

Westport News

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With American flag as her canvas, Westport artist stands up for fallen heroes



Westport artist Marlene Siff looks at a maquette or model version of her mixed media artwork, "Fallen Heroes/Afghanistan," which now hangs in the Washington, D.C., office of Congressman Jim Himes.



By Paul Schott
pschott@bcnnew.com

Last week, a new American flag was hung in the Washington, D.C., office of recently re-elected U.S. Rep. Jim Himes, D-4. From a distance, it looks like a regular flag. Take a few steps forward, though, and the stars and stripes become something different — not just a flag, but a memorial. Printed in place of the flag's white stripes are the photos of almost 1,000 servicemen and women who have lost their lives in the war in Afghanistan.

This mixed-media artwork, "Fallen Heroes/Afghanistan," constitutes not just a unique interpretation of the American flag, but also the culmination of a two-year mission for Westport artist Marlene Siff.

Siff clearly remembers the project's origin — Aug. 7, 2008. She opened *The New York Times* that day to find a feature headlined, "Roster of the Dead," listing the names, pictures and ranks of every American service member who had lost his or her life in the war

in Afghanistan, Operation Enduring Freedom, up to that point.

"I started to cry when I looked at it. I just became overwhelmed," she remembers. "All their faces looked so young and so full of life. It was a tragedy. As an artist, I felt I had to do something about it."

Immediately, Siff responded artistically to what she had just seen in the newspaper. Her vision for the work was clear — the American flag would be her canvas.

"That to me was the most significant way to express this whole concept of commemorating their lives," she says of the flag. "I envisioned the faces on the white stripes, and I would keep the red. The red would signify the terror and the blood."

Like the original flag with its array of stars and stripes, a multitude of components and decisions went into Siff's creation of this new American standard. The work consequently developed slowly and meticulously.

See Artist on A5



Paul Schott / Staff reporter

In "Fallen Heroes/Afghanistan," Siff represents the white stripes of the American flag with pictures of service members who lost their lives in the war in Afghanistan. Her work also includes bullet casings from the United States Military Academy at West Point.

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Weather

PARTLY CLOUDY
 Low: 54
 High: 54
 Wind: N at 16 mph
 Humidity: 60%
 Sunset: 4:38 p.m.



Artist pays tribute to American soldiers

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"I wanted it to come out with my vision correctly," says Siff, a resident of Westport for more than 40 years.

For the flag's red stripes, Siff used watercolors and oil pastels to paint large sheets of torn paper with several shades of the color, and then layered the sheets on top of each other. "I wanted those stripes to be so vibrant," she says.

The flag's blue, meanwhile, was painted in watercolor, while the stars were made with white oil pastels.

Assembling the fallen service members' names and photos represented the most emotionally difficult part of the artistic process for Siff. To keep the work current, she checked newspapers and online news websites daily for the names and pictures of service members who had recently died. After more than a year into the project, Siff made the decision that she would have to limit the number of fallen troops commemorated on the flag so that she could finish the work. "Fallen Heroes," therefore, honors service members who had died in the war as of Dec. 31, 2009.

To show, however, that Operation Enduring Freedom has continued since then, Siff did draw the silhouettes of six unnamed service members in the bottom row of the troops' portraits.

Other features aside from the flag itself also distinguish "Fallen Heroes/Afghanistan." Siff evoked the terrain of that country by framing the flag with a composite of several colors of sand, glued to the backing on which the flag rests.

The backing then lies on a custom-made aluminum frame. Siff painted this latter frame black with acrylic paint to signify a memorial to the troops. Against the black backdrop, Siff also wrote the title of the work in links of gold lettering. Including text in her work, she says, is a signature of her artistic style.

To accentuate the militaristic themes that inform "Fallen Heroes," Siff also

affixed bullet casings to sand at the base of the work. The casings were genuine U.S. military issue that Siff obtained from a friend who attended the United States Military Academy at West Point.

As Siff neared completion of her work last May, she attended a policy conference sponsored by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. She met Himes there and along with other 4th Congressional District constituents joined him for a tour of the U.S. Capitol. Following the tour, she pitched Himes the idea of displaying the 77-by-57-inch work in his office on Capitol Hill. After visiting her home studio in Westport, Himes agreed to Siff's proposal.

And finally, on Aug. 8 of this year — almost two years to the day after she began the project — Siff completed the "Fallen Heroes/Afghanistan" mixed media artwork. About three months later, it would stand inside a Plexiglas case in Himes' office.

"Fallen Heroes" will be on view in Himes's Congressional office, or possibly another location on Capitol Hill, until it returns to Connecticut in September 2012 to be featured in a solo show of Siff's work — "Elements of Peace" — at Fairfield University's Walsh Art Gallery.

"I've never seen an artist who is so dedicated to the process in terms of how her work matches the subject matter," says Diana Mille, the gallery's director. "I think Marlene's work shows that she has a true understanding of what it means to be a conscientious global citizen."

Siff emphasizes however that her objectives for "Fallen Heroes/Afghanistan" are not driven by a political agenda, but by a nonpartisan desire to raise public consciousness about the war.

"I hope when people look at it, they realize what this war is all about," she says. "When you look up and see the faces of these young men and women, I think it draws you closer to what's really going on. It makes you think, why can't there be peace in this world?"