What Good Is Art in the Military? The Work of Carlin Kielcheski Pam Chadick-Aloisa

ou do what?" "Where?" "What Good Is That?" These questions show up in the first few pages of the recently published book, Short Rounds. They were common questions targeted to now-retired Dr. Carlin Kielcheski, a combat artist who served in Vietnam. He also served as one of the first art professors at the United States Air Force Academy teaching art there from 1960 to 1980. His book expresses more than just a simple memoir of his life, expanding as it does into intellectual analyses of his experiences and their contributions to the value of teaching art to the military. Art courses were considered enrichment courses at an institution offering a liberal arts education; cadets weren't forced to take art courses unless they were Humanities majors. Kielcheski promoted art as a valuable aspect of humanity, fulfilling the mission of the Air Force Academy to develop future leaders of character to serve our country. Courses included not only art appreciation, but also studio art, both 2-D and 3-D classes, designed to promote the value and importance of artistic cultural creativity for military leaders. In his book, Kielcheski repeats the questions pushed at him and the complaints he received through his entire career for teaching art in the military. These questions were often asked by people who would not seriously accept a true response.

In 1998, the art gallery at the Air Force Academy exhibited over 40 artworks by Dr. Carlin Kielcheski. Seven of his artworks on display, his Mission Paintings that are now part of the Air Force Art Collection maintained in Arnold Hall at the Air Force Academy, were created in 1968 when Kielcheski was assigned to 7th Air Force Headquarters Saigon in Vietnam. When he was a

Captain at the Academy, being promoted to Major would be challenging unless he got deployed. His year deployment consisted of 23 combat missions that gave him professional development as one of the few Air Force military combat artists during the Vietnamese conflict. His unique training contributed to cadets in his art classes back at the Academy when he returned for the rest of his career. Kielcheski embedded his experiences into his art lessons, attempting to provide cadets with knowledge about how art reflects emotions, truth, and culture.

Fifty years after the facts, *Short Rounds* describes Kielcheski's military experiences as they came to be reflected in his paintings and sketches, closely focusing on his duties as a combat artist and the creation of his Mission Paintings. "Short Rounds" is a term used by the military for badly aimed, badly targeted shooting errors that can run the gamut from having no major consequence or being terribly destructive. At first, the use of the term wasn't entirely negative, primarily describing shells unable to reach targets. Gradually, the term drifted negative, applying to any failure. "Short Rounds" also referred to death by "Friendly Fire" referring to military members killed by their own troops. Kielcheski expands the "short rounds" term to include wrong decisions, mistakes, and failed attempts that don't 100% represent our goals but are, nonetheless, part of the realities in all our lives.

The first strong pull of *Short Rounds* is its cover. A combination of segments of artworks discussed in the book are displayed on a shaded blue background with green and dark military uniforms on four figures. The focal point is a larger light circle in the center, filled with an aircraft drawn in a position leading eyes to the lower right. The book title and the author's name grab attention by the way the letters are embedded within drawings of natural wooden boards based on very common Air Force shipping crates with stenciled letters. These drawings depict linear

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skills art teachers pass on to their students. "From A Sketch Pad" "A Vietnam Vet's Visual Voice" and "Observations of an Art Professor in the Military" all describe subtitles with smaller-sized letters but entice readers to move to understand what these subjects refer to.

The book's structure forms a chronological sequence of career events in Carlin's assignment to Vietnam in 1968, beginning with a few chapters that provide readers with details about Kielcheski's early life, education, and military jobs before his deployment. Different air bases make up the titles of later chapters, locations where Kielcheski participated in his combat missions. Reproductions of sketches and paintings abound

From the very beginning of the Air Force Academy, the existence and vitality of art in the undergraduate courses was often challenged.—complaints mainly focusing on the false claim that art courses are unnecessary, unconnected to cadets' future careers, and a squandering of funding.

Short Rounds is filled with memories of many events in Kielcheski's life translated as *short rounds*, from childhood and his early educational years and throughout his military career. He explains his personality being developed based on growing up as "a loner" who didn't consider himself a team player. In his first art class in college, he was called a "hill-billy clod." He experienced several major setbacks in his first years in the Air Force; he was informed that he possessed no aptitude to continue forward with pursuing a pilot career. He passed his final flight test, but his trainer pilot dismissed him from flight training in 1958 because of his "fear of flying," although it was actually due to Carlin's lack of flying experience.

This failure was a giant short round in Kielcheski's life and led to anxiety as he felt banished to his next assignment as an administrative officer in Albuquerque, but was surprised to be warmly accepted into his new job by the pilots who invited him to fly with them. Within a

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short time, doors opened to new opportunities for him. Carlin's art education led to an invitation from the Humanities Division at the newly opened Air Force Academy to teach art. He immediately accepted this "most wonderful job opportunity." Kielcheski was asked to teach a variety of courses within the English and Fine Arts department at the Air Force Academy. Before moving to Colorado, both Carlin and his wife attended the University of New Mexico. He spent a year participating in non-degree training in art history, music, and literature to add to his art education so he could teach his required classes. A few years into his teaching career, Kielcheski received his Masters Degree in art education from Colorado College. Later, his PhD degree was obtained from Arizona State University.

As he continued with his art classes and prepared for his professorship, some coworkers voiced resentment about teaching art being considered a serious job for an officer. But Kielcheski's new role pushed him forward to start his life-long positive support for the Fine Arts and his exploration for how to make the military appreciate them.

In 1960, Kielcheski starts his career teaching art in the English Department at the Air Force Academy. In *Short Rounds*, he discusses how he designed his art courses to add to the



Kielcheski teaching cadets sculpture techniques

development of new officers for the Air Force. Not only did he consider lesson plans that promoted creative expression, he also embedded his teaching with aesthetics, art history, military culture, and other multidisciplinary topics. He linked practices for the cadets to create, to read art books, observe other artists' works, and to express their ideas. Kielcheski was an excellent example promoting the reason why the Academy wanted military professors to make up the entire faculty; officers use their personal experiences to inspire cadets. Carlin supported cadets early on, selecting excellent artworks from his classes to be included in the Academy Art Collection that he started and maintained. Faculty offices borrowed cadet art to display in their areas.

What short rounds did Kielcheski experience in his new job? He tells stories about cadets cheating and also confronting him with why they are required to read and write in an art class which the students mistakenly defined as just playing with a basic level of craft to draw, paint, and create sculptures. Some also complained about wanting to do projects that weren't part of their established lessons. When the Superintendent's wife visited his class and was rude about the cadet assignments she saw, Kielcheski was frustrated with this lack of respect. He always responded to complaints and accusations with allegiance to his role and the importance of art in military careers. The woman who complained in this instance later became one of the most rigorous supporters of the art program and requested that cadet art from the classes be hung in the Superintendent's home. That became the norm for years. Even though Carlin was treated poorly at times, the Academy leadership and the department recognized his devotion to his job and his expertise as an artist. The first Dean at the Academy supported art as an elective and his strong support ensured the art classes stayed in the curriculum.

Kielcheski's sketches throughout the book demonstrate a wide variety of successful drawing techniques. They are dynamic examples of the drawing skills he taught in class. Linear techniques, shading, focal points and accents, coloration, expressionist marking, contrast, and strong composition are all attractive elements that make up his masterful art from the smallest sketches to his largest paintings.

But the formal description of artworks doesn't fully define an artwork. Art appreciation focuses on three main aspects of analyzing an artwork and art skills to understand it and to value it more: Description, Interpretation, Judgment / Evaluation. Description of art stays limited to its form, the most basic engagement with its audience. The form involves the craft of making art—materials, techniques, and styles—that lead to the visual composition of the artwork. Many of the complaints pushed on to Kielcheski were rude opinions that teaching art was just teaching craft at its lowest level; it was considered more connected to perhaps high school rather than to an undergraduate college art education.

However, the interpretation and judgment aspects definitely pull art away from being simple craft to becoming remarkable, engaging, and complex intellectual works. Interpretation includes many methodologies to research the deeper meanings and narratives, historical, religious, political, social origins, and symbolism of the art. Judging art, the third aspect of art appreciation, in art classes can mainly focus on having students understand that once art is created and shown to others and possibly exhibited and / or published, it can provoke a variety of responses from viewers. Kielcheski's small sketches can open viewers' eyes to unforgettable stories and meanings, not just appealing to viewers by the way the work looks. To expand his teaching about interpreting and judging art, Kielcheski required his students to go look at the actual artworks in local art museums and galleries and also to research images by well-known artists that have affected human culture and history.

In 1967, his department head encouraged Kielcheski to participate in the Vietnamese conflict that was getting more dangerous and involving more pilots and military members.

Kielcheski saw the rare opportunity to volunteer as a combat artist. He knew the possibility existed also that it might be difficult to get promoted to Major if he did not go into combat and participate in a "real" Air Force experience. He volunteered for Vietnam. The Academy leadership endorsed Carlin's request and he was assigned for a year to a position as an information officer at the 7th Air Force Headquarters in Saigon. His art classes were cancelled for the year he was away.

Kielcheski planned to work as a combat artist, and plans were made to allow him the opportunity. In the past, combat artists in the military had been assigned to draw and paint images as factual, historical documentation of daily activities in zones that the general public had no safe or close access to. The Vietnam conflict brought a change to this practice; civilian artists were approved to accompany small groups of military soldiers and airmen and live with the group for a short time to obtain photographs during their various missions. The artists would then later create paintings based on their photographs. Kielcheski was determined to inspire cadets in his future art classes with the most definitive aspect of the Air Force at that time—pilots working to *fly, fight, and win*.

Before he left for Vietnam, Kielcheski's moved his family to Northern Wisconsin, where his children would live for the year with their grandparents. It was definitely a short round that was never regarded as a positive decision; Carlin's children and wife always believed it was a mistake and they felt abandoned by their husband and father.

Kielcheski's first three months in Vietnam were full of tasks that did not include combat art missions. At the end of January 1969, Tan Son Nhut Air Base and the US Embassy were attacked during the Tet Offensive. His "Introduction to Guerrilla Warfare 101" started a redirection of attitudes about the conflict, especially knowing that the US public had only access

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to the bad news happening. During this same time, enemy forces occupied temples in Hue, but the US Marines didn't attack because they felt responsible for saving cultural buildings. Keilcheski used this event as the reason why humanities courses need to educate cadets about how important it is to respect and value other cultures. Most cadets will be assigned at some point outside of the US during their military careers and they will realize that the art of different countries and different eras provides crucial insight into cultures of the past and the present.

During his deployment, Carlin continuously connected with former students, friends, coworkers, and Air Force Academy leaders and faculty members who showed up as visitors or who were stationed at different locations. His sketches, notes, photographs, and paintings included some of their images. The major painting projects that Kielcheski worked on during his year abroad were called Mission Paintings, denoting the different missions he participated in. The paintings, 7 total, were 30" x 40" acrylic paintings on canvas. The subjects shown were aircraft, bases, combat and military events, and a variety of figures. The first Mission Painting he finished, titled *The Green Angel*, is Kielcheski's visual interpretation of a close friend from the Academy. The facial portrait that takes up a large part of the composition shows Kielcheski's professional style and strong sensitivity to the personal narratives of the subjects he paints.

In addition, Kielcheski also connected with people he never met before, but were civilian artists from the Society of Commercial Artists. They were approved by the Pentagon to travel to various places in Vietnam to conduct artistic research; they would return to the US and create their art projects. Carlin's job, Artist Liaison Duty, was to escort these artists to different bases and locations. They did not fly with combat troops or participate in the missions. This aspect of



Kielcheski Interacting with local

his job was one of his most favorite of his time spent in Vietnam. While escorting the artists, Carlin was able to pursue his own sketching and photography.

Before leaving Saigon, Kielcheski was asked to draw full-page sketches for a project

that focused on Vietnamese customs, the 9-Point Program. The General in charge of that project did not get it finished to the point of publication, but one of Kielcheski's sketches is reproduced in his book. This sketch documents what was considered a violation of a cultural custom in Vietnam: men are not allowed to touch women! An American GI was attempting to help a woman get out of a rickshaw. It was another short round!

Kielcheski was transferred to Cam Ranh Bay from April to May of 1968, which enlightened Carlin to his opportunity finally to do sketches of various aircraft and flying missions. He would deliver supplies to special forces camps which allowed him to make sketches of a flight line rescue helicopter and a C7A cargo aircraft, away from his office and go on-sight while various missions were happening. This is what he had wanted to do for months. His second Mission Painting was based on his sketches and photos of the C7A cargo aircraft and includes subjects such as a cow, a local woman, and a truck. During his time at this base, a Pentagon Inspection Team and the US President's son-in-law both arrived at the base, surprising Carlin with very memorable visits.

As always, during his combat assignments, Kielcheski experienced short rounds that often included other workers, military members, high-ranking supervisors, and the local population. Carlin became more resilient and able to safeguard his career by adjusting quickly and efficiently to most of the challenges. His combat art attracted more attention as he was able to work on it in his living quarters; one painting caused a short round because it was observed as negatively defining Americans making mistakes in their mission. The painting features a C-130 crew chief standing in front of his aircraft on fire, destroyed by a rocket. The composition of this painting is based on a traditional painting style of realism, different from the montage style that was used for the first two Mission Paintings. Carlin made his decision to go forward to use the more modern montage style for the rest of his Mission Paintings.

What is the montage style? Paintings for many centuries focused on realism to visually document subjects being rendered, ensuring viewers could recognize the images clearly and understand the setting and stories being referenced. This is before photography came into the culture, allowing the same documentation much more quickly and efficiently. With the invention of photography, modernist styles emerged to keep painting alive and meaningful. Picasso led contemporary painters into new directions, changing the art world at a time when many artists dropped their palettes and became photographers instead. One popular abstract technique that Picasso is famous for is collage. Collages are created by adhering different physical pieces of various materials—fabric, papers, flat pieces of metal, wood, and relief sculptures to fill in subjects and form compositions that don't follow traditional realistic appearances. The materials are often torn, overlapped, and connected in multiple ways to offer surprise results to the audience. The montage technique is a painting technique that requires merging subjects in the format. It doesn't focus on texture and combining actual materials like those used in collages; instead, painted parts of subjects (vignettes) are designed close together and overlapped to create interesting arrangements that include different perspectives and ways of moving viewers' eyes around various parts of the paintings. Kielcheski's choice to do montage style Mission

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Paintings was a smart decision because each painting was able to tell complex stories of complicated mission events that wouldn't be possible with the simpler, traditional painting compositions.

In Kielcheski's art classes, the universal theme of war in art was studied by cadets who had to learn about their expected future roles serving their country. In all of art history, war has been portrayed with morbid and sullen imagery when the goal focused on documenting specific historical events. However, after photography became the well-established technique for visualizing history, different moods, stories, and opinions of war became more popular.

Kielcheski's third Mission Painting, *Ranch Hand* tells a specific story of pilots spraying forests with defoliants. This experience gave Kielcheski insight to pilots' roles and their personalities that had to "survive the inhuman demands of their vocation." The vignettes in the composition balance the focus on the pilot by giving visual recognition also to the service contributed by groups of crew members on the flight. Both positive and negative moods are embedded in the same painting.



Ranch Hand

A strong mood connected to war is GI battle-fatigue, which Kielcheski witnessed firsthand. In June 1968, he took a break to Bangkok, Thailand which gave him an overnight change in the emotional environment he was experiencing. Kielcheski regained energy as he returned to Saigon facing back and forth "alternating useful work and grinding frustration." One success was his design of a Christmas card that required many preliminary sketches. The 7th Air Force



7th Air Force Christmas Card

approved and printed out Carlin's design depicting a pilot next to his aircraft in a nighttime venue with a bright star shining overhead. A short round that harassed Kielcheski repeatedly was his desire to put into practice his combat art role; staying in Saigon took away that capability. At the end of July, an Information Officer from the Air Force Academy arrived, assigned to the 7th Air Force, and approved Kielcheski's new schedule to travel to bases to photograph and sketch different aircraft and missions. "Blanket TDY orders" gave Kielcheski the ability to jump onto different aircraft on short notice based on what missions he could connect with. Finally, he spent the remaining months of his deployment working as a professional combat artist!

Kielcheski's AC-47 "Spooky" Gunship Mission Painting depicts the Spooky pilots shooting Gatling guns into enemy territory during a night run. In the darkness, the guns blasted the environment with bright flares. The focal point in the painting is a small rectangular shape in

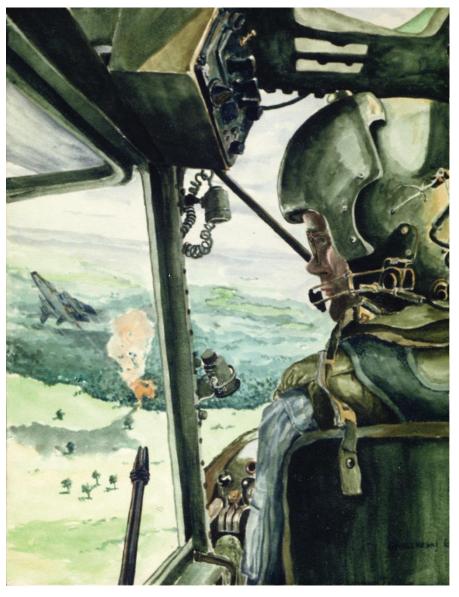


Spooky

the center area, representing an opening, with red-orange color symbolizing intense heat. Everything else in the painting is cool coloration—dull greens, grays, and navy blues. To obtain the source photos for this painting, Carlin borrowed a flash camera. During the flight he was told to turn it off so as not to attract enemy hits. Kielcheski quickly took a last photo that he used to make a sketch of a gunner writing a letter; the light came from the shooting mechanism. Kielcheski's TDY to Danang Air Base fulfilled the intense desire he had for years to fly an F-4. The F-4 Phantom fighter / bomber painting vertically engages multiple images of many military figures. The entire left-hand side is dominated by the standing, smiling pilot. Hands on bars on the right center edge tell the story of pilots imprisoned in Hanoi Hilton. The F-4 aircraft dives from the upper right corner. Two months later, Carlin discovered that the pilot, an AF Academy grad, died; he gifted a copy of his painting to the widow. Throughout his deployment, Kielcheski suffered the loss of comrades.

Another common stress every military member faces is the necessity to have to repeatedly say goodbye to people they work with. "Separation Rites" are described by Kielcheski as get-togethers regularly offered by squadrons a day before someone leaves, returning back to the United States. Kielcheski attended a rite for a pilot finishing 100 missions. He quickly drew a "poor quality sketch, as is" from memory. Drawings based on memory lack many of the details of both the subject(s) and techniques of the drawing—hence, "poor quality." Details depicting lines, shapes, and shading help the drawing represent the subject in a more recognizable manner. Art teachers focus on pushing students to spend more time closely observing objects, landscapes, and people they want to include in their drawings. Kielcheski had very little time to spend getting this sketch drawn, so most of it was drawn from his memory of the event before he left the base. He writes that military customs of saying goodbye support unit cohesiveness, keeping military members close. Kielcheski experienced this in his time in Vietnam, constantly connecting with different people he said goodbye to earlier.

He soon met another person he had said goodbye to years before: a captain who was in Kielcheski's first art class at the AF Academy. He met him again when he flew a Huey helicopter to Quang Tri Army Post. His time at the Army Post made Carlin appreciate "interservice cooperation" and question the politics that keeps most military services separated and



Gunner

not more efficiently working under a single command. "Turf wars among our own service branches seemed downright wasteful, unpatriotic, and painfully ironic."

Kielcheski participated in a pararescue mission on a Sikorsky "Jolly Green Giant" helicopter in Thailand. His *NKP* painting was the last of his 7 Mission Paintings and Carlin considers it the most complicated one in the group. The figure of a sergeant, a parajumper, covers the entire left side of the vertical format, peering outside the helicopter where there are

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many different aircraft composing sections of the painting and showing different activities. During the mission flight, Kielcheski "couldn't stand the suspense and asked "are we getting some action?" "Naw," growled the young Pararescue sergeant, "and I wanted you to paint my picture!" Carlin did! This enlisted member perhaps performed the most dangerous tasks of anyone Kielcheski met with.

Perhaps one of the most difficult short rounds Kielcheski experienced happened



NKP

when he was called and warned about some of his colleagues getting hepatitis. His lab tests confirmed this was a health problem and he was diagnosed with Hep A. He got inoculated, stayed in a hospital in Bangkok, Thailand, then was flown to Manila and stayed in the hospital at the Air Force base there for 2 weeks. He then flew to McCord Air Force Base in Tacoma, Washington and then back to the Air Force Academy hospital. More lab tests were given and he spent 2 more weeks in the hospital there. He was then allowed to fly to Wisconsin to stay with his family during his recovery. Carlin's fight with hepatitis certainly was a very long, short round, but later he believed getting it may have saved his life.

Kielcheski's deployment was finished. Later, he was able to look back and realize the results of the conflict, which he considered a "horrible short round," and how it affected civilian and military cultures in this country. "A loss of integrity, which I used to think occurred only in

other countries, now seems to exist here in the United States." Kielcheski discusses the real



Cadets pose in front of one of their murals

danger experienced in war zones, the psychological consequences of conflicts, and possible ways military can survive and move forward. He becomes very contemplative writing about the value of his own short time spent in Vietnam.

When he returned to teaching, Kielcheski shared his combat experiences and art with his

cadets, passing on to them the integral responsibilities they needed to consider for their future careers. Kielcheski taught his art classes the montage technique that was used for several wall murals in Fairchild Hall, where his classes were conducted. He also created a new montage painting dedicated to Lance Sijan, one of his art students who died during Vietnam and is the only Air Force Academy graduate to be awarded the Medal of Honor. The painting "F4 2 4F - The Legend of Lance," tells the story of Sijan's tragedy in Vietnam. Carlin gives credit to many other people in the final chapter,



F4 2 4F - The Legend of Lance

listing who served and supported him during his career. He himself was awarded the bronze star and flight recognition. Keilcheski served many more years at the Academy; later in his career he was assigned second-in-command in the English Department.

Kielcheski's Mission Paintings were accepted into the Air Force Art Collection and exhibited in galleries and shown during Kielcheski's many invitational talks and military lectures. More short rounds happened when Carlin became concerned about how his paintings were handled and how they might avoid being appreciated in the future. He knew his art could lack attention being in a location that is not open to the general public. Kielcheski's book is an excellent solution to this short round! For the first time, all 7 Mission Paintings are reproduced in a published book that formally defines the collection in one source for official reference by the curator(s) of the Air Force Art Collection and future viewers of his art.

Kielcheski joins contemporary professional artists who connect their visual works with writing. Throughout the centuries, viewers don't have an opportunity to fully understand artworks if they never meet the artist, never read publications written by the artist, or never study material presented about the artist. We all know that "a picture is worth a thousand words." In most art exhibits, titles, labels, and Artist Statements mounted near the art attracts attention of visitors and gives them information about the artist and sometimes additional writings and research by art critics and other artists make up published exhibition catalogs. *Short Rounds*, while not considered a catalog about Kielcheski's artworks, certainly connects great words with great art.

A short number of pages at the end of *Short Rounds* covers the years of Kielcheski's life after returning from Vietnam. He discusses his military retirement in 1980, his teaching jobs at various colleges and universities, his family life, and his advancement as an artist. Over the years, Kielcheski's art included paintings done while visiting and working at different international locations, including Sri Lanka, India, and his return to Vietnam as a tourist. Today, Carlin identifies himself as a Western painter, inspired by American cowboy artists. His work has been exhibited in local, regional, national, and international exhibits and included in many collections across the globe.

In 2009, the Grand Re-opening of the newly remodeled Air Force Academy gallery featured a solo exhibit of Kielcheski's art, including, again, his Mission Paintings. Also shown

were the 7th Air Force Christmas Card and Lance Sijan's artwork done under Kielcheski's guidance. The exhibit honored a military member who continued to keep art alive at the Air Force Academy.

Kielcheski's responses to his short rounds often exposed an oxymoron in officership—humility. Humility is a positive acceptance of mistakes, bad decisions, bad luck, obligations, roles, challenges, and



Kielcheski stands next to 'Ranch Hand' during his Exhibit celebrating the re-opening of the Permanent Professors Gallery

realities in life. Kielcheski's personality is heavy with humility. He generously shared his talents with cadets and easily accepted the personal styles of his students and did not harbor a sense of superiority. Carlin learned to combat negativity, complaining, and rather resentful behaviors of others about what he did for his career. "You do what?" "Where?"_"What good is that?" Kielcheski valued his role as an artist and art professor for the military and knew that what he

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did was good. He always served with strong devotion to his country, his superiors, and his position. Humility in his leadership is a rare and powerful attribute.

Humility also occurs in the way the military can appreciate and respect global cultures. Many military members will spend part of their careers outside of the United States; even those staying in the US will face the responsibility of supporting allies and other countries around the world with their jobs. The Air Force Academy still educates cadets in art classes today, teaching them to appreciate the many different cultures across the globe. Carlin Kielcheski's book opens our eyes to his art. It reflects his life, his family, his military service to our country, and his combat experiences in Vietnam. His art helped open cadets' eyes in his art classes. *Short Rounds* also opens eyes to the reality of *everyone's* life; short rounds entice us *all* to learn from our mistakes, open new doors, and choose directions that can better define our lives and culture.

Pam Chadick-Aloisa began her teaching career as the sole art professor and director/curator of the art gallery at the Air Force Academy in 1991, 11 years after Carlin Kielcheski retired from there. Her education includes BFA, MA, and MFA degrees in art. She studied under famous artists Edward Catich, Leon Golub and Ida Lorentzen. Pam still teaches at the Air Force Academy and has hosted several exhibits of Kielcheski's art in the Permanent Professors Art Gallery.