

‘I Drew The War’

A Vietnam vet’s art collection he created while serving in the war zone is now featured at the Library of Congress

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When Carl Les Fordahl left the Vietnam War in 1971, his art, a collection of paintings, photographs and combat sketches, went into a closet before resurfacing again two decades after his service.

The art, which captures locations and moments during the Vietnam War, drew interest from other veterans who over the years encouraged him to donate it to the National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum in Chicago, as well as other museums and veterans art collections that include the Library of Congress.

Fordahl, who enlisted in 1967, served with the Army’s HQs Co., 1st Signal Bde., and deployed to Germany and later Vietnam in 1970 as a draftsman, illustrator and combat artist during his service in the military.

“I drew the war,” Fordahl said. “I sat on firebases and sketched. I sketched on the streets. I sketched on the rivers. Wherever I was.”

With a penchant for sketching since he was 8 years old, Fordahl’s artistic gift was first recognized while training at the Army Security Agency at Fort Devens, Massachusetts, where he liked to sketch during after-duty hours to relax and ease himself into sleep.

“I was sketching and they saw me sketching, and one of the officers said ‘Can you do a mural in our dayroom?’” said Fordahl, a native of Wilmington, Minnesota. “They gave me temporary duty and I did the mural, and then I ended up doing two more murals for the mess hall.”

Fordahl was then transferred to the art department at the Army Security Agency headquarters in Arlington, Virginia, where he trained six months before deploying as a

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draftsman to Germany in 1969.

“They needed a draftsman to go to Germany and do the church for the congressional study of our bases in Germany,” Fordahl said. “I was there with the 11th Signal Battalion and on-call as a draftsman 24/7, but I got a chance to travel Europe and see quite a bit.”

Fordahl spent 13 months on that assignment in Germany before volunteering for Vietnam as a draftsman, assigned to the Southeast Asian Telecommunications System with the 1st Signal Brigade in Long Binh.

“We were doing charts and replacing charts for pretty much the entire communications network in Vietnam,” Fordahl said. “Some of the areas, the communication had been compromised, so that was my job. It was my job to replace those areas and fool the enemy, so to speak.”

While working on charts in Vietnam, an Army colonel who recognized Fordahl as an artist assigned him to the 221st Combat Arts and Photo Division.

The group was comprised of three artists, and Fordahl was to be the fourth. He joined the art team and they traveled from the Delta to the DMZ, assigned to several units across several fire bases, where they lived and documented their daily activities with sketches and paintings throughout the war.

Among those was Fordahl’s sketch of Firebase Bastogne, which the artist can still recall with precise details imprinted in his memory.

“Those guys on the frontline and up in the hills did not have much, but they would give you what they could,” Fordahl said. “That is the kind of men you served with [in Vietnam]. They always took care of each other.”

Following the Vietnam War, Fordahl returned with 131 sketches, but only 85 of them survived after he was beaten by protestors in Oakland, California, upon his arrival back in the States.

Though he spent most of his life as a civilian working for the United States Postal Service, Fordahl recreated from memory the other sketches destroyed and has continued to study, teach and speak of his combat art at several local universities in Minnesota, as well as for the Library of Congress and its Veterans History Project.

“I was proud of what I did,” Fordahl said. “I never drew a weapon. I drew my pencil, and my paper and my camera. Documenting the war, that is the greatest blessing God gave me to do.”

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