

WWII Vet Paints Fallen Heroes

A VFW member in Pennsylvania creates portraits of troops who have paid the ultimate sacrifice, gifting the artwork to the families of the deceased

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Alex Yawor, who served in the Marine Corps from August 1942 to February 1950 with Headquarters Co., 3rd Bn., 25th Marines, 4th Marine Div., as a rifleman, has created 149 oil paintings since 2009.

When he returned home from World War II, after having participated in battles on the Marshall Islands, Saipan and Iwo Jima, Yawor said he did not leave his house for about a year.

“After that, I got a job in a steel mill that was only two blocks away from me,” Yawor said. “And then I started to date what I call my high school sweetheart, and we finally got married. I still was not in a good mind, and I thought that I used to do a lot of drawing. [So I] said I’m going to try painting. So I started painting still lifes and scenery.”

Then he heard about a woman in Utah who painted portraits of “fallen heroes” and gave them to the deceased troops’ parents.

“So that’s what I decided to do after the first two things I was painting,” Yawor said. “Then I decided to do some portraits. I became pretty good at it. I decided I was going to paint these portraits and give them to the parents.”

A friend from the Yellow Ribbon Girls, an Ellwood City, Pa., nonprofit that sends supplies to troops overseas, connected him with a family for his first painting.

Yawor has found additional subjects through the Gold Star Mothers, an organization of parents whose children have been killed while serving in uniform.

“There’s a lot of mothers whenever I would send the painting, they would send me back a letter and tell me what a beautiful job that I’ve done of their loved one,” Yawor said, “and

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then they tell me that they would hang the picture in the room he used to sleep in. Then when they go into that room, they feel that he is still there. They talk to him.”

Conversing with the portrait subjects is something Yawor relates to.

“When I paint, I talk to them,” Yawor said. “And I cry. And I say to myself, ‘Why do they have to die?’ ”

Each painting takes about a week to create. Yawor sketches the image first, then completes the piece with oil paints. The World War II veteran said that capturing the eyes is key to his work.

“If you don’t paint the eyes right, you might as well throw the picture away,” Yawor said. “The eyes definitely have to be exactly right. One day I’m painting, and the young man that I was painting, he had a little smile on his face. So when I started painting on his eyes, I wasn’t getting the eyes right. And I looked at the eyes, and his smile disappeared.”

Yawor questioned what he saw.

“Am I seeing things? He looked like [he was] sad,” Yawor said. “So I finally got the painting with the eyes right, and then when I looked in his eyes real good again, they got a happy look, and the little smile came back.”

Yawor said his motivation to keep painting these troops is that he feels like it is his life’s purpose.

“I love to do it,” said Yawor, a member of VFW Post 8805 in Aliquippa, Pa., “and I’m 95 years old, and I just hope that I live long enough that I can maybe do another 149.”

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