

## The End of Guy Brown Wiser's Air War:

### Notes on an American Airman's First World War P.O.W. Artwork<sup>1</sup>

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Archival holdings at the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force (NMUSAF), near Dayton, Ohio, include a small sketchbook of vivid, amusing watercolors describing a young American airman's brief captivity as a prisoner of war in Germany at the very end of the First World War. The paintings, by Lt. Guy Brown Wiser, are unusual and instructive. They stand out immediately because of their obvious artistic quality as a colorful tongue-in-cheek record of the American POW experience, and they are instructive because they offer unique insight into how a young American and his comrades interpreted what they did and what happened to them. This paper traces Wiser's path through the war by combining his artwork with his own verbal narrative explaining what he thought and saw, and offers arguments for what the work signifies and why it is important. The aviator's particular circumstances of combat, capture, captivity, and freedom in 1918–1919, and how the artist turned experience into pictures contemporaneously with a sense of humor and optimism, suggest a particularly American sensibility and attributes of personality that enhance understanding of the U.S. Air Service's WWI culture and heritage. Moreover, the paintings and the artist's story add to a broad appreciation of the American war experience overall.

### Guy Brown Wiser's Story

Guy Brown Wiser was born in 1895 in Marion, Indiana, in the heart of the American Midwest. A talented artist, he graduated South Bend High School in 1912 and went off to study architecture at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. In college, "Bud" Wiser (the nickname says something about his sense of humor) put his visual ability to good use in several activities, including illustrating the yearbook as its artistic editor and drawing for the monthly humor journal *The Cornell Widow* as well as leading the staff of artists at the university's newspaper. He also joined the engineering society Tau Beta Pi and "Gargoyle," the university's architectural



Figure 1. Guy Brown Wiser as a Cornell student. (Cornell University).

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society, as well as serving on various student boards, other organizations, and rowing on the crew team. Wisner graduated in 1917 (Figures 1 and 2).<sup>2</sup>

The U.S. having entered the war not long before his graduation, Wisner enlisted in Chicago with a desire to fly airplanes. He was sent to aeronautical ground school at The Ohio State University, Columbus, where he spent some free time drawing for Ohio State's *Sun-Dial* undergraduate humor magazine, then edited by James Thurber. As Wisner went off to war in November 1917, Thurber wrote that "...if he is half the aviator he is the artist, our worst fears and best hopes for him will be realized, which is circumlocution for saying that we are selfish enough to want him to 'stick around,' and ply ever an anon for our issues the pen and India ink on the Bristol board ... Our heart will be with a certain war plane every time it's in action bombing Kaiserism deader. So long, all luck, Guy, and our regards to Paree."<sup>3</sup>

And so, after much more training and travel, 2d Lt. Wisner, having been commissioned at Ft. Worth, Texas, and further trained in England, was posted to France. After yet more instruction there, he made it to the front as a pilot in the 20<sup>th</sup> Aero Squadron, 1<sup>st</sup> Day Bombardment Group, based at Amanty, and later Maulan, in early September 1918.<sup>4</sup>

He flew two-place, single-engine biplane De Havilland DH-4 bombers on combat missions during the late-war St. Mihiel and Argonne drives. His final mission took place during the Argonne effort, on September 26, 1918. Flying from Maulan to bomb Dun-Sur-Meuse in the company of aircraft from another squadron, the formation was attacked by seven German planes after dropping bombs, and was thereafter engaged, still over German territory, by a much larger enemy force. During the fight, five of the seven U.S. planes were lost, four airmen ended up as prisoners, and seven were killed in action.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 2. Guy Brown Wisner's cartoon style is evident in his illustrations for Cornell's 1917 student annual. (Cornell University).

<sup>2</sup> Cornell University, *The Cornell 1917 Class Book: A Record of the Class of 1917* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1917), 60-61, 208-368 passim; National Museum of the U.S. Air Force (hereafter NMUSAF), Research Division, archival resource 68-D21, Wisner, Guy Brown (Wisner's account); "Wisner '17 Missing," *Cornell Alumni News* 21, no. 6 (October 31, 1918): 62.

<sup>3</sup> *The Sun-Dial* 7, No. 2 (November 1917): 5.

<sup>4</sup> NMUSAF, Research Division, archival resource 68-D21, Wisner, Guy Brown (Wisner's account); Guy Brown Wisner, letter to Woodford Patterson, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, regarding service record, April 8, 1920 (Cornell University Archives).

<sup>5</sup> NMUSAF, Research Division, archival resource 68-D21, Wisner, Guy Brown (Wisner's account); Maurer Maurer, ed., *The U.S. Air Service in World War I*, Vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: USAF, 1978): 372; Sidney Howard, "The Raid on Dun," *The North American Review* 210, No. 769 (December 1919), 809-819. See also Caroline Ticknor, ed., *New England Aviators, 1914-1918: Their Portraits and Their Records*, Vol. 1 (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1919), 113-114; Martin Matrix Evans, ed., *American Voices of World War I: Primary Source Documents, 1917-1920* (London: Routledge, 2001), 129-132; Mitchell



Wiser's observer, Lt. Glenn Richardson, found his twin Lewis machine guns jammed, and so emptied a revolver at the Germans, and finally threw cartridge cases and map boards at them. Meanwhile, a vulnerable main gas tank between Wiser and Richardson was punctured, along with a smaller reserve tank in the wing above the pilot, and fumes bathed the observer. Around 11:00 AM, main and reserve gas tanks wrecked, engine shot out, and radiator holed, the vital fluids leaked away and the DH-4's engine stopped at 13,000 feet over Conflans. Observer Richardson had been shot in the heel. Gliding and defenseless, Wiser tried for the front but was turned instead toward a German field by an enemy plane's warning bursts of machine gun fire across his nose; the German wanted to capture the men and the plane. Wiser could only obey.<sup>6</sup>

They landed and were unable to burn the DH-4 as they'd been taught to do—Richardson was much affected, "inebriated" Wiser wrote later, by gas fumes, and his revolver was empty in any case—though Wiser shouted "shoot the damned thing!"<sup>7</sup> (In later years, that exclamation would be a source of inside humor between the two men.) They were immediately surrounded and taken prisoner by *Jasta* (*Jagdstaffel*, or squadron) 12 at its airfield at Giraumont (Figures 3 and 4).<sup>8</sup> This is where Wiser's visual account begins.

### A Unique Sketchbook

About three weeks after being shot down, Wiser obtained art supplies and began his watercolor journal of captivity. He was a prisoner from September 26 through December 1, 1918, a total of only 67 days. But in that time, he managed to set down in color and line a unique record of his experience. Many years later, he gave a talk in which he explained the main incidents; this audio



Figure 3. Captured: Wiser (seated, center) Richardson (seated, left), and Jasta 12. Alfred Greven, who shot them down, is standing, center, without hat.



Figure 4. Damaged: Wiser and Richardson's DH-4 at Jasta 12's base at Giraumont.

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Yockelson, *Forty-Seven Days: How Pershing's Warriors Came of Age to Defeat the German Army in World War I* (New York: Penguin, 2016); Mark Jones, "The Wild Blue Yesteryear of WWI Fliers," *Los Angeles Times*, (October 1, 1976):1, 4.

<sup>6</sup> NMUSAF, Research Division, archival resource 68-D21, Wiser, Guy Brown (Wiser's account).

<sup>7</sup> NMUSAF, Research Division, archival resource 68-D21, Wiser, Guy Brown (Wiser's account).

<sup>8</sup> NMUSAF, Research Division, archival resource 68-D21, Wiser, Guy Brown (Wiser's account; letter of Alfred Greven, April 22, 1963).



recording stored at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum adds detail and perspective to his watercolor diary.<sup>9</sup>

Humor is the hallmark of Wiser's work. For instance, he begins the book this way: "Note: We acknowledge our indebtedness to the Richtofen Circus, whose help has made this book possible," and "Preface: A modest account of the entertainment accorded us while guests of the German Government." Irony and sarcasm were never far from Wiser's brush.

The sketchbook itself, held in the NMUSAF's special collections, is compact and sturdy. It has 38 leaves and measures 9" by 5 1/2". Front and back covers are heavy paper-covered cardboard, and six stapled folios are bound at the top short end with fabric tape and a narrow glued-fabric outer covering. The bottom short edge has a small round metal clasp that once secured a leather closing strap, and rounded corners; the leaves likewise have rounded bottom corners. The book's manufacturer is unknown.

Wiser's work is pencil drawings with watercolor and ink, and comprises 41 single-sided plates (he used both sides of a few leaves). He decorated the outer cover with a "behind bars" self-portrait, the inner front cover with a fanciful personal coat of arms, and the back inner cover with a small cartoon about the book being "made in Germany" (Figures 5 and 6). He did the paintings, he notes in the book, between about October 20, 1918, and February 1919, when he finished the collection aboard the USS *Michigan* en route to the United States after the war.



Figure 3. Front cover of Wiser's notebook with self-portrait. Note that the mischief on his face contrasts with the halo on the "coat of arms" inside the cover.



Figure 4. GBW "coat of arms" and "made in Germany" label in the sketchbook. The KG stands for Kriegsgefangene or prisoner of war; the stripes reinforce the point. Wiser makes subtle sport of European traditions and pretensions with this coat of arms.

<sup>9</sup> National Museum of the U.S. Air Force, Archival Resource 1981-D11, Sketchbook, Guy Brown Wiser; Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum Sound Archives (hereafter NASM), "After Dinner Conversation with Lieutenant Guy Brown Wiser (20<sup>th</sup> Aero Squadron)," part 1, file xxxx-0139 (*sic*), May 20, 1966.



Figure 5. Making light of German versus American thinking while being taken to their first POW holding place.



Figure 6. Wisner's depiction of getting shot down on September 26, 1918.

Wiser excerpts the significant moments of his POW days with humorous sincerity. Air combat is a serious attempt by pilots and aircrew to kill one another and on Wisner's last mission several died. However, he painted the event in a wry cartoon spirit (Figure 7)—both he and “Rich” stare at individual bullets and one appears to be chasing Richardson. This casual humor in the face of danger is not an uncommon way of dealing with such events (compare with Bruce Bairnsfather's famous “Old Bill” WWI cartoons). What is uncommon is that this comic sensibility is set out in a cartoon POW diary, the only such record of the American WWI aerial and prisoner experience in the hundreds of collections in the NMUSAF's holdings.

Wiser made sure to contrast orderly German habits with the easy-going, casual attitude of American troops. On the car ride to their first POW quarters, a tiny house at Joeuf (Figure 8), the roads were rough, and the tires were fragile, and the car only had four seats—but there were five riders: Wisner, Richardson, the commandant, a driver, and a guard. The Germans just couldn't put five people in a four-place car. Wisner said “This was not to be thought of, with German efficiency, without a great deal of thought. I didn't know if they were going to shoot one of us to make the car balance.” Wisner ended up sitting atop the front seat facing rearward and claimed he was airborne for much of the trip. Richardson, with his wounded heel, got the back seat with the commander.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> NASM, “After Dinner Conversation with Lieutenant Guy Brown Wisner (20<sup>th</sup> Aero Squadron),” part 1, file xxx-0139 (*sic*), May 20, 1966, 16:20.



Figure 9. Beer and cards with friendly German guards at Joeuf.



Figure 10. "Torture" involved getting a haircut from a truly unskilled barber.

This is not to imply that Germans were unfriendly or punctilious, though some were. When the airmen encountered some elderly men assigned as prison guards, Wiser and Richardson found them to be quite kind. One of them gave Richardson his cane because of his wounded foot, and the good-natured guards brought beer and taught them how to play German card games with an unfamiliar 32-card deck decorated with what Wiser thought were roses and cabbages instead of the usual clubs, hearts, spades, and diamonds (Figure 9). The closest Wiser and friends came to torture was getting a brutal haircut from someone that Wiser supposed had been trained by shearing sheep (Figure 10).

One German officer they came across, who escorted them via train to another camp at Karlsruhe, apparently was mean, or at least mean-looking. He was a classic type with dueling scars and struck fear into German soldiers they met along the way. He "made Humphrey Bogart look like Little Lord Fauntleroy," according to Wiser, so of course the artist made light of this character (Figure 11): At one stop, a night-time air raid "put the wind up" this officer, who took to his heels and sprinted in panic for the bomb shelter. "Our real hero captain, the tough boy," said Wiser, "He blasted off without a countdown. He just took off down the station platform and into an air raid shelter. He left the guards to take care of us."<sup>11</sup> Note in the painting of this brave flight that the crossed searchlights echo the famous insignia of the 9<sup>th</sup> Aero Squadron, now 9<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron, which specialized in night bombing, and this emblem is still used today (Figure 12). This may or may not have been intentional, but one hopes it was.

<sup>11</sup> NASM, "After Dinner Conversation with Lieutenant Guy Brown Wiser (20<sup>th</sup> Aero Squadron)," part 1, file xxxx-0139 (*sic*), May 20, 1966, 22:25.



Figure 11. “Tough boy” runs for shelter at the Strasbourg station during an air raid.



Figure 7. Today's 9th Bomb Squadron uses an emblem introduced in WWI. Note the echo of this in Wisner's art. (U.S. Air Force)

The prisoners in transit locked this same officer in the restroom on the train by blocking the door with Richardson's German-gift cane. There was some commotion, but no punishment. Their captor, finally released, counted prisoners, sighed, and sat down (Figure 13).

Camp conditions where Wisner was held—Joeuf, Karlsruhe (the infested “Hotel d’Engleterre” and a larger main camp), Landshut, Villingen, Constanz—were unpleasant but not terrifying or deadly for Wisner and his comrades. Wisner managed to visually joke about many aspects of how camps were run. For instance, upon arriving at the main Karlsruhe camp, inspectors regarded an English flier's artificial leg as a notable challenge, certain that something was hidden inside it. They searched everyone vigorously, but took special interest in and a great deal of time with the leg (Figure 14). Near the end of his captivity, the terror of disease had crept into Landshut prison as one Italian orderly had died of flu. Wisner and the other flyers there were vaccinated many, many times for malaria, typhus, etc., and Wisner called it “branding” (Figure 15). While annoying, this was in fact health care. Food was a constant concern and it was often bad and even inedible by reasonable standards (Figure 16). However, Wisner noted their rations were not so different from German soldiers' rations. The very serious blockade of Germany was having its effect. Wisner described bread and thin soup as poor, short rations, but the Red Cross fortunately supplemented the fliers' diets. “Every ten days we had a shipment of Red Cross rations, and they were marvelous,” he recalled (Figure 17). They had rice, beans, tinned meat, cigarettes, and chocolate,



Figure 13. Locking their escort in the restroom on a train to Karlsruhe.



Figure 14. Inspectors at one camp made a special, long search of a British prisoner's artificial leg, sure that there was something nefarious to be found.



Figure 15. "Branding," or being vaccinated over and over again, at Landshut.



Figure 16. Food was not good, but fliers' rations were as good as Germans'. Applesauce was the culprit in this illustration.

and "the prize of all was Gail Borden's Eagle brand milk." They all swore when they got out they would buy it by the case, spread it on bread, and eat it because it was sweet and tasty.<sup>12</sup>





Figure 17. Red Cross packages included the much-loved Borden's condensed milk, seen here atop the pile.



Figure 18. Wiser was no fan of French popular music.



Figure 19. Itinerant photographers provided portraits to send home; Wiser wasted no time making fun of this.

The Americans and other aviators were able to cobble together entertainment and even to have their pictures taken and sent home to loved ones (Figures 18, 19, and 20). These aspects of camp life may have relieved boredom and Wiser certainly made use of them for joshing. He described and painted his least favorite act, a French singer: “I think the worst was the French, I’d still put the French popular song of 1918 against anything in the world for tunelessness...it goes on by the hour...give a Frenchman a guitar, and he hits those five notes endlessly.”<sup>13</sup>

Despite diversions to fill the time, the airmen still were in prison, and



Figure 20. The reality of portraits for hire: American fliers at Karlsruhe, Wiser on the far left and Richardson on the far right, still with cane.

<sup>12</sup> NASM, “After Dinner Conversation with Lieutenant Guy Brown Wiser (20<sup>th</sup> Aero Squadron),” part 1, file xxxx-0139 (*sic*), May 20, 1966, 29:00.

<sup>13</sup> NASM, “After Dinner Conversation with Lieutenant Guy Brown Wiser (20<sup>th</sup> Aero Squadron),” part 1, file xxxx-0139 (*sic*), May 20, 1966, 32:35.



Figure 21. *Escape was verboten. Though it was probably a bit funny, the man went to solitary confinement.*



Figure 22. *When a friend thought lost showed up, Wisser was ecstatic. Though a cartoon, this painting depicts real affection.*

escapes were contemplated. One attempt was made during Wisser's captivity and it failed. Three men found a washed-out hole under the three-layered barbed wire fence, and one of them, a rather big man, tried to get through it. He got stuck, as the hole wasn't as big as it looked. The other two saw this happening and melted away; the would-be escapee spent some time in solitary confinement (Figure 21). And of course, they were still at war and people were still dying in the thousands not very far away. One of Wisser's dear friends, who they had thought dead and of course hadn't heard from, showed up several days after their September 26 battle as if risen from the grave. Lieutenant Ed Leonard personified a miracle: He'd been shot through the neck and the bullet entered and exited in such a way as to narrowly miss killing him; the round was so hot it cauterized the wound and after ten days' recovery Leonard joined his mates in prison. Wisser's depiction of Leonard's return is perhaps the most touching plate in the sketchbook, the most illustrative of friendship and affection among the American fliers (Figure 22).

Landshut, one of the last places the fliers were imprisoned (and where they got vaccinated so many times), was most interesting. The prisoners' quarters were a huge stable adjacent to one of the oldest castles in Germany, Burg Trausnitz, atop a very tall hill. Wisser painted the arduous trek up the hill and decades later returned and had his picture taken next to the stable. By the time they moved to Landshut, Wisser recalled, "We'd collected quite a lot of cooking utensils and food and



Figure 23, *The climb to Burg Trausnitz from Landshut's railway station, with burdens.*



Figure 24, *Wiser at the giant Landshut stable in 1963. It is atop the hill adjacent to the castle.*

junk of all kinds, all in a box; it was quite a job carrying it from the railroad station up all those steps to that castle.” (figures 23 and 24)<sup>14</sup>

The end of the war was a cause for joy for the American fliers and for continued humor in Wiser’s sketchbook. When the news came through at Landshut, where they could and did order food, writing checks on a Paris bank (!) for whatever they wanted, there was a drunken celebration (Figure 25). Wiser remembered “We were there when the armistice was signed; the boys went and sent out for a lot of Rhine wine. I couldn’t stand the stuff, it was too bitter, or too something for me, fortunately, because all of the rest were terribly plastered.”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> NASM, “After Dinner Conversation with Lieutenant Guy Brown Wiser (20<sup>th</sup> Aero Squadron),” part 1, file xxxx-0139 (*sic*), May 20, 1966, 39:00.

<sup>15</sup> NASM, “After Dinner Conversation with Lieutenant Guy Brown Wiser (20<sup>th</sup> Aero Squadron),” part 1, file xxxx-0139 (*sic*), May 20, 1966, 43:45.



Figure 27. At Villingen, a bar of soap would net nearly any souvenir from defeated Germans. (National Museum of the U.S. Air Force)



Figure 28. Wiser's visual journal triumph: the shower of luxuries at Bern, and the return of the Stars and Stripes. Note the well-wishers and historical figures in the background. (National Museum of the U.S. Air Force)

Shortly thereafter, they walked out through Landshut in confident style (Figure 26), only to be stymied by administrative delay and having to hang around a more southerly camp at Villingen awaiting transport to Switzerland. While in this curious middle zone of not-freedom, Wiser and his mates encountered a strange phenomenon: Germans would trade anything for soap. “I got a first-class Iron Cross for half a stick of shaving soap,” said Wiser, “And one fella took his whole jacket apart. Took all his decorations and buttons and everything, and was trading every part of it, pockets, epaulettes, everything, he was just tearing them off and trading them in for any kind of soap. Cuckoo clocks, briar pipes, meerschaums, Dachshunds, anything you wanted, for soap” (Figure 27).<sup>16</sup> Finally the erstwhile prisoners made it to Bern, Switzerland, and enjoyed a scene that inspired the best painting in Wiser’s remarkable sketchbook (Figure 28). At Bern, they met an American diplomatic delegation and were absolutely deluged with luxuries: “They just descended on the train; we had twenty-six different brands of cigarettes given us, just showered with everything—oranges, letter paper, stationery, everything they could think of including old G.I. overcoats. We all got them, but no one got one that fit him. We spent the rest of the time trading overcoats trying to get one to fit. But that was the first time we’d seen the stars and stripes....”<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> NASM, “After Dinner Conversation with Lieutenant Guy Brown Wiser (20<sup>th</sup> Aero Squadron),” file xxxx-0139 (*sic*), May 20, 1966, 45:50.

<sup>17</sup> NASM, “After Dinner Conversation with Lieutenant Guy Brown Wiser (20<sup>th</sup> Aero Squadron),” part 1, file xxxx-0139 (*sic*), May 20, 1966, 47:30.



Wiser's war story ends shortly thereafter. He spent some time being evaluated with others at a French hospital, and visited his friend, and aerial observer whose place Richardson had taken on the fateful day, and who had lost a leg in later combat. Wiser was assigned to help gather the history of the war for the Air Service for a short while, then tried unsuccessfully (too much Army bureaucracy) to remain in France to attend more college, and finally went home aboard the USS *Michigan*. He was discharged at Garden City, New Jersey, on March 17, 1919, and returned to South Bend to begin a career as an architect and illustrator. (Fig. 29) "I just consider that I'm one of the luckiest guys alive," he said to a WWI history audience decade later, "And I've been through some fairly lively experiences, and I just thank the good lord for keeping a hand on my shoulder when I needed it."<sup>18</sup> Wiser married and went on to a notable career teaching and studying art, illustrating science textbooks and children's books, and becoming a modernist painter. He eventually contacted Alfred Greven, who shot him down, and they reunited as friends in the 1960s. For many years, he celebrated September 26<sup>th</sup> with Glenn Richardson and friends as "Our Shootin' Down Day." Guy Brown Wiser passed away in 1983 in California.<sup>19</sup>



Figure 29. Returning home in 1919, Wiser continued drawing and painting as a successful illustrator and artist.

<sup>18</sup> NASM, "After Dinner Conversation with Lieutenant Guy Brown Wiser (20<sup>th</sup> Aero Squadron)," part 2, file xxxx-0139 (*sic*), May 20, 1966, 2:25.

<sup>19</sup> NMUSAF, Research Division, archival resource 68-D21, Wiser, Guy Brown (Wiser's account and various other documents); "Alumni Notes," *Cornell Alumni News* XXIX, No. 17 (January 27, 1927): 213; Edan Hughes, "Artists in California, 1786-1940," *Los Angeles Times*, December 23, 1924, reprinted in "Biography: Guy Brown Wiser," [www.askart.com](http://www.askart.com), accessed January 9, 2018; Farhat Art Museum, "Guy Wiser (1895-1983)," <https://farhatculturalcenter.wordpress.com>, accessed January 9,



## Links, Connections, and Meaning

What do Wisser’s whimsical paintings and his explanations of them mean for the heritage of the U.S. Air Force in the history of the First World War? Foremost, they represent a unique record of a rare experience. They preserve events that otherwise would probably have been forgotten had not a keen and comic eye transferred them to paper. Compared to later wars, not many American aviators—only 153—were taken prisoner, and those who were, like Wisser, were not held long before the war ended. Overall, 123 U.S. Air Service fliers and one balloonist were forced down and captured, along with 19 Americans flying with the British, 10 with the French, and one with the Italians. The Air Service was still small, fielding at the end of the war 45 squadrons at the front, with 38 seeing combat, and a total of 767 pilots, 481 observers, and 23 aerial gunners.<sup>20</sup> For those captured, their experience was relatively humane compared to later wars, as Wisser’s chronicle shows.<sup>21</sup> Kindness and respect was evident, along with a degree of freedom unknown in later conflict. Germany’s dire circumstances near the end of hostilities may have played a part in this, as other prisons at other times and places during the war were far less hospitable.<sup>22</sup>

So, while Wisser’s small slice of experience was but a tiny part of a gigantic and horrible war, its evidence preserved in art is precious to the U.S. Air Force. It demonstrates qualities the USAF values, including courage, resourcefulness, and calm in the face of danger, that are unaltered by time. This heritage is both educational and inspirational. Of his humor in the midst of war, and the loss of several men on his last mission, Wisser wrote later that “Only because the whole action seems unreal, because we had been conditioned to accept death lightly, and because we were still alive, are we able to joke about such a tragedy.”<sup>23</sup> One quality in particular, that of “wingmanship,” is evident in Wisser’s experience: the USAF wants its airmen to look after and care for one another the way Wisser shows in his greeting of the friend they thought was killed. Being able to point to a real-life example through the medium of firsthand artistic witness from the earliest days of air power is invaluable to USAF heritage.

One can argue that Wisser’s art, while demonstrating his own personality and perspective, also suggests a particularly American sensibility. Though this is hard to test or prove, Americans seen through Wisser’s lens seem easy-going, open, optimistic, perhaps a little loud and mischievous—or in other words, typically American, in the way we might feel others see Americans and especially American soldiers in Europe. This may have been especially true as confident, well fed, well-equipped, motivated, and surely somewhat innocent and naïve U.S. troops arrived in 1917 and 1918. In this way, art’s ability to transmit feeling, atmosphere, and nuance, where bare facts may not, enhances its value as historical interpretation.

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2018; “Alumni Notes,” *The Cornell Architect* 4 (June 1919): 52; Guy Brown Wisser, “Our 59<sup>th</sup> Shootin’ Down Day, 1918-1977,” Invitation, September 25, 1977, Van Nuys, CA (Cornell University Archives).

<sup>20</sup> NMUSAF, “Meuse-Argonne Offensive,” fact sheet, [www.nationalmuseum.af.mil](http://www.nationalmuseum.af.mil).

<sup>21</sup> NMUSAF, “WWI Prisoners of War,” fact sheet, [www.nationalmuseum.af.mil](http://www.nationalmuseum.af.mil).

<sup>22</sup> For further information on other POW experiences, see United States Air Force Academy, *The American P.O.W. Experience*, Special Bibliography Series No. 96, November 2000.

<sup>23</sup> Guy Brown Wisser, typescript photocopy attached to sketchbook, n.d. (Cornell University Archives).



And as historical record, Wisser's art vividly demonstrates both change and continuity, the foundations of meaning and significance. The machines and clothing, the structures of authority and manner in his work, are clearly of another century, but the concerns of daily life remain unchanged. That soldiers relish Red Cross and other "care" packages, play jokes, obey and persevere is as true in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as it was then. And an American serviceman making fun of his daily life is definitely nothing new. Guy Brown Wisser simply did it very well in a very rare circumstance and we are the beneficiaries of his generous and perceptive talent. Through his little sketchbook of a century past, he lets us peek into a vanished era and see its echoes in the present.