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Artist-Journalists of the Civil War

The Press: Artist-Journalists of the Civil War

The soldiers are marching home, and with them the noble army of artists. There never was a war before of which the varying details, the striking and picturesque scenes, the sieges, charges, and battles by land and sea have been presented to the eye of the world by the most skillful and devoted artists. They have made the weary marches and the dangerous voyages. They have shared the soldiers' fare; they have ridden and waded, and climbed and floundered, always trusting in lead pencils and keeping their paper dry. When the battle began, they were there. —Harper's Weekly, *June 3, 1865*

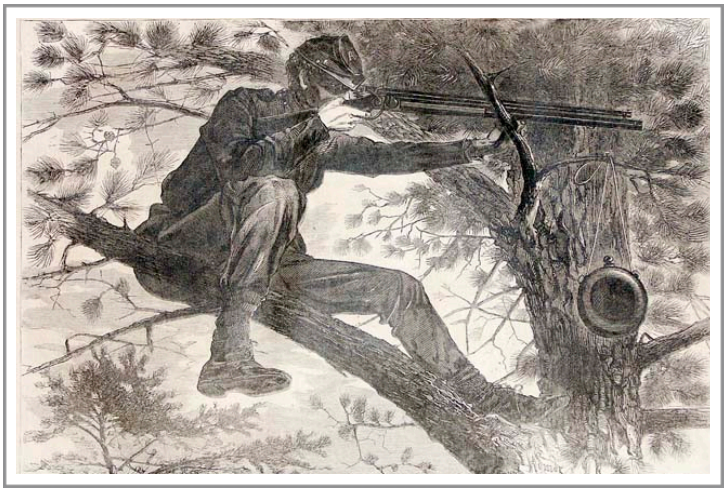
Above right, artist Alfred Waud sketching from a hillside vantage point. Below left, a Waud sketch of a battle in progress.

They were known as the Special Artists of the Civil War, and their mission was not to write of battle but to portray the terrible visage of war. Their implements, besides the pencil, were the crayon, the brush and the sketchbook. Their lot was to go wherever the winds of combat blew, to live under fire, to endure the privation, hardship and danger of the campaign for months on end, and to send to the illustrated newspapers that employed them rough and hasty sketches whose chief purpose was to cue the wood engraver back home. From Fort Sumter to Appomattox—at Bull Run, Shiloh, Antietam, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, Chickamauga, Missionary Ridge and the Wilderness— they recorded the bloody course of the conflict with a vitality that has earned them a unique and permanent place in the annals of the press.

In a very real sense, the Special Artist was the product of the Civil War, although he had appeared on the 19th century scene some two decades before the war began. In 1842 Herbert Ingram, an English newspaperman, established the *Illustrated London News*, the world's first successful pictorial news weekly. Ingram's staff artists sent crude sketches from the field that were then engraved, in a leisurely way, to appear as illustrations alongside the printed accounts of important events. By 1860, the U.S. had three successful examples of graphic journalism: *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, *Harper's Weekly* and the *New York Illustrated News*. Thus, when war broke out the following year, the Special Artists were on hand for their greatest and most grueling challenge.

Head in the Way

To trap the ever-changing image of war, the three illustrated papers dispatched a mere handful of men—some 30 in all from beginning to end, and never more than a dozen at any one time. The rewards were low—about



A Harper's *engraving based on a sketch by artist Winslow Homer of a "Rebel Sharpshooter."*

$5 to $25 per sketch for piecework—and the risks were high. One chill night, *Harper's* Artist Theodore R. Davis, sharing his threadbare blanket with a Union soldier, waked at dawn to find his bedfellow dead beside him. "It was plain.'' wrote Davis afterward, ''that but for the intervention of his head the bullet would have gone through my own." To oblige Major General George G. Meade, Harper's Special Artist Alfred R. Waud scaled a tree to draw the enemy lines — and enemy fire. "Rebel sharpshooters," he wrote, "kept up a fire at me the whole time.''

When not the target of hostile fire, the Special Artist was frequently decommissioned by the many illnesses and hard ships of the field. "I was down with an attack of the billious remittent fever. Brought on by exposure to the damned cli mate in the cussed swamps," wrote Alfred Waud, who was more artistic than literary, to a friend back home in 1862. Waud's brother William, who came to the U.S. from England in the 1850s and became a Special for *Leslie's*, fared little better. Wrote Alfred about Will: "Three weeks ago he had a sunstroke and fell insensible to the ground, while visiting Sickles Brigade since that time he has been 'sick, a low fever having used him up."

Switch of Allegiance

The Specials were governed by the same rules that applied to the 300-odd newspaper correspondents covering the war for the North, and the rules were often sternly applied. *Harper's Weekly* was banned for carrying maps of Union siege works between Virginia's York and James rivers. After the first Battle of Bull Run, in July 1861, British Artist Frank Vizetelly, sent over to cover the war by the *Illustrated London News*, incurred the wrath of Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton by writing too candidly of the Union defeat: "Retreat is a weak term to use when speaking of this disgraceful rout, for which there was no excuse. The terror-stricken soldiers threw away their arms and accoutrements, herding along like a panic-stricken flock of sheep."

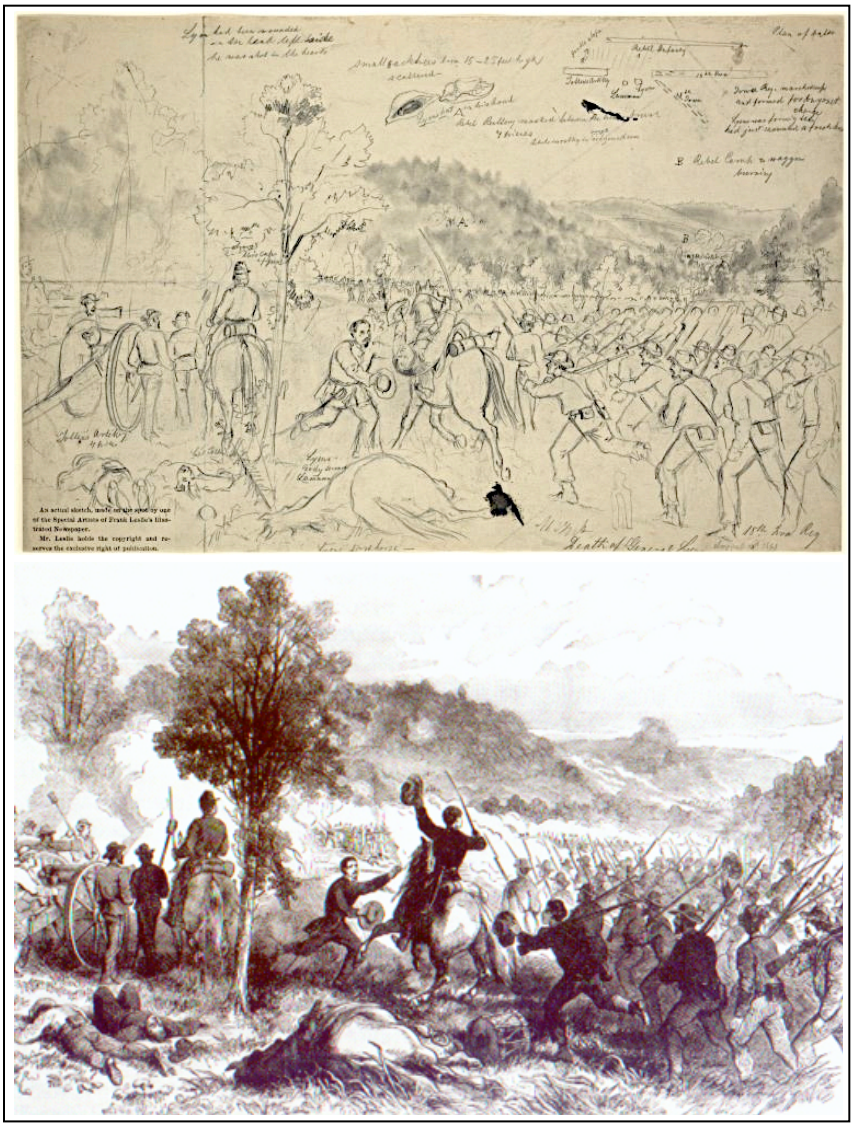
Banished from the Army of the Potomac after this statement appeared in print with his picture of the retreat, Vizetelly switched not only his skill but his allegiance to the other side. Joining General Robert E. Lee's forces at the Rapidan in 1862, he thereafter produced the principal visual record of the Confederate campaigns, together with some strongly worded expressions on behalf of the Southern cause: "Surrounded as I am by the Southern people, I emphatically assert that the South can never be subjugated."

The Special Artist had a competitor of sorts in the Civil War photographer. But photography was then in its rude infancy, and its slow action —10 to 30 seconds' exposure time—could not match the Special's quick hand and eye. Men such as Mathew Brady, best known of the Civil War photographers, lumbered up in their wagons to take static pictures after the battle, or gathered portraits of the generals and the men before the battle had begun. The fight itself was the province of the artist, who usually sat on a hilltop, scanning the battle with his glasses, and came down later to talk to survivors.

A photographer's wagon used to develop images in the field.

Under battle pressure, the artist often resorted to a sort of sketchbook shorthand—a line or two to fix the horizon ridges, a picket fence of pencil strokes for the men on the line. These were later worked up into more finished sketches, much of the detail supplied from the artist's own pocket reference book. "Infantry, cavalry and artillery soldiers," wrote *Harper's* Theo Davis, "each had their particular uniform, and besides these, their equipments, such as belts, swords, guns, cartridge boxes, and many other things, were different. As many as ten different saddles were in use, and of the many army homes—tents—there were a great variety." Artists' sketches were often scrawled with advice to the engraver ("N.B. Put as much fallen timber and dead limbs between the figures as you can").

Artist Henri Lovie's original sketch with his handwritten notes showing Gen. Lyon's death on the field. Below it, the engraving as it appeared in Leslie's *showing a more triumphant Lyon still on horseback.*



"Very Correct"

In the mercurial flow of battle, neither the artist's eye nor his skill could freeze the scene with absolute accuracy. But the Special came astonishingly close. His severest critics were the troops; when the illustrated weeklies reached the front, their pictures were carefully measured against the memories of the subjects themselves. "I beg to say," wrote a major of the 9th New York Regiment to *Leslie's* in 1862, "that your illustrations of the victories on Roanoke Island are very correct." If the artist erred, he was certain to hear of it. Alfred Waud was greeted with derisive hoots for his picture of the charge of Sickles' Brigade at Fair Oaks, Va. in 1862, which showed the assaulting infantrymen with rifles at shoulder arms.

But the artist's greatest obstacle was his own newspaper. The arrival of his sketches set in motion an elaborate process by which they were converted into print. Copying the drawing—in reverse—on a segmented boxwood block, separately engraving its various pieces—anywhere from 6 to 36— reassembling them and electrotyping a metal printing plate, took at least two weeks and usually more. By the time *Leslie's* received Henri Lovie's moving depiction of the death of Brigadier General Nathaniel S. Lyon, its home artists had already twice rendered the general's death; Lovie's sketch was edited to make quite a different point.

Into Obscurity

When the war ended, the Special Artists themselves slipped into an obscurity that was hastened by the development of the camera as the most accurate witness of passing events. Frank Vizetelly returned to England, pursued his craft on a variety of assignments; in 1883, covering the Mahdist insurrection in the Sudan, he vanished forever during the massacre at Kashgil. Alfred Waud stayed on at Harper's, a minor commercial artist. Leslie's Edwin Forbes established a studio in Brooklyn and painted landscapes and cattle.

Some originals of the Special Artists' sketches survive... a tribute to the men who limned war's savage and evanescent spirit under the red light of battle.