



"Moving Up in the Dust"

Combat Artist Kristopher Battles Is Anything but Typical

"My mission is to recruit, train, and deploy uniformed and civilian combat artists to create world-class art that will tell the Marine Corps story for generations to come."

—Kristopher Battles

Recently named Marine Corps Artist in Residence, Kristopher Battles works in his studio at the National Museum of the Marine Corps, Triangle, Va.



NANCY S. LIGHTMAN

By Kelly A. Battles

From active-duty service to the Marine Corps Reserve and back to civilian life, Kristopher Battles has proven himself to be anything but the typical artist and Marine. In December 2019, Battles became only the second Marine Corps Artist in Residence (AIR), a position left vacant since 1992 when Colonel Charles Waterhouse retired. “My main directives are to spearhead the Marine Corps Combat Art Program (MCCAP), preserve the visual story of our Marine brothers and sisters stationed around the globe, and create original art based on key events from Marine Corps history,” said Battles, who works out of the Combat Art Studio at the National Museum of the Marine Corps (NMMC).

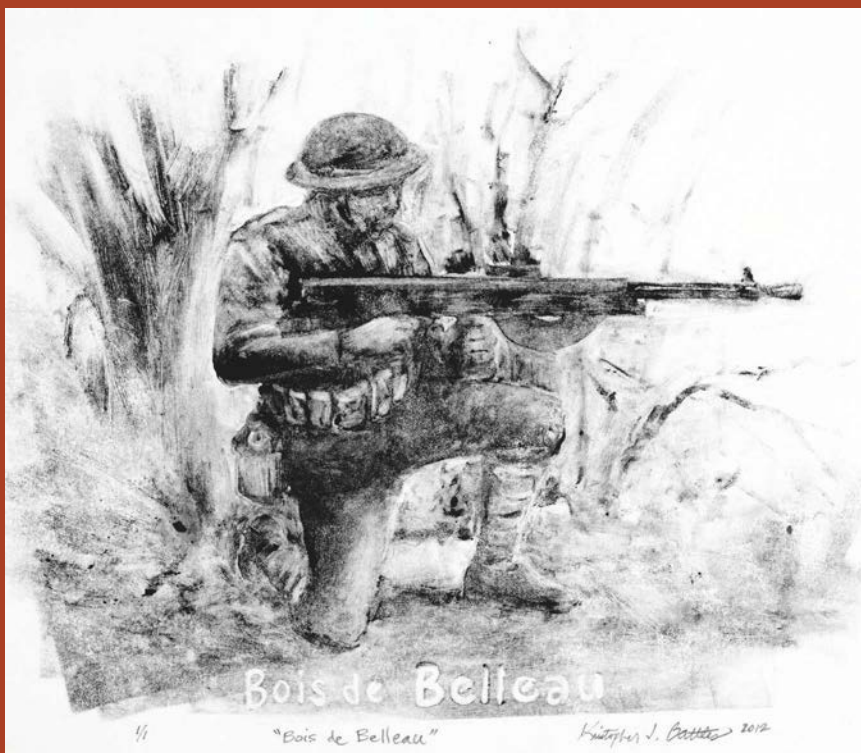
Of his 16 years in the USMC, Battles served half of that time as an active-duty combat artist. His experience and fine art skills are the unique combination needed to advance MCCAP’s mission: “Go to war, do art.” Battles leads this directive along with a handful of specifically selected active-duty Marines and civilian artists.

Whether Battles is working on historical pieces to fill the gaps in the Marine Corps Art Collection or sending a civilian artist to document Marines supporting USNS *Mercy* (T-AH-19) near Los Angeles, Calif., during a global pandemic, he knows the importance of preserving the Corps’ rich heritage and legacy. Using fine art to document, inform, and inspire Marines of yesterday, today, and tomorrow is the key. “My mission is to recruit, train, and deploy uniformed and civilian combat artists to create world-class art that will tell the Marine Corps story for generations to come,” he said.

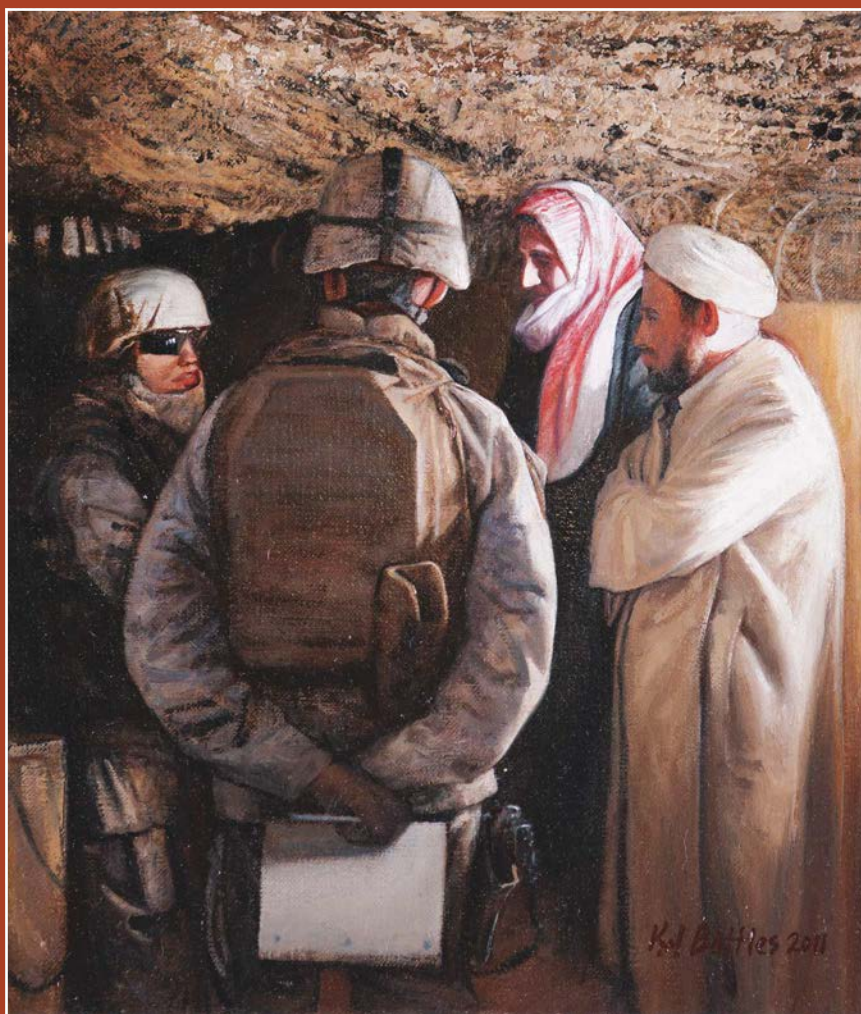
Battles has always loved the Corps. Just after his high school graduation, with a signed parent waiver in hand, 17-year-old Kristopher Battles enlisted in the Marine Corps Reserve and reported to recruit training in June 1986 at Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego.

Beginning as a computer operator, he spent his drill weekends in Kansas City, originally with 4th Force Service Support Group (FSSG). Battles became a combat correspondent in 1989 and was attached to Headquarters Company, 24th Marine Regiment in Kansas City, Kan. During those years, Battles also was a full-time art student at Northeast Missouri State University (now Truman State University) graduating in December 1991 with a BFA in studio art.

After eight years as a reservist, Battles left the Corps to pursue art professionally. Taking an interesting turn with his career,



“Bois de Belleau”



“Evening Parley at Rutbah”



"Of Binocs, Bottles and Flypaper"

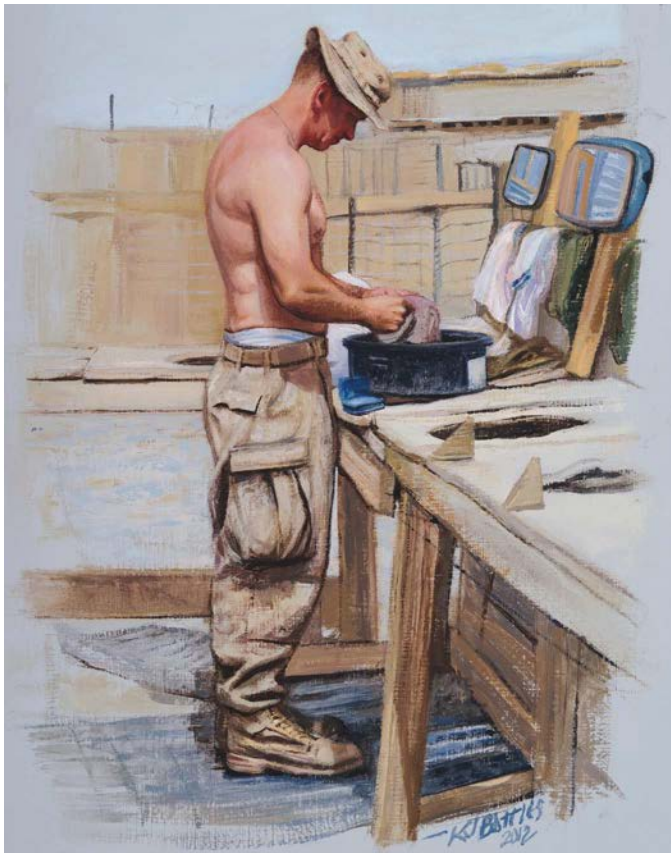
he became a Christian missionary in Haiti, working with local artists as the crafts development officer for Baptist Haiti Mission. While in Haiti, Battles learned to speak Haitian Creole fluently. Little did he know, he would return to Haiti as an active-duty Marine nearly a decade later to cover the humanitarian efforts after the devastating earthquake in January 2010.

In 2001, after two years of mission work in Haiti, Battles returned to the United States to pursue his professional art career in St. Augustine, Fla. After the tragic events of 9/11, he couldn't shake his desire to return to the Corps. He started following a blog written by an active-duty combat artist, Chief Warrant Officer 2 Michael Fay. Fay, who is now retired, introduced Battles to NMMC Art Curator, Captain Charles Grow, USMC (Ret), and the director of the Marine Corps History Division, Colonel Richard Camp, USMC (Ret). An interview was set up with each individual to assess Battles' skills to become a combat artist.

On June 28, 2006, just over 20 years since his original enlistment and with 14 years as a professional artist with a BFA



"They Watch Us"



"Chaplain Robert Washing His Laundry at the Wash Rocks, FOB Dehli, 2009"

in Studio Art, Battles reenlisted in the Marine Corps Reserve as a combat artist. Finally, his love of art and the Corps were combined.

Joan Thomas, the current art curator at the NMMC, said she believes Battles' artwork will stand the test of time. "Kris was always a Marine first and artist second. He brought the same commitment for excellence both as a Marine and artist to the table. He maintained his readiness to deploy and always has produced works of art that are honest, informed, and inspired."

As soon as he was mobilized to active-duty status from the Marine Corps Reserve in September 2006, Battles moved his family from Florida to Virginia. "When I first began, I was creating art in a makeshift studio in a supply closet at History Division's headquarters, but was soon permitted to work out of my studio in Fredericksburg, Va., and eventually worked with CWO-2 Fay in a dedicated art studio on Marine Corps Base Quantico."

Within weeks of arriving at Quantico, Battles deployed to Camp Fallujah, Iraq, for his first-ever combat deployment, where he was attached to Information Operations to cover Marines engaged in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF).

On that first deployment, Battles embodied the motto "Every Marine a rifleman." His mission to embed and record

Marines sent him on patrols with many units in places across Al Anbar Province, including Habbaniya, Baharia, Rutbah, Al Qaim and Korean Village. He even had an opportunity to accompany Navy SEALs while on patrol. Battles said the most memorable incident during this deployment was when he found himself being escorted by military police to the base provost marshal's office at Al Asad Air Base. Battles was detained for sketch-

On that first deployment, Battles embodied the motto "Every Marine a rifleman." His mission to embed and record Marines sent him on patrols with many units.

ing and photographing guard posts and a downed MiG. Luckily, his combat art orders proved he really was there to capture the Marines in paint. He stayed away from sketching or photographing certain parts of the base after that. While he was sketching the MiG, a bystander snapped a photo. That photo was eventually turned into a silhouette that the NMMC placed



"Lioness Reading"

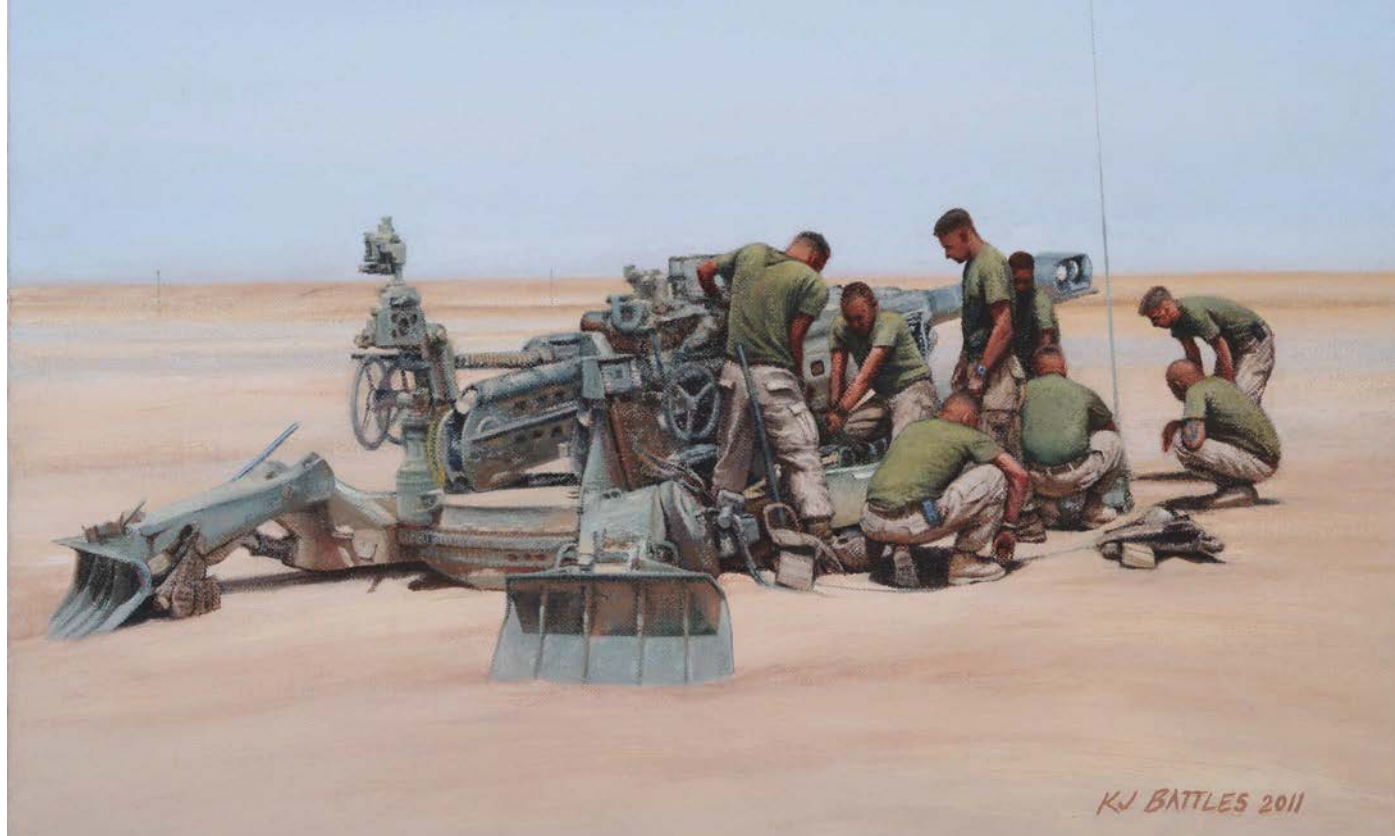
on the wall just outside the entrance to the Combat Art Gallery.

The Marine combat artist is a unique breed. After Battles' first year as an active-duty combat artist, he had the honor of meeting the Corps' first AIR, Col Waterhouse, when Grow, Fay and Battles traveled to Waterhouse's studio in Toms River, N.J. In September 2007, all four Marine artists were featured on ABC News as "Persons of the Week."

Battles' deployment with Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron 263 was also memorable as he was embedded with the Osprey unit for their first-ever deployment to the Middle East in September 2007. His portraits of the pilots and other Marines, as well as their famous aircraft, have been shown in various art shows, including the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C., show titled, "Fly Marines! The Centennial of Marine Corps Aviation: 1912-2012."

One of Battles' most requested images is a painted sketch titled "Lioness Reading." Uncharacteristic of his classical realism and lacking identifying characteristics of the Marine, the sketch depicts a deployed female Marine in such a way that many women can relate to her. NMMC visitors can view a reproduction of the painting, which hangs permanently in the museum.

Battles was sent to Afghanistan in the summer of 2009. He traveled in Helmand



"Triple Seven: Arty Marines Placing the Gun"



"Flight Operations Aboard USS Wasp"



"Smoke Break on USS Carney"

Province, painting and sketching a wide variety of activities. Some of the memorable moments captured consisted of a painting of a chaplain shaving and Marines speaking to a tribal leader in a nearby village—Battles captured the essence of the civil affairs mission. His paintings, sketches, and illustrations from this particular deployment highlight the importance of building strong relationships between Marines and locals.

Battles created more than 200 paintings and sketches for the Marine Corps Art Collection as a result of his deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan to cover Marine combat operations as well as to Haiti and the Philippines in support of humanitarian relief efforts. In Haiti, he also found himself useful as an unofficial interpreter thanks to his proficiency in Haitian Creole.

Battles participated in atypical training for a Marine. While conducting research for his first sculpture, he was sent to Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center in Bridgeport, Calif., for the Animal Packers Course. Battles had expected to be an observer, but he was enrolled in the course, which afforded him firsthand knowledge about the subject. In the end, Battles added "certified animal packer" to his service record book.

While on active duty, Battles earned his MFA in illustration from the University of Hartford. His master's thesis included the creation of several historical paintings of Marines in famous battles including Belleau Wood, Manassas and Peleliu. These paintings have all since been accessioned into the Marine Corps Art Collection.

Battles' active-duty orders were renewed several times during this period, and he also reenlisted several times, eventually being promoted to staff sergeant. In the spring of 2014, after eight years of creating hundreds of original artworks that are now part of the permanent collection, Battles transferred to the Individual Ready Reserve.

Battles transitioned to civilian life and in the fall of 2014 became a Navy combat artist as well as an adjunct professor at the Corcoran School of the Arts and Design in Washington, D.C. With the Navy, he was deployed to sketch and paint Navy subjects on ships throughout the globe. "My paint palette went from Marine Corps Coyote Brown and Olive Drab to Navy Blue and Haze Gray," joked Battles.

On his own time, Battles continued to add to the Marine Corps Art Collection with commissioned sculptures and paint-

ings. In 2017, more than a dozen pieces of his work from the collection, including his first sculpture, "A Mule and His Marine," were added to the NMMC's Combat Art Gallery inaugural show.

In 2019, with the full support of NMMC Director Lin Ezell and Deputy Director Charles Grow, the Artist in Residence (AIR) position was revived with Battles' selection. Although he had hoped to wear the uniform again, the position ultimately created was a civilian one. As the second Marine Corps AIR, not only does Battles create art once again for the Marine Corps Art Collection, he also recruits, trains, and deploys civilian, active-duty and reserve Marine combat artists to cover training and combat missions across the globe. As a team, the MCCAP is preserving the Corps' accomplishments in a way that will endure for generations.

According to Grow, "Kris Battles is a rare blend of career Marine and professional artist. We were lucky to have him serve in uniform and blessed to have him onboard as the Artist in Residence. The artwork he creates will help to cele-

He was deployed to sketch and paint Navy subjects on ships throughout the globe.

"My paint palette went from Marine Corps Coyote Brown and Olive Drab to Navy Blue and Haze Gray," joked Battles.

brate the Corps' 250th anniversary. The artists he influences will contribute to the Corps' significant visual history."

Later this year, Battles hopes to host the NMMC's annual Combat Art Symposium with artists and museum professionals from across the nation and even abroad. This year's focus is on "One Team One Fight" and will bring all military branches together at the NMMC.

The storied history of the Marine Corps will be enriched and captured for centuries, thanks to the work of Kristopher Battles who is anything but a typical Marine.

Author's bio: Kelly Battles is a part-time English teacher as well as a freelance writer and editor living in Spotsylvania, Va. She has been the Marine Corps Combat Art Program's special assistant since January 2018.

CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION IS ONLY PART OF THE EQUATION



THE REST IS ON YOU

Don't lose your edge. Continue your education with
MCA's Professional Development Resources.

- Battle Study Guides
- Decision-Making Exercises
- Article Collections
- Writing Contests
- Audio Article Libraries
- References

And much more.

mca-marines.org/professional-development

 **MARINE CORPS**
ASSOCIATION & FOUNDATION
EST 1913