

My Army Murals

Conn Barracks, Germany 1959–1961

My fifth grade “mural” having had its sad ending, my next murals some nine years later, were happier events. These were in Conn Barracks, outside Schweinfurt, Germany, where I was stationed 1959 to mid-1961.

One day, our Battery Commander asked for volunteers to paint murals in our newly remodeled recreation and service center. As it happened, there were several guys in our unit who had studied art in universities and were very good painters. My experience painting, up till then, was while I was in the Army was painting girlfriend’s portraits for lovesick, homesick soldiers (I sold them for \$3.00 each). Nevertheless, I was quick to raise my hand, although I felt certain someone else among those who had studied art would get the assignment. To my surprise, no one else volunteered, and I got the job.

Our Battery Commander a certain Captain Hood, then explained what he wanted done. He said that while our recreation area was comfortable and spacious, there was something missing—image of home. And it was true, some of us often felt homesick being separated from sweetheart, families and friends. He wanted reminders of home, scenes of our beautiful country. He then gave me a stack of scenic postcards from many places across the United States. Some of these were Mount Rushmore, a cowboy and his horse, the New York City skyline, the Rocky Mountains, and even one or two seaside beaches with bikini clad young beauties.

This was a dream assignment and I was soon painting every day, excused from most duties except, of course, from guard duty, KP, and going out on military alerts.

It was interesting to see the reaction to the murals from some soldiers. For example, when painting a mural showing the New York City skyline, guys from that area would sit around the mural and reminisce about their city, or rather their neighborhoods, precincts, barrios, ghettos, etc.

While painting a cowboy and his horse, some western types would gather around and talk about their work in ranches, rodeos and such.

I was getting an education not only in painting, but learning about my fellow soldiers. There were southern accents, accents from Boston, the Bronx, African-Americans, LA Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, not to mention mannerisms, cuss words, raunchy stories, etc. *Mi ruka, mi weeza, mi cuera, mi chava*, that was Chicano or cholo for *my girlfriend*. “Chuitjt?” meant, “did you eat yet?” From someone from New Jersey, I think. I listened while I painted and I was proud also of my own Tex-Mex-Spanish.

That project lasted for some months and I received a Letter of Commendation from our Battery Commander. Too soon, it seemed I was transferred to Fort Ord, California. There, I only painted one large mural in our mess hall in 1961. It was titled “Monterey Bay.” While stationed at Fort Ord, I enrolled at the nearby Monterey Peninsula College and took night courses in art and electronics, electronics as part of military training in radio communications. My painting instructor was heavily into abstract painting, so I did not learn much there. I painted a large abstract piece, receiving an “A” for the course.