

## Sgt. Rock of Easy Company

My second venture into the world of art, the first being my childhood art lessons at Zwolle's *Hopmanshuis* in 1950 that date back to the locker-lined hallways of the Wallaceburg District Secondary School. In 1960, during the early months of grade nine, I was introduced to a formidable character. He made such an impact on me and every other young boy that memories of his exploits lasted well into adulthood. He became the inspiration for endless sketches and myriads of doodles in the margins of my school textbooks. During tedious science classes he filled my head with thoughts of great adventures. He was my solace when I felt rejected by fellow classmates, especially a young girl I dared not talk to. He was flights of fancy and unbridled imagination when history lessons droned on and on. Every young boy I knew in highschool belonged to his special group.

He was Sargeant Rock of Easy Company, that notoriously brave band of American GI's who nearly single-handedly fought the entire Nazi regime - and won. Even though such stereotypical images of male archetypes steeped in the idealism of American culture are no longer politically correct whether as propaganda, metaphor, or a more simple boyhood fantasy, the images were part of having grown up in the immediate years of post-war reconstruction. I will never forget the endless columns of guns and GI's that traveled through the city of my birth towards the east where a defeated enemy had left a bloody trail of death and destruction. I watched with awe and wonder as they rolled down the tree-lined avenue that led out of the city. I was only five years old when I experienced the presence of real-life liberators. Those who have never experienced such emotions cannot stand in judgement of the language of those times. It was it was.

Sgt. Rock was a comic book hero.

All of us young boys belonged to his *Easy Company*.

Whenever a new comic book issue arrived it was quickly circulated among the boys of WDSS. I could not afford to subscribe to the comic book, but those who could were generous in lending the slim editions to everyone. Later, when I turned 60, a friend gave me an original edition of the comic book, *Sgt. Rock and Easy Company*. It's somewhere in my archives.

I had learned very quickly how to draw fighter planes, tanks, artillery, bazookas and the ever present graphic representations of "*BLAM, WHAM, SLAM*" from exploding shells. More than anything else, Sgt. Rock was cool. Nothing fazed him. He had nerves of steel, the kind every young boy wished he had. He walked unscathed from all enemy ambushes. He tore the sides off an enemy bunker with the single toss of a hand grenade. He could fire a cumbersome machinegun from his hip. Sgt. Rock was every fatherless boy's father, every homeless boy's family, and every frightened boy's *rock* of peace. Often, in the absence of comic books, we gathered other students to create our own situations for Sgt. Rock. His exploits filled the margins of my school textbooks and endless pages in three-ring binders. I was the group's faithful illustrator of our boyhood fantasies.

Soon I earned a reputation as a pretty good cartoonist and illustrator. My reputation was God-sent, because my artistic talent became a convenient bridge from obscurity and shyness to peer acceptance among social life in highschool. When I entered grade nine, I was terrified to socialize with anyone in school. After school, I never hung around long enough for fear of being discovered as Dutch or Christian Reformed. Drawing gave me a bridge over which to cross that terrible divide and venture into the domain of "those Canadians" as Dutch church-people had a

tendency to marginalize their fellow Canadians. Being "Canadian" was thought of as some social disease deserving of anyone who was not religiously Christian Reformed. No doubt it was also part of a complex defense mechanism of early immigrants to deal with being labelled a *honkie* or religious *foreigner* to the accepted norm of Anglican and Presbyterian institutions. Reverse racism are perhaps better words to describe the protectionist attitude of an immigrant church. However, not willing to accept the church's verdict of my highschool friends, I dared to enter into the camp of "Canadians." I found the reception overwhelmingly friendly.

Before grade nine was finished my drawings had become a real hit. Temptation of fame followed soon afterwards. My popularity had inadvertently lured me into forbidden areas such as cheating in science classes. Everyone knew that I created beautiful drawings for my zoology and botany notes. I wondered: "If only those drawings could be seen when writing a test when everyone wished they could draw like me. It would certainly rise above a passing grade?" Tempted as I was, I soon turned thoughts into action. Therefore, during exam time I sometimes drew plant cells, hydra, skeletal structures, and diagrams about photosynthesis, big enough for everyone to see. When the supervisor was not looking, I held the drawings up high for all to see and copy. Of course, I am not proud of such antics, and fortunately I did it only for one major exam and just a few tests. But it demonstrated the extent to which I wanted to show my gratitude for being accepted by "those Canadians." Sgt. Rock cartoons, however, were a safer avenue with which to explore peer acceptance. He became commonplace in my textbooks and notes as well as the textbooks and notebooks of my classmates.

But the grandest finale of my artistic popularity was reserved for two specific events. These events were the autumn and spring dances held in the school auditorium and the school's yearbook. What made the dances so special was the fact I was not allowed to dance. After all, such godless activity, so I was told again and again by church elders, would lead to serious sin and the eventual collapse of my moral character. I never did understand how dancing with Janet Dugit, Cheryl Christopher, or Ginny LaPointe, could ever lead to moral decadence. I never did dance with them for fear of some holy curse falling upon me. Who knew, with home-visitation only weeks away, perhaps the church-elder's son had been on the lookout at the dance or as they did at the movie theatre? Yet, these classmates were such gentle sweet spirits and dancing seemed like so much fun. I wondered whatever happened to them. Sixty-one years later I discovered one of them who still lives happily in Victoria, British Columbia. We're email-friends now and our dance is with words, that is, metaphorically speaking.

Back to the first of two events, specifically the dances of spring and autumn.

Even though I was not allowed to dance, I was as popular as were the *Homecoming Queen* or *Red Feather Queen*. My popularity, however, was not based on any prowess on the dance floor. Instead my "fame" was my art. I had been asked to join the Social-Convening Committee of our high school's Student Council. The committee's sole responsibility was the organization of highschool dances. By accepting my position, I netted the highly visible honour of creating huge colour chalk murals on the blackboards of our school's cafeteria. One can imagine my excitement when day after day leading up to the big spring and fall dances I stood in front of the entire cafeteria crowd drawing my chalk wonders. And they were big, very big, covering an entire wall. My dance was in the art of chalk drawing. I created the magic of Hawaii, the pulse of a big city, or whatever dance theme the committee chose. I drew masterpieces in vibrant yellows, greens, oranges, red and blues. However, I can no longer remember the theme of the autumn dance. Nevertheless, although I could not dance I sure could draw.

My success got me an invitation to join the Yearbook Committee. Catapulted to fame, now I could at least *talk* to Janet, Cheryl, and Ginny, because they were also members of the same yearbook committee. As a result of my blackboard masterpieces, I was asked to become Art Director for the school's yearbook. I did so for two years. During 1963 and 1964, “*ACTIANA*,” the title of our yearbook, was graced with many drawings of school activities, cartoons, and other pertinent illustrations. For the yearbook of 1964, I obtained permission from Hanna-Barberrra in Hollywood to use their famous Flintstones characters as subjects for my drawings. *ACTIANA 64* was filled with images of Fred, Barney, Wilma, Betty, BamBam, and Pebbles. As providence would have it, a copy of the ‘64 yearbook became the largest entry in my portfolio of drawings when I submitted my application for enrollment at the Ontario College of Art in Toronto. In January of 1964, I was accepted for study at OCA. Studio classes would commence that September. Sgt. Rock would have been proud of me.

From *Hopmanshuis* in Zwolle, to highschool dances and yearbooks at the Wallaceburg District Secondary School, my art was about to undergo a major change, namely that of formal training. In September of 1964, a portfolio of drawing paper under my arm and a tackle-box filled with art supplies in my hand, I began my fine art studies at Canada’s prestigious and oldest art college, the Ontario College of Art on McCaul Street in Toronto. To alleviate any fear of getting lost in the big city (after all Sgt. Rock had no fear and he planned every move carefully), just around the corner, I had rented a 3rd floor, L-shaped room from which I could see the college.