

# IMAGES OF THE COLD WAR

## Combat art

Examples of folk art or casual doodling by soldiers may be traced back many centuries, ranging from crude representations of ships scratched on walls to exquisite pieces of scrimshaw fashioned by Napoleonic prisoners of war. The personal, and later commercial, adaptation of discarded military items from World War I, especially shell cases and bullets, is now recognised as trench art. Probably more familiar to many people are the cartoons applied to aircraft and flying jackets, especially by American air force personnel during World War II. Artwork ranging from unit insignia to risqué pin-ups was also commonplace in many airfield messes and crew rooms.

Military artwork may be studied to offer insights into the culture of different armed forces. Within military environments, all activities and spaces are tightly regulated, and the application of any artwork might be regarded as damage to government property. The type of image will differ depending on where it is found. In semi-public areas, where authorised visitors have access, paintings are usually restricted to official unit insignia or heroically realistic representations of men and machines reflecting pride in the unit. In the technical areas, some images are clearly training aids. Access to parts of these areas was usually highly restricted, and was often in these areas that more unrestrained images were found; greater latitude was also permitted in crew messes and barrack areas.

### Conservation of wall art

Wall art was particularly prevalent in United States Air Force (USAF) bases during the 1980s. This resulted partly from official air force policy, which sought to reinforce unit cohesion through history and the pride of belonging to a given unit. This policy manifested itself in the re-introduction of World War II-style leather flying jackets, the application of nose art to aircraft and less formally to crew areas on the ground. The often-aggressive 'Street Gangsta' cartoon styles of many USAF images contrast with the more restrained RAF artwork, often restricted to a unit badge. A greater contrast still is found with the formulaic and politically ordained wall art found in Warsaw Pact bases. In England, combat art

has been photographed by English Heritage photographers at some of the key USAF bases of the Cold War. Among these are Upper Heyford, Oxfordshire, Bentwaters, Suffolk, Alconbury, Cambridgeshire, and Greenham Common, West Berkshire. At Greenham, the artistic interventions of protestors include graffiti within the base and painted fence posts and graffiti on the roads outside.

The conservation of wall art presents many challenges; paintings on external surfaces are especially prone to weathering and casual vandalism. The long-term stability of some of the media used to execute the images, including paint, aerosol sprays and fibre tip pens, is also unknown. If retention in place is not an option, in exceptional circumstances the image may be physically removed, as happened recently to images from a hangar at Greenham Common. This building is likely to be demolished and, following discussion with West Berkshire Council and English Heritage, the paintings have now been removed with their wall sections, for display at nearby RAF Welford.

Given the many uncertainties about the survival of wall art, English Heritage recommends that examples should at the very least be recorded using medium or large format colour photography. Afterwards, in exceptional circumstances, removal to a secure location may be acceptable.

### Inspirational value of Cold War sites

Perhaps more surprising than the artistic interventions of servicemen is the inspirational value of the sites on which they served, and the influence this has had on creating representations of the Cold War. Subsequent to the closure of

*During English Heritage's recording and assessment of Cold War sites, combat art was recorded at several bases. An assessment of this artwork is leading to an understanding of the inspirational and social values Cold War architecture holds for contemporary artists and writers*

*Alconbury, Cambridgeshire, a Hercules gunship painted on an external wall. This image was applied when the 352 Special Operations Group arrived in the early 1990s*

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## Images of the Cold War

Bentwaters, Suffolk, 'Death' holds a depleted uranium round. The image is in spray paint in the munitions maintenance area



some military bases, photographers, artists and writers have used the architectural forms and the rhetoric of apocalypse that they convey to inspire works ranging from installation art to photographs, photographic essays, poetry and music.

Perhaps best known is the Turner-nominated Wilson twins' video sculpture *GAMMA* [sic], recorded and filmed at Greenham Common Airbase, which investigates the themes of power, surveillance and paranoia through photographs, performance and installation art (Schjeldahl, 1999). Greenham was also the inspiration for John Kippin's photographic essay, *Cold War Pastoral* (2001), which documented the changing landscape of Greenham as it reverted to common land, and Michael Symmons Roberts' book of poetry, *Burning Babylon* (2001). Most recently, the Cold War was the inspiration for Yannis Kyriakides' musical composition, 'ConSPIracy Cantata', performed in The Debrief Centre or 'Star Wars Building' at Bentwaters Airbase, Suffolk, as part of the 2002 Aldeburgh Festival.

Since the publication of English Heritage's assessment of Cold War sites in December 2001, photographers are increasingly asking to see the report for guidance on suitable subjects, while similar work is taking place on former Soviet bases, with photographers recording the process and state of abandonment. Angus Boulton's *Cood Bay Forst Zinna* (2001), a video tour of a deserted Soviet base, was screened during the Imperial War Museum's 'Moving Image and the Artist' season. The potential also exists for closer collaboration between archaeological recording and artistic interests. The possibility of documenting the process of monumentalisation at Cold War sites – combining conventional archaeological recording, oral testimony and an artistic project – is being explored during English

Heritage's survey of a 1950 missile test site at RAF Spadeadam, Cumbria.

Historic sites of all periods can provide inspiration for artists of all media. The sites of the Cold War, however, have a particularly poignant value where events and fears are still within living memory. In 1998, the Commander of British Forces on the Falkland Islands invited four young artists to spend a month there, visiting the battlefields and creating murals and an exhibition space for the so-called Millennium Mile, the mile-long corridor at the Mount Pleasant Base that connected the living quarters with other facilities (Ashcroft *et al* 2002). The aim of the project was to improve signage and transform the corridor through the artists' depictions of the war and its legacy. The results, which draw heavily on the conflict and its physical remains, were the subject of an exhibition in 2002 at the Imperial War Museum, London.

### Promoting understanding

Both contemporary combat art and the later representations of the Cold War, inspired by the front-line bases, demonstrate the link between experience and imaginative response. In transforming the redundant spaces of Cold War military bases, art can create a dialogue between the past and the present. As seen in the Millennium Mile at Mount Pleasant, art can be an effective medium for interpreting past events in a challenging way. It can also be an eloquent expression of opposing views – between East and West, the military and political authorities, the protest movement and the media. Artistic representation too plays a significant role in increasing public understanding of the physical remains of the Cold War. The longer-term cultural benefits of a partnership between art, architecture and archaeology could be immense. □

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### References

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