SLATE

HISTORY

“No Medals This Time”

How my great-uncle, Mitchell Jamieson, depicted war in art, from D-Day to Vietnam.

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Mitchell Jamieson, *Morning of D-Day From LST*, 1944. Courtesy of the Naval History and Heritage Command

On June 6, 1944, my great-uncle, the combat artist Mitchell Jamieson, stood on a Tank Landing Ship with hundreds of other soldiers waiting to join the assault waves and demolition parties already heading to Utah Beach. In his description of his painting of that morning, *Dawn of D-Day Off of France,* he recalled the freighted tension of the moment:

> These men … could only wonder what awaited them as they stared at the distant coastline, barely discernible. The boats, suspended on davits above their heads, expressed oddly in their dark shapes the taut, waiting threat of this dawn off the Normandy coast.

Hours later he would come ashore with a .45 pistol, pencils, and a sketchbook. Living in a foxhole on the beach, Mitchell spent the next week documenting the death and destruction wrought by the largest amphibious invasion in history, the turning point of World War II. He was 28 years old.

Mitchell Jamieson, *Dawn of D-Day Off of France*, 1944. Courtesy of the Naval History and Heritage Command

The U.S. had used combat artists to capture the action in World War I, and early in World War II, the military determined that they were once again crucial to galvanizing popular support. George Biddle, a muralist who became the chair of the War Department Art Advisory Committee, laid out the mission, advising his artists:

> Express if you can, realistically or symbolically, the essence and spirit of war. You may be guided by Blake's mysticism, by Goya's cynicism and savagery, by Delacroix's romanticism, by Daumier's humanity and tenderness; or better still follow your own inevitable star.

High-minded exhortations aside, the making of art out of war must also be, by necessity, a propaganda mission, to justify the effort and expense. The World War II combat artists would, implicitly, reveal the bravery, heroism, and resilience of "our boys." Though a photograph might simply show a slaughter—as Mathew Brady's Civil War work famously did—a painting could soften the raw carnage, allude to epic themes, and offer meaning and solace in the face of inestimable loss.

My great-uncle Mitchell and I overlapped in this world only briefly, and across a continent. To mark my birth, he gave my parents a black-and-white drawing of the Apollo mission capsule floating on dark waters, which I like to think he meant as a metaphor for my own recent landing on Earth. We never met, though; I was born in San Francisco in 1974, and he killed himself in Alexandria, Virginia, in 1976. Throughout my childhood I heard vague rumblings about Mitchell, but knew him only by his later iconic work for NASA, which my parents always pointed out to me when we visited the Air and Space Museum. But I had no idea that he'd been a New Deal artist, painted for the Roosevelts at Hyde Park, and traveled

the world as a Life magazine correspondent. The family shame around Mitchell's violent death prevented me from understanding his full legacy, and ultimately circumscribed the meaning of his life and art.

Mitchell Jamieson, *First Steps*, 1963, a painting of astronaut Gordon Cooper emerging from the *Mercury* spacecraft onto the deck of the recovery ship after his mission that year. Courtesy of the National Air and Space Museum

About a year and a half ago, I discovered that Mitchell's correspondence, sketchbooks, and hundreds of pieces of artwork were still in the family, stored in the 1800s townhouse in Alexandria where he'd spent most of his adult life, where he died by suicide, and where his son, Craig, still lives. I reached out to the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, and they were interested in a donation of Mitchell's papers, most of which hadn't been touched since his death. As I began helping Craig unearth the sheaves of Mitchell's records, photographs, and drawings, I became intrigued by his life and the significant role he'd played, almost haphazardly it seemed, in many of the pivotal events of the 20th century.

It is an odd thing to become acquainted with a family member decades after their death, and doubly strange when this person was a well-known artist in their time. Mitchell's astonishing art spoke to me first, his intricate visual renderings of everything from military tanks and orphaned children to shells and flowers. His sketchbooks, in particular, about 80 of them in the family collection, offer a remarkable record of his working style as an artist, the rapidity with which he drew, his ability to capture details in high-stress moments, his delicate notations of colors to add when he later painted from the sketches ("water grey-green, blue reflections"). But in exploring this archive, it is his voice as a writer and a thinker that has surprised me most. Knowing him as a visual artist, I was prepared to see through his eyes; I was not prepared for his poetry, his prose.

Mitchell Jamieson, *Waiting for Burial, Cemetery Above the Beach*, 1944. Courtesy of the Naval History and Heritage Command

Mitchell composed descriptions of his combat artwork, over 500 pieces of which have been collected by the Naval History and Heritage Command, and his writing provides context for each piece. Some of his notes are literally scrawled on the back—the *verso* in artistic terms—of the art, while others were clearly composed and submitted when the pieces were given over to the Navy. These descriptions range from straightforward accounts to lyrical observations, short essays, and scraps of poignant reportage from the field. On a simple pen-and-ink drawing, *Waiting for Burial, Cemetery Above the Beach*, he included direct quotes ("told to the artist") from an unnamed sergeant grappling with the challenge of burying thousands of American, British, and German corpses in a war zone:

> Why, when we landed we didn't know what to do or where to start. Bodies everywhere you looked and firing going on all around you. Some of the officers of another outfit wanted to use a bulldozer [to bury the dead] but our lieutenant said no, we'd do the job proper and decent.

In the sketch, four covered bodies represent the anonymous dead, but the *verso* reveals the real savagery of the beach scene. Mitchell described the "apologetic" tone of the sergeant when he acknowledged how the horrifying task and the sickening smell had become

routine. In this exchange we see his encompassing role as an artist correspondent on the battlefield: the listener, the watcher, the witness to it all.

Mitchell Jamieson, *Sea Wall at the Eastern American Beach*, 1944. Courtesy of the Naval History and Heritage Command

Before Normandy, Mitchell had been embedded with a convoy to North Africa, and landed at the invasion of Sicily, where his sketchbooks were soaked through, and men all around him were hit by shrapnel. From Europe, he was sent to Iwo Jima, where "every square foot of earth seemed to be torn or pockmarked by shell fire and shrapnel," and then Okinawa. Craig remembers his father telling stories of a Japanese kamikaze plane dive-bombing and hitting the aircraft carrier he was aboard. In an interview with the Washington Post, Mitchell described his work from that time as "filled with pleasure of drawing, of fighting with men I loved, the exhilaration of color and war." He learned of the atomic attack on Hiroshima from a shipboard broadcast. "I was glad," he said in the same interview. "I wanted the war to end. I hated those bastards."

The combat artist role is inherently paradoxical. In Mitchell's art and writing it's evident that he's straddling the line between surviving and creating, being in the action and observing the action, capturing the details while not losing the larger picture. In contrast to war photography, visual art requires a longer, intimate engagement with the moment. It

demands conceiving, sketching, lingering; it demands time. In the chaos of the battlefield, he became aware of all the moving pieces and terrible nuances: German prisoners so relieved to be out of the fighting that they'd salute when approached; the truck called the "meat wagon" which transports the dead; the "slow, steady and appalling" work of burying the fallen. And in the midst of this, he recognized the frustrating impossibility of seeing and expressing it all, what he later described as a "gnawing dissatisfaction and awareness of the disparity between the enormity of the tragic subject and one's own trivial effort."

Lt. j.g. Mitchell Jamieson, USNR, official U.S. Navy combat artist, painting in North Africa, 1943. Courtesy of U.S. Navy

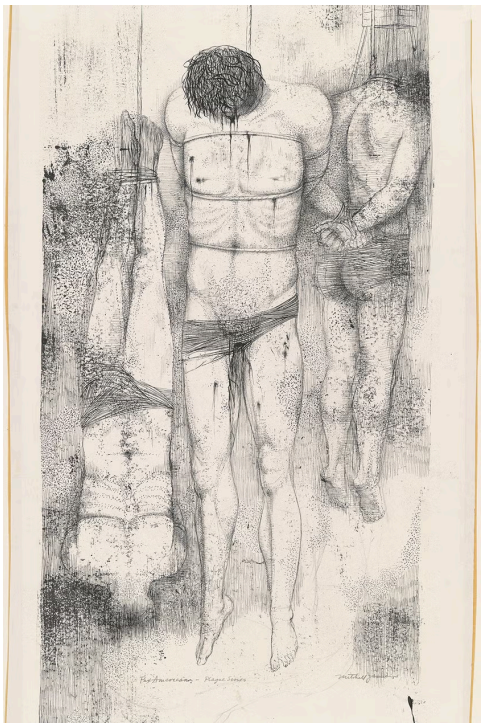
After three years of service, Mitchell returned from World War II with a Bronze Star and the foundation of a successful career in the arts. He had a one-man show at the Corcoran Gallery, his paintings were included in an exhibit called "Operation Palette," which toured the country for five years, and he won two Guggenheim fellowships. He started teaching at art schools nationally, and eventually landed a tenure-track position at the University of Maryland. During this time, his perspective on his combat service began to change, gradually it seems, and then all of a sudden.

In a 1962 talk for the Society of Federal Artists and Designers, titled *Razzmatazz and Tatterdemalion: The Myth of the Useful Artist,* he shared his ambivalence about his role as

documentarian and propagandist for the US Navy:

> For a period of three years, during the Second World War, I occupied a position in the U.S Navy known as Combat Artist. According to your predilection, this designation will seem either a contradiction in terms or a natural state of affairs …
>
> The war experience left me with a curious duality in my art and in my thought. On the one hand, my painting reflected a great and universal theme, of concern to everyone. Recognition for it was not lacking, stemming as much, I am sure, from the subject matter as from my mastery of my craft and art. There was, on my part, a gratifying sense of fulfilling both a useful public role and a personal potential for development at the same time. On the other hand … the sense of being manipulated by vast forces.

It was these "vast forces" that made him want to understand what was really going on in the Vietnam War, beyond the news reports. In the summer of 1967, he reprised his role on the battlefield, this time as a civilian volunteer artist under the auspices of the Office of Military History. Visiting Saigon, Pleiku, and Dak To, he filled sketchbooks and took hundreds of photos. Sickness forced him back to the United States after less than a month, but he had seen enough to transform his life and art forever.



Mitchell Jamieson, *Pax Americana*, 1970. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art

If Mitchell's World War II combat art built his career, then his obsession with Vietnam destroyed it. My grandfather, usually a reserved man, opened up to a journalist about his brother's state of mind after going to Southeast Asia: "For two years he had insomnia. Ludy [Mitchell's wife] said she heard nothing but Vietnam for six years after he got back." Through all those sleepless nights he painted and listened to Vietnamese music and read "every book published on Vietnam," many of which are still in the Alexandria townhouse. He created an opus of work, still unfinished at his death, called "The Plague," which is both a reference to Albert Camus' book of the same title and the U.S. military itself. Mitchell's post-Vietnam art was prolific, pointedly political, and largely unsaleable.

To render Vietnam, Mitchell became a new artist altogether. Gone is the heroic sense of comradery: the brave, grim-faced men piling onto boats to fight and die together. Now we see only black-and-white drawings, faces and bodies emerging from

midnight splotches of ink. Mitchell felt the horror of this war should be captured in monochrome; color was by its very nature sensual and inappropriate. These drawings, he wrote, were "composed in a spirit of cold fury, animated by an overwhelming sense of the obscene, insane, waste of young lives, and addressed to a new and revolutionary young consciousness." The brutality, the viciousness of killing, and its aftermath are all documented, but also something else. A sense of claustrophobia, of trapped, hypocritical, pointless violence. Tortured, decapitated, castrated victims ringed in barbed wire; prostitutes suffering the affections of grinning, obese officers; grieving peasants wailing, hunched over dead children. While his World War II work is clearly reportage, here he goes beyond what he actually witnessed, imagining scenes in harrowing detail. His art pivots from stylized to surreal; if his early pieces had echoes of Edward Hopper, they now seem haunted by Hieronymus Bosch.

Mitchell Jamieson, *Terrified Mother and Child, Vietnam* (from series "The Plague"), 1976. Smithsonian American Art Museum, gift of Frank McClure, 1976

Mitchell's anti-war crusade had real-life impacts, including delaying his tenure at the University of Maryland. Institutions which had once welcomed him back as a returning war hero refused to acknowledge his incendiary new body of work. In an unpublished article titled "Das Kannibal," Mitchell wrote angrily about being blackballed for speaking out against the war. The Defense Department, which had first invited him to Vietnam, declined to show "The Plague" drawings, he said, suggesting that perhaps they could be exhibited in "50 years time" when they would be less controversial. The Smithsonian, too, turned their back on him (a cutting blow for an artist who'd lived in the D.C. area his whole life) because (Mitchell wrote) they were "intimidated by celebrities like [Alexander] Calder" who threatened to withhold gifts of his art if they circulated an exhibit on the war. In a scathing rejection of his newest work, Bernard Quint, art director at Life magazine, wrote on Nov. 28, 1967, "From looking at your drawings, I would gather that only American G.I.'s are guilty of poking their daggers into Christ-like Vietnamese and obviously Hanoi and the Viet Cong are blank pieces of paper which symbolize innocence." The doors that were once opened to Mitchell now slammed shut, and he felt profoundly betrayed. "No medals this time," he told a Washington Post art critic. (I asked the Smithsonian and the Department of Defense for comment on the events Mitchell described. A spokesperson for the Smithsonian replied that they were unable to offer

informed comment due to the time that has passed, and the Department of Defense did not reply to my request before press time.)

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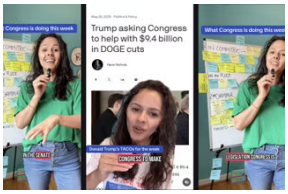

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All my life, I heard that the trauma of my great-uncle's visit to Vietnam killed him, and his obituaries and many of the articles about his life and legacy reflect this sentiment. But as I've learned more, I've started to question whether it was the three weeks he spent in Vietnam or the three years he served in World War II that led to his ultimate breakdown. In "Das Kannibal," Mitchell writes that Saigon "brought back vividly to me the Algerian city of Oran in 1942-43 ... first city I'd ever seen surrounded by the feverish activity of war-time." Just over 20 years after the end of his World War II service, he returns to the battlefield and finds another formerly peaceful country overtaken by war. It is all too familiar, but now he is 20 years older, a reporter and not a soldier, his vision no longer clouded by the communal spirit of war. Standing apart from the machine, he sees it for what it truly is. Camus' *The Plague* is set in Oran, and with this connection in mind he christens his new series of unflinching depictions of massacre. *This time*, he seems to be saying, *I will tell the truth about war, all the wars I have seen and all the wars to come.*

Mitchell Jamieson, *The Beach at Dusk*, 1945. Courtesy of the Naval History and Heritage Command

But how much of this was already brewing before Mitchell stepped foot in Indochina? In his 1976 eulogy at Mitchell's funeral, Lt. Cmdr. J. Burke Wilkinson described how Mitchell's art evolved during World War II:

> I heard he had gone to the Pacific … and we saw in *Life* his Iwo Jima pictures … the growing depth and compassion of his art … the terror and the beauty too … a sadder, harsher note, colors more disturbing … a sense of strain, exhaustion even …
>
> Later we heard he had been ordered home by the Head of the Art Unit and had begged to be allowed to stay.

As a military man, Wilkinson would have known that "strain" and "exhaustion" could be signs of serious mental health deterioration. The diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder was not recognized by the American Psychiatric Association until 1980; before that it was known simply as combat or battle "fatigue." There's also evidence that the profusion of bodies and nightmarish scenes that characterize Mitchell's later work started to creep in *before* he went to Vietnam. The catalog for Mitchell's posthumous Corcoran show in 1979 notes that a group of dream-influenced paintings, including one called *Fragments From the Apocalypse,* were exhibited before he visited Vietnam, and closely

resemble his painting *The Saigon Follies,* "with its melange of grotesque images." In going through the art in Craig's house, I've also come across pieces in the same surreal style that predate his Vietnam experience. It leads me to wonder: How long had Mitchell been suffering? Had he ever gotten help?

I'm left with the uneasy sense that both my great-uncle's life and death have been misunderstood. We know that he'd witnessed countless losses in World War II, saw wounded men dying in agony, traveled the world to participate in some of the bloodiest battles history has ever seen. And his official duty was to bring this brutality to life on paper. While other men had terrible jobs, they also had the possibility of forgetting, putting the war behind them after their task was done. But Mitchell's charge was ongoing: to capture the slaughter in his mind's eye, to witness and remember and translate everything he had seen for the broader public. Once these images were seared into his memory, they tormented him and they emerged in his imagination, his dreams, his art. He could never forget. Could it be that Vietnam was the trigger, not the cause, of his self-inflicted demise?

In 1964 Mitchell had an exhibition at the University of Maryland of work from World War II called "On War: Drawings from the Arena," pulled from his personal collection. On the postcard promoting the show, he quoted James Joyce's *Ulysses,* "History is the Nightmare from which I am trying to Awaken." Below he added this text to justify displaying his wartime artwork, these "odds and ends of catastrophe found in history's wake":

> If it is asked why this assemblage of faces from a dusty picture, burning villages and cities, refugees and invasion armadas … should be presented at this time, one can only reply that for so many of us the longest day in history dawned, cheerless and cold, off the coast of Normandy twenty years ago.

Mitchell survived that "longest day" in body, but the damage to his spirit would only become evident two decades later in another land ravaged by a new American war. At such close range, sketchbook in hand, the repeating cycles of history proved too much to bear. In the last, he must have felt his only chance to awaken from the nightmare was to end the dream.