

NADIR BALAN

NOTHING COMIC ABOUT WAR

"Here and there a farmhouse burned, throwing a deep red illumination into the night ... Here on a perfect summer night 'neath the quiet stars, the concentrated hatred of nations created a storm of such deadly violence as to stun one's reason." – excerpt from the World War I diary of Philip English

This passage summarizes a gripping exhibit of large murals created by illustrator Nadir Balan to interpret the WWI diary kept by Lieutenant Philip English of New Haven, Conn. Adopting the narrative and graphic style of comic

racing to deliver orders. English's job was motorcycle courier.

Each panel is dominated by bright red, symbolizing the glowing skies of burning villages and exploding shells that English describes in his diary. Balan's approach was to depict "not only action scenes and war scenes," he said, but to capture the emotional impact the war imposed on soldiers. The foreground images in black and white represent six different phases of the war and are surrounded by a series of light-grey montages depicting experiences such as meeting French

co-courated the show, feels the comic book style is especially appropriate to illustrate a war diary. "We wanted to do something different and this approach complements the diary," Bishcoff said. "The graphic novel/comic book medium is able to tell a better narrative than just using individual shots. There's also a zeitgeist to it; comic book movies are popular; kids relate to it."

The dynamic scenes and accompanying excerpts from English's diary bring the 100-year-old war alive. "I think the way you do it is from a

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THE COURIER: TALES FROM THE GREAT WAR

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books, Balan distilled the diary into a series of 4' x 6' panels entitled, "The Courier: Tales from the Great War," now on view at the New Haven Museum.

The two-year daily diary provides an intimate window into the anguish, tragedy and idealism of soldiers on the ground in the churning crucible of war. Balan has captured all of it vividly and dramatically, from cheering send-off parades, to torn bodies hanging on barbed wire, to a motorcycle courier

women in pubs and zeppelins being shot out of the sky.

Balan said this technique of saturated red on top of black and white is used extensively in comic books as a way to induce excitement to the narrative. "The comic book style has its own history of being used to show a story," he said, "always larger than life stories, a hero's journey."

Jason Bischoff-Wurstle, the museum's director of photo archives who

first-person perspective," Balan said. "When you're on the ground and you see what actually happened, what are the struggles day to day. That to me is the most exciting way to learn history; it's the personal stories. It's seeing the guy in the trench, being gassed, putting the gas masks on, running around and hearing the shell fire."

A scene in one panel features a stiletto – a triple-sided trench knife. "It was so brutal that they outlawed it after the fact

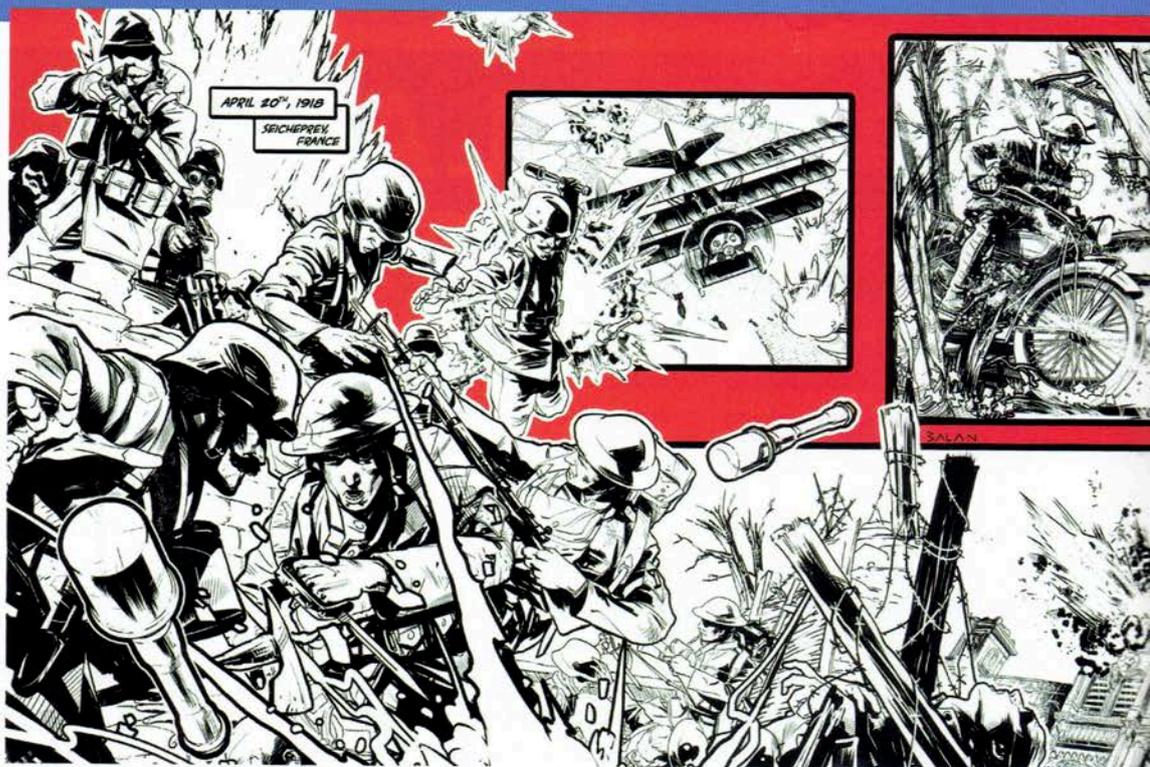
LEFT: Recruitment and deployment phase of Philip English's WWI journey depicted as a propaganda poster. Enthusiastic, patriotic and naive.

RIGHT: Philip English, WWI motorcycle courier, driving along the front lines with courier pigeons. Various emotionally charged scenes he experienced fly by behind him.

because you couldn't even sew up the wounds," Balan said. "It was humanity at its most savage." Other panels portray soldiers in trenches, English roaring off on his motorcycle – "the quintessential courier" Balan calls him, an abstract image of two people that could be seen as men relieved that they survived an attack, or two souls consoling each other at the loss of a son or brother.

Balan is an astute student of WWI and has absorbed its interpretation from two viewpoints. He grew up in Turkey, where it was seen as the destruction of the Ottoman Empire. After coming to the United States, he learned a much different perspective. "The modern map, every single thing we see on the news today, every foreign policy decision that we're arguing about, can only be comprehended by going back to WWI," Balan said. "From an artistic point of view, it was orders of magnitude more devastating for people on the ground than WWII was. That human story to me is so interesting. But it was also extremely brutal."

A prolific illustrator, with more than 50 books and comic books to his credit, Balan said interpreting a war diary was unlike anything he's done before. Comic book writers often want to tell the illustrator how to describe scenes, and that can limit one's creativity. "In this case, I was able to take the entire thing. I had the whole story, I could pick whichever parts I wanted and decide how to lay it out," he said. "As a comic book artist, this is a huge



opportunity for me to show what comic books can be, what the art form can be. I think there's an easy dismissal of it by people who aren't familiar with the media. This is a way to translate the art form," Balan said, to show how it can tell a story beyond comics.

"The Courier: Tales from the Great War" is supplemented with photographs that were taken by men in English's unit. Bischoff explained they're designed to pull you into the war by displaying local scenes English referred to before being shipped overseas, along with photographs of troops on the battlefield and shattered villages.

The New Haven Museum focuses on art, culture and history related

to the New Haven region. Products manufactured in New Haven on display include Eli Whitney's 1803 cotton gin, an 1866 large wheel bicycle, Erector sets, clocks, corsets and Winchester rifles.

This summer the museum will mount another WWI exhibit featuring Gilbert Jerome, a New Haven native and WWI fighter pilot who was shot down during the war. The museum possesses his diary and a scrapbook of his sketches, drawings and watercolors. The show will run from June 8 through the end of the year.

To read Philip English's entire diary, go to newhavenmuseum.org and click on Library to find the document.

The Yankee Division encounters a German trench attack at Seicheprey. Panels of industrialized warfare are also seen: aerial bombardments, gas attacks and heavy mortar fire.

Tom Soboleski

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