BRANDON LINGLE

Rendering War in Prismacolor
a conversation with Richard Johnson

In late 2014, Richard Johnson embedded with U.S. Forces to "Draw the Drawdown" in Afghanistan. As the lead public affairs officer for the air wing at Bagram Airfield, I was thrilled to work with Rich. Between his trips to some of the smallest U.S. outposts in Afghanistan, we spent many hours hunting scenes around Bagram, the largest coalition base in the country. Whether on aircraft, in hospital wards, or in bunkers, it was extraordinary to watch Rich in action. Fueled by coffee saturated with heaps of sugar and cream, and a steady flow of cigarettes, Rich instantly built relationships and overcame difficult conditions to produce sketches that reached worldwide audiences often within hours of their production.

It is not a stretch to argue that Rich's work did more to humanize the war than most other media coverage of Afghanistan. His sketches and dispatches are more than reporting, they're art. These pieces confront us and help to create conversations not only with ourselves, but also with others. They ask vital questions in subtle and timeless ways that will endure and inform our children's children about our nation's odyssey in Afghanistan. Working with Rich was the highlight of my deployment, and I'm pleased to share some of this work here.

BL: *How did you get into art and war sketching?*

RJ: Poor timing and bad decision making that turned out well enough in the end—

so far. Late in 2002, as the U.S. and allies built up forces around Iraq for the most poorly kept secret invasion ever, the pre-game media frenzy was in full swing. Many media companies were trying to find an angle, or a way of differentiating from the pack. I was a desker for the *Detroit Free Press* when a company-wide email went out asking for ideas. I made a "bad decision" and threw my name in the hat as an artist correspondent. My "poor timing" happened to coincide with the hiring of Joe Galloway as Senior Military Correspondent for the *Freep's* parent company.

Joe is one of a very small group of journalists to be held in extremely high esteem by the military. As many know, Mr. Galloway was awarded a bronze star for helping rescue wounded soldiers in the battle of Ia Drang in Vietnam in 1965 while covering that conflict.

While in Vietnam Joe came across an old combat artist named Howard Brodie. Not knowing who he was, Joe thought of him as a ridiculous old man with his pencils. Thirty years later, Joe realized that Brodie's sketches had a profound effect on him. In early 2003, in more or less Joe's first act on the job as Senior Military Correspondent, he green-lighted my request to cover the Iraq invasion. We have been friends ever since. My friendship with Joe has at various times allowed me to open doors that seemed firmly shut. When the answer is no, for no obvious reason, I still call Joe.

On 19 March 2003, I staged with the U.S. Marines in Kuwait. Never have I felt more juxtaposed and out of place to my surroundings. Over the next month I filed, more-or-less daily, a bunch of sketches to accompany articles written by Jeff Seidel the *Freep* writer I was accompanying. I hid my constant terror by drawing everything. The response from readers was huge. I was hooked. I felt at home.

BL: *What kind of advice did Joe Galloway, coauthor of* We Were Soldiers Once… and Young*, offer you in the months before Iraq?*

RJ: For the life of me I don't remember much in the way of advice from Joe beforehand. We only met once before I left. It was a busy time. He was the only reason we received any training whatsoever, though. He arranged for a four-hour first aid course after the paper suddenly brought forward our launch date because they were nervous that we would miss the war. He made a call to Fort Meade, MD and we went down there in a cab the same day. Those four hours is all of the military training I have ever received. Thank goodness I have never needed it. I do remember that he told me not to worry too much and that the soldiers would look after me.

BL: *Your 2014 embed in Afghanistan was not your first time sketching war. It's been several months since you've returned, so you've had some time to make sense of what you saw over there. How did this trip compare to the others, and what are some of the events or people from this most recent trip that really resonate in your memory?*

RJ: My 2014 trip started much the way most of my trips start—with the complete distrust of the military. I don't blame them any longer. The episodic groundhog day of arriving again and again into an environment where I am treated with complete suspicion has become so pro-forma that I can almost spot the stages that enlisted folks go through as they try and fit me into their equation of how things should work.

The key for me is to get as far from the message control folks of public affairs and as close to the guys in the dirt as possible. This is always a conundrum because I need the public affairs folks to have the vision to give me some latitude, but if I frighten them they will be controlling my every movement in the battle space. So, I am patient, and I am sympathetic, and I try to impress upon them that we are all seeking the same thing—to get the good stories out.

So, I take it gently and look for small ways to prove that I am not the enemy. I lug my own gear. I ask for nothing extra. I try to be low maintenance. I sleep in the transit tents, not the VIP quarters. I keep my gear in order and myself packed and ready to move.

And, I draw constantly, and I publish regularly, so that the grapevine starts to fill with the work. Every online drawing I publish is passed from soldier to soldier, shared from unit to unit. So, every sketch becomes a steppingstone to a better sketch and better access.

Early in my time in 2014 the U.S. 3rd Cavalry (Brave Rifles) lost a man while out on security patrol from a soon-to-be-shutdown FOB Ghazni. There was to be a ramp ceremony and I accompanied the Regimental Sergeant Major back from Ghazni to Bagram for the ceremony. In the middle of the night—while hundreds of us all waited on the flight line for the casket to be loaded onto a plane—public affairs caught up with me again and sheepishly asked if they could have my camera. There are no photographs allowed at a ramp ceremony. I was lucky they let me stay at all I guess. Freed from my camera, I did what I do and put together a sketch of the Brave Rifles flag bearer standing at attention.

This was a key moment in my 2014 trip. The urge to publish this sketch immediately was pretty huge especially when my editor got wind of its existence. But from where I stood I could also see that it was essential to get the green light

from the military first. It took three days for the sketch to finally get cleared, and although I am unclear how far up the food chain this decision went it is my understanding that it went "pretty fucking far up." This case is a good example of trust-building which paid dividends later on. Plus, it was the right thing to do.

BL: *The restriction of photography and coverage of ramp ceremonies for fallen service members is a controversial issue. U.S. officials argue these rules arose out of respect for the fallen. Critics say this is a thinly-veiled way to minimize coverage of casualties. And, the policies differ among the NATO coalition countries. At a transfer ceremony for four Czech soldiers killed by a suicide bomber, I watched a photographer snapping photos as he weaved through the formations. I would submit that that at the very least military photojournalists should be allowed to capture the event for the families of the fallen and historical documentation. It's a dangerous thing to look away from the costs of war. You mentioned a little about how difficult it was to get permission to cover this, and the limits officials placed on you. What are the challenges of sketching such emotional events?*

RJ: The logic behind the U.S. military ban on publication of images from ramp ceremonies is not clear to me, but I certainly respect it. My first ramp ceremony in Afghanistan was actually for a Canadian soldier at Kandahar Airfield. He had been killed by an IED on a convoy the day before. The Canadians did not have a "no media" policy at their ceremonies. Although there were hundreds of U.S. personnel and other coalition nations also paying their respects at each one I attended the media were welcome.

It was early in the a.m. when it took place and I didn't have an opportunity to sketch so instead I took my impressions and my few photographs and returned to my hooch, and—as most of the other journalists went to bed—I went to work creating this drawing. This still stands as one of my favorite sketches I think because I was personally moved by the somberness of this my first ramp event and the sincerity of everyone's loss. And, I include the media present in that "everyone." The media was never anything less than respectful at the Canadian ramp ceremonies I have attended, and I never heard of anyone breaking the publication embargo in place to allow the military to let family members know before media's publication of names.

Personally, I have no interest in rules that limit what the public can know, but working within the U.S. military it is one of the few restrictions I have come across on publication, so I adhere to it.

BL: *On Dec. 31, 2014, you published a piece about why people draw. You mentioned "a drawing's power to transport you back to the moment when you created it—there is a strange thing about that—because to a lesser degree you can also transport someone who was never there. Years from now, or days from now, people squinting at your sketch—good or bad—will be connecting with that time on a very personal, human level. Seeing and feeling the world through you. This is why we draw." It seems that governments and other powers systematically work to distance the personal and human levels of communication in how wars are portrayed. Your art works against that, and I think that's one of the reasons why your work is so important. Why do you keep going back to war, and how do you see your art adding to the larger discourse on conflict?*

RJ: "A very dangerous addiction," is how I have heard it described by the small group of front-line field artists who I know and who have done this type of thing. For me it is an opportunity to tell it like it is, and an opportunity to use all of my skills. As weird as it is, it has always felt like a natural fit.

And it is hands down the work that gets the largest reader response. Something about the incongruity of an artist in a war zone captures people's imagination and the drawings mean more to readers than drawings would in peacetime.

BL: *On a late night in Craig Joint Theater Hospital's intensive care unit, I watched you sharpen your Prismacolor pencils with a pocket knife before drawing a suspected Taliban fighter. I asked you about the pencils, and you told me a fine story about a World War II combat artist—Howard Brodie, I think—losing his gear over the side of a landing craft and how he scavenged some military Prismacolor pencils. Can you discuss the war artist tradition, your greatest influences, and your tools of the trade?*

RJ: That was actually a story that Brodie told me himself when I took a few days out to visit him at his ranch in California in early 2003, just before I headed for Kuwait to join the invasion of Iraq. He was telling me how he adopted the Prismacolor pencil as his weapon of choice. As I remember the telling when he landed on Guadalcanal in 1943 he lost all of his paper and materials over the side of the landing craft. With no other choice he "repurposed"—his word for "stole" (as he said it with a smile and a wink)—these pencils from a command post where they were used to mark up maps. He never used anything else.

That was good enough for me. I sketched Brodie that day when I was there. It was the most intimidating sketch I have ever done as he glared at me with his clear blue

eyes. It is one of the last sketches I ever did in graphite. Since then all I have used for the most part has been Prismacolor pencil.

BL: *What are your thoughts on the importance of art in the military and our society today?*

RJ: I think without the ability to create and collect these images, and then to be able to reflect through humanity on the inhumanity of war we run the danger of losing the lessons we have learned.

There is a whole temperature-controlled vault under the Smithsonian Museum of Armed Forces History in D.C. In it they have sketches that were drawn in World War One. They are fine clean detailed renderings seen through the eyes of someone right there. Unlike a photograph from the same period, the sketches are not obviously sepia toned and dated by their quality. In fact they look like they were drawn yesterday. And it is precisely this constant immediacy, this inability to tell when it was created, and the human filter that drew the image that makes it that much more alive—even more than a hundred years afterwards the lesson is there waiting to be learned.

BL: *Your sketches are often in conversation with text, both on the drawing and in your accompanying dispatches. What is your perspective on this relationship, and how do you decide what text to include and what to omit. With regard to the drawings with text, would they be as powerful without the accompanying words?*

RJ: Sometimes as much as I would like to be able to capture every element of a scene or of a portrait there are things that I can't draw. The periodic scream of a couple of F-16's on full afterburner, the medevac helicopter on constant chopping readiness on the flight line, or a phrase someone heckles the soldier that I am drawing with, or something that soldier says to me as we sit and chat and draw. All of these are key details that I feel deserve notation on or around the drawing itself.

BL: *During a rocket attack, we joked in a bunker with an interpreter you planned to sketch later. This is just one example of how even the simplest tasks are harder in warzones. You wrote a lot about the challenges of living on FOBs and drawing in helicopters, airplanes, MRAPS, Afghan police stations, and villages. What were your biggest obstacles to sketching in Afghanistan?*

RJ: I think the seeming incongruity of being both an artist and a journalist is one of the things that give the work that much more credibility. Drawing live is challenging even in the civilian world. Opening your sketchpad in public and allowing the world to see what you are doing as you are doing it is harrowing. It is exponentially harder again to take your sketchpad out in a place where many see what you are doing as frivolous and stupid. You have to be willing to overcome the fear of failure and the fear of ridicule and the added fear of demise and do it anyway. So, I think the biggest challenge, aside from all the obvious physical and environmental challenges is mental.

BL: *You're great at creating connections and developing relationships with those around you, and I think this helps you get access to people and places that would otherwise be unavailable to more conventional media in warzones... battle-damaged equipment, enemy wounded, special operations forces, tiny outposts, etc. I also think your medium helps. People are less threatened by a sketch artist than a photographer. You wrote that your "drawing works as a lure out here to help me break the ice with people. In the civilian world, if I sit down somewhere public and start sketching, people naturally gravitate towards me to see what I am up to, or the more surreptitious stand back behind me and look over my shoulder. Out here the sketching has become a way to bridge that civ-mil trust gap. It allows me to talk to and find the interesting characters and stories." Why do you think this is, and what is it about an artist that draws people in?*

RJ: Big question this one. I am just careful to be myself more than anything else. And although I may lay on the self-deprecating "fish-out-of-water" office-jockey schtick pretty thick as well, mostly I just don't pretend to be anything I am not. Soldiers appreciate a sense of humor, especially if it is empathetic to how crappy even the cushiest commission can be in Ghan. I try and treat every contact I make as a potential story, so I am quick to ask questions of people and take an interest. And that is not false. I genuinely am interested. It is ALL so very interesting. Just not so much if you are seven months into a nine-month tour doing the same job.

BL: *You wrote that "the 'draw' is a confluence of a number of factors; something to do with using a human being as the lens, something to do with binocular vision over the camera's monocular view, something to do with the art itself being a timeline of a period spent studying something, and lastly, with an implied intimacy with the subject. And it may be this last one that is the most important. For to draw something,*

to really draw something, you have to understand what you are looking at and know it intimately. When it is a scene I have drawn, I leave with a pixel sharp embedded memory far more clear and lasting than if I had taken a photograph. And if it is a portrait of another person I have learned them as I drew, anatomically, socially and personally. We eventually part with a connection and in most cases a lasting friendship." How does drawing in a warzone compare with your work back home? How much more difficult is it to really know what it is you're looking at when you're in a warzone?

RJ: It is all about telling stories first and foremost. Sometimes the drawing does it on its own. At other times the drawing just helps in the telling, by pulling the viewer in—to make them read something they didn't know they needed to know—and deepening the connection. Look at the portrait of Lucky Mulumba and you will see what I mean. I can write all day describing her character and personality and the challenges of her profession, but I think that looking at the sketch you can see all of that—the happy veneer hiding what must be a mentally difficult job to do every day.

BL: *You're involved with the* Joe Bonham project: Drawing the Stories of America's Wounded Veterans, *and I'm wondering how working with wounded vets in the U.S. compares to the experience of war itself?*

RJ: It is the hardest thing that I do. I have examined why and I think it is because at the core of it I feel like I am taking something from these people. It feels wrong. And yet for all that it feels that way, my motives are pure. I want to remind readers what the sacrifices are that are being made in their name. To do that I have to overcome my own fear of being seen as a voyeur to someone else's despair, and I have to step through the door to their hospital room. Every time I have done this kind of work I always expect to be told to get out, but it has never happened. Every time I have stepped across the threshold into someone else's pain, I have been welcomed and accepted. And I find that Canadian, American, Afghan, civilian or military they all have a story to tell, AND they want me to tell it. It is not easy, it grinds against a lot that feels decent, but I hope it is the right thing to do.

BL: *On one of your last nights in Afghanistan we sat on a C-17 that was quarantined to find a mouse that jumped from an MRAP as it was being offloaded. The search for the mouse bought you some critical time to complete what you wrote was "probably*

my best sketch in Afghanistan." It depicted the inside of the aircraft with a lone soldier, SSgt. Bronson, who had just completed his fourth combat tour. In many ways, this drawing represented the end of the war … loaded up equipment, leaving under the cover of darkness, battle weary soldiers, and silence. The end of the war was largely a non-event back in the U.S. How do you think your art helped inform the rest of us about the supposed final days of Afghanistan?

RJ: Most people that I asked last year before I left for Ghan were surprised that we are still there. Even people I considered smart and worldly. My task then was to remind them by observing and reporting from ground level the challenges faced by the average grunts in accomplishing the grand sweeping goal of drawing down most of the U.S. forces. And to further remind people that regardless of that "draw down," risks were still being taken. From the C-130 crew weaving through tracer fire, to the infantry still dying while reconnaissance patrolling yards from their bases, to the constant incoming rocket fire, to the never-ending threat of IED's. It was my job to experience the challenges and report it out so that people would understand. Hopefully one or two more readers were reminded that people were still risking and still dying in Afghanistan through such reporting.

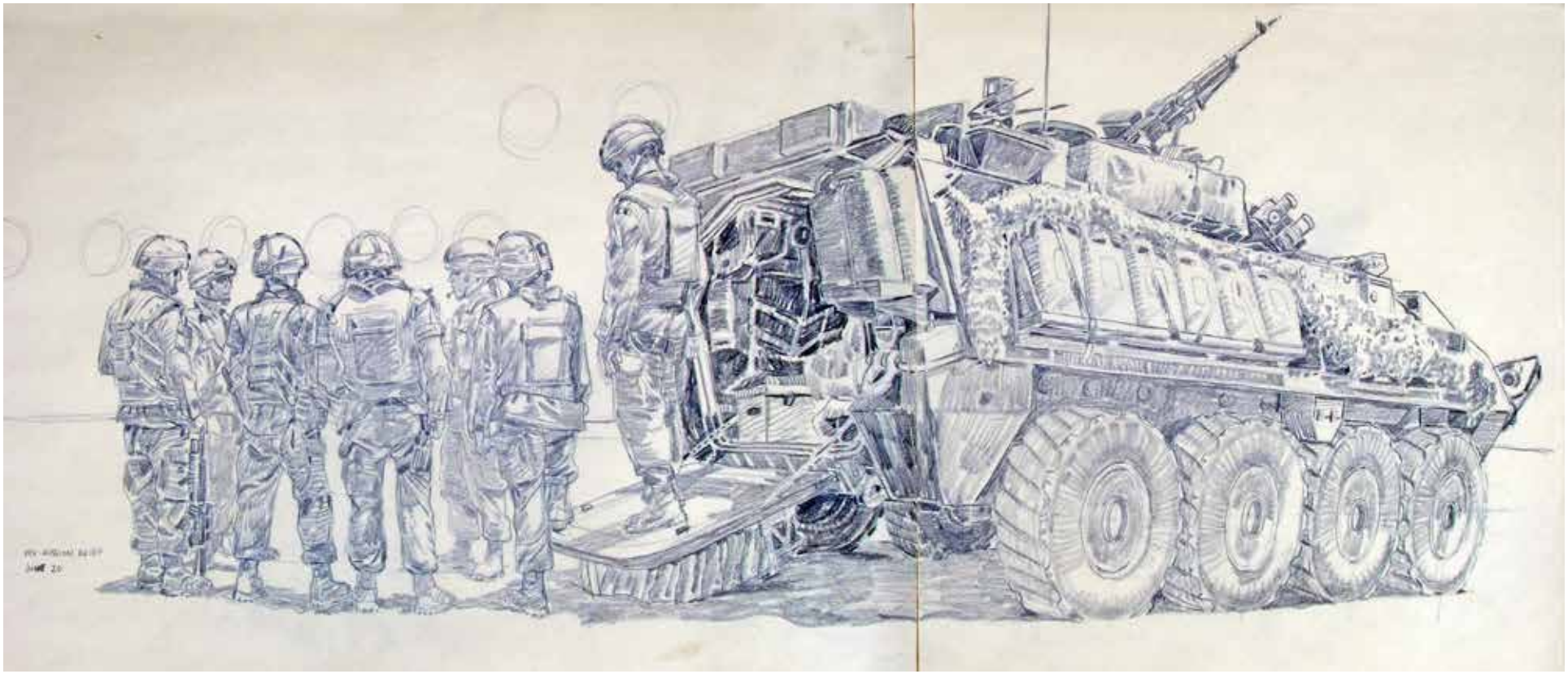
BL: *Thousands of coalition forces are still in Afghanistan as part of enduring missions that will continue at least two more years. In your last dispatch from Afghanistan, you wrote, "The smart money would be on this being my last visit in this lifetime—safe bet honey." What are your thoughts on going back to draw the drawdown again?*

RJ: I think that I cannot afford another divorce. Plus, I love her too much.

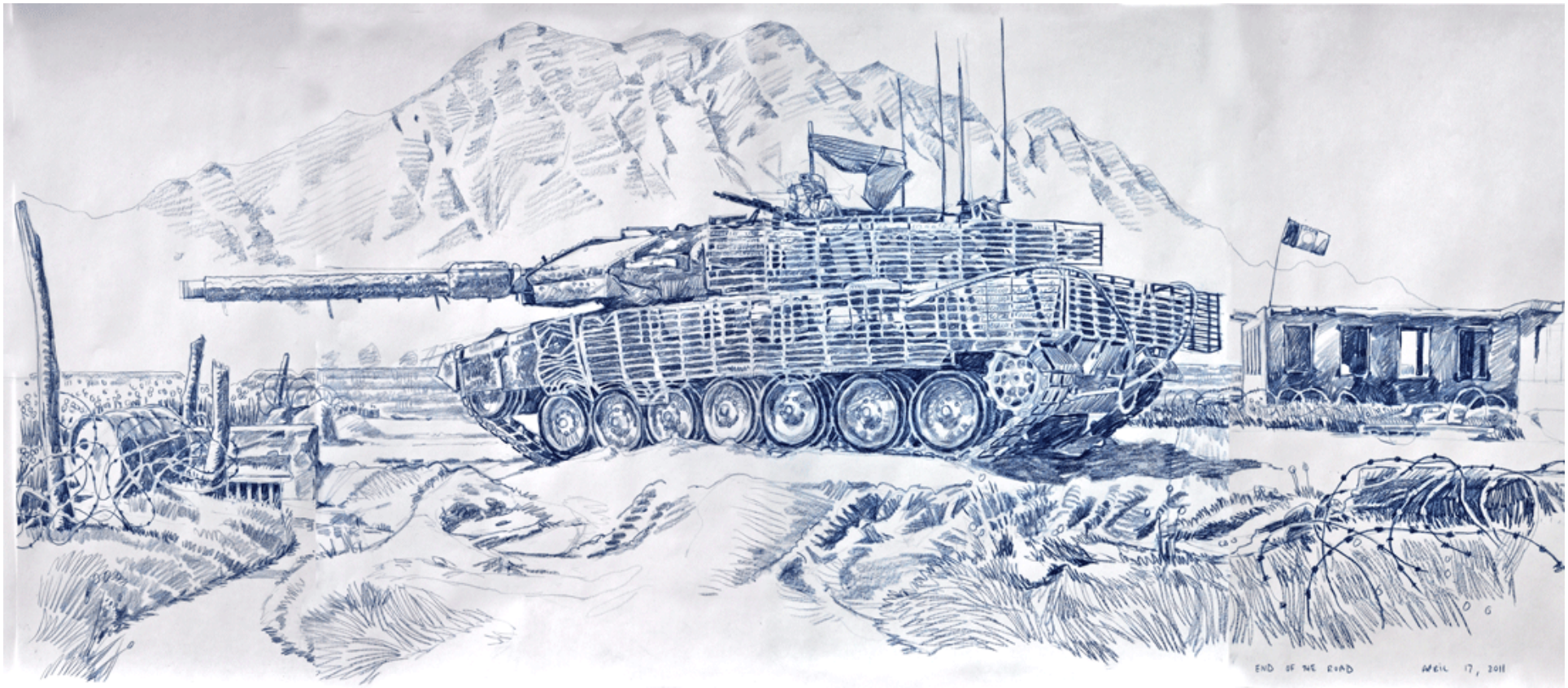
BL: *Anything else you'd like to add?*

RJ: This was not a career that I particularly chose for myself, nor one that I would recommend. Initially, I am not sure that I even understood its true value as a communication method. But now I have it bad. I am a born again, a true evangelical for the need for more live art everywhere, especially stories in places where people don't want to look.

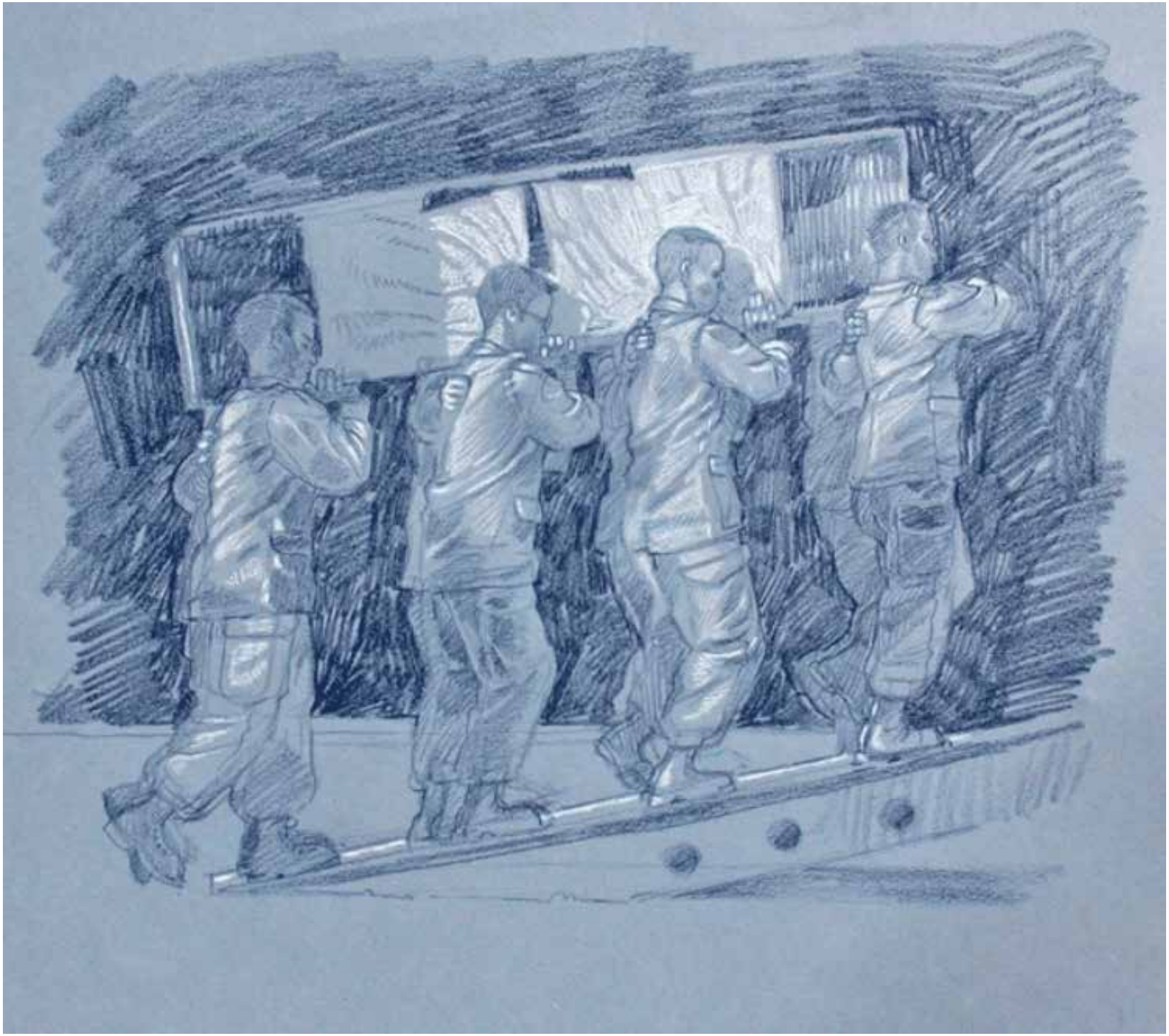
There are drawings I have done in war zones that have true power, power to empathetically transcend the time and space since they were drawn. When I look at them now it is like I have never left that moment. For other people though, they are moved, they are drawn there. How strange in a digital age that it is the tactile hand-drawn art that moves us still.

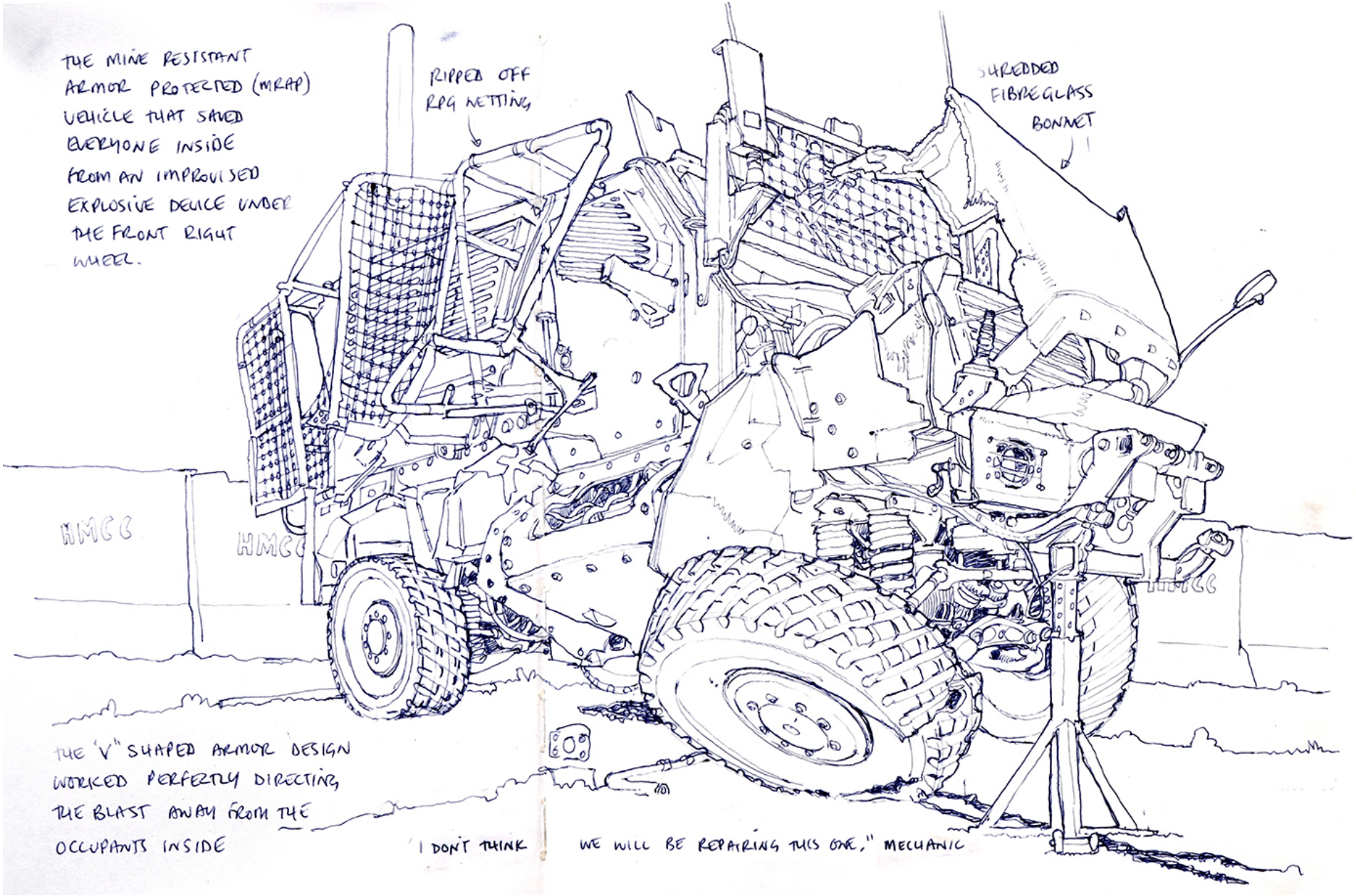


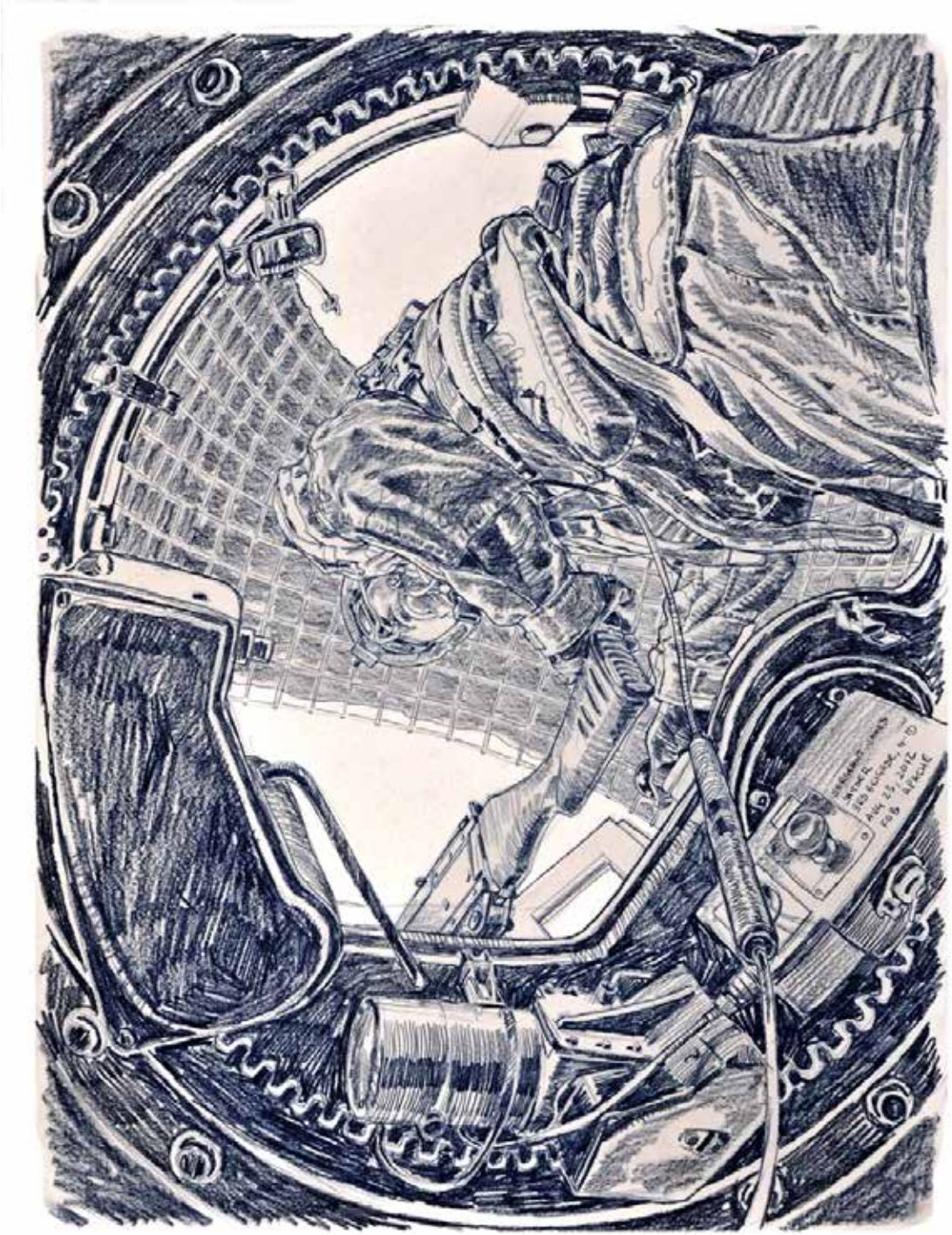

AFGHAN NATIONAL POLICEMAN SURGERY


END OF THE ROAD
APRIL 17, 2011


AFGHAN NATIONAL ARMY SOLDIERS WAITING TO BE ASSIGNED A SEAT ON THE CONVOY OUT
SEPT 12, 2012




THE MINE RESISTANT ARMOR PROTECTED (MRAP) VEHICLE THAT SAVED EVERYONE INSIDE FROM AN IMPROVISED EXPLOSIVE DEVICE UNDER THE FRONT RIGHT WHEEL.
RIPPED OFF RPG NETTING
SHREDDED FIBREGLASS BONNET
HMCC
HMCC
HMCC
THE "V" SHAPED ARMOR DESIGN WORKED PERFECTLY DIRECTING THE BLAST AWAY FROM THE OCCUPANTS INSIDE
"I DON'T THINK WE WILL BE REPAIRING THIS ONE," MECHANIC

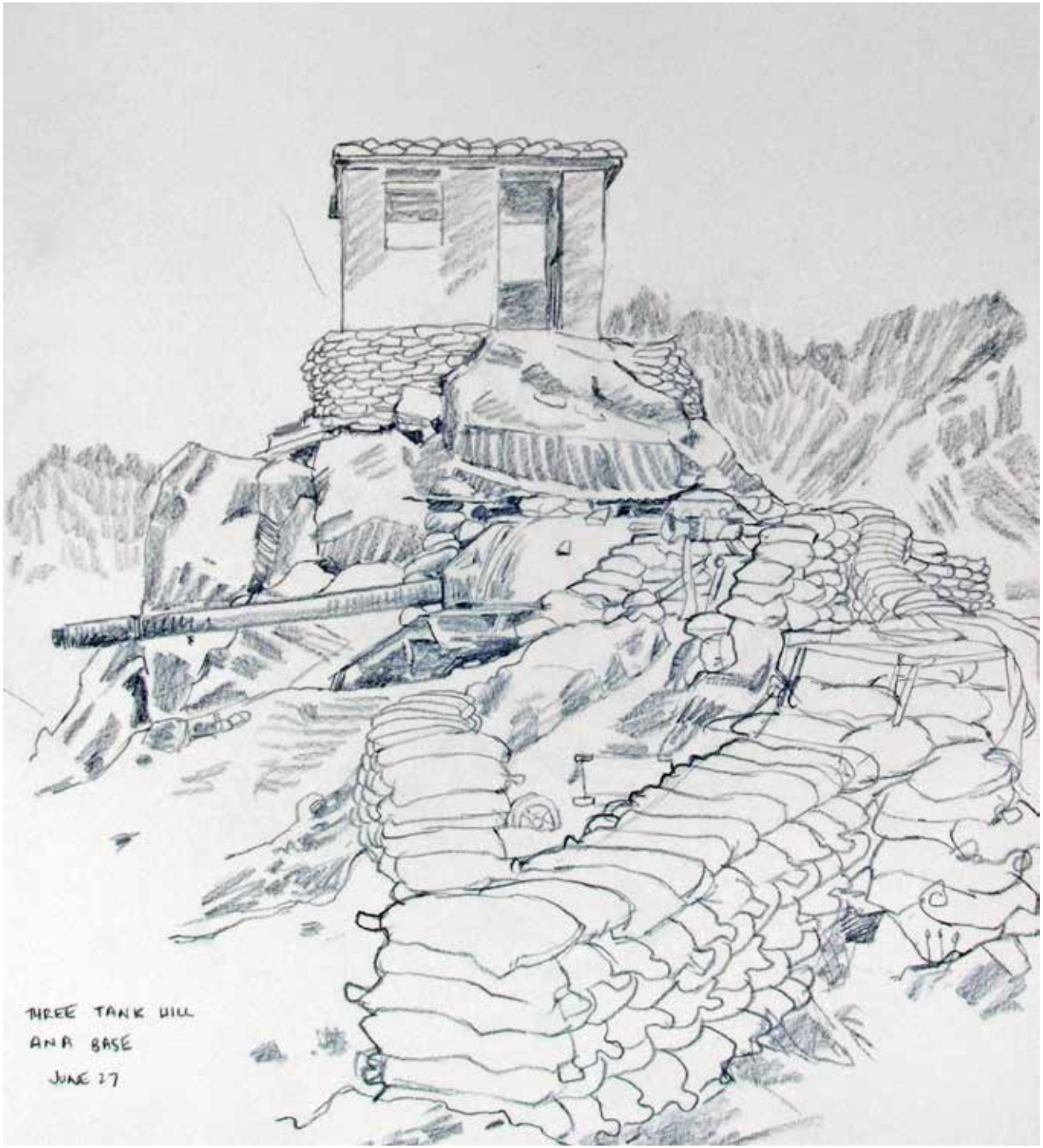


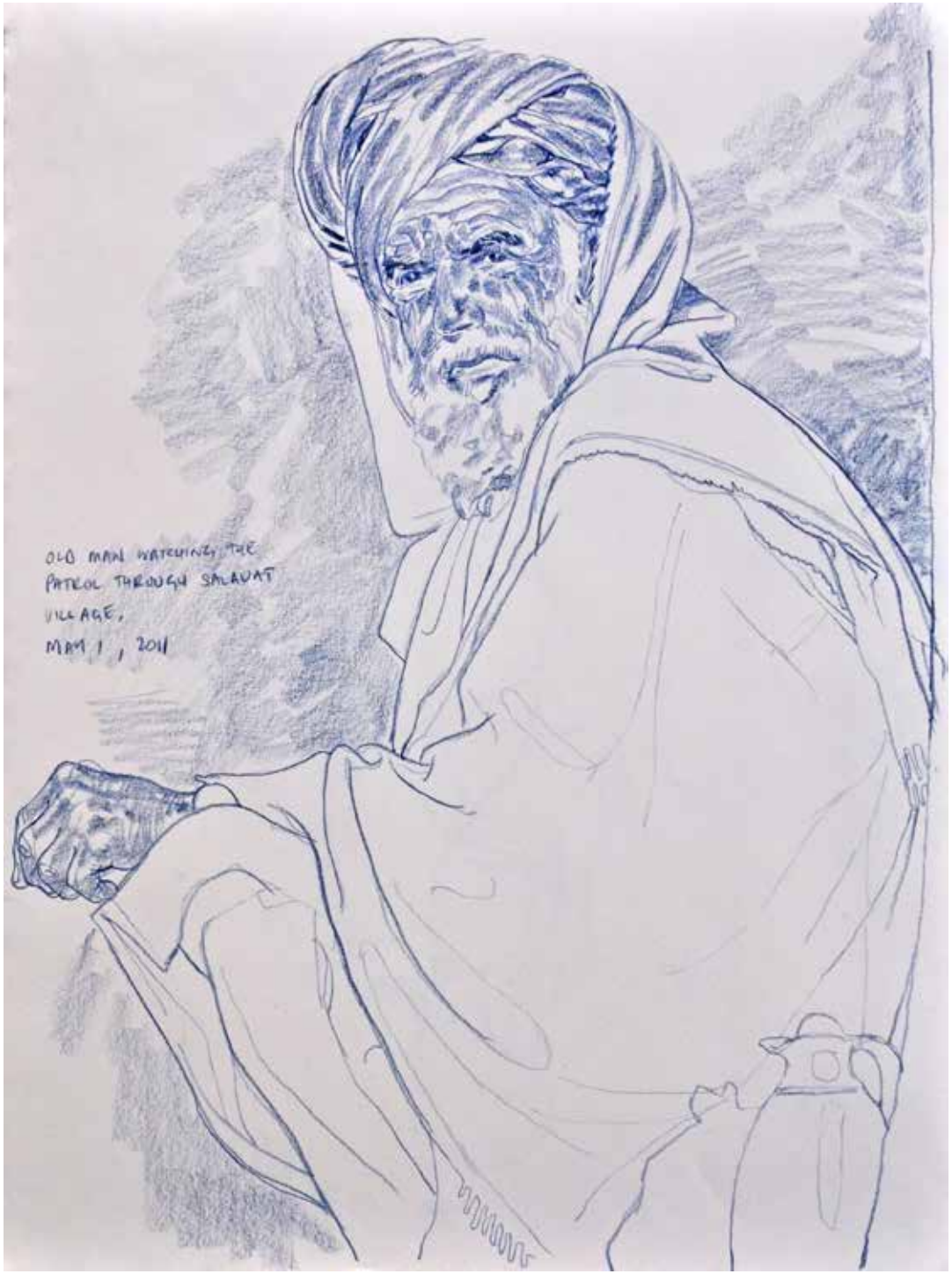

INTERPRETER
BORROWED U.S. HUMVEE
SEPT 13, 2012
LT. ALEX JOSEPH BUCK (2RCR)
SGT KURT WALL (RCD)
CPL. MIKE TALBOT (2RCR)

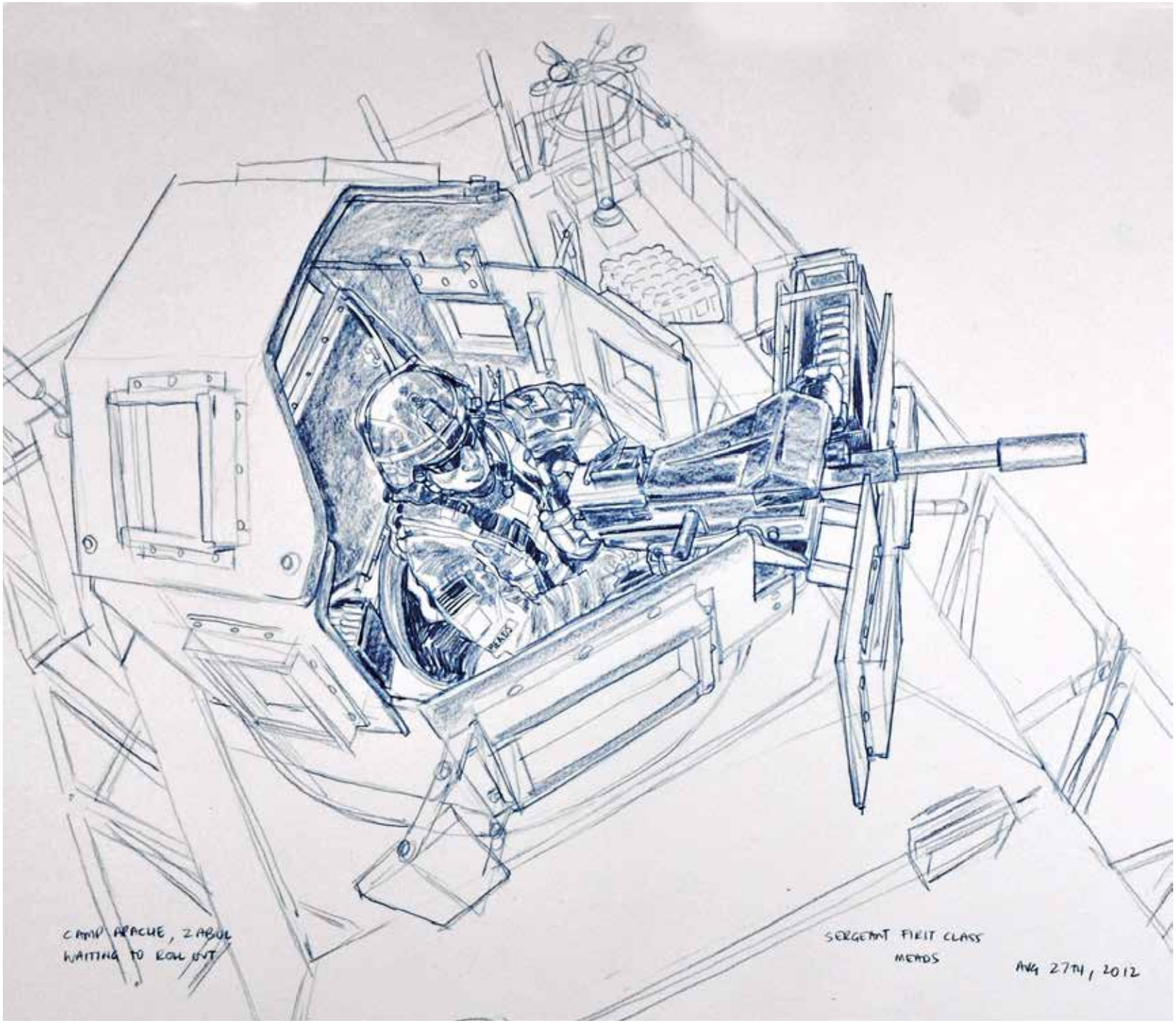

MULTI
US AIR
ISAF


MEMORIAL SERVICE FOR THE SIX SLAIN
JULY 7 FOB MASUM GHAR


WOUNDED AFGHAN NATIONAL ARMY SOLDIER IN THE INTENSIVE CARE UNIT
OF KABUL ARMED FORCES ACADEMY OF MEDICAL SCIENCE.
NO NAME - LOST BOTH LEGS
SEPT 11, 2012

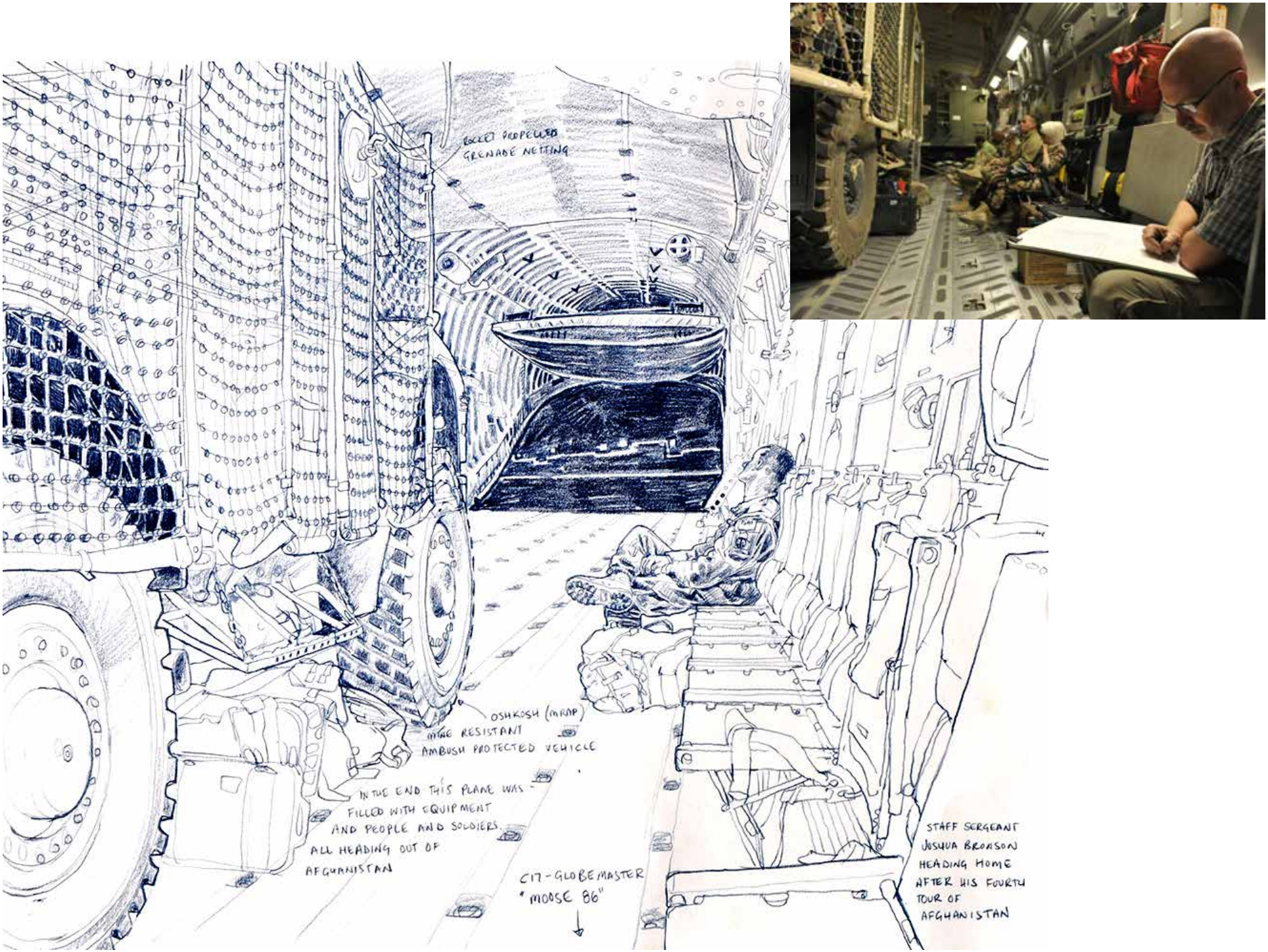

THREE TANK HILL
ANA BASE
JUNE 27


OLD MAN WATCHING THE
PATROL THROUGH SALAVAT
VILLAGE,
MAY 1, 2011


CAMP APACHE, ZABUL
WAITING TO ROLL OUT
SERGEANT FIRST CLASS
MEADS
AUG 27TH, 2012


IN THE EARLY HOURS OF TUESDAY MORNING
THE 1ST BATTALION, 504TH REGIMENT ATTACHED TO
THE THIRD CAVALRY LOST A SOLDIER.
HE WAS NOT THE FIRST AND IN ALL LIKELIHOOD WON'T
BE THE LAST TO DIE HERE IN AFGHANISTAN.
IN THE EARLY HOURS OF FRIDAY MORNING A
BRIEF CEREMONY WAS HELD AT BAGRAM AIR FIELD,
HUNDREDS OF U.S. SOLDIERS ATTENDED THE SILENT
CEREMONY ON THE AIR FIELD TARMAC.
STAFF SERGEANT BRIAN ARBUCKLE IS REGIMENTAL
FLAG BEARER FOR THE 3RD CAVALRY. HE STANDS
TO ONE SIDE OF THE DOORS OF A MASSIVE C-17 GLOBEMASTER
AS THE BODY HAS BEEN CARRIED ABOARD IN A FLAG
DRAPED CASKET. I ASKED HIM WHAT HE THOUGHT OF HIS
JOB AS FLAG BEARER. "I FELT IT WAS A PRETTY IMPORTANT
THING TO DO ESPECIALLY IF IT IS ONE OF OUR OWN. I REALLY DIDN'T
WANT TO MESS IT UP... IT CAN BE PRETTY NERVE-RACKING...
IT CAN GET TO THE POINT THAT IT IS PRETTY ROUTINE, SAD TO SAY.
BUT WHEN IT IS SOMEONE CLOSER TO HOME, SOMEONE IN OUR FORMATION...
WE ARE KIND OF LIKE A FAMILY," HE SAID.
"OTHER THAN THAT IT IS LIKE EVERYTHING ELSE IN THE ARMY, YOU'RE
TOLD TO GO DO IT AND YOU GO DO IT," HE ADDED.


JIMMY AND HIS DOG
APRIL 20, 2011


ROCKET PROPELLED GRENADE NETTING
OSHKOSH (MRAP)
MINE RESISTANT AMBUSH PROTECTED VEHICLE
IN THE END THIS PLANE WAS FILLED WITH EQUIPMENT AND PEOPLE AND SOLDIERS. ALL HEADING OUT OF AFGHANISTAN
C17 - GLOBEMASTER "MOOSE 86"
STAFF SERGEANT JOSHUA BRONSON HEADING HOME AFTER HIS FOURTH TOUR OF AFGHANISTAN


SUSPECTED TALIBAN INSURGENT
WOUNDED IN CROSSFIRE IN
HELMAND PROVINCE.



RICHARD JOHNSON is a field artist and visual journalist. He has helped cover the war in Afghanistan for *The National Post*—traveling with Canadian and U.S. forces; and the war in Iraq for the *Detroit Free Press*—embedding with the United States Marine Corps. He has also worked as an artist, advocacy photographer and documentary filmmaker in Kenya, Zimbabwe, The Democratic Republic and the Central African Republic—for the United Nations. Richard has been nominated for two National Newspaper Awards in Canada, and has a mound of annual awards from the Society for News Design. Many of his fieldwork reportage sketches from Iraq and Afghanistan are held by the Smithsonian Museum of Armed Forces History, and the United States Marine Corps Museum. He currently works as a Senior Graphics Editor at the *Washington Post*. For more of Rich's work, visit http://newsillustrator.com/.

BRANDON LINGLE has served in Iraq and Afghanistan as an Air Force public affairs officer. His writing appears in *The New York Times, The North American Review, Guernica, Zone 3, Narrative, The Evergreen Review,* and elsewhere. His essays were noted in *The Best American Essays 2010* and *2013*. He's published photos in various publications, including *The Atlantic* and *The New York Times*.