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SOLDIER WITH V CORPS SIGNAL BRIGADE TRANSMITS MANIC ENERGY TO HIS WORKS OF ART

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DARMSTADT, Germany – “People always tell me that I need to smile more,” said Spc. Brandon Spragins of V Corps’ 22nd Signal Brigade.



PFC MICHAEL HOWARD

Spc. Brandon Spragins, a command group driver assigned to the 440th Signal Battalion of V Corps’ 22nd Signal Brigade, fleshes out the final details of a ‘Tropo Predator’ for the tropospheric scattering communications platoon of the battalion’s 578th Signal Company. Spragins did the picture while on leave, on his own time.

And perhaps they’re right. At first glance he doesn’t seem the friendliest person in the world. Mouse-brown hair shaggy enough to elicit dirty looks from his fellow Soldiers, but short enough to avoid on-the-spot corrections, frames a granite face that seems quite incapable of a smile.

Yet, like most people, Spragins defies first impressions. Once he speaks three sentences the granite mask crumbles to reveal a hyper-ecstatic

grin and an unsuspected enthusiasm. The grin gives character to a self-styled artist and adventurer ready to risk his skin to share a unique vision expressed via a thousand pursuits, each more ambitious than the last.

Spragins is officially a driver for the command group of the brigade’s 440th Signal Battalion, but he wears countless hats daily.

"It's very easy for me to get bored," he says. "My mind is constantly changing channels. I think it's actually a gift. I'm able to 'multi-task' like an ordinary person cannot. Give me one thing on my platter, and I procrastinate. Give me 50,000, and I love it. It's stressful, but I actually enjoy it. If I have multiple things to do, it keeps me busy constantly, and I'm running around here and there doing this and that, and it's great."

Spragins has enough hobbies and interests to fill a hundred pages, but arguably the most interesting is his talent for painting murals into which brazenly injects bits of himself. "I'm not afraid of putting a piece of myself out there for other people to criticize," he says.

Spragins claims he became an artist so early in his life he is unable to pinpoint the beginning of his interest. "I can't really say when it started," he says. "I just grew into it, I guess."

And apparently it kept growing, which may be the reason Spragins' talent was recognized at an early age. "I've been in quite a few contests. One was the Quaker Oats 'Think Big' contest. It was nationwide. I won second place when I was seven. I designed the T-shirt for my hometown beach cleanup one year. I was active in art throughout high school and wanted to pursue it in college, but I ended up selling cars..."

As immense a career shift as that may seem, Spragins says such changes are pretty much his norm. Spend a few minutes talking with him, and you'll see a heartless statue transformed under the spell of an almost terrifying but contagious zeal that seems to follow a million paths at once, all at warp speed. "I talk fast. I walk fast. I'm hyper. Always jumping around. Just constantly motivated. False motivation means

nothing to me. If I like something, I'm there. I'm jumping around, trying to help out, to do everything."

While Spragins says he's usually pursuing many goals at once, he seems to maintain a laser-like focus on his art. "It's a bit of a 'Catch-22,' because with my artwork, I can literally stand there for hours with my mind preoccupied. When I was in Kuwait, I'd sit out at the concrete barrier painting from sunup to sundown. Sgt. Maj. [Arthur] Adkins (operations sergeant major for 22nd Signal Brigade) would bring me my food, my water and any supplies I'd need. For five days, I put in about 18 hours a day. By the time I left, my skin was peeling off where I had worn shorts, and the back of my neck was pretty much gone."

Spragins also fancies himself a bit of a philosopher, and has written several tracts outlining his views on life. Determined to live for the moment, he comes across as desperate to hyper-experience life. "Anything and everything, I'm up for it. That's a given. I want everything out of life. This is my time. I'm alive now. When I die, that's when I get to rest. Until then, of course, I'm going to try to do everything," he says. "You can't stay alive forever."

Live-for-now philosophy notwithstanding, at least part of Spragins is planted in, and motivated by, a sense of the immortality of great art. "Look at Michelangelo," he says. He lives on forever. He's dead now, yet he's still around. You see his posters everywhere. People buy them every day. You see his paintings, and none of it is going anywhere."

Caught in the moment, but determined to leave a legacy, he paints with the speed and frenzy of an inner-city kid on a graffiti binge.

His works – and bits of himself – can be found in his hometown and other states and countries, spanning all the way to the deserts of Iraq and Kuwait. At Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., thousands of basic trainees share a piece of him every day. Those who carry a 440th coin hold a piece of him in their pockets. Probably every Soldier who has participated in the 22nd and 440th's Operation Iraqi Freedom-related events has been captured in his photos.

The soldiers of the 440th jokingly spring to attention and yell, "Battalion painter!" when Spragins enters a room. It's an honorary title that may not give life to the legacy he'd like to leave behind, but it's a start, and it spurs Spragins on his way as he searches for an enduring calling down one of his million frenetic paths.

