

# Aero Brush

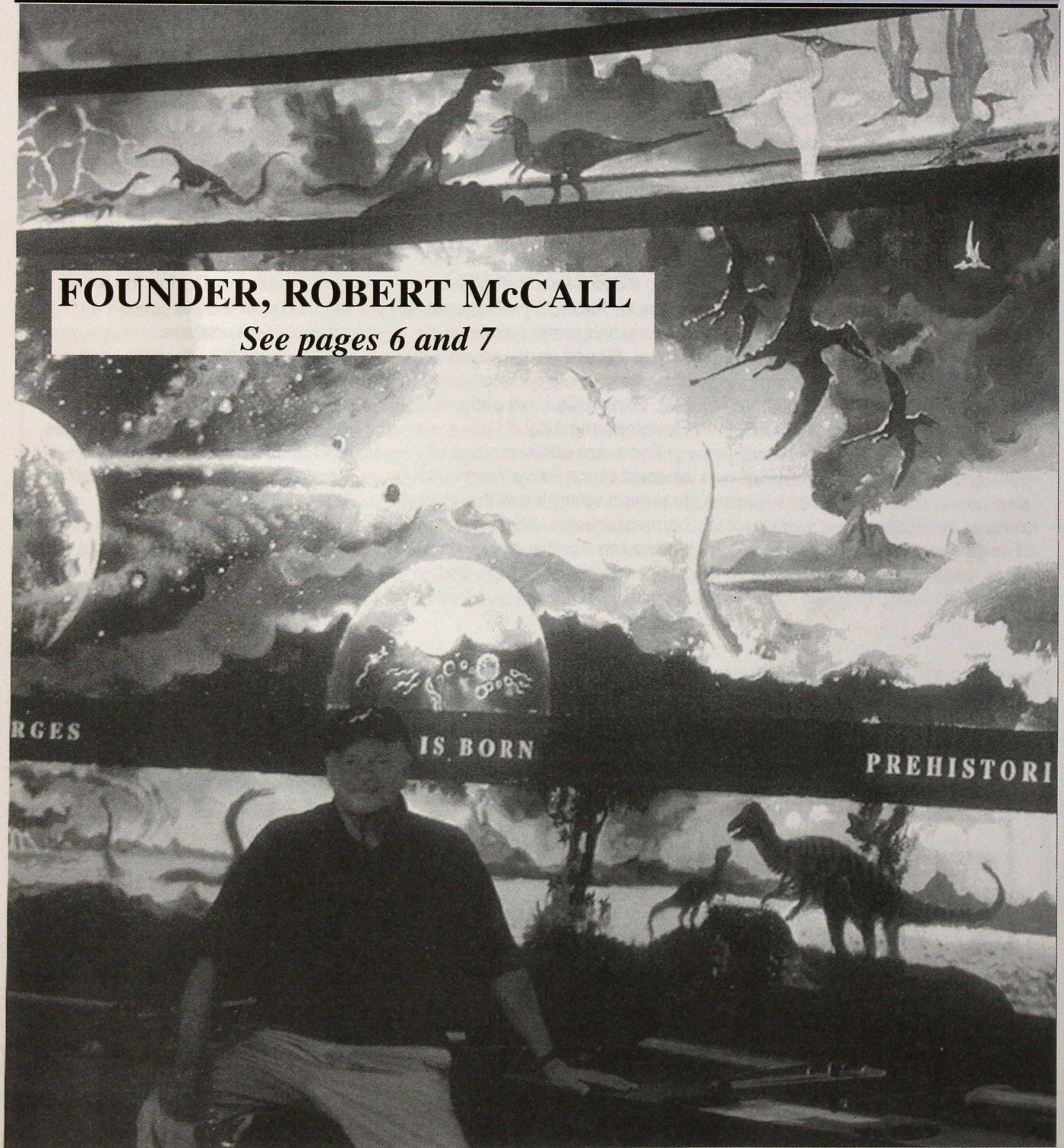
Winter 2000-2001

The Newsletter of the American Society of Aviation Artists

Vol. 14, No. 1

**FOUNDER, ROBERT McCALL**

*See pages 6 and 7*





## APPRECIATING A WORK OF ART

### Wilson Hurley's "Air Strike At The French Fort"

by Michael O'Neal



#### **"AIR STRIKE AT THE FRENCH FORT"**

*Wilson Hurley wrote, "Ten kilometers west of Tigertown in the central highlands of Vietnam, there are the remains of a triangular French fort built in the Viet Minh days. On the evening of the first day I reported to my forward location, we were in contact with the North Vietnamese and conducting air strikes close to the fort. My boss, Major Ed Garland, took me out in the back seat of an O-1 to observe the strikes that were being controlled by Major Norm Comfort. We arrived just as an F-4 Phantom had a can of napalm explode on his wing. ...the vivid scene etched itself on my memory."*

While at the World War One Fly In at Wright Patterson AFB last summer, I was fortunate to find a display of Wilson Hurley paintings in the Kettering Gallery at the U.S. Air Force Museum. While his work is well known to many ASAA members, my personal experience had been limited to the few images in his book, *The Art of Wilson Hurley*, and to his paintings that have been exhibited at the most recent ASAA shows.

When I walked into the Kettering Gallery, I was unprepared for the impact of his paintings. I can't think of another way to express this. There is a definite, unmistakable power to the images, which will literally stop you in your tracks. Throughout the gallery, you could not walk past a painting – they reached out and grabbed you forcibly. Each one compelled you to stop and look closely, carefully, and thoughtfully at the images. But among the group was one painting that stood out even among the many strong images.

"Attack at the Old French Fort" was painted in response to Wilson's first trip as a FAC during his tour in Vietnam. Along with pilot Major Ed Garland, they

flew a Cessna L-19 / O-1 to an area being targeted by F-4s. The sky was overcast and twilight was creeping into the valley. Color gave way to the misty greys and shadowless forms created by diffused light.

In the fading light, the F-4s, upon direction from Major Norm Comfort, were to drop napalm on their targets in a heavily wooded valley. During a drop run, the *Phantoms* occasionally neared the speed of sound. When this happened, the unfinned napalm ordinance sometimes broke loose and rolled up on the leading edge of the wings.

Unbeknownst to Wilson, this is what had happened to the attacking F-4 just prior to his arrival on the target. Almost coincident with Wilson's O-1 arriving on the scene, the napalm exploded on the F-4's wing and with that, the F-4 disappeared in the fireball. Seconds passed as the vapor and fire cloud began to disperse, some on target, most falling harmlessly in the woods below. In the next instant, the F-4 reappeared on the far side of a massive stream of fire, vapor and excess napalm.

Wilson's painting captures the instant the F-4



reappears, apparently undamaged, climbing hard away from the target and out of the valley.

Wilson's approach to this painting defies the accepted logic of portraying historical events and attempts instead to generate an emotional response. Instead of big airplanes which become the focus, he has deliberately made the airplanes subsidiary. Where the first reaction of many painters would be to show the hardware, he has, through careful use of color and composition, made the painting a visual event first and a historical document second. In the subdued lighting the airplanes are difficult to see and even the L-19 in the foreground which occupies a good portion of the compositional space, is so subdued in color and lighting as to be almost invisible. The other two airplanes in the painting, the F-4 and a second L-19 are so far away from our viewing position, they are almost incidental. But this is what makes the painting great—the focus is on the intensity of the incident. The aircraft are there to support this impression, not to be the center of interest.

To me, the central point of this painting is the long trail of vapor and smoke left by the napalm exploding on the F-4's wing. This shape alone dominates the composition. Without reading the story

the painting has impact. Once you understand what has happened, you follow that trail of vapor eventually discovering that there are indeed two more airframes in the distance. They look small, pathetically so against this large explosion. I believe that is intentional to move the viewer to understand the force of the explosion and the relative smallness of the airplane and its human occupants. You sense their predicament and audibly exhale once you discover that they have avoided a disaster.

There are many ways to enjoy this painting. Your personal experience with flying, the military, or art will dictate your response to it. But what I find remarkable about this painting is that it was powerful long before I knew what it was about, long before I recognized the aircraft, long before I sat and studied it. Its impact was immediate, strong and direct. It is an emotion captured by the artist's ability to convey the reality and excitement of it without requiring special knowledge of the event or aviation. As Wilson put it, the painting suggests the “..vividness of reality.” Most of us imagine an event, but there is nothing in our imaginations that can match the intensity of having been there.