

VIEW from the Hill



C-141 Loading Wounded Afghan Freedom Fighters by John Thompson, 1987.

Painting Military History

John Thompson has found himself in some exotic places over the years, courtesy of the U.S. Air Force. He's witnessed injured Afghan freedom fighters, women, and children being airlifted out of Islamabad, Pakistan, in the dark of night. He's touched down in Argentina, Paraguay, Saudi Arabia, and Sicily, among other locations. Most recently, he ventured to Qatar and Iraq. "Irbil, the Kurdish area of Iraq near Turkey, looked like Montana, very pretty," says Thompson, an illustration professor at the College of Visual and Performing Arts. "I got off the plane and asked if I could take pictures and was told, 'Just don't walk in the grass.' There were mines that hadn't been cleared."

Such are the occasional obstacles encountered by the long-time volunteer in the U.S. Air Force Art Program. The program calls on visual artists to document military activities around the world and then displays their work at the Pentagon, military bases, and elsewhere. "I have an incredible sense of adventure," says Thompson, who became involved with the program as a member of the Society of Illustrators. "The Air Force takes me to places I wouldn't normally go."

On location, Thompson scouts for images that spark his curiosity, taking pictures, sketching, or painting with watercolors. During a trip to the Middle East last June, he spent time at an air base in Qatar and flew to Iraq twice. In Irbil, he met infantry soldiers from Fort Drum, New York, and had them pose in front of a C-130 plane they were about to board. On another excursion, a pilot flew Thompson over an archae-

ological dig at the ancient city of Ur, birthplace of the biblical Abraham. Contrast that with the contemporary images that amazed him during his Middle East visit: the ubiquitous—and absolutely essential—presence of sunglasses and bottled water. A sunglasses-wearing servicewoman sitting in front of a stack of water bottles caught his attention for one painting. "Water was everywhere," he says. "She became a very important symbol of the trip to me."

Thompson likes to interact with troops, believing that once they're comfortable with him they're more apt to open up and provide him with ideas for his art. "I enjoy mingling with the people and building a sense of camaraderie with them," he says. "Generally, I'm excited about what they do, so they pick up on my enthusiasm."

Thompson's most challenging assignment to date was the Islamabad evacuation. In the late '80s, during the Soviet Union's war with Afghanistan, Soviet officials allowed the United States four hours to fly into Islamabad and pick up wounded Afghans at a hangar converted into a field hospital. Thompson wandered among the Afghans and, working with a translator, struck up conversations, gained their trust, and took photographs. At departure time, he watched the boarding, which was lit up by car headlights from a nearby parking lot. "These people had never been on an airplane," he says. "It was like a scene out of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. I was taking pictures and thinking, 'I hope I get this.' It was a very moving experience."

—Jay Cox