



Conway Bown, member of ISWA

is off the table». Another Marine Corps colonel, Robert Oltman, still remembers how shocked he was to see the paintings that Fay made of his battalion deployed in Iraq in 2005, particularly the faces of some of the men killed in action. «We have someone who was there who can tell the story. Thanks to Fay, the children or the loved ones of all those young men, newly married or new fathers, who died in Iraq can know what they did there».

Despite the distances between members and the personal commitments that each of them has, the International Society of War Artists has been able to organized some joint exhibitions of their

works. The society is also working on a joint project called «Joe Bonham», which aims to address another side of warfare, perhaps more forgotten than it should be, which is the recovery of soldiers wounded in combat.

Michael D. Fay said of Augusto Ferrer-Dalmau

«As we are honored by your brave work telling the artistic story of your brave countrymen in Afghanistan. So many overlook the contribution of the proud Spanish forces.»

