

Painting captures veteran's nightmare

Town of Tonawanda Marine survived slaughter in Korea

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Dennis C. Enser/Buffalo News
Artist Ralph Sirianni and Korean War veteran Peter Bingheimer stand in front of the copy of Sirianni's painting, "Outpost Frisco."

Peter Bingheimer's nightmare is on display for all the world to see.

It is depicted in "Outpost Frisco," a painting in the new National Museum of the Marine Corps in Quantico, Va. A copy hangs in the lobby of the veterans hospital in Buffalo.

The museum will be dedicated today, the 231st birthday of the Marine Corps. Weekend activities include a Veterans Day ceremony on Saturday. Bingheimer, a Town of Tonawanda resident, was one of a handful of Marines to survive the Korean War battle on Oct. 6, 1952, when the outpost was overrun by hundreds of Chinese soldiers.

A fellow Marine dragged him down the hill after he was left for dead.



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Peter Bingheimer, left, and John Kruppiak were reunited in Chicago in 2004, 52 years after Outpost Frisco onslaught.

He stuck his hand in the mud to stop the bleeding after a hand grenade blew off two fingers. He still has a bullet in his back and pieces of shrapnel throughout his body.

Fifty-four years later Bingheimer, 75, still receives treatment at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Buffalo for post-traumatic stress disorder. He previously overcame a drinking problem.

But the nightmares aren't quite as bad as they used to be, and Bingheimer credits the painting for helping.

He commissioned local artist Ralph Sirianni to paint the work, based on his description and Sirianni's experience as a Marine in Vietnam.

The painting is disturbing, and that's by design, Sirianni said.

Bingheimer was overcome with emotion when he first saw "Outpost Frisco" and said Sirianni captured the brutality of the event.

"It's a masterpiece," he said.

He said he donated the painting "because I want the Marine Corps to know what happened." He said he didn't find out until many years later that many of the bodies of the dead Marines were not recovered because commanders ordered napalm bombs dropped on the hill after the Chinese captured it.

Joan Thomas, assistant curator of art at the museum, said only a small percentage of its

collection of more than 8,000 works can be displayed at any one time and "Outpost Frisco" was chosen "because of the subject matter and the story it tells, as well as artistic merit."

The museum will open to the public on Nov. 13 and be open daily except Christmas.

Health problems prevent Bingheimer from attending the dedication. Sirianni will be there, along with John Kruppiak of suburban Chicago, who dragged Bingheimer off the hill after finding him in a bunker under two dead Chinese soldiers.

Kruppiak, who located Bingheimer a few years ago after a long search, said he actually owes Bingheimer his life. Since he was covered with Bingheimer's blood, medical personnel thought Kruppiak was severely wounded also and sent him for treatment.

"Otherwise, they would have sent me back up that hill, and I would have gotten slaughtered with the rest of those guys," he said

Kruppiak, 76, said that while he escaped physical injury, the ordeal took its toll.

"I went nuts for a while and they had me in the bug ward in a hospital in Japan for two months," he said.

He said he returned home with some trepidation because he had to face his mother.

She had found out by accident that he was in Korea.

"I used to write her saying I was in Hawaii so she wouldn't worry," he said.

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