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Carl Schaefer, War Artist

1903-1995

Laura Brandon

With the passing of war artist Carl Schaefer on May 21, Canada has lost an important connection with the momentous years of the Second World War. As an Official War Artist with the RCAF, Schaefer served with Fighter, Bomber and Coastal Commands in the United Kingdom and Iceland. The 221 paintings, sketchbooks and war diaries retained in the art collection of the Canadian War Museum bear testament to war years richly lived and experienced.

Carl Schaefer was born in Hanover, Ontario, and as a student attended the Ontario College of Art. The Group of Seven artists, J.E.H. MacDonald and Arthur Lismer, were amongst his teachers. At essence a landscapist, he found the countryside around his birthplace particularly inspiring, especially during the lean years of the 1930s. His fortunes as an artist turned when, in 1940, he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship which enabled him to paint full-time in New England. Then, in 1943, he was commissioned into the RCAF as an Official War Artist. After the war he taught for many years at the Ontario College of Art before retiring.

Of Schaefer's war years, George Johnston wrote:

Its first effect was stimulating: the machines and aerodromes, and the lives of the airmen and airwomen fascinated him, and he seems to have grasped the idea of flight immediately as something he wanted to paint. It is the power of flight that one feels most strongly in his aeroplanes, whether they are airborne or on the ground. But there are ominous and brooding tones in all these pictures...¹

Opposite: Bomb Aimer, Battle of the Ruhr.
(Canadian War Museum Catalogue No. 11786)

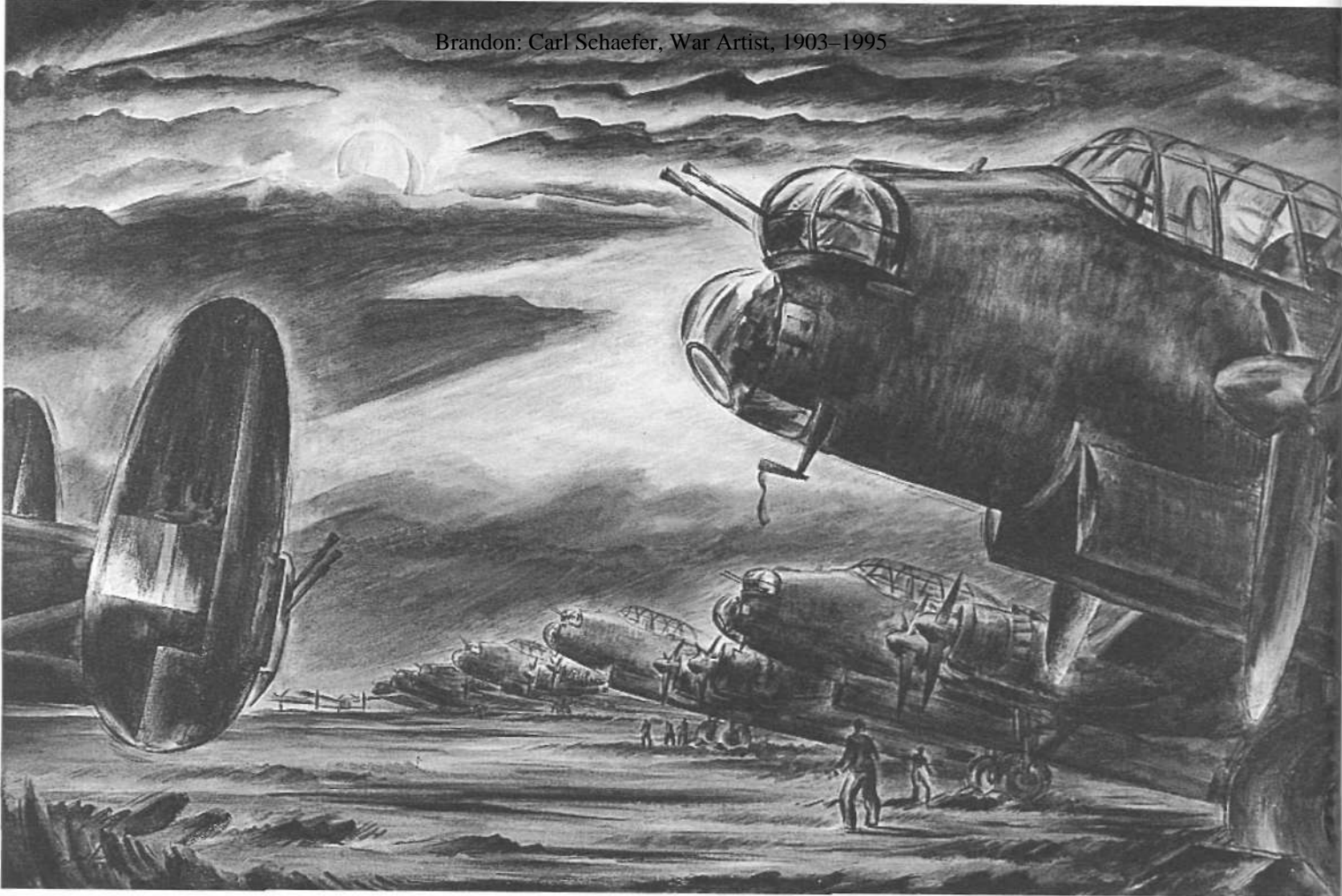
An outstanding example of his war work in this vein is *Marshalling Lancasters Against Stuttgart* (CWM 11836). Currently on view at the Canadian War Museum, it captures the threatening presence of these black bombers as they stand ready for take-off, their striking fuselages silhouetted against dark and lowered skies.

In England for most of 1943, Schaefer spent time in Northern Ireland in 1944 and Iceland in 1945 before returning to Canada. He was promoted to the rank of Flight-Lieutenant in 1944 and released in June 1946. Of his own and his fellow artists contribution to the record of the war he wrote, "...we did what we could under harrowing circumstances and at the same time we were close to what we did and understood through experience..."²

His war work is composed entirely in the watercolour, ink or graphite medium. In his diaries he writes vividly of practising his craft. On January 13, 1944 he notes:

...made another watercolour from under [the] wing of C Charlie in Dispersal. Rain beating down, draining off wings, finally coming down on me in large drops through spaces around...starboard Engine. Wind whipping around, tears off my paper from drawing board as water spatters all over watercolour. Finally finish...³

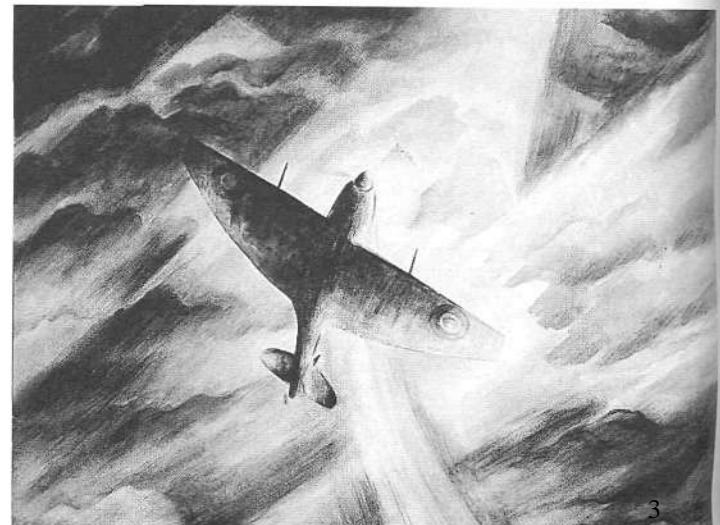
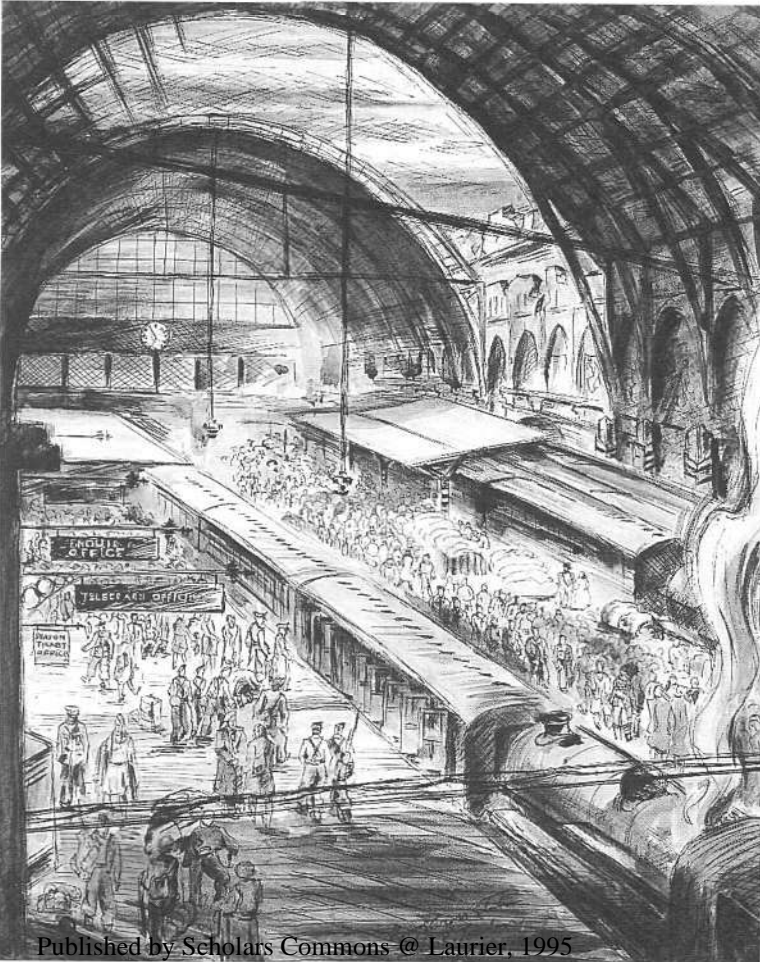
Like many artists of his generation he kept a sketchbook. The sketchbooks (CWM 19940015), recently acquired by the Canadian War Museum, shed a particularly lively light on aspects of wartime life that is not present in his more formal and larger paintings. While the diaries tell us that Schaefer narrowly escaped losing his life when a



Above: Marshalling Lancasters against Stuttgart.
(CWMCN 11836)

Left: King's Cross Station. (CWM CN 11828)

Below: Per Ardua Ad Astra. (CWM CN 11886)



London pub he was in was hit by a bomb, it is clear from the sketchbooks that the incident did not discourage him from further convivial meetings with friends and fellow artists such as the British painter Augustus John. Indeed, our knowledge of wartime pub life is recorded for posterity in the ebullient and swiftly drawn figurative sketches that are to be found in his sketchbooks.

Another evocative study of war time London can be found in the richly detailed *King's Cross Station* (CWM 11828). In it air force personnel are shown getting ready for departure to Northern England and the Bomber Command RAF and RCAF squadrons based in the counties of Yorkshire, Durham and Lincoln. The artist has chosen to depict the scene from above, and the vast iron and glass vaulting of the station dominates the trains and airmen below, the whole softened by the steam that gently swirls upwards.

His official war art is generally, however, imbued with a more serious purpose. As a memorandum sent to the artist on March 30, 1943 by a senior officer in charge of air force artists stated, his artistic responsibility lay officially in, "portraying historic scenes, events, phases and episodes in the experience of the R.C.A.F. overseas."⁴

Schaefer's painting *Bomb Aimer, Battle of the Ruhr* (CWM 11786) is probably his best known work in this vein. Worked up from a series of notes, sketches and drawings (recently given to the Canadian War Museum) it features a Bomb Aimer's station in the nose of a Halifax Mk.III of No.428 (RCAF) Squadron. The intense concentration and tension present in the figure creates a moment of stillness in the maelstrom of flak, bomb bursts, incendiary fires and searchlights before him. It is an extraordinary depiction of courage and perhaps best epitomises the ambition which was expressed in the artist's diary entry for April 16, 1943. "I've felt like working more than ever. I want to achieve more imaginative results with this grim subject matter. It is the eyes of the soul, ever here."⁵

One of the most interesting collections of war art by Schaefer is centred on his studies of aircraft and cloud formations. Many were completed during a single flight as he sketched furiously while the aircraft he was in climbed. During this flight he was presented with the opportunity of observing

evasive action practice first-hand from the cockpit of a Halifax bomber. It was an experience he was to put to good use in later, more thoughtful compositions.

This knowledge of the skies was used to superb effect in his painting, *Per Ardua Ad Astra* (CWM 11886), which features a climbing clipped wing Spitfire MK.IX skidding to starboard. The painting is an extraordinarily powerful and emotionally charged rendition of an aircraft in flight. The acrobatic capabilities of the plane and the sense of controlled spiralling in a limitless sky are successfully captured.

The painting's title is a fitting epitaph for Carl Schaefer, war artist. The painting itself is an appropriate memorial for an important Canadian artist who, in the years of the Depression, experienced adversity before achieving deserved recognition as a painter of his country's overseas war of fifty years ago. The painter subsequently lived to make a significant contribution to Canadian art both as an artist and teacher.

Near the end of his life he noted:

The war changed my life. Some of my best friends died in the war. When you see that much death and you are away from your native land, it colours your whole life. When you come back to normal life, you are changed. You can't explain why, any more than you can explain the taste of sugar.⁶

Notes

1. George Johnston, "Carl Schaefer: A Short Appreciation", *Carl Schaefer: Paintings 1932-1967* (Oshawa: The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 1976). Exhibition Catalogue.
2. Carl Schaefer, Interview by Joan Murray, 28 March 1979, transcript, Carl Schaefer file, War Artist Files, Canadian War Museum.
3. Diary of Carl Schaefer, 1943-1944, Canadian War Museum Archives, 1994015-003.
4. Photocopy of Memorandum to F/O C.F. Schaefer from S/L W.R. Thompson, 30 March 1943, Carl Schaefer file, War Artist Files, Canadian War Museum.
5. Diary of Carl Schaefer, 1943-1944, Canadian War Museum Archives, 1994015-002.
6. Nancy Baele, "Artist Recalls How War Changed His Life, Art." *Ottawa Citizen*, 30 April 1993.

Laura Brandon is the Chief Curator at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa.