

The Artist at War

"Stand up straight" The sergeant roared "you're in the Army you 'orrible thing" The new recruit moved just a little more upright then subsided into a comfortable stoop. He was a dark haired thin man of thirty eight.

"What's your name? You 'opeless 'eap?"

"Frank Brangwyn ...sir."

"Don't call me Sir, I aint no Sir, I 'm Sarnt Driscoll an' don't you forget it"

The first day of Army life had not been kind to Frank. He had enlisted with the Artist's Rifles in London but somehow he found himself at a training camp in Yorkshire. How did it happen? He had no idea, but wished he could change his mind. Could he go "Conchie" like his friend Bertrand Russell? No! It was not in his nature to rebel and he believed this would be a just war against the German Kaiser. All he hoped for was a chance to show support for the Empire and some part in the fight against the Huns. But this was something else, a world of shouting and mindless routines led by soldiers who regarded the volunteers as idiots and victims.

At night when, at last, the routine bullying and continuous noise ceased, he brought out his sketch book and doodled pen portraits of the characters he met. Driscoll became a dragon with a mouth full of teeth; Captain Foster, the officer in charge of his Company was a languid ostrich and the troop corporal Jenkins a Pekinese dog yapping at everybody's heels. The other recruits enjoyed the fun and soon his cartoons were circulating among the squads

who shared the same training course. It was inevitable that some dunce would leave them on show someplace where the staff would find them.

During the second week he was told to "appear on Regimental Orders." the following morning. Corporal Jenkins explained this meant he was up before the Captain and he'd better be in best kit or else.

Next morning "Left Right--Left Right-Halt--Left Turn" There were his cartoons on the desk in front of the officer.

"Did you draw these?"

"Yes Sir"

"Very good, I had no idea you are Frank Brangwyn the artist. What on earth are you doing here, training in Yorkshire?"

"Well" he began "I don't know either but they sent me here."

Foster leaned back in his chair and smiled.

"What would you say if I wrote a note to the War Office that you are available as a war artist? Would it suit you?"

Brangwyn nodded his acceptance and felt tears brimming in his eyes at the thought of finding a release from the drudgery he had endured for the last weeks. All the humiliation and pointless discipline had worn him down but he felt ashamed of this outburst of emotion in front of the officer.

The War Department was in Whitehall and he reported to The Official Record Office, still in his unbadged basic uniform.

"Your Yorkshire training was useful?"

The enquiry came from an officer considerably younger than himself and dressed in immaculate uniform of one of the top cavalry regiments. He smoked a Turkish cigarette through an ebony holder and wore a monocle which he played with from time to time.

"We have rather a different regime here" he smiled archly "I have to find jobs for the Belle Monde who offer their services to the Nation."

Frank took an instant dislike to this effete young person.

"I am not one of your Belle Monde; I enlisted like thousands of others to help the country at war."

"Well, so you shall." His arrogance was insufferable.

"I am posting you to First Army Headquarters at Arras as an official war artist; you can have three days leave and then report to them.

Frank left the office without saluting although he had learnt well enough what was correct. Promotion to War Artist meant an automatic commission, so he arrived in Army Headquarters in new uniform but no idea of his role. He reported to a Major Symens who explained the job involved creating sketches or simple line drawings of the men at the front line.

"Good for Morale, y' know" Symens twirled his waxed moustache to emphasise the point "But not too much blood and guts."

He smiled nodding to Brangwyn as if they were old comrades.

"I'll do my best" Frank assured him "But I will draw what I see."

"Of course, do what you think is right, but remember we are supporting the folks at home not writing a Penny Dreadful"

He chortled at his joke and offered Brangwyn a glass of sherry. Frank accepted gladly, knowing it was unlikely he would get another till he came back to England.

His first "expedition" took him to a field hospital near Mons about twenty miles from Arras. The sound of shellfire boomed incessantly, but far away. The wounded, lay in makeshift wards. It was a scene which stirred his soul. These men accepted pain and loss as they waited quietly for a release which would most likely be death. He drew the lines of grey men and shadowed in the canvas covering which shrouded them.

In the next weeks he went to the front trenches at Ypres and saw for himself that life there was a survival against terror. The gunfire from both sides roared continuously overhead. Corpses in shell craters; horses slaughtered in harness; guns and gunners in fragments and huddled groups of troops sleeping in muddy trenches like dogs in dirty kennels. All these images he sent back to Arras.

Immediately he was recalled and confronted by Symens.

"Brangwyn, I reminded you at the outset; we did not want images of suffering or other dreadful stuff from you. What has got into you, Man?"

"What did you expect? Scenes of Christmas cheer across No Man's Land?"

Symens shifted in his seat and gazed out of the window as if to gain control himself or get guidance from outside.

"Look" he paused and dropped his voice, "all we want is some views of the country from our side. Maybe a picture of our troops manning the trenches. Or..." he was gathering steam-

"what about a sketch of one of the aerial Observation Balloons? They look splendid in the sunlight."

Frank simply said "I didn't see one but I heard one was shot down only two days ago."

He glanced at Symes to check whether he sensed the irony in the remark.

" Well" Symes continued, unaware of the barb "I can't send these back to London. I'd better get advice from further up."

And he dismissed Brangwyn with a wave.

Within a week Frank Brangwyn was transferred back to England and detailed to travel the North Country sketching the stolid workforce producing the guns to fight the Boche and the sturdy farmers, who fed the Nation, at their ploughs.

His War Sketches never reached the Public until 1934.

By that time the nation knew The Great War was "The War to end All Wars." and his sketches were used to prove that such horrors could never happen again.

Germany re-armed the next year.