

The Creation of *God Loves a Grunt*

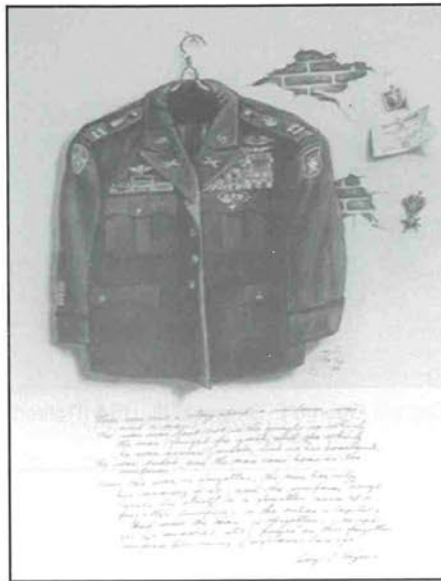
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INTRODUCTION

I first met George L. Skyepeck Jr (Sky) in the late seventies. His artwork and poetry was on exhibit as part of the “Forgotten Warrior Research Project” sponsored by the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) Center in Washington, DC. The project was created by Dr. John Wilson at Cleveland State University. I had met Dr. Wilson when I worked as a physician assistant (PA) in psychiatry at the University of Pittsburgh. He had invited me to attend a presentation of his research in traumatic stress and to see the art show that accompanied it. At the time, Sky was doing a number of DAV works and his poetry and art were used to illustrate Dr. Wilson’s study. This was the first Veterans Service Organization study focused on the post-traumatic stress aftermath of the Vietnam War.

Sky and I soon became friends, and I often visited his studio located in a loft in the old Stars and Stripes building across the street from Union Station in Washington, DC. It was a great place to meet a number of the veterans who were just starting to become involved in Vietnam veteran issues. This group included Chuck Hagel, Ron Brock, Rusty Lindley, Jack Smith and others who were dedicated to helping veterans of the war in Vietnam. They would drop by the loft to chat about one of Sky’s new paintings. (Of course, we all gave Sky advice, which he mostly ignored but thanked us for anyway.)

Sky is one of America’s most prominent military-historical commemorative artists. He is a combat-wounded, disabled Vietnam veteran



Uniform by George L. Skyepeck, III

who rose from private to captain while serving two combat tours as a special warfare and senior intelligence advisor from 1967 until 1971. He is a decorated veteran, having won two Bronze Stars, the Purple Heart, three Air Medals, and numerous other awards. Sky has a special fondness for medics and created a piece of art titled “Nobody Forgets a Medic,” based on his being treated by an Army medic after being wounded the first of three times in Vietnam.

Sky studied art at the Corcoran Museum in Washington and is a resident artist member of the famous Society of Illustrators of New York City. He has received numerous national and international art awards, including the prestigious Military Order of the Purple Heart’s George Washington Medallion of Merit. His last active duty assignment was to design and conduct John Wayne’s famous 1974 arrival into

PA HISTORY

Feature Editor’s Note:

George Skyepeck’s painting “God Loves a Grunt” contains thousands of names of Vietnam veterans who signed the artwork as it traveled throughout the USA in the 1980s. How the painting came about and how more than 500 PAs came to sign it is a fascinating and emotional story. Prints of the painting and signatures have graced the walls of the White House and Congress and have appeared in the homes of military leaders and film and television stars. With the artist’s permission, the Veterans Caucus of the AAPA sells prints of the painting to generate scholarship funds for PA students who are veterans. “God Loves a Grunt” reminds us of the dedication and sacrifice of those first ex-military corpsmen who were selected to pioneer our profession. Here, the author brings us that history from a unique and personal perspective.

— Reginald Carter, PhD, PA

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This feature publishes articles on all aspects of PA history. Much of the material comes from the PA History Center, which is dedicated to the study of the history and legacy of the physician assistant profession. Additional information can be found at <http://pahx.org>. Authors desiring to contribute to PA History should forward submissions to:

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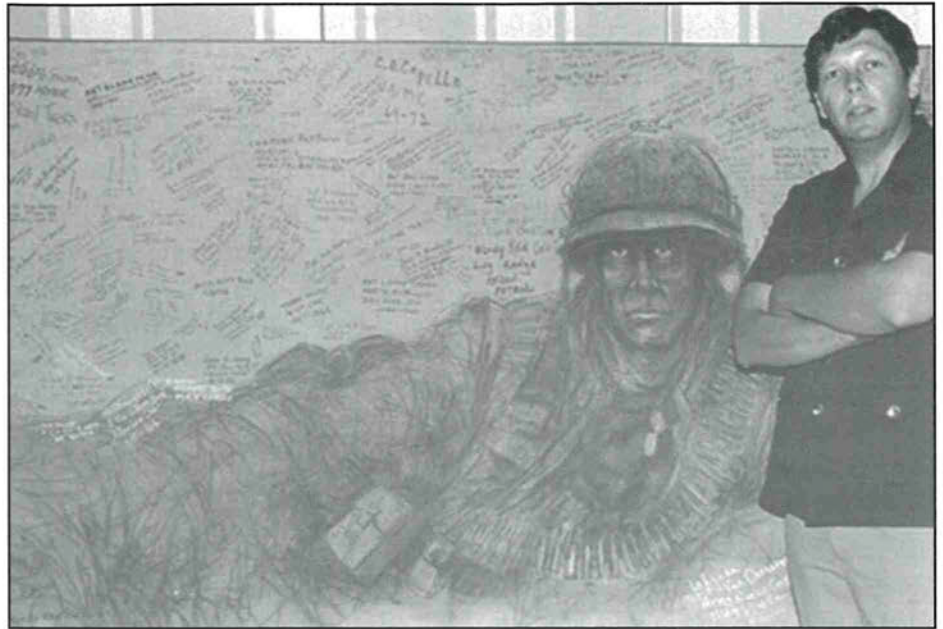
Harvard Square atop an M-113 armored personnel carrier for Wayne's appearance at the Harvard's Lampoon and Hasty Pudding Club.

GOD LOVES A GRUNT

In the early 1980s, Sky talked about creating a unique participatory piece of artwork that would reunite Vietnam veterans. His idea was to create a 6-foot high, 9-foot wide painting on burlap canvas and then invite veterans to sign their names, units, and service dates on the canvas. He would then display and move the piece around the country to let Vietnam veterans join in the camaraderie of signing it. This was about the same time that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, soon known as "the Wall," was being built in Washington.

The working title of the painting was *God Loves the Grunt Because No One Else Does*. Over time it was shortened to *God Loves a Grunt*. The painting shows a solemn combat veteran looking straight at you with a "thousand yard stare" and a face that has seen too much to forget.

Everyone who has seen *God Loves a*



Captain George L. Skypeck, III, USA (Retired) with his painting, *God Loves a Grunt*
Photo by Ken Harbert

Grunt is drawn to the artwork, if not by the forbidding face of the grunt, then by the thousands of names and units and personal "Kilroy was here" messages left by those who signed this moving work of art.

The painting was exhibited first in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Dennis Joyner, president of the Disabled Veterans, was first to sign. It was next

sent to Washington, DC, and then to other cities around the country.

THE PA CONNECTION

Having seen the artwork, I knew that PAs who were veterans would benefit from signing it and experiencing its healing effects. I asked Sky if we could display it at the American Academy of Physician Assistants' (AAPA's) 10th annual conference in Washington, DC, in 1982. He gave his approval and turned over the huge artwork to me and four veteran colleagues, who loaded it into a rented van.

The painting was displayed at a reception at the Hilton in Washington, DC. At the time I was co-director of a counseling group for the Vietnam Veterans of America and persuaded them to sponsor the reception. I had organized and implemented veterans' receptions at previous AAPA conferences with Lonnie Holmes, Ron Woodwarth, Jimmie Keller, Randy Danielsen, Tom Lemley, Mike Champion, and others. These receptions brought Vietnam veterans together in a posi-



John Wayne in Harvard Square, Jan 15, 1974
UPI photo

tive spirit of helping each other understand better the impact of what they had experienced in Vietnam. The PA profession included a unique group of veterans whom I described in my poem “Lifesavers then ... Caregivers Now,” which became the motto for the Veterans Caucus. Many of us believe that the PA profession was one of the most positive transitions afforded to Vietnam veterans; it allowed us to use what we had learned in the military to extend care to medically underserved patients throughout the United States. As a group we wanted other PAs to recognize the special contributions of men and women who had served with honor and distinction as medics and corpsmen in Vietnam and their impact on establishing our profession. Having *God Loves a Grunt* and Sky attending our annual meeting seemed a perfect way to accomplish this mission.

We had a great turnout at the Hilton. Special guests included Bobby Muller and John Terranzo from the Vietnam Veterans of America; Chuck Hagel, who at the time was an administrator for the Veterans Administration; Steve Champlin, who was working in Congress for Vietnam veterans; Jarrett Wise, past president of the AAPA; Richard Currey, who had recently published the international best seller *Crossing Over*, a book of poetry based on his Vietnam experiences; David Gwinn from the White House Medical Unit; representatives from the Army Society of Physician Assistants; and many others. On that day, more than 150 PAs signed *God Loves a Grunt*, making Sky and his painting forever a part of the legacy of the PA profession.

FROM PAINTING TO PRINT

In 1983, I worked with Sky to get *God Loves a Grunt* memorialized into a special limited edition print. The

Educational Research Foundation (now the PA Foundation) of the AAPA agreed to sponsor the printing and Sky approached the Smithsonian Museum print shop and obtained the services of a professional photographer to photograph the original artwork for use in creating the prints. The printing was an amazing work of art itself — taking nine runs through the presses to bring out all the signatures and colors. The prints were made on Smithsonian Museum acid-free rag and only 1,325 were created. Sky got the first print off the press and gave me the second, which I have bequeathed to the PA History Society after my death.

In the years following the original signing, many veterans told me privately that they wished they had signed it. Much like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, this artwork has become a hallowed piece of remembrance, evoking both good and sad memories of a unique type of comradeship forged in a place that few understood or could have even imagined. So it became important to offer a second chance for those who missed the first signing. In 1989, the AAPA's annual conference was held again in Washington, DC, and over 400 veterans signed the original artwork. In addition, 15 Vietnam veteran nurses in DC for a meeting with the National Parks Commission had an opportunity to sign the canvas. They were in town to advocate the creation of a Vietnam Women's Memorial. Diane Evans, Lynda Van Devanter, and Kathleen Fennel surprised some of the PAs attending the conference whom they had served with but had not seen since Vietnam. Likewise, Gen. George Price, Adm. James Zimble, and Congressman John Murtha met PAs whom they had served with in Vietnam. Once again, *God Loves a Grunt* offered an opportunity for those who served to rekindle

friendships by providing a link from past to present.

So *God Loves a Grunt* lives on, immortalized forever in the signatures, units, and messages left behind by veterans, some of whom have died since signing. The names bear witness to the valor of those who fought, cared for others, and experienced the Vietnam War. Two Medal of Honor awardees signed the piece, including Louis Rocco, who returned to active duty as an Army PA at the age of 51 during the first Gulf War. Others include Gerry Strode, who received the Navy Cross for valor in 1967 with the 5th Marines, and John Padgett, who served many years in Vietnam and was awarded numerous Bronze Stars.

In the years following the last official signing of *God Loves a Grunt*, the prints have made a history of their own, showing up in the White House, the central office of the Veterans Administration, offices of members of Congress and the Senate, and the Pentagon. They have found their way into the homes of entertainers like Bob Hope, Gary Burghoff (“Radar O’Reilly” on *M*A*S*H*), and Patrick Duncan and Russ Thurman (producers of *Mr. Holland’s Opus* and *Courage Under Fire*); military leaders Gen. Colin Powell, Lt. Col. Ronald Ray, Col. Robert Rheault, and Gen. John Vessey; authors Frederick Downs, James Lee Burke, and Tony Hillerman; actors Dana Delaney, Tom Selleck, Gerald McRaney, and Dennis Franz; and politicians including Bob Kerrey, Chuck Hagel, John Murtha, John McCain and many others.

The print appeared in the background of television shows like *Simon and Simon* and *NYPD Blue*. Most recently, the print, along with other related artwork, hangs on a wall in the Eugene A. Stead Jr. Center for Physician Assistants in Durham,



(L to R) Diane Evans, RN; Lynda Van De Vanter; Rose Sandeck, RN
Photo by Ken Harbert

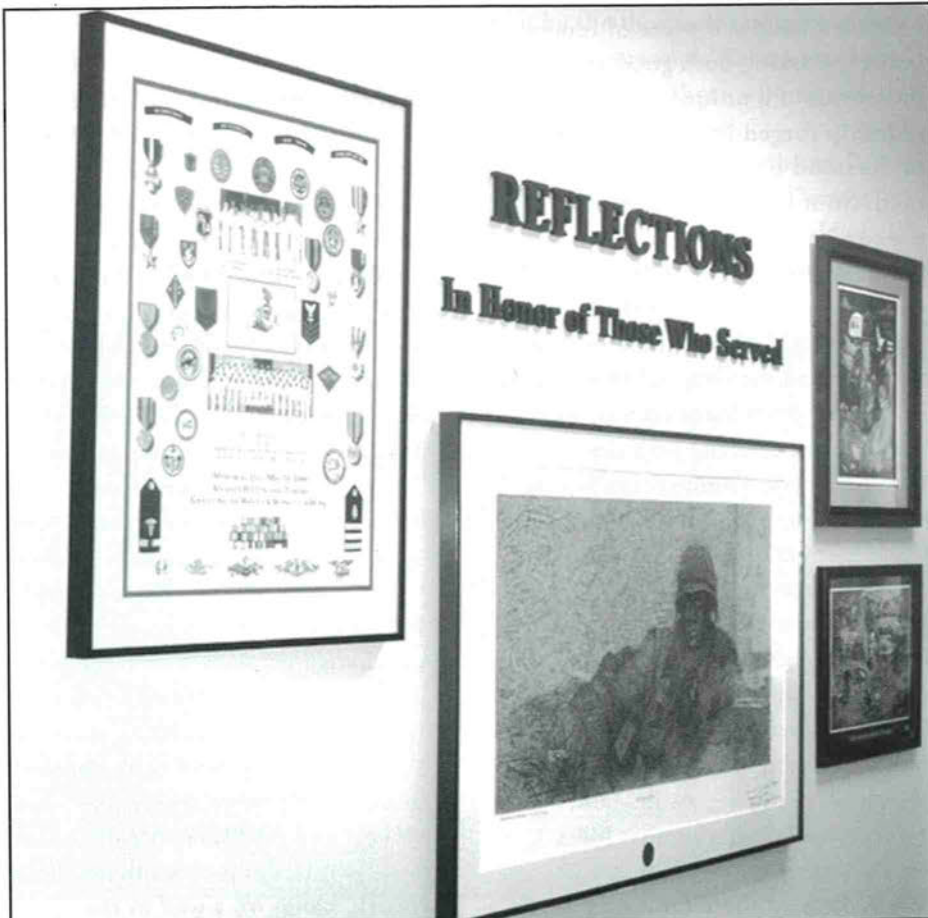
North Carolina. The print was donated to the PA History Society by Victor Germino, one of the first graduates of the Duke University PA Program.

STILL WORKING FOR VETERANS

Several years ago, the board of directors of the Veterans Caucus of the AAPA agreed to purchase all the remaining prints of *God Loves a Grunt* from the Physician Assistant Foundation. The sale of these prints has helped the caucus raise money for scholarships it awards to veterans who are students in PA programs. As such, the prints continue in a positive way to provide a legacy for the men and women who signed the artwork.

And the print continues to inspire charity and remembrance. The stars of the TV show *China Beach* auctioned off prints to support the Vietnam Women's Memorial Project. The Physician Assistant Foundation and the Veterans Caucus continue to auction off prints to raise money for PA scholarships. The Veterans Caucus donated prints to Veterans Centers in each of the cities that hosted an AAPA conference and to other Veterans Administration hospitals along the way.

Sky summed it up best when he said, "Now and forever, the memories forged in the heat of combat, refined by the pain of wounds, and sustained by alienation of society cannot be forgotten." *God Loves a Grunt* has offered Vietnam veterans and others to come together to appreciate the courage and valor of those who served and especially those who cared for others often above themselves.



Reflections Wall Exhibit – Stead Center for Physician Assistants
Photo by Reginald Carter, Society for the Preservation of Physician Assistant History Collection