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Art of a warrior: Major's talent ranges beyond military

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An Army Special Forces logistics officer and veteran of five Operation Enduring Freedom combat deployments, Maj. Michael "Spike" Solovey isn't the typical artist. He's just as comfortable hunting down a terrorist hideout in Afghanistan as he is skillfully crafting pictures of motorcycles, houses or various military themes.

For someone who describes himself as "a local ham and eggs kinda guy," Solovey's art is on display in the offices of several noteworthy individuals and world leaders, including Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who owns a copy of "Khandahar Mosque." Solovey also designed the official unit patch worn by the Afghan National Army Commando Unit.

He works primarily in pencil and watercolors, but does some paintings in oil. Solovey's subjects include Soldiers, military equipment and symbols, architecture, furniture, motorcycles and even an ex-girlfriend.

Solovey said when he's not doing military themes he enjoys painting architectural features, such as homes and buildings, in an impressionist style.

For example, his 1999 painting "Die Wahl Cafe" is an impressionist view of a cafe that he composed while stationed in Bad Kreuznach, Germany.

His approach to art is simple: "Engineer the art like a BMW, design it like a Porsche, and build it with the heart and soul of a Harley-Davidson. Produce the highest quality and most passionate art in the world," Solovey says on his Web site.

Solovey's interest in art goes back to kindergarten and Sunday school, but it wasn't until junior high that he received any formal art instruction. In his senior year of high school, he was one of 16 students statewide invited to the prestigious Virginia Governor's School for the Arts. It was then, Solovey said, he knew he was good.



Maj. Michael Solovey flips through his portfolio Jan. 9 at Maximus Fitness & Wellness in Leavenworth. Solovey's artwork is displayed in the hallway seen behind him and in one of the workout areas. Lamp photo by Prudence Siebert.



Maximus Fitness & Wellness employee Justin Brown and patron Mike Behrens talk down the hall from the artwork of Command and General Staff College Intermediate Level Education student Maj. Michael Solovey Jan. 9 at the Leavenworth fitness center. Lamp photo by Prudence Siebert.

Originally from Williamsburg, Va., Solovey turned down a full scholarship to Savannah College of Art and Design in Georgia to attend Virginia Military Institute. He has a bachelor's degree from VMI in modern languages with a minor in fine arts.

Solovey studied art for one year at the Marchutz School in Aix-en-Provence, France, as part of a student exchange program. He said visiting places Van Gogh, C/zanne and Monet painted was a real treat and true inspiration for any artist.

Solovey is currently pursuing a master's degree in the Intermediate Level Education program of the Command and General Staff College, and will graduate in June. His thesis examines how Hitler used various forms of art to advance the Nazi agenda.

Dr. Sean Kalic, an associate professor in the Department of Military History at CGSC, is Solovey's faculty adviser. He's a Cold War expert who has also written and presented on Nazi philosophy of art.

Kalic described Solovey as "a talented artist with a keen eye for detail."

"I welcomed and supported his proposal, because it seemed like a great opportunity for him to use his unique experience as an artist to research and analyze the use of art as propoganda under the NSDAP (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei) regime," he said. _

Solovey said he was drawn to the topic because his family is half German, he speaks German and lived there for five years. As part of his research, he received special permission last year from the U.S. Army Center of Military History in Washington, D.C., to view pieces of Nazi art not on public display, including watercolors painted by Adolf Hitler.

Solovey is currently working on four projects, all in different stages of completion. He said each project takes about one month from the initial idea until the final concept sketch, then another month to actually complete the work. Solovey said most of his works are unit commissions and that he only finds time to paint two or three personal projects each year. He already has 10 projects lined up in the queue this year.

"All Seven" is one of Solovey's most popular drawings, and also one of the most difficult he's ever done.

"I'm very spiritual and always wanted to do something that shows that," he said. The picture depicts seven Soldiers in combat gear with seven guardian angels watching over them.

Solovey said "All Seven" was the result of 10 years of conceptualizing, drawing and re-drawing. Its inspiration came from an odd mix of Michelangelo, Mel Gibson's film "The Passion of the Christ," Garth Brooks' album "Sevens," Metallica's album "S&M," and personal close calls in the field. Like a wall of loud guitars, he wanted to portray a wall of invincible guardian angels ready to do battle. Ultimately the final concept for "All Seven" came to him in the middle of the night while deployed in Afghanistan.

What makes his art so popular with other military members is "I've actually been in the trucks and fired the weapons, so that gives me a unique perspective," Solovey said.

Maj. Toby Moore, a CGSC classmate of Solovey, said, "He's in the military so he knows what it's like to chew dirt."

Solovey's art is so unique and inspiring that one Soldier had "All Seven" tattooed across his back and signed by Solovey. Another Soldier is waiting to have the same tattoo made.

Every graduating CGSC class has a print commissioned that represents their class. Solovey was asked to participate in the design competition for his class, something he said was a big honor and almost never done by students.

Solovey's print "Don't Tread on Me" is a collage of symbols, flags and shields in front of a map of the world with the Twin Towers in the foreground.

"The inspiration came from my peers. They wanted something that applied to everybody in the class, and many of them suggested the collage idea," Solovey said.

"I really wanted this to be selected as the class print. Our class is about 98 percent combat veterans, and nothing really captures our class like this," said Maj. Richard "OJ" Ojeda, a member of Solovey's class. "Everybody is recognized here, and to me it says that we're all in this fight together. This means everything about everybody in our class."

Solovey's design came in second to renowned military artist James Dietz, but the CGSC Alumni Foundation decided to sponsor "Don't Tread on Me" as well.

Another popular Solovey work is "Brotherhood," a drawing of two Soldiers carrying a wounded comrade between them. Solovey said he had three of his own Soldiers in Afghanistan pose for the picture.

Solovey is requesting a design assignment from the U.S. Postal Service for "Brotherhood," the first step in the process of having a design approved to be made into a postage stamp.

Solovey plans to donate the original "Brotherhood" print to the Association of the United States Army.

Fans of the television series "Army Wives" may have noticed two of Solovey's works on the set in the general's office: "Brotherhood" and "Desert Eagles." He described it as one of those "strange, but true" stories as to how his art came to be on the show.

It all started a couple of years ago when one of his bags was lost while he was flying to Qatar. Inside were two of his uniforms that eventually made their way with other surplus uniforms to the set of "Army Wives" for use in the show. Solovey's uniform still had his nametape on it, so one of the directors decided to look him up. When they performed an Internet search of his name they found his Web site and contacted him. They loved his art and asked if they could use it on the set.

Part of Solovey's company charter and personal commitment as an artist is to get involved with the local community wherever he's stationed. At Fort Bragg, N.C., he wanted to address the art students at the post middle school and make a donation to the art program, however after meeting him, the principal insisted Solovey speak to all 800 students. Solovey said more than four years later he still gets phone calls from teachers at the school telling him what an influence he had on the students.

Solovey says he plans to work with middle school students on Fort Leavenworth as well.

Reaching out to the community even includes his local gym. Larry Robinson, assistant manager of the Maximus Fitness & Wellness center in Leavenworth, told how the walls of the gym were completely bare until Solovey came to sign-up for a membership last September. He looked at several of Solovey's samples and was very impressed.

Robinson allowed Solovey to hang as many pictures as he wanted, and so far there are more than 40 spread throughout the gym. He described it as "a fabulous display, there's not been one negative response."

Robinson, himself former military, said he's now formed a kinship and friendship with Solovey, and has even commissioned a few works for his own collection. He said his favorite Solovey drawing is "All Seven."

Solovey said it's sometimes difficult to find time for his studies, business, gym and personal life.

"It comes down to precise time management and the willingness to stay up late and wake up an hour earlier," he said.

As for the future, Solovey said he'll "stay in the Army. I enjoy it, the quality of the people. After I retire, whenever that is, I'll do art full time."

"Being able to contribute with the art is the most important thing," Solovey said. "With every set of prints I have the ability to touch 500 people positively, and for that many people to appreciate what I'm doing is incredibly humbling."

For more information and to view his works visit <http://www.soloveyart.com>.