

# U.S. ARMY ART SPOTLIGHT

## THE FORGOTTEN WAR

### *Korean War Art by Weldy Baer*

By Sarah G. Forgey

Overshadowed by World War II before it and the Vietnam War after, the Korean War is often referred to as “the forgotten war.” Despite the success of the Army Art Program during both world wars, combat art was not yet a permanent program within the U.S. Army at the start of the Korean War. The World War II program was disbanded officially in 1946 after receiving several thousand artworks completed by forty-three soldier-artists in both theaters. Although there was a brief attempt in 1951 to create an artist program to document the Korean War, nothing came of the effort because of lack of funding and momentum. Furthermore, in contrast to the two world wars, which were documented widely by both soldier-artists and civilian artists serving as press correspondents, there were very few civilian artists covering the Korean War.

Recognizing this lack of artists as a major omission, civilian artist Robert “Weldy” Baer volunteered his services to the Army as a combat artist. Baer had trained at the Art Students League in New York City and previously had taught art in Pennsylvania. He was working in Japan as a civilian when the Korean War began. The Army assigned him temporarily to the Eighth Army Historical Section, where he documented the American soldier’s experience in Korea through paintings and drawings.

Though Baer had not served in World War II as either a soldier or soldier-artist, his approach to combat art was much like that of World War II combat artists. He worked in both graphite and oil paint, documenting a wide range of subjects. His oil paintings are typically large battle scenes, convoys, or representations of soldiers interacting within the Korean landscape. They are loose representations of the subject matter and less skillful in comparison to the work of most of the Army’s World War II combat artists. There is little personal feeling to his paintings; rather, they represent the Korean War soldier as an anonymous tool in the orchestration of the war. His painting *Taking A Village At Night*, which represents American soldiers as small figures with their backs turned from the viewer in a dark setting, is an excellent example of the way in which Baer divorces the individual soldiers from the actions that he represents in his artwork. Other paintings, such as *Convoy*

*From Wonsan To Hamhung*, depict the Army’s presence in Korea without showing a single soldier.

Baer’s graphite drawings, in contrast, are much more intimate representations of individual soldiers and reflect the artist’s emotional connection to his work. His drawings are more often camp scenes or portraits rather than battle scenes or portrayals of movements of people or equipment. One of his most moving portraits, *Tired Doc*, portrays a doctor of the 2d Division with his head bowed and eyes closed in fatigue. The subject is bundled up, wearing his helmet, and unshaven, indicating long days and nights spent caring for wounded soldiers. In other drawings, Baer represents the soldier’s experience in Korea by empathizing with the miserable conditions in which they served, an approach common to combat artists from every era. Baer’s drawing *Winter In Korea* is a simple representation of a soldier dressed in winter gear with a grimace on his face as he stands patrol in the cold. Similarly, in a drawing titled *C Rations—Cold Again!*, the artist rendered a soldier dressed in winter gear holding his C-ration in his mittened hands as he glances toward the viewer, resigned to eating another cold meal to keep up his strength.

Though the quality of Weldy Baer’s Korean War art is not as high as Army Art from World War II or later periods, his work is important as one of the only artistic representations of the Army during the Korean War. Like Army Artists that came before and after him, Baer looked to soldiers themselves as inspiration for the emotional content needed to create effective art. He was most successful when he focused on the personal experiences of individual soldiers rather than larger scenes involving tactical operations.

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*Convoy From Wonsan To Hamhung, Robert (Weldy) Baer, oil, 1950*



*Tired Doc, Robert (Weldy) Baer, pencil on paper, 1950*



*Winter In Korea, Robert (Weldy) Baer, pencil on paper, 1950*



***Taking A Village At Night, Robert (Weldy) Baer, oil on canvas, 1951***



***C Rations—Cold Again!, Robert (Weldy) Baer, pencil on paper, 1951***