'Exactitude is truth': Representing the British military through commissioned artworks

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Abstract

The work of 'regimental artists' is often derided for being jingoistic, irrelevant and predicated on anachronistic representational strategies rooted in high-Victorian battle painting. Despite their marginal status, a core of professional painters today work regularly for the British armed services to record, and occasionally commemorate, contemporary and past feats of arms, as well as more mundane public service duties such as ceremonial display and 'Keeping the Army in the Public Eye' (KAPE) tours. Their work is largely unseen by the non-military public, largely because it is intended for a closed community of serving soldiers, their families, and veterans who are associated with the unit. Yet, as a sizeable contemporary body of art work, it contributes to the commemorative rhetoric of the British military and employs a number of artists of national standing.

Drawing on the author's own experiences as a several-times commissioned military artist, this paper is a 'work-in-progress' that examines the work of several painters – John Ross, Ken Howard, and Keith Holmes – who have worked intermittently for the British armed services in the past three decades. But the paper will takes as its principle working case-study the work of painter David Rowlands, commissioned in the 1990s by the Permanent Joint Headquarters (UK) as their official artist to record the British build-up in the Arabian Gulf, and since then fully employed by units in the British army (and some overseas military units) to paint commemorative works related to active service overseas, largely in Iraq and more recently Afghanistan.

Through an examination of Rowlands' work, the paper touches upon the formal language of military painting, particularly the tensions between illustration and interpretation, between factual and technical accuracy, and examines the issues of authenticity and historical verity. The paper also touches upon issues of agency and reception, and the stresses between the commissioning process, the independence of the artist as interpreter, and broader concerns of testimony and visual authority.

Keywords

Battle Art

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Ken Howard

Introduction: the pursuit of authenticity

> Everything is on such a wide scale. Figures scattered, atmosphere dense with haze and smoke - shells that would simply not burst when required. All the elements of a picture were there, could they but be brought together and condensed. (Bickel 1980:61)

So complained the photographer Frank Hurley, a veteran of Ernest Shackleton's ill-fated Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition in 1914-16, who was attached in 1917 to the Australian Imperial Force and posted to the Western Front as honorary captain and official photographer. (McGregor 2004) Having endured the barren wastes of the southern ice-fields Hurley was deeply frustrated by the diffuse character of the war on the Western Front. Its lack of focal points, the vastness of the desolation and the sprawling anonymity were the antithesis of the photographic mode, which, even with the inadequate techniques of the day, was primed to capture events and character. (Carmichael 1989)

Eschewing his principles as a documentary photographer, Hurley chose the unthinkable. In the darkroom he created his own compositions, placing negatives one on top of another to create a composite version of the reality of trench warfare. It was a dreadful mistake. The official Australian historian, Charles Bean, admonished him severely, alleging that he had transgressed the boundaries of factual reportage. His photo-montages - 'combats' as he termed them - had broken a sovereign rule of documentary reportage, namely that the true representation of war was predicated on the primacy of the ocular, the all-seeing eye uncorrupted by false gaze or invented vision. (Jay 1993) In fact, Hurley's indiscretion was far from unique. The Canadian photographer Ivor Castle was also suspected of staging fake action pictures on the

Western Front. By judicious cropping, he could transform a somewhat mundane image into something more aggressive, and, like Hurley, he superimposed shrapnel clouds and bomb-bursts into otherwise clear skies, and he severely cropped figure compositions so as to lend a more martial air to otherwise mundane images of training. Furthermore, being so flat and level, the Flanders landscape was a convenient and uncomplicated setting for these staged multi-layered and enhanced 'combats'. (Gough 1993)

Not far from where Hurley and Castle were manufacturing their versions of modern warfare, the American painter John Singer Sargent was also grumbling about his difficulties in locating a subject. 'The further forward one goes, the more scattered and meagre everything is', he complained. 'The MOI [Ministry of Information] expects an epic – and how can one do an epic without masses of men?' (Charteris 1927:214) Sargent eventually located 'three fine subjects with masses of men':

> One a harrowing sight, a field full of gassed and blindfolded men – another a train of trucks packed with "*chair a cannon*" – and another frequent sight a big road encumbered with troops and traffic. I daresay the latter, combining English and Americans, is the best thing to do, if it can be prevented from looking like going to the Derby. (Mount 1957: 290-291)

Ultimately, he abandoned his officially-determined brief which required him to depict British and US troops working side-by-side and instead chose the field of several hundred gassed men he had seen at le-Bac-du-Sud, on the road south-west of Arras. The painting that resulted from this traumatic sight, *Gassed*, is one of the best known of all images from the Great War. To achieve this vast frieze of pain and redemption, Sargent relied upon notes taken in the field and a series of drawings of clothed models made in his studio in London. (Mount 1957: 291)

War artists gather information in many ways: some through reconstruction and interviewing participants, some through a collage of impressions and received sources; others through vicarious re-enactment. Some serving soldier-artists asserted that they have simply reported what they have seen. The artist's actual presence on location carries considerable value in the *genre* of war art. Indeed, it was the guiding principle for all artists officially employed and sanctioned by the British War Memorials Committee (and its successors) in the Great War, and was the ethos of similar organisations in the Second World War. (Harries and Harries, 1984; Malvern,2004; Foss, 2007) In 1916, the very first official British war artist was the Scottish etcher Muirhead Bone, famed for his

detailed renditions of complex architectural and industrial subjects, and trusted with creating a faithful (if sometimes anodyne) visual index of the armed forces in France and Belgium. As Sue Malvern asks, what did Bone's appointment tell us about the preferred visualization of modern war? How was it construed by those many Royal Academicians whose panoramas of battle were shown each year and celebrated in print, poem and song, but who uniformly failed to be commissioned by the Lord Beaverbrook's Ministry of Information? And why were there such discrepancies between Bone's diligent drawings and the inspiring visions of massed battle created each week on the desks of the 'studio artists' in Fleet Street? (Malvern 2004) Such questions were being asked during the course of the First World War and focused on these key concerns: what actually constituted an authentic image of war? How might a painting or drawing be modified or transformed by an accompanying text or a leading title? How much front-line experience did an artist need, if any at all, to create convincing representations of modern warfare? This last question is especially pertinent when one examines the work of the much-celebrated soldier-artists Richard Nevinson, Wyndham Lewis and Paul Nash. Their value as young Modernist painters was further validated and given special authority by their front-line experience, even if – like Nevinson – they may have rarely seen a shot fired in anger, or like Paul Nash, they experienced only 'quiet' trenches and spent a relatively short time on the Front. (Walsh 2002: 95-96)

However, in the past two decades, the principle of the war artist as ocular witness has been challenged by other ways of gathering raw material. In official schemes there have been many examples of artists who have gathered their impressions from remote sources, collaged impressions, and digital means. After the First Gulf War in 1991, for example, the official recorder of the British involvement, the painter John Keane, having done little observational drawing on his official tour drew upon a vast stock of photographs taken personally in Kuwait and Iraq, but he also watched hundreds of hours of videotape news footage gathered by the BBC *Newsnight* programme. These became the basis of his painting suite *Gulf*. Peter Howson's depiction of a war crime in the Bosnian War (*Croatian and Muslim*, 1994) was recreated from an incident that he had heard about rather than actually witnessed. The horrific image of a rape summarily challenged the edict that an official war artist has first to be uncontestable verifier before committing brush to canvas. Howson's stark image and the argument it precipitated still reverberates today, provoking sharp (and polarized) debate

in the press about the validity of painting 'imaginary' events as opposed to 'factual records'. (Heller 1993; Howson 1994)

Commissioning paintings – the regimental view

There is of course a major difference between being recruited to make work for a national collection of art, and being commissioned by a particular regiment or military unit to capture in paint, silver or bronze a specific event. But the issue of authenticity overlaps both. It is also worth noting that the official British war art collection has altered tone and direction several times, shifting during the course of the Great War from the representation of the present (with a short-term emphasis on propaganda and documentary record) to the creation of a permanent legacy for future generations as an emblem of remembrance - a lasting memorial expressed in art.

Most of the painters who are today commissioned by units of the British army would probably cite not the official war artists (Nash, Lewis, Nevinson and other Modernists) as their artistic predecessors, but the historical battle painters whose work regularly adorned the Royal Academy and similar salon-sized London galleries in the 19th century, reaching near-saturation in the 1880s. Both Joan Hichberger (1988) and Peter Harrington (1993) have covered this period in depth, and there is a considerable historiography in the subject. Yet, as we shall see, today's battle painters enjoy little of the public attention and privilege afforded to the likes of John Charlton, Stanley Berkeley, Elizabeth Butler, Richard Caton Woodville and other late Victorian painters. Like many of those artists, today's battle painters relish complex contemporary subject-matter, vivid action narratives, and an iconography that is dominated by simplistic constructions of masculinity, martial values and racial superiority. (Kestner, 1995)

Before turning to look at two painters in a little detail, we should identify the principle drivers behind each successful commission: firstly there are those commissions that are 'unit-driven': 'this event/person/act was/is considered important, it merits pictorial recognition; we want it painted'. The second scenario is initiated by the artist: 'I understand that this event/act took place: I can re-create it for you (with your guidance and co-operation): I will re-stage it through your eyes'. And thirdly, there is a challenge laid down by both parties: 'we feel that this action (or event) is beyond representation, it cannot be truly painted, but I/we feel it – the act, the event, the moment – was so significant that it needs to be remembered. Through the transformational act of picture-making it can be brought back from obscured memory, and we entrust that task to an

artist of our choice.' As is obvious, few of these imperatives share much in common with officially sanctioned war art schemes, which have alternated in the past ninety years from giving artists a quite open brief ('go hence into the maelstrom and draw whatever suits your visual idiom') through to highly prescriptive and indexical commissions, which aim to systematically record wartime activities, whether they be in-theatre or on the home front ('the committee requires that jam-making as done by the Women's Institute will be depicted in oils by an official painter'). (Harries and Harries, 1983; Gough 1999)

Interestingly, although a potential artwork may be widely (and energetically) discussed by the members of the Mess, a successful commission is rarely triggered by regimental consensus. In fact, it is often the opposite. If the commanding officer (usually the titular head of the respective Mess - the Colonel or the Regimental Sergeant-Major) decrees that a particular event must be painted then that is usually sufficient to see that the funds are raised, the artist approached, and the timetable set. However, the criteria for the choice of subject are usually narrowly determined: precedence, the style of a preferred painter and a select catalogue of possible subjects play a large part in dictating the range of visual approaches.

And what are the characteristics of those visual approaches? As we have already noted, authenticity, by which I mean many tiers of interlocking veracity is paramount. This can be evidenced by a number of factors: firstly, the principal subject-matter of the incident must be figurative and representational; it must have shared significance, either because it represents a notable 'action' or incident (a decisive moment in a firefight, for example) or an action that is consensually regarded as typical of a tour of duty (patrol routine, for example) which can be augmented by local colour and regional flavour. This latter example is distinct from the 'action' painting in that it acts as a form of tour *souvenir*, a token of memory ascribed to a particular period in the rhythm of a military unit. We can also identify a third sort, which most often takes the form of 'an end of an era' painting and is often commissioned when a unit disbands, merges or reaches a particular anniversary. Such a painting is intended to summarise pictorially its unique achievements and characteristics, and does this through a collage of vignettes loosely joined together. Usually destined for a regimental or divisional museum the 'end of era' paintings are significant emblems of commemoration which embody and accrue historical, and to a degree cultural, capital. In all three cases, however, there is an attendant commercial driver because a painting can often pay for itself or generate funds

for charitable causes through the reproduction of several hundred high-quality colour prints signed by the artist (or on occasion, a protagonist depicted in the picture).

Ken Howard and David Rowlands

One of the few painters who has worked for both the Imperial War Museum and for many regiments in the British Army is Ken Howard (born 1932, elected as a Royal Academician in 1991). He had already worked for several army units by the time of his Northern Ireland commission for the Artistic Records Committee in 1973. In the province he accompanied army patrols with sketchbook in hand. Eschewing the use of the camera - for personal security as well as artistic reasons - he drew in observation post and concealed 'sangars', in crowded barracks and ill-lit offices. The twin themes of Howard's illustrations are claustrophobia and tedium; the conflict is re-presented as an event foisted upon an unwilling, and largely ignorant, armed soldier. He had decided on this approach before his visit, regarding his task as being to produce:

> … a record of the everyday existence of the soldier, of hours
> of planning and briefing in operations rooms, of waiting and
> watching in observation posts or 'sangars', of intelligence
> gathering and routine foot patrols. (Harries and Harries 1983: 279-280)

Howard was required by his brief to produce intelligible work that was technically and tactically authentic. To do so, he had to learn the 'invisible' details of routine operational procedure - 'the precise distance between men on patrol, the points at which a patrol would stop, or run, or spread out and so on'. (Harries and Harries 1983: 280) John Ross, an artist employed by the Royal Anglian Regiment, then on a tour of duty in Belfast, also had to learn the subtleties of patrol and posture: exactly how a rifle was cradled in its sling, the preferred angle of a 'squaddie's' helmet on dawn patrol, the preferred arrangement of webbing and other niceties of dress. (Ross 2006) To have ignored this level of anecdotal or tactical detail or to have simply 'got it wrong' would undermine both the credibility of the artist, but also the innate authority of the image as a self-authenticating document. As Howard later wrote:

> I lived with the regiment and went on patrol with them. Unlike in a proper war, I
> could go out with them to observation posts and vehicle checks and the like. I
> was very much hands on, and the regiments liked this because whatever I did
> was right. No one could say, a soldier wouldn't have carried his gun like that, or
> wouldn't have walked then when he should have run, because I was there.
> (Howard 2008)

Howard's paintings and drawings of the troops in Northern Ireland have a veneer of objectivity and neutrality that is both reassuringly familiar and oddly disquieting. Schematically drawn, the soldiers on foot patrol are pictorial ciphers locked into a sepia world of graffiti-strewn walls and brick-peppered pavements. Unlike his simulated battle paintings or his crowded oils of massed troops on parade, Howard's Belfast work relies almost entirely on the architectural context to provide the pictorial narrative, and by inference the *raison d'etre* for the soldiers' presence. Like John Ross, Ken Howard struggled to evoke any 'esprit de corps' in this work; there are, after all, few cultural precedents for a war of patrol, interrogation and surveillance, little aesthetic purchase in attempting to portrait civil insurrection. Many of the images are attempts to summarise a general state of affairs rather than identifiable moments of action. In this respect they are generic renditions of armed intervention rather than specific instances or time-lined actions.

By comparison, most of the work undertaken by painter David Rowlands is focused often on a few hours, possibly minutes of activity on a distant battlefield. Rowlands is one of the best established, and possibly the most accomplished, of the small band of painters who have tailored their art practice for the British (and occasionally the United States) military. He gains the work in one of several ways: through recommendation (usually word of mouth, but also amongst a network of patrons within military units); through occasional canvassing of his work via the internet or by select exhibitions; and, thirdly, though hosted visits to theatres of war, where he will tour military camps and bases, renew old acquaintances, gather new raw material for potential pictures, but will also share examples of his completed work amongst new audiences in the hope of securing new business. Working 'to spec', in this way, carries its own hazards: the visits, such as those made to Afghanistan in 2003 and 2007, are always arduous, often unscheduled and occasionally hazardous. A two-week tour will, however, yield sufficient contacts, commissions and photographic records to sustain Rowlands' studio for twelve months. Indeed, when interviewed in late 2007, he had a two-year waiting list for one of his medium-sized canvases. (Rowlands 2007) The British Army's heightened role in Iraq and Afghanistan has stimulated an intense period of commissioning from Officers' and Warrant Officer/Sergeants' messes, and a number of regimental museums.

A worked example: TELIC1

Let us take one recent example that will help illustrate the process of negotiation, commission and representation. During a pitched battle on the Al Faw peninsula, Iraq, during Operation TELIC 1 in 2003, a British Army unit carried out the first ever recovery under fire of a Challenger (Mark 2) main battle tank. The operation was extremely dangerous. A recovery vehicle of the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (REME), part of C Squadron The Royal Scots Dragoon Guards (Scots DG), came onto the battlefield and attempted to hitch up and tow away the stranded Challenger tank from a ditch after both sets of tracks had been severely damaged. Disabled astride a narrow causeway it was attracting concentrated fire from the enemy. A recovery vehicle known as a CRARRV (Challenger Armoured Repair and Recovery Vehicle) was brought into action but its winch became inoperable and a second CRARRV had to be brought into play, the two crews working together to recover the tank. Having evacuated the crews of both vehicles, the two commanders, Corporal Justin Simons and Corporal John Morgan took charge of the recovery operation. Corporal James Garrett provided close protection by operating the General Purpose Machine Gun (GPMG) from his turret, while the enemy mounted numerous attacks as night began to fall. To offer some protection from enemy observation, their Squadron Leader requested 29 Commando Regiment Royal Artillery to fire smoke rounds onto the position. This is the period depicted in the painting.

In a four-hour operation the REME junior non-commissioned officers (JNCOs) managed to attach a 15-foot long tow-line to the stranded vehicle. However, so badly damaged was the tank, so shattered its tracks, and so hazardous the environment, that as soon as it was under tow it skewed off the causeway into the ditch on the far side of the road. A further six fraught hours were spent on emergency welding and securing the tank until it was sufficiently stable to drag from the battlefield. For their part in this epic recovery, both Garrett and Simons were mentioned in dispatches, praised in the citation for 'their leadership, calmness and disregard of their own safety'.

David Rowlands had been in the theatre of war at the time of this action. When he met the Commander of 7th Armoured Brigade, facilities were provided for him to visit several of the units which were scattered around the city of Basra. While in bivouac in the desert encampment of the Scots Dragoon Guards (Scots DG), he happened to meet and talk to Corporal Simons and his comrades; he saw how their CRARRV deployed its recovery equipment, and, having heard at first-hand their story of the tank rescue, he

made copious notes and drawings of the vehicles and men in the correct tactical configuration, and took the opportunity to visit the actual scene of the incident. All of this was done 'on spec', not to meet the demands of a commission, but to gather first-hand accounts and witness the critical topography.

In the months following his return to the UK, on-the-spot enquiries about commissioning various paintings were followed up and the work of producing regimental paintings began in earnest. However, neither the Scots DG nor REME took up his offer to do a painting of this the Al Faw event, though REME did commission an action for which a Sergeant Comber was awarded the Military Cross, (an event worthy of recording by virtue of the status of his award for bravery). It was not until several years later that Rowlands secured the further commission when discussing the incident with the Corps Artificer Sergeant Major (CASM) at REME HQ in the UK. Up to that point the rescue event had been marked only by a couple of paragraphs in the REME journal. After it was translated into a visual image by Rowlands' painting, the recovery of the tank under fire achieved esteemed status in the mechanized units of the British Army. (Rowlands 2008a)

Not only does this extended process throw interesting light on the convoluted acts of commissioning, the incident brings together several tropes of deep significance to the professional soldier: a refusal to leave one's dead or wounded on the field of battle (in this instance the wounded tank serving as the surrogate comrade); unflinching dedication to tactical duty (here, the cool demeanor of the technicians, unfazed by mounting technical challenges); and the unflinching courage of the recovery team working in harness together (components working co-efficiently and to a defined end). In addition to the primary narrative of vehicle recovery, the incident has a markedly human dimension that is centred on the roles of the three soldiers. (It also has a rather bitter after-story that will be mentioned briefly later). In the tradition of high-battle art, the composition stresses group identity by carefully selecting an incident which stresses comradeship and duty of care. By contrast, many of the other paintings (or regimental silverware) commissioned by the mechanical arms of the armed services are, by necessity, focused on the 'kit': the weapons systems, the logistics vehicles and the infrastructure that supports the forward troops. A number of Rowlands' other commissioned paintings of that period feature bulky bridge-laying armoured vehicles, or squadrons of heavy-plated tanks moving through dusty plains. In such compositions, the figures are often marginal adjuncts to the 'hardware' of the heavy metal vehicles. (In an

army recruiting campaign, individual soldiers were once, rather notoriously, described as the 'software').

Negotiation and Realisation

Having been instructed by the commissioning Mess that they wish a particular incident to be recreated in canvas, the next stage in the commission focuses on information-gathering. The painter will first collect, where possible, eye-witness accounts, often traveling to interview those who have taken part. Clearly, such interviews can only be conducted with those who survived or those who wish to make themselves known. This is a familiar practice amongst artists who have depicted battle: Elizabeth Butler did much the same when commissioned to paint her well-known cavalry charge. In 1915, Eric Kennington sought out the surviving members of his platoon to re-stage his tableau 'The Kensingtons at Laventie'. (Weight 1986) To fulfill his official commission, Henry Lamb asked the officials at the Imperial War Museum in 1918 to procure a full set of soldier's equipment and three somewhat unkempt soldiers from a Salvation Army Hostel who posed for him during the summer of 1919, each 'in turn leaned, crouched, and posed as though hurtling for cover among the paraphernalia of water bottles, entrenching tools and messtins that littered the studio floor.' (Bardgett 1990: 54)

Site visits are also crucial for gathering evidence; the method is often forensic because verifiable accuracy is paramount. Rowlands always insists that he is shown the key locations by a guide who was actually present at the key incident, or by an individual directly involved in the subject of the painting 'so that tactical detail is accurate'. (FN) In this case, as we have seen, Rowlands visited the scene of the CRARRV 'rescue' shortly after the action, escorted by the Squadron Leader who acted as 'cicerone':

> The track marks in the crumbling earthen banks on the slope of the causeway
> and the marshy ground at the bottom clearly showed where 'Two One' had been
> extricated from its predicament. While we stood here I was able to make a sketch
> of the terrain. When I was in bivouac with the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards, Cpls
> Simons and Garrett explained the recovery process and showed me their
> CRARRV. (Rowlands 2008)

Further negotiations follow. After the interviews and site visits, preparatory sketches are usually drawn up and sent to the commissioner so that an interim review of factual,

technical and tactical detail can be checkedand signed off. Through this dialogue, a set of operational details are mutually agreed. Although the aesthetic and design concerns remain the preserve of the artist, they are invariably subordinate to the tactical and military considerations, which are determined the commissioners. However, some visual Local and incidental colour can often be added to the agreed composition. Through this detailed dialogic rapport with the protagonists of the tank rescue, Rowlands discovered that, contrary to orders, the REME flag was flying from an antenna throughout the action: an important detail that helped particularize the commissioned work and further fix (as well as glorify) its association with a particular unit. This last point is an important one in the commissioning process because, given the complexity of the army's internal structures, with its complicated programme of *roulement*, secondments and cross-staffing, it is vital that the artist locates sufficient visual clues and identifiers to link an oftenconfused action or event with a specific military unit. Without this level of specificity, there is no focus to the commission, no correlation between event, narrative and record.

From this point in the commissioning process (possibly after many weeks of correspondence), a composite picture is finalised. Constructed out of conversation, fieldwork and local histories, it is often augmented by hand-written notes, technical drawings and photographs borrowed from combatants. This process of verification is crucial to the impact and reception of the final painting: it was vital, for example, that the swivel mechanism used to attach the stranded Challenger 2 tank was precisely drawn, just as it was crucial for the painter to understand that the 15 foot fixed tow-bar had to be used, not the shorter, 9 foot, version. In this way, the accuracy of the painting re-affirms the precision of the engineer's task on the day. In 'getting it right' Rowlands vicariously lives out the painstaking task that was so successfully acquitted on the battlefield.

The process of verification does not stop there. The precise position of individual combatants will be checked and double-checked, the location of vehicles, checkpoints, bunkers or other points of tactical value will be rigorously tested and located in the design. Little is left to chance. Only the more transient features – plumes of smoke, urban detritus, and other visual ephemera – can be used by the artist to balance the composition, orientate the design or add local characteristics. In the case of David Rowlands' work, a penultimate inspection is permitted. In fact it is strongly advised to:

> … visit David's studio before completion in case any detailed changes need to be made at points during the production. Once the painting is finished you are

invited to confirm its completion before a professional art photographer takes digital images to produce your prints. David has worked closely with his printers over a ten-year period and will scrutinise proofs for colour accuracy and quality. (Rowlands 2008)

In the final composition of the tank rescue, Rowlands accentuated the symbolic importance of the tow-bar by creating a bold silhouette at the very place where the swivel mechanism touches the stranded tank. Purposefully making this a point of maximum tonal contrast, Rowlands reserves one of the darkest tones in the painting for the delicate mechanism of the tow-bar, which is strikingly juxtaposed against the light tones of the wafts of smoke. Placed here, tending to the umbilical cord between the two vehicles, he positions one of the three protagonists of the paintings' narrative, who steadies the delicate lifeline between the CRARRV and the ditched tank. Using a simple compositional device – the unyielding diagonal of the tow-bar – Rowlands connects the three figures: Garrett firing the turret-mounted GPMG, the exposed engineer connecting the two vehicles, and the third figure rooted at the base of the Challenger, coolly engaged in fitting and securing the towing mechanism. Earlier drawings show that Rowlands experimented with, but subsequently rejected, more panoramic compositions, which showed greater expanses of the battlefield under fire. He also abandoned a composition that took an aerial view of the calamity, a device often preferred for those paintings where he is required to cram in many more figures, as well as the tactical context around them. Some of these compositional decisions were arrived at through negotiation and discussion with those who were there, as well as those responsible for purchasing the painting; other decisions are drawn from the painter's repertoire of designs.

The CRARRV canvas – or '*Thrown Tracks'* as its finale title became - gains from the relative simplicity of the design and also from its highly controlled tonal structure which (unusually in Rowlands' work) relies on silhouettes of simple dark profiles against light-grey smoke. In other paintings commissioned by REME, (for example the earlier painting of *Corporal CJG ('Fred') Comber MC and Crew in Action*) (REME 2008) Rowlands relies on leaden skies and smoke-filled backgrounds to help illuminate the bulky vehicles that dominate the foreground, their bright-metal hulls posed for effect as if on a showground. Strongly illuminated in this way, Rowlands is able to display his technical virtuosity, his unerring ability to 'get it right', and to achieve his characteristic

highly wrought exactitude, which will always include each weld and every detail of rigging, camouflage and 'regimental' insignia.

The pressure to achieve technical verisimilitude requires professional acuity, an illustrative naturalism and an ability to subordinate certain narrative elements so as to premise the over-particular above the general. Captions help underpin the hierarchies within a given composition, helping locate place, time and (certain elements of) context. In many regimental paintings, just as the title lends irrefutable authority to the depicted event, each individual can be identified; indeed most will have been interviewed to help exactly fix their part in a given action. One who could not be interviewed was Corporal James Garrett who is depicted on the right-hand side of Rowlands' painting. Garret died not long after demobilization from Iraq. The picture thus serves a dual commemorative function as both emblematic *souvenir* of a distinguished action, and a memorial image to a recently deceased soldier.

Further work

Clearly there is work to be done in this area of commission, visual representation and reception. I am now working on several further areas of enquiry.

The first of these is an exploration into a possible lexicon of posture used in military history paintings. Peter Burke (2001; 144) has described how the narrative conventions of such canvases relied on and contain 'formulae' in the form of small-scale schemata that could be deployed, sometimes prescriptively, as stock repertoire in figure composition. Such posturing is rooted firmly in the heightened diction of battle which as famously listed Paul Fussell as a set of literary equivalents, in which 'a friend' was always regarded as 'a *comrade'*, a horse is a steed or charger, the enemy is the foe or the host, and so on (Fussell 1975: 21-23) If High Victorian and Edwardian battle painting created its own visual lexicon, can it also be detected in current renditions of battle, or are many of its compositional devices, stances and attitudes drawn more exclusively from Hollywood or absorbed through documentary photography?

The second area of enquiry concerns the role and identity of the individual soldier within a broader military structure. In the paintings of Rowlands and Howard, these identities operate and overlap at several levels: between individual soldier and fighting unit, between regiment and army; and between these layers of identity and the events themselves. As Shaw (2007: 93-94) observes, representing the 'collective' addresses matters of identity, hierarchy and organization, and the role of the combatant within

explicit corporate structures. More work has to be done on how these tensions are expressed visually, and how the resulting paintings are displayed and interpreted.

Thirdly, there is the tension between heroisation and anonymity. Painters such as Rowlands, and to a lesser extent Terence Cuneo and Ken Howard, are often required to identify individual soldiers and units for a commemorative picture. They also have to preserve the confidentialities required by the Ministry of Defence (and the Defence of the Realm Act). The rhetorical diction of captions, accompanying texts and titles play an instrumental role here. Susan Sontag (2003) has argued that to the militant, the irregular soldier and the 'terrorist' the caption is crucial. She argues that identity – especially of civilian victims - is everything, and all photographs (and, by extension, hyper-real painted re-enactments) wait to be explained or falsified by their captions. The illicit release of photographs of torture and intimidation at the Abu Graib Military Prison in Iraq, and the subsequent faking of photographs of British servicemen that were released in the British press has thrown into stark relief the differences between officially sanctioned captions and those produced as an accompaniment to some 'terrorist' or martyr videos, which use extended monologues (and screen sub-titles) to clarify and justify a course of violent action. (Sontag 2003) A noble tradition of naming and prioritising specific army units (as exemplified in the grand narratives of high battle painting) has now to be handled more tactfully by today's regimental painters. Clearly, further work on representational strategies has to be done in this area.

In this brief paper, I have looked in detail at the process of commissioning, and touched on issues of agency, reception and representation. By focusing on a single painting (which I had the advantage of seeing in its gestation, and more recently in its place of prized display) we can see how an image is nurtured, negotiated and concluded. We see that the artist is involved in a complex choreography of negotiation and compromise, and we begin to appreciate how the resulting work (and its reception) is always measured in terms of a shared set of historical 'facts'. To those who commission such work, the principle criterion for judging an artwork is its pictorial verity, which must be achieved through unassailable technical examination. The painter must not only be a gifted visualiser of a scene, but command authority for technical control and objective reportage. Although the finished painting has usually been developed through close dialogue with the patron, it is the painters' ability to re-create an indexical account of an often chaotic and bloody scene that lends the painting, and the event depicted, an unassailable authority as a piece of mediated reality.

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Images

1
David Rowlands, *The Liberation of Basrah*, 6 April 2003, 7th Armoured Brigade, Oil on Canvas, 90 x 120 cm, Collection of 7th Armoured Brigade. (Photograph: David Rowlands)

2
David Rowlands, '*Thrown Tracks'*, 2007, Oil on Canvas, 90 x 120 cm, collection, Warrant Officers and Sergeants Mess, REME, Hazebrouck Barracks, Arborfield. (Photograph: David Rowlands)

3
'*Thrown Tracks'*, in preparation in David Rowlands studio, 2007. (Photograph : Paul Gough)

4

Preparatory drawings for 'Thrown Tracks', David Rowlands' studio, 2007. (Photograph : Paul Gough)

5
Preparatory drawings for 'Thrown Tracks', showing tow-line swivel, David Rowlands' studio, 2007. (Photograph : Paul Gough)

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