

The Art of Espionage

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An Artist At War

By James G. Fausone



Sending Artists to War

When the United States entered the war with Germany in 1917, they didn't have the technology to ping locations. Instead, they used artists to sketch the location and return the drawing to camp. The images were then given to the U.S. government where they were carefully preserved and photographed. The art would show how brave American soldiers were and serve as propaganda for the war. They would also become historical records of WWI.

Hazards Artists faced

The artists' jobs were not easy. They were constantly undercover, avoiding shrapnel and hidden defenses. Scouting and sketching with the constant fear of being discovered by the enemy made this job extremely dangerous. Millions were killed by these weapons, but the artists had to focus on their sketching being as accurate as possible. Failure could mean disaster to the highest degree. The soldiers following the drawing could become lost or worse, walk directly into an enemy camp.

[Capt. William J. Aylward, Capt. Walter J. Duncan, and Capt Harvey Dunn](#) are some of the first artists selected to cover the war. At first, no one was interested in the images. Due to their creators being comfortably hidden behind the front lines, the art did not have propaganda or military purpose. As America's participation in World War I increased however, the drawings became more graphic and revealed the reality of war. With this change in the artwork's nature came a demand for the images, both from the military and from the press.

New WWI Artist Discovered

These men weren't the only artists in WWI. Over 90 years after his service, Leonard "Len" Smith's diary was discovered. It detailed his life as both a soldier and an artist in WWI along with some of his contributions to winning the war. One of the most notable of these was a drawing of a tree.

Born in London in 1892, Leonard Smith joined the 7th Battalion on his 23rd birthday. His brother Harold served as a gunner and Smith saw it as his patriotic duty to continue service. Although he considered himself an "[ordinary bloke in khaki](#)" he would go on to make some of the most valuable artwork of WWI.

Smith was a sapper in the "Shiny Seventh" when the Battle of Loos occurred. The British attempted to use poisonous gas but unfortunately, the wind blew the gas back at the British soldiers. After being one of the few survivors of A Company's attempt to scale [Double Crassier](#) during the battle, he was drafted into the 140th Brigade. Smith became a sniper, "[A job I hated, but orders is orders](#)" he said in his diary.

He became known for his observation skills and eventually became an accredited War Artist. Brigadier General Cuthbert gave Smith a command to create a detailed panoramic drawing of the trenches. Smith needed to note troop movements, detail the terrain, and avoid sniper fire and mortar shells. All this needed to occur under the cover of darkness so that Smith wasn't discovered.

After sneaking around German forts and sketching placements of machine guns, craters, and any intel he could gather, Leonard Smith finished his drawing. Smith used his colored pencils to place every bush, tree, and blade of grass he could. The artist finished his drawing which ended up being over two feet long.



Spying from the Trees

Spying on enemies and sketching the area was no strange task for the artist of WWI, but Smith took it further than anyone had before. He snuck within a few yards of the enemy's headquarters to draw a tree. He sketched the tree with such immense detail because he knew lives would depend on that sketch.

Once the tree drawing was complete it was sent back to friendly territory where it would be used by the allies to [build a hollow replica](#). This replica would be created from steel and then painted to look exactly as the real tree did. Once the final touches were done the false tree was moved to enemy lines. From there, in the dead of night soldiers replaced the real tree with the replica. A soldier was able to fit in the replica and from it listen to the German's plans. Infiltrating German headquarters revealed German movements and gave the Allies an immense advantage. If

Smith had failed to recreate a perfect rendition of the tree, the soldier would have been discovered and the network of tunnels built under the tree would have compromised many camps. Smith, however, succeeded and gave the Allies exactly what they needed to complete the scheme.



Leonard Smith became a commercial artist after his service. He then retired and took commissions for watercolor paintings. He had tried to get his diary published in the seventies, but no one wanted to print it. The diary sat in a box until it was discovered years later by Smith's great-nephew David Mason. Mason got the diary published and the detailed note-keeping Smith took is now published as "The Pictures and Diary of a Wartime Artist".

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*Jim Fausone is a partner with **Legal Help For Veterans, PLLC**, with over twenty years of experience helping veterans apply for service-connected disability benefits and starting their claims, appealing VA decisions, and filing claims for an increased disability rating so veterans can receive a higher level of benefits.*

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