

The Theater of War:
A brief overview of illustrated conflict reportage since the advent of photography

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Mom, I wouldn't wish war on my worst enemy.

—John, U.S. Marine, twice deployed to Iraq¹

The invention of the printing press in 1448 revolutionized the way information could be reproduced and, subsequently, circulated.² The techniques of engraving, for illustration, were originally developed and dominated by carpenters (woodcuts) and goldsmiths (intaglio) in the early part of the 15th century, until painters began to learn the craft before the century's close.³ It made practical sense that engraving would be the primary medium used when the press began to incorporate illustrations into periodicals and mass media.

News of war has consistently held popular interest, as it directly impacts personal lives, economics, politics and national pride. Until the invention of the electric telegraph, reports from the front lines could take days or weeks to reach the home front. As well, any illustration that accompanied a news report was often rendered based on oral or written accounts of the event. Photography, as of the 1860s, would provide a literal visual document of the battlefield and provide a template for the engraver. When photomechanical reproduction became practical in the 1880s, engravers all but disappeared from newspapers and magazines by the early 20th century, as photographs would become the primary graphic of war.

¹ Jim Lommasson, *I Wouldn't Wish War on My Worst Enemy*, artist book (2010), <http://www.23sandy.com/bookpower/artists/lommasson.html>.

² "Johann Gutenberg," Lemelson-MIT Program, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, accessed March 28, 2013, <http://web.mit.edu/invent/iow/gutenberg.html>.

³ James Snyder, Larry Silver, and Henry Luttikhuisen, *Northern Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, the Graphic Arts from 1350 to 1575* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2005), 248.

Although our visual knowledge of conflict in the 20th century has been primarily photographic, there are those who believe that photographs of war and atrocities no longer have an impact on the viewer; that their ubiquity has rendered them ineffectual. This paper will review the history of conflict reportage and the volley between artists as special correspondents and photojournalist as relates to major U.S. military conflicts since the Civil War. In addition, the author will introduce the Black.Light project, which endeavors to recontextualize conflict reporting by melding the written word with photographs and illustration—a project that may be indicative of a relatively new pattern in reportage.

Very few archives survive of early publishers. As such, the history of the illustrated press is somewhat unclear. Even the transition from engravings based on drawings to photographic illustrations in the latter half of the 19th century is rather hazy.⁴ “While side-grain woodcuts had been used to illustrate occasional publications since the fifteenth century (lampoons, broadsheets, public announcements), it was not until the very end of the eighteenth century that the first real illustrated periodicals appeared, [...]”⁵ The invention of the lithography process in the 1830s made reproduction easier and illustrated satirical publications and news magazines began to appear in Western Europe (including St. Petersburg) and the United States.⁶

The Crimean War (1853 - 1856) was a watershed moment for conflict reportage. Thanks to the electric telegraph, William Howard Russell, correspondent for *The Times* in London,⁷ was able

⁴ Pierre Albert and Gilles Feyel, “Photography and the Media: Changes in the illustrated press,” in *A New History of Photography*, ed. Michel Frizot (Köln: Könemann, 1998), 359.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 359.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 359 - 360.

⁷ Pat Hodgson, *The War Illustrators* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), 14.

to cable first-hand accounts to his editors within hours.⁸ Although Russell's reports are said to have been "often exaggerated or partial, [he] caught the attention of the public [...]"⁹

One of the first "special" correspondents—artists working as illustrator and reporter—was Joseph Archer Crowe. Crowe, an accomplished artist and art historian, started his journalism career at the *Daily News* in London in 1846.¹⁰ After it became apparent that the Crimean conflict would be a more engaged endeavor than originally anticipated,¹¹ Crowe received a solicitation from the *Illustrated London News* and subsequently covered the war embedded with Britain's 95th Regiment.¹²

The advent of photography, as well, would initiate a dramatic shift in the way conflict was illustrated in popular press and reproductions.¹³ In 1853, Roger Fenton was commissioned by the publisher Thomas Agnew and Sons to document the Crimean War, with the intention that the finished prints would be sold by subscription as a "record [of] the theater of war".¹⁴ Fenton traveled to the Crimean peninsula on the Black Sea, where England, France, and Turkey were fighting against Russia. To avoid offending Victorian sensibilities, Fenton refrained from photographing the dead and wounded.¹⁵ His more than three hundred images of encampments,

⁸ Andrew Lambert, "The Crimean War," History, BBC, last updated March 29, 2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/crimea_01.shtml

⁹ Ibid., http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/crimea_01.shtml.

¹⁰ Hodgson, *The War Illustrators*, 34.

¹¹ The allied forces of Britain, France and Austria optimistically believed that the campaign would extend no longer than 12 weeks, but ended up lasting for three years. Lambert, "The Crimean War," History, BBC, http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/crimea_01.shtml.

¹² Hodgson, *The War Illustrators*, 34.

¹³ While the Daguerreotype and the Calotype were commonly in use through the 1840's, in Europe and the U.S., the development of the wet collodion and albumen processes—in 1851 and 1852, respectively—made photography more practical for working outside of the studio.

¹⁴ "Landing Place, Railway Stores, Balaklava, 1855, Roger Fenton (British, 1819-1869), Salted paper print from glass negative," Heilbrunn Timeline of Art, accessed April 13, 2013, <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/2005.100.67>.

¹⁵ Ibid., <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/2005.100.67>.

battle sites, and portraits of all military ranks, became the first extensive photo-documentation of any war. [Fig. 1]

Yet while the coverage of Crimea may have been extensive, “The American Civil War was one of the best visually recorded wars of the nineteenth century”,¹⁶ thanks to the photographic coverage implemented by the Mathew Brady Studio. In addition, there were an inordinate number of artists enlisted by the Federal and Confederate armies as well as the illustrated press.¹⁷

Mathew Brady believed that photography had a historic role to play in the Civil War (1861 - 1865). As soon as war was declared, he tapped several political friends for the funds to outfit a photographic wagon. His “operators” were at Bull Run on July 21, 1861. Unfortunately, the wagon was caught in shell fire and disabled, if not completely destroyed. Brady then bankrolled several photographic wagons which were assigned to specific territories. In the field, representing the Brady Studio, were James Brown, George Cook, Alexander Gardner and Timothy O’Sullivan.

Harper’s Weekly had many of the Brady Studio photographs reproduced as woodcut illustrations, including Gardner’s images after the Battle at Antietam. [Fig. 2 and 3] *Harper’s* own special correspondents included Winslow Homer, Theodore R. Davis and the Waud brothers from London.¹⁸ [Fig. 4, 5, and 6] Edwin Forbes, one of the youngest artists in the field and who covered the war in its entirety, had been hired by *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated* and was with an Army regiment at the Potomac.¹⁹

While photomechanical reproduction was not in practical use until 1880s,²⁰ many publishers did require that their engravers base their illustrations on the photographs that came in

¹⁶ Hodgson, *The War Illustrators*, 16.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁹ Walt Reed, *The Illustrator in America, 1860-2000* (New York, N.Y.: Society of Illustrators, 2001), 17.

²⁰ Half-tone engraving allowed for the direct, mechanical reproduction of photographs. The first photo-mechanical reproduction to appear in popular press was on March 10, 1877, in the French publication *Le Monde illustré*. Michel Frizot, *A New History of Photography* (Köln: Könemann, 1998), 361.

from the front. As a consequence, the public began to see a more literal rendering of collateral damage. When photomechanical reproduction did become cost efficient for mass media publications, photographers supplanted artists as the primary documenters of conflict by the early 20th century. [Fig. 7, 8 and 9] That said, although photography has dominated combat imagery this last century, painters and illustrators have continued to be recruited as military correspondents, trained as soldiers and embedded in the units.

During the Second World War (1939 - 1945), U.S. military leaders preferred to enlist artists, rather than photographers, to cover the front lines. According to the documentary film *They Drew Fire: Combat Artists of World War II*, generals insisted that artists could convey the experience of war better than still photographs.²¹ Many of these artists went through basic training with their fellow recruits and were equipped no different than their comrades, except that they had the added tools for painters and draftsmen: sketchbooks, pencils, paints, etc. Some artists, however, did not have the benefit of basic training.²² If the works were used for reproduction, it would have most likely been in *Yank*, the weekly magazine published by the U.S. military.

There were also illustrators who covered WWII for private publications and corporations. *LIFE* magazine had started out as a humor magazine published by Harvard alum and had been around since the 1880s.²³ It was bought out by Henry R. Luce by the mid-1930s and transformed into a picture magazine that, along with *LOOK*, fostered the nascent field of photojournalism and pioneered the picture story. Although *LIFE* had primarily photographers on its staff,²⁴ along with writers, the publication hired more than a half dozen artists to cover the war in Europe, including

²¹ Brian Lanker and Nicole Newnham, *They Drew Fire: Combat Artists of World War II*. New York: TV Books, 2000.

²² Ibid.

²³ "The History of LIFE Magazine, LOOK Magazine, and the Birth of Photojournalism," Collecting Old Magazines, accessed April 13, 2013, <http://collectingoldmagazines.com/magazines/life-magazine/>.

²⁴ Margaret Bourke-White, Alfred Eisenstaedt, Peter Stackpole, and Thomas McAvoy were the first photographers to be hired as staff. Not long after, Carl Mydans and Gordon Parks would also join the magazine. Ibid., <http://collectingoldmagazines.com/magazines/life-magazine/>.

Floyd Davis, Peter Hurd, Rubin Kadish, Edward Laning, Tom Lea, Fletcher Martin, Bernard Perlin, and Paul Sample.²⁵ [Fig. 10 - 17] More often than not, their artwork accompanied specific stories and several of the artists were profiled in the publication.²⁶ The magazine's cover was generally faithful to photography, but on occasion a painted work was used. [Fig. 15]

In addition to the press, the U.S. Navy allowed for artists hired by Abbott Laboratories to embed with the regiments. Abbott was a large pharmaceutical company that supplied drugs and pharmaceutical supplies to the military, and was allowed to test newly developed compounds on soldiers, for devastating diseases like malaria.²⁷ Howard Baer, Robert Benney, Franklin Boggs and Kerr Eby [Fig. 18 - 22] were the primary artists working for Abbott, whose intentions were philanthropic, as opposed to commercial or self-serving:

Charles S. Downs, art patron and Abbott's director of advertising, believed that good art-work could be a powerful tool in bolstering public support for the war effort and in encouraging the public to buy war bonds. He initiated a formal agreement with the Federal Government by which Abbott would sponsor the creation of an art collection that would serve as a "comprehensive record of war activities, both at home and on the battlefield." The contract made it clear that the artwork was to be for the benefit of the American public, not Abbott Laboratories, and that the work would belong to the people.²⁸

During the Vietnam War (1959 - 1975), photographers and television reporters working for independent news agencies could still get transport to conflict areas with the U.S. military. Despite that, the reporters were not beholden to the military, in that, their film was not reviewed nor censored by military personnel or the Pentagon. Allowing for ultimate freedom of the press proved to be disastrous for the Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon administrations; the

²⁵ "Art Gallery," They Drew Fire: Combat Artists of World War II, PBS, accessed March 14, 2013, <http://www.pbs.org/theydrewfire/gallery/index.html>.

²⁶ "Peter Hurd: He paints U.S. airmen," *LIFE* (Feb. 15, 1943); "England at War: Floyd Davis shows how British live and play after four years," *LIFE* (Apr. 3, 1944); "Peleliu: Tom Lea paints island invasion," *LIFE* (Jun. 11, 1945).

²⁷ "Abbott Laboratories War Art," Voices—Compassionate Education, accessed April 13, 2013, <http://voiceseducation.org/content/abbot-laboratories-war-art>.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, <http://voiceseducation.org/content/abbot-laboratories-war-art>.

incessant barrage of images published in newspapers and, especially, the television footage of death and casualties fostered wide-spread dissent for the conflict domestically.

While it is unknown (to this author) if any division of the U.S. military recruited artists to cover the Vietnam War, there are paintings by several veterans who revisited (or exorcised) their experience through their artwork. In particular are J.D. Nelson, “Doc” Bernie Duff and Frank Romero.

Photography has continued to dominate the coverage of conflict since the 1960s. The evolution of the imagery, however, is somewhat unexpected and the number of publishers willing to reproduce photographs and stories of war has diminished considerably since the 1990s.

The writer, critic and activist Susan Sontag, in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, notes, “For a long time some people believed that if the horror could be made vivid enough, most people would finally take in the outrageousness, the insanity of war.” Sontag then proceeds to trace the introduction of conflict photography into mass media and how it has evolved as a part of our visual culture since the 1860s. While the images by Roger Fenton, from the Crimean War, and the photographs made by James Brown, George Cook, Alexander Gardner and Timothy O’Sullivan during the Civil War, were initially an affront to Victorian sensibilities, the specificity of photography in depicting atrocities not only became the norm, they were preferred.

Being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience, the cumulative offering by more than a century and a half’s worth of those professional, specialized tourists known as journalists. Wars are now also living room sights and sounds. Information about what is happening elsewhere, called “news,” features conflict and violence—“If it bleeds, it leads” runs the venerable guideline of tabloids and twenty-four-hour news shows—to which the response is compassion, or indignation, or titillation, or approval, as each misery heaves into view.²⁹

²⁹ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 18.

Beyond the constant stream of photographic images that capture tragedy, brutality and destruction, is the progressive aestheticization of these images, in that, the photographs of atrocity are rendered more and more beautifully. [Fig. 23] Not surprisingly, it has been the picture editors and the Pulitzer Prize selection committees that have taken the brunt of the blame. War photographer James Nachtwey [Fig. 24, 25 and 26] and Thorne Anderson [Fig. 27] have both candidly stated that aesthetics have come to play a roll in their imagery for reason that the more visually pleasing photographs have a greater likelihood of getting published.³⁰ As well, the most coveted prize among journalists and photojournalists is the Pulitzer and it has been remarked that, with regards to photography, the proverbial bar continues to be raised for the photographers, as the annual prize continues to go to the most aesthetically rendered image of the most violent or catastrophic.³¹

In addition, the number of magazine publishers who are devoting pages to the more difficult stories—like civil war and genocide—are dwindling, and it's becoming more difficult for photojournalists to get their work published. As a consequence, a pair of war correspondents who covered the Charles Taylor Wars in the late 1990s and early 2000s, are turning to illustration as a vehicle for recounting their tales in a more interpretive medium and, inherently, broaden the audience for a segment of history that, like innumerable atrocities, should never be forgotten, so as to never be repeated.

The German photographer Wolf B \ddot{o} wig and the Portuguese writer Pedro Rosa Mendes reported on several West African conflicts between 1998 and 2007. [Fig. 28, 29] The challenge of getting their reports published has been constant, not to mention that their 2006 book

³⁰ Christian Frei, et al., *War photographer* ([S.I.]: (Christian Frei Filmproductions, 2001), DVD; Thorne Anderson, "Think and Drink Explores Photography and War" presentation sponsored by Oregon Humanities, May 26, 2010.

³¹ Scott MacLeod, "The Life and Death of Kevin Carter," *TIME* (Sept. 12, 1994), <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,981431,00.html>.

Schwarz.Licht (Black.Light) garnered little attention.³² Above and beyond conveying their own experiences in this region, they also wanted to find an avenue by which the survivors could tell their stories, to further expose the terror and brutality that Taylor's militia inflicted daily on civilians. It was decided that a "new contextualization" was needed.

With the desire to engage a new and broader audience, Böwig and Mendes felt that the comic and graphic novel genre could be the effective form of story telling they needed. Inviting 15 internationally known illustrators to re-tell the histories of the recent West African conflicts, the Black.Light project was reborn. Using Böwig's photographs, Mendes' writings and interviews with Father John Emmanuel Garrick—whose parish in Sierra Leone was the site of repeated terror³³—as primary source material, each artist has been given a chapter to interpret. The final project will take on two primary forms: a large-format book comprised of ten chapters created by the illustrators interpreting one segment of the history(s), five chapters devoted exclusively to photographs, a historical timeline of the conflicts, interviews and copies of newspaper reports about the West African wars from the 1990s to 2002; the second, and equally significant element of the project, is a traveling exhibition of the original artwork, photographs with incorporated text. The hope is that either form will give the audience multiple access points into the stories/history.

As noted, the artistic team of the Black.Light project is international. The most prominent American illustrator of the group is George Pratt, who is most well known for his graphic novel *Enemy Ace: War Idyl*.³⁴ [Fig. 30] Pratt was approached by Böwig not only for his interest in history, story telling abilities and artistic skill, but also because he has an established audience for his

³² *Schwarz.Licht: Passagen durch Westafrika* was published in 2006 by Brandes und Apsel.

³³ "The Black.Light Project," George Pratt (Blog), accessed April 1, 2013, <http://georgepratt.wordpress.com/2012/09/12/the-black-light-project/>.

³⁴ *Enemy Ace: War Idyl* is a fictional account of the German WWI pilot known popularly as "Red Baron" and the story of a Vietnam Vet dealing with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The graphic novel was published by DC Comics/Warner Books in 1990.

work.³⁵ This combination applied to many of the artists who were invited—the fan base of each artist virtually guarantees a significant audience. Most importantly, the combination of illustration, photography and story telling has gotten the Black.Light project the press attention it was hoping for.

When the Black.Light artists first gathered for a workshop in Erlangen, Germany, just north of Nuremberg, in the summer of 2012, it was timed just before the Erlangen Comics Festival. Not only was their workshop studio converted into an exhibition space, television crews and newspaper reporters spilled over from the festival coverage, with many of the artists, including Father Garrick, participating in a press conference at the Internationaler Comic Salon. According to Böwig, if it had just been Mendes' reports and his photographs, in the traditional journalism format, they probably would have only gotten two lines in the local paper. Instead, with this infused form of comic-style illustration and story telling coupled with the photographs, the project ended up getting featured in a two-page spread.³⁶ With support for the exhibition portion of the project guaranteed by the Goethe Institute since the festival, Böwig, Mendes and the participating artists are optimistic that they will be able to secure a publisher for their ambitious book by the summer of 2013. [Fig. 31 - 34]

There are precedents in the graphic novel world for conflict reportage. Most notably is Joe Sacco's coverage of Bosnia, Palestine and Sarajevo.³⁷ If the Black.Light project is successful, in its mix of international talent, artwork, photography and narrative, in engaging a new and broader audience to confront horrors far removed, then perhaps history will gain an advantage over the apathy that's colored the U.S. these last several decades, as pointed to by Sontag. In an ideal

³⁵ Wolf Böwig, telephone interview with the author, April 7, 2013.

³⁶ Wolf Böwig, telephone interview with the author, April 7, 2013.

³⁷ A selection of the Joe Sacco's books include: *The Fixer: A Story from Sarajevo* (2003); *Palestine* (2001); *Safe area Goražde [The War in Eastern Bosnia, 1992-95]* (2001).

world, history should illuminate the wrongs and the ill-conceived such that societies avoid the mistakes of their past in an effort to improve their future. Unfortunately, the ideal exists only in conception. Too often reports today, whether they are political, social, or environmental, are no different than tales from 50, 90 or even 1,800 years ago.³⁸

Perhaps the illustration of conflict is on the brink of coming full circle. Susan Sontag posited that “A photograph is supposed not to evoke but to show”³⁹, which could be why they no longer have the effect they once did, when the photographic image was novel; the shock of the new. Medical science also now understands that the human mind has an easier time registering simplified imagery, versus photographic.⁴⁰ In an age where photography is ubiquitous, it could be that the literal image is being regarded as evidence, rather than having *meaning*. If through paint, ink and brush, an artist is able to induce an emotive response to the reports from the battlefield and the subsequent aftermath, then reportage may well return to illustration and we could see a second coming of the special correspondent.

³⁸ To name a few random examples: In the U.S. the oil crisis of the early 1970s brought attention to environmental concerns; the economic crisis since 2008 has been repeatedly compared to The Great Depression of the 1930s; the decline of the Roman Empire, economically, was due not only to war mongering in the 3rd and 4th centuries, but also due to an overburdened welfare system that was fostered by outsourcing and the importation of cheap goods (foodstuffs especially, which grossly undermined its original and primary economy: agriculture. (Reference for the last example: Edwin W. Bowen, “The Relief Problem of Ancient Rome,” *The Classical Journal* 37, No. 7 (Apr. 1942): 407-420.)

³⁹ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 47.

⁴⁰ In medical school, students study from illustrated texts, for reason that it is easier for the brain to process simplified imagery, versus a photographic image. Begoña Rodríguez, medical illustrator, discussion with the author, c. November 1, 2012.

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ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig. 1 Roger Fenton, *Plateau of Sebastopol*, 1855



Fig. 2 Alexander Gardner, *Federal buried, Confederate unburied*, 1862



Fig. 3 Alexander Gardner's *Federal buried, Confederate unburied* reproduced in *Harper's Weekly* (top, center)



Fig. 4 Winslow Homer, *6th Pennsylvania Cavalry Regiment ready to embark at Alexandria for Old Point Comfort, Virginia, 1862*



Fig. 5 Theodore R. Davis, *Union cavalry burning the Shenandoah Valley in the fall of 1864*, 1864



Fig. 6 Alfred Waud, *Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg*, 1864



Fig. 7 Robert Capa, *FRANCE. Normandy. June 6th, 1944. Landing of the American troops on Omaha Beach.*

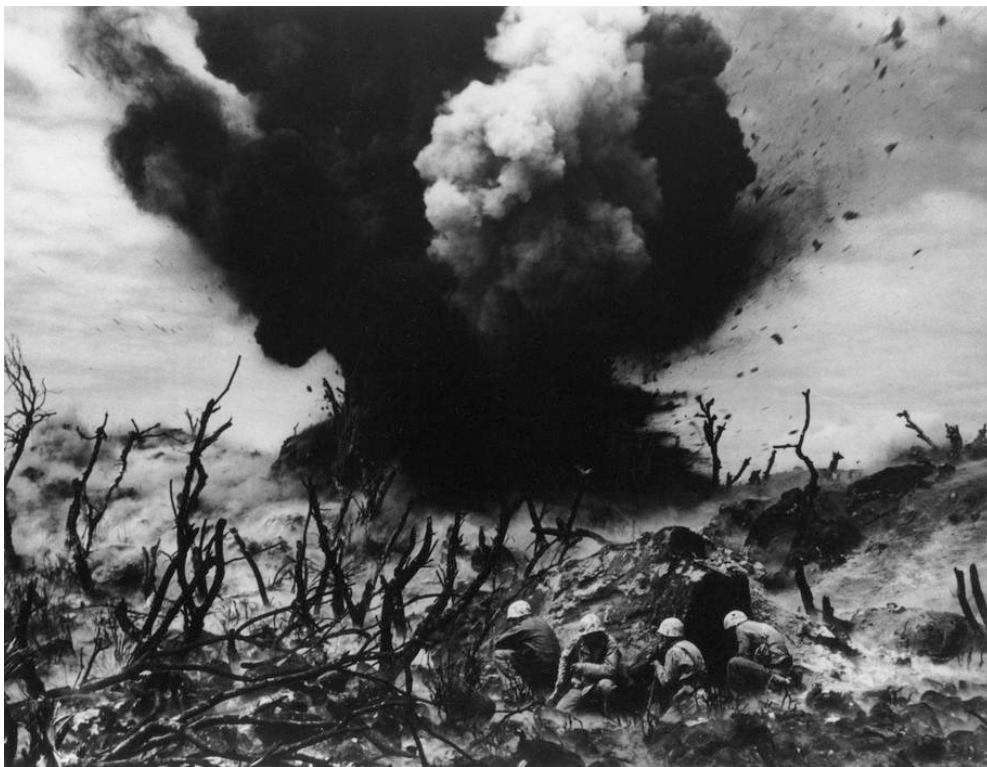


Fig. 8 W. Eugene Smith, *WORLD WAR II. The Pacific Campaign. February 1945. The Battle of Iwo Jima (Japanese island). US Marine demolition team blasting out a cave on Hill 382.*



Fig. 9 W. Eugene Smith, *WORLD WAR II. The Pacific Campaign. January-February 1944. US Navy Avenger fighter bomber, belonging to the USS Bunker Hill aircraft carrier, drops its load on the Marshall Islands, occupied by the Japanese.*



Fig. 10 Floyd Davis, *Hamburg Raid*



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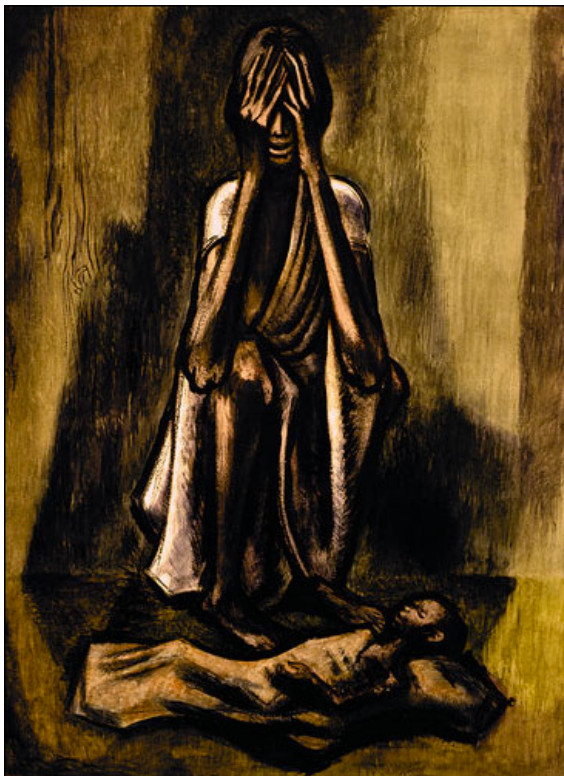


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Fig. 19 Howard Baer, *Chinese Stretcher*



Fig. 20 Robert Benney, *Battle of Midway*

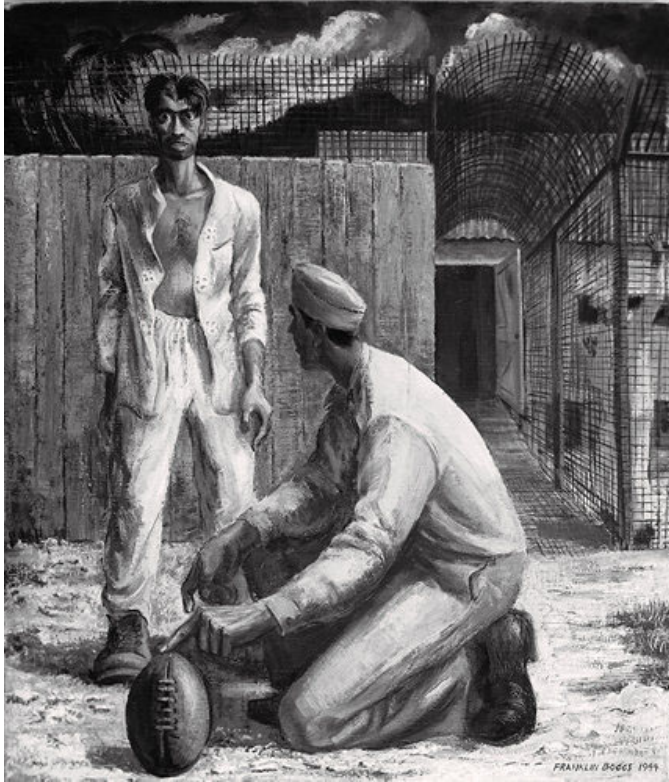


Fig. 21 Franklin Boggs, *An Emotion of War*



Fig. 22 Kerr Eby, *Fighting on Tarawa*



Fig. 23 Larry Burrows, *Reaching Out*, 1966



Fig. 24 James Nachtwey, *Nicaragua*, 1984 - *Contra mortally wounded in jungle warfare.*



Fig. 25 James Nachtwey, *El Salvador*, 1984 - Army evacuated wounded soldiers from village football field.

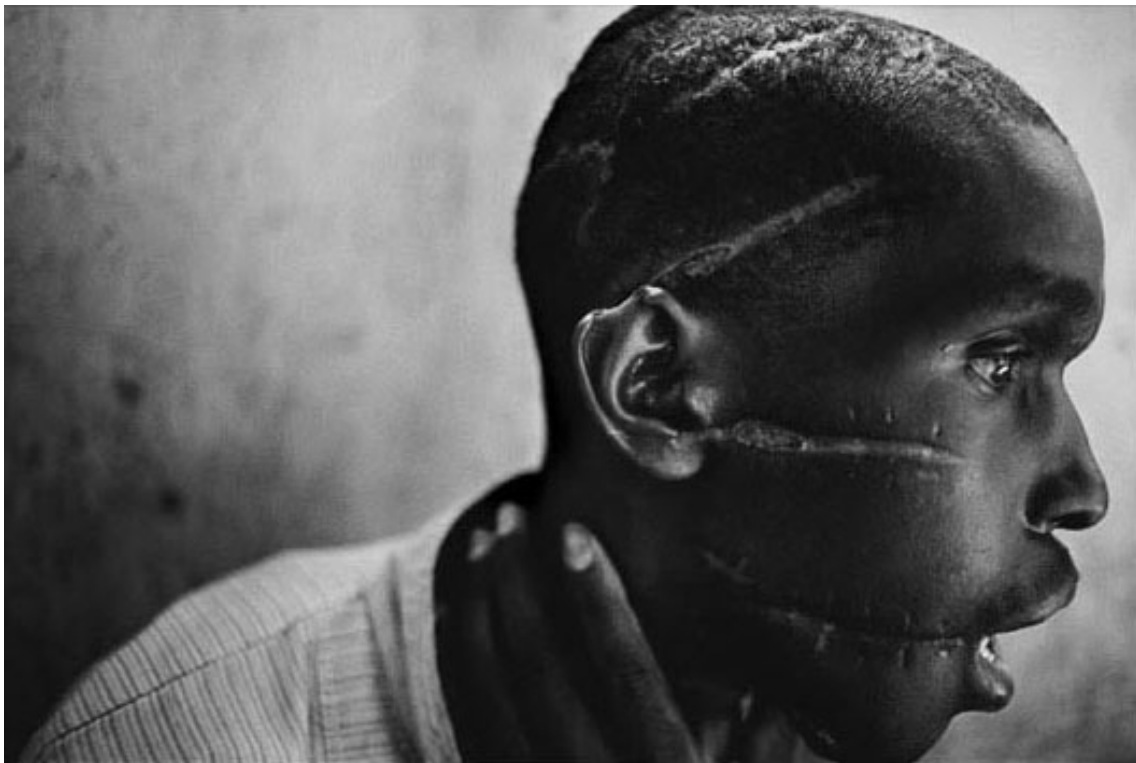


Fig. 26 James Nachtwey, *Rwanda*, 1994 - Survivor of Hutu death camp.



Fig. 27 Thorne Anderson, *Najaf, Iraq*, 2004



Fig. 28 Wolf Böwig [Untitled]



Fig. 29 Wolf Böwig [Sierra Leone]

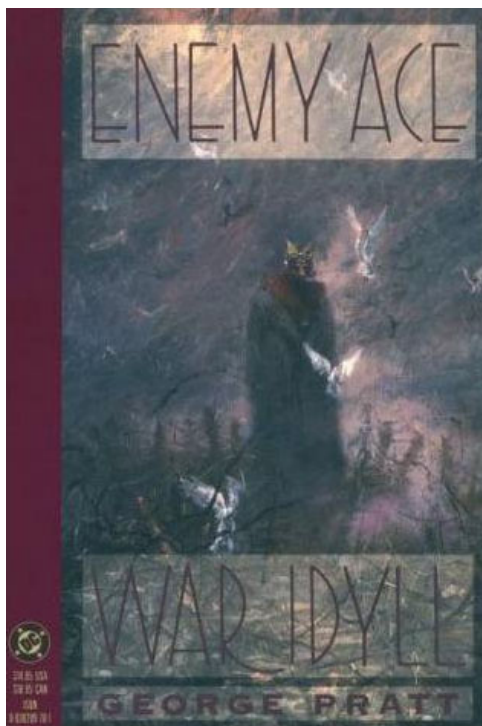


Fig. 30 Cover *Enemy Ace: War Idyll*

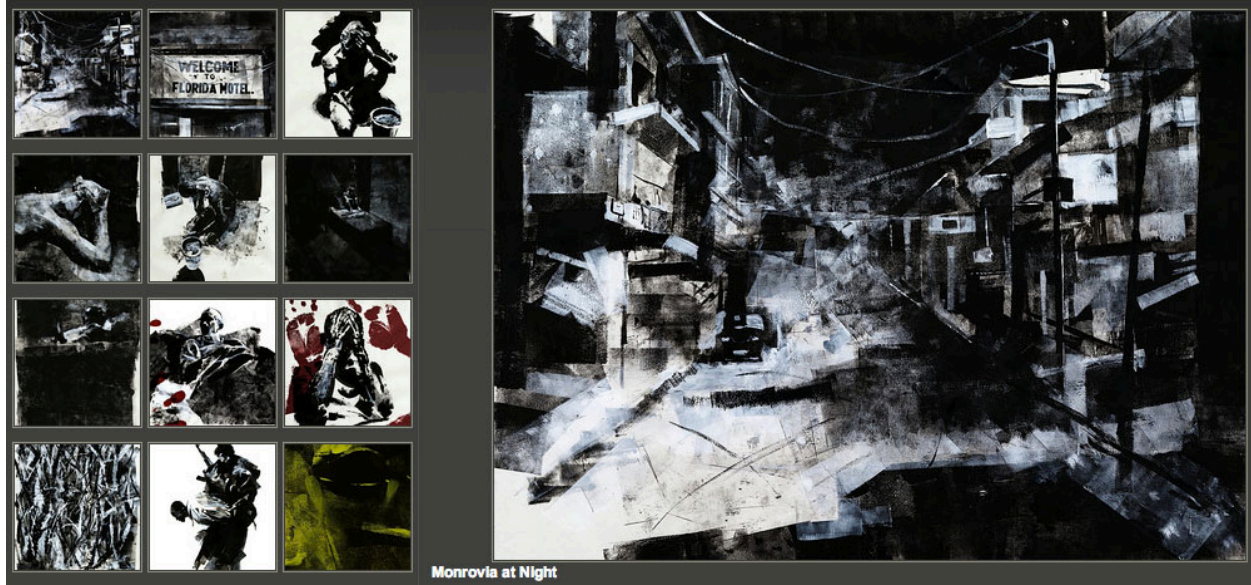


Fig. 31 George Pratt, artwork for final chapter of *Black.Light*

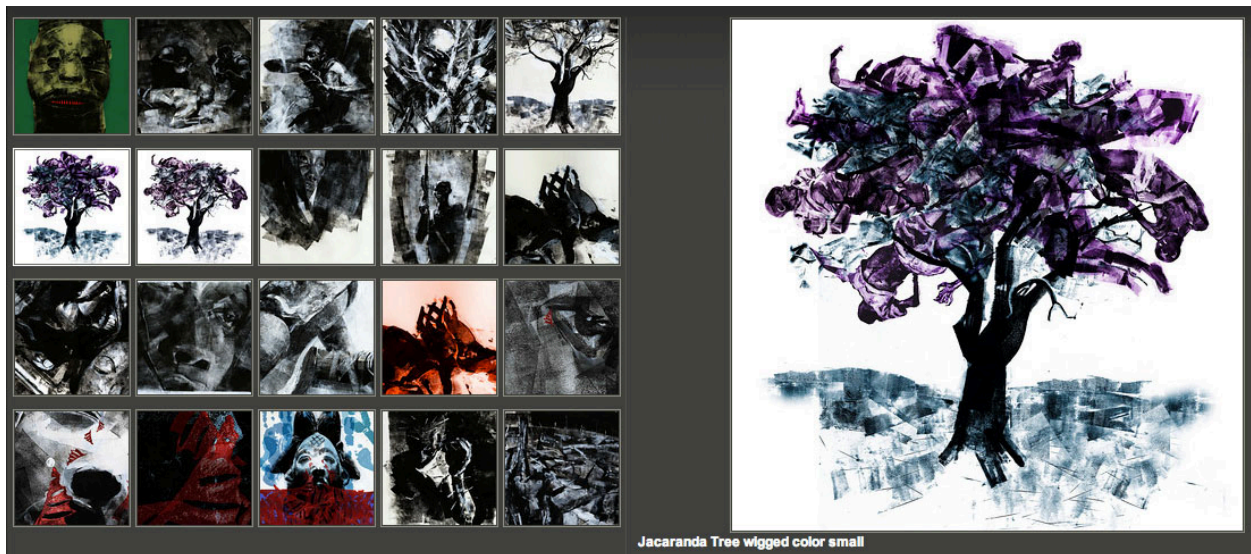


Fig. 32 George Pratt, artwork for final chapter of *Black.Light*

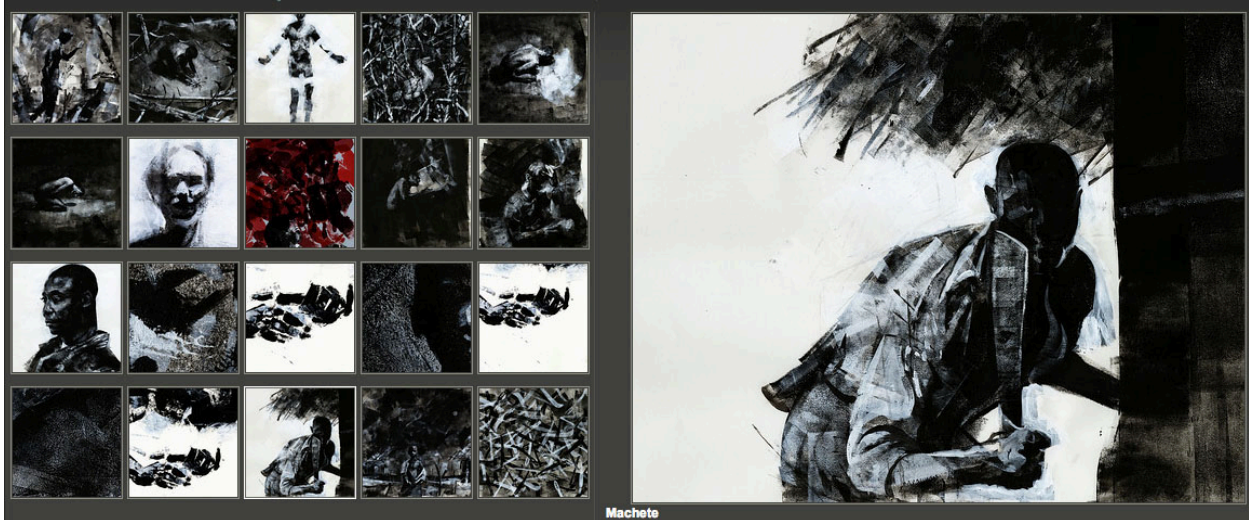


Fig. 33 George Pratt, artwork for final chapter of *Black.Light*

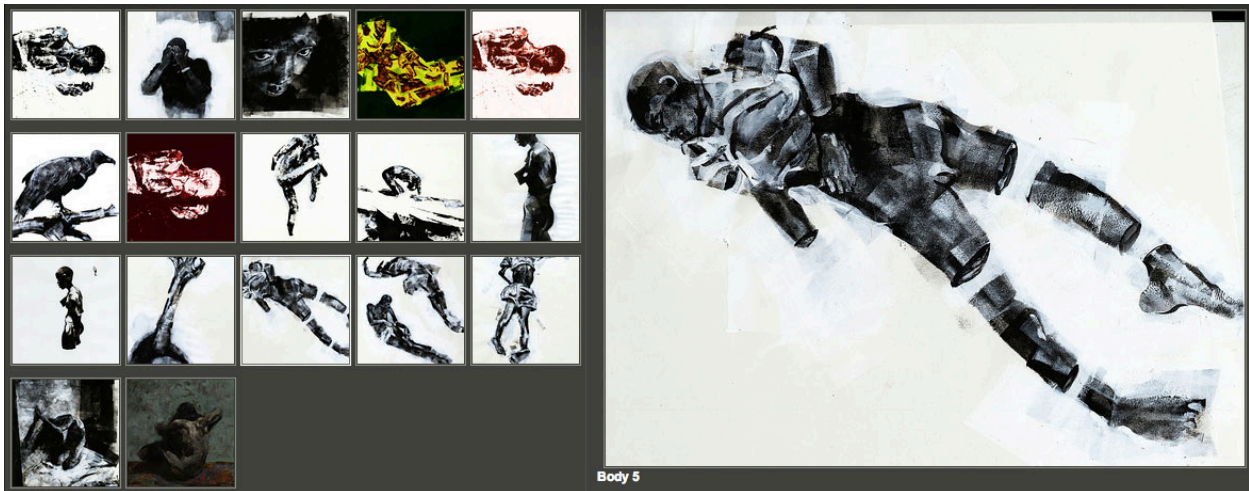


Fig. 34 George Pratt, artwork for final chapter of *Black.Light*