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Painting beyond the numbers: Alaska Guard civilian paints superheroes

JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON - Sept. 11, 2001, was a grievous day for everyone. It was Richard Cornwell's 25th birthday, and the terrorist attacks proved to be the straw that shattered the camel's back.

The then-Marine Corps lance corporal had recently suffered a major relationship breakup, his close great-grandmother died and 9/11 only deepened his overshadowing depression.

In the comic books Cornwell loves, superheroes use extraordinary powers to save ordinary people from dire circumstances. It would be those same heroes who would save him from his depression, but it would be by his pencils and paintbrushes rather than the supers' otherworldly and quite fictional abilities.

Pursuing a passion

Cornwell, a civilian materials handler at the Alaska Army National Guard Central Issue Facility, said he has been drawing comic book characters since he was in kindergarten.

Though he could only draw stick figures, they were Hulk and Superman stick figures capable of incredible feats within the confines of their two-dimensional realm.

His sketches were the beginning of a single-minded interest in all things fantastic, all things amazing that could be dreamed up and captured on the pages of a comic book. Cornwell said he doesn't dodge being identified as a nerd, geek or similar moniker.

"I've been a dork all my life," he said with a grin. "I've been such a geek about all this stuff. I grew up watching scary movies and sci-fi movies – 'Star Wars' and all that stuff. You grow up with these movies, and you want to draw some of these characters."

Cornwell said his artistic impulse is genetic. His Saturday morning routine of watching 'Thundarr the Barbarian' was interrupted when his mother would set up her easel and tune into 'The Joy of Painting,' hosted by the soft-spoken Bob Ross.

"Every Saturday, when I could be watching cartoons or a movie, she would turn it to ['The Joy of Painting']," Cornwell recalled. "It was only half an hour, but it was an excruciating half an hour. Then, when I would watch him paint, and he would make this masterpiece in half an hour. I was amazed."

In the same manner Ross created landscapes from the pastures of his mind, Cornwell would grow up to conjure scenes of superheroism from his fervor for the fantastic. After high school, he sent his portfolio

to the Kubert School in Dover, New Jersey – founded by DC Comics artist Joe Kubert – and was accepted.

His curriculum included computer-aided coloring, animation, narrative art, lettering, character design and airbrushing. Cornwell said he was surprised his strong suit was painting.

“I didn't even know I knew how to paint, and I was one of the top three students in the class [of 20],” he explained. “I was surprised.”

Though he found success in painting, he struggled in other areas. Cornwell said it was difficult to keep up with the pace necessary to produce a monthly comic book.

“I wanted to be an artist, and then I found out the pressures it took with the deadlines and stuff,” he said. “It was actually really hard for me to actually draw comic book panels – to tell a story. I had to have a lot of help.”

Cornwell completed two of the school's three years. He had run out of money and said he suspected making a living with his art may be out of his grasp.

The artist placed his dreams on hold.

Semper fi

Cornwell returned to his home in Exeter, California, where he worked odd jobs. He wasn't using the skills acquired at school, and he wasn't forging ahead in a new career. The artist was aimless.

His father noticed. Soon, the younger Cornwell came under pressure to move out and join the military. He met with recruiters from every military service. The last one he met with, a Marine, hit a nerve.

United States Marine Corps Recruit Training is widely regarded as the toughest boot camp the U.S. military offers, and Cornwell said his friends and family didn't think he could do it. He wanted to prove them wrong, and if he couldn't be a comic book artist, then he was determined to be a Leatherneck.

“Hearing the term 'starving artist' – not knowing where your next paycheck is going to come from as opposed to paying the bills – didn't really appeal to me,” Cornwell said. “I wanted something a little more stable, so I joined the military for stability, and I joined the Marine Corps for myself to see if I could do it.”

His naysayers were partially correct. Recruit Training was even more difficult than he imagined, but he would prove he had the grit necessary to hack the 13-week-long trial.

“Everyone was surprised I made it,” Cornwell said. “I wanted to quit every day, but I wasn't going to.”

Cornwell qualified as a motor transport operator and took assignments at Camp Pendleton, California, and Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni, Japan. Though he walked away from a potential career in comic books, his passion followed him to the parade field and the motor pool.

His peers and leadership quickly discovered his artistic skills, and they put his talents to good use. At MCAS Iwakuni, he was commissioned to paint a gigantic mural of the Marine Wing Support Squadron 171 logo. Though most artists use a projector to assist them in tracing a large logo, Cornwell said that method didn't cut the mustard for him. Instead, he used a drafting technique he didn't learn at art school.

With the assistance of another Marine, Cornwell graphed a picture of the 171 logo into 1-inch squares.

He graphed the mural wall into 1-foot squares. He could then free-hand paint the logo with the accuracy of a trace, adding artisan quality to a process of precision.

Grappling with depression

It was during his Marine Corps enlistment when terrorists plowed jetliners into the twin towers and the Pentagon. It was after 9/11 when depression tried to get the best of Cornwell.

He said he self-medicated by drinking too much and by indulging in his painting. Unfortunately, his passion had turned into a drudgery.

“I would not go anywhere, and all I would do is paint,” Cornwell elaborated. “It got to the point where I was cranking out all of these paintings, and they didn't mean much to me. It was just something to pass the time.”

Cornwell said he recognized he was walking down a dark path. He saw a counselor and was prescribed antidepressants.

Eventually, he vanquished depression with the help of counselors and stopped taking prescription drugs.

“I try not to keep the weight of the world on my shoulders – so much pressure,” Cornwell explained.

Avengers in Wonderland

Today, Cornwell said he has regained his passion for bringing superheroes to life. His work area at the Central Issue Facility looks like Doctor Strange transmogrified a Comic-Con expo into Cornwell's personal miniature pantheon of the amazing.

Comic book characters from Marvel and DC mingle with stormtroopers and "Star Trek" starship models. His paintings of Superman, Hulk and other fantastic fictional characters – all with a military aspect like a ballistic helmet added in – embellish the walls.

“Even though I'm paying back loans to the school I went to, and I'm not really making any money at it, it's a passion for me,” Cornwell said. “Doing these pieces isn't just to satisfy my art craving. Now, it's to entertain. I've had people bring their kids to see this stuff, and I'm just blown away sometimes. This is my museum.”

Roberto Vina, a materials handler who works with Cornwell, said he admires how each painting integrates National Guard elements. He isn't the only one.

“There are customers who, every time they come here, they appreciate the way it shows the Guard,” Vina said.

Cornwell is all too eager to show other comic book enthusiasts his portfolio. He flips through the parchments, cradling each piece like it's a tiny Renaissance painting.

He doesn't just talk about how he painted the artwork from a technical perspective. He talks about how he was feeling at the time – what was happening in his life. Each portrayal of hero or villain, zombie or ghoul, is a snapshot of Cornwell's contemporary experience.

The artist's favorite superhero is Spider-Man, and perhaps Peter Parker's alter ego represents someone he can relate to – someone who has surmounted deaths of loved ones, regret over fateful decisions, and triumph through following his convictions.

“There's something about a person who has gone to hell and back and still does the right thing,” Cornwell said of the webslinger. “That, and his costume's just cool.”

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PHOTOS

1. **DVIDS link** includes story and selected full-resolution photos. (Primarily for media, DVIDS is accessible from .mil computers.)

<https://www.dvidshub.net/news/187348/painting-beyond-numbers-alaska-guard-civilian-paints-superheroes#.Vqu9Pk0UWUk>



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Richard Cornwell, Alaska National Guard Central Issue Facility materials handler, stands by a mural he painted for 38th Troop Command. Cornwell is a school-trained comic book artist. (U.S. Air Force photo by David Bedard)



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A painting by Richard Cornwell, Alaska National Guard Central Issue Facility materials handler, portrays Marvel Comics' Spider-Man. Cornwell uses acrylic paints and a mix of comic book and traditional techniques. (Courtesy artwork by Richard Cornwell)