

Impact Statement

Gabrielle Van Allen, Grade 11.

Cher Ami, 2017.

Mixed media on canvas, 35 x 12 Inches.

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Unsung Hero: Cher Ami

Imagine approaching a perfect stranger and asking them what they picture when the words “unsung hero” is spoken. Would it be a firefighter valiantly carrying a child out of a burning building or possibly the person that decided to turn back to put their life in danger in order to save another in a time of crisis? When I first heard those two words, a person as previously described appeared in my imagination. Someone whose life is a testament to live by and whose story allowed the stories of so many more to continue. This is why I chose Cher Ami.

Cher Ami was not at all what I would first expect when I think of an unsung hero and that is why I was so drawn to her tale of relentlessness and perseverance. She did not outwardly radiate with strength, nor with leadership and fortitude, in fact, she was not even human. She was merely a little carrier pigeon during World War 1 whose name meant “dear friend” in French. But eventually she did indeed become a dear friend to many American soldiers fighting for our home, for those in search of morale to keep pressing forward and for those who knew that she was their last hope in a moment of darkness. It all occurred one day in October when 500 soldiers were trapped and being fired upon by their own men who did not know that they were there. In a desperate at-tempt to communicate to those firing, the soldiers attached a message to their last pigeon, Cher Ami, who then flew as fast as she possibly could back home. After being fired at and blinded, as well as attaining numerous other injuries and falling out of the sky once, she flew back up and continued to keep flying until she delivered the message. The remaining soldiers could not have been more grateful. When they saw her condition following her amazing and awe-striking flight, they did everything in their ability to bring her back to health, including carving her a wooden leg for the one that had been shot. Once she returned home, she became a celebrity and received multiple awards including the Croix de Guerre Medal for her services. Although she would eventually pass away a year later due to her injuries, Cher Ami will forever be remembered for her utter perseverance and complete lack of fear in the face of danger.

Through projects like this, I hope that her memory will inspire others as it did me to know and appreciate what being a true hero and a true friend means. In my artwork I wanted to portray Cher Ami’s story in a creative yet simple way. Pigeons are not known for their grace or elegance and beauty. During the war many of them were used to carry messages back and forth and it was no clean task to complete. To symbolize this simplicity, Cher Ami is not the center and primary focus of the artwork, instead she is a part of something bigger. Much like her job during the war, she is carrier of a message far greater than herself or just one person. I sat her on the top of a gun and helmet memorial to display the impact that she had in a war effort that sadly resulted in the loss of many lives, but also to picture the hard work and dedication that it required to protect the freedoms that we love. The helmet depicted is of an American soldier in honor of Cher Ami being an American carrier pigeon and the gun is French to represent the

country that her Battalion was in when she delivered the message that saved over 200 hundred lives. I kept the color scheme muted and the tone somber to picture the mood that would have been tangible to all the soldiers as they released their last hope into the air to save them. After I had gathered my inspiration and decided upon my vision for this artwork, I began to create the background. I knew that I wanted to create texture to represent the dirt, smoke and roughness of war so I used napkins and collaged them onto the canvas. Over this, I painted using darker colors and created a variation from top to bottom to symbolize Cher Ami rising above the dust and war that ensued below her. Next, I began the gun and helmet. The texture made it slightly more difficult at first to paint, but it posed as a new obstacle that made the task more interesting to take on. In contrast to the background, I wanted the subject matter to appear soft-er, so in order to do this I had to apply more layers of paint to fully cover what was be-hind it. As I painted Cher Ami I thought very much of detail and creating the look of soft feathers. I painted only her left leg to display how she lost her right to gunfire during her flight. Finally, I painted a note attached to her leg with part of what the soldiers wrote on it in honor of her mission to carry the note back home to receive help.

The story of Cher Ami's flight through a rainstorm of bullets and pain in order to save a battalion of helpless soldiers is a story that deserves to be told and repeated to the world. She became not only an inspiration to her nation, but she most importantly be-came its dear friend, and I am honored to be able to create an artwork celebrating such a deserving hero. I will never forget the importance of remembering that there are most definitely times where great courage comes in small packages.