

Volare *Optimos*

Honoring the
Silent Professionals of
Special Operations Aviation

by Joshua D. Esposito





Standing at the entrance to the U.S. Army Special Operations Aviation Command (Airborne) (USASOAC) headquarters at Fort Bragg, NC, is a ten-foot tall, 2,500 pound bronze statue of a winged Centaur. Ares, the Greek god of war, is dismounting to engage in battle.¹ The monument is the culmination of years of design, approvals, engineering plans, and collaboration between a number of individuals.

The project had its origins in conversations between U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) senior leaders and James G. Shore, a renowned artist and sculptor. In 2012, Shore was among a group of individuals invited to a three-day demonstration of special operations forces. After the presentation, then-USASOC commander, Lieutenant General (LTG) John F. Mulholland, Jr., asked to meet with Shore to discuss the possibility of developing a small

The *Volare Optimos* statue stands in front of the U.S. Army Special Operations Aviation Command Headquarters at Fort Bragg, NC.



memento for soldiers completing special operations courses.² At LTG Mulholland's suggestion, Shore also met with Brigadier General (BG) Clayton M. Hutmacher, then the Commanding General (CG) of USASOAC, and received a briefing on special operations aviation.³ When LTG Mulholland changed command in July 2012, Shore anticipated that the idea would evaporate. BG Hutmacher, however, was interested in developing a larger statue for USASOAC, and worked with Shore to carry on the project.⁴ Having decided on a monument to special operations aviation, Shore asked to design and fund the statue. BG Hutmacher welcomed the offer, and charged USASOAC Command Chief Warrant Officer (CCWO) CW5 Robert D. Witzler with overseeing the project.⁵

Witzler brainstormed throughout March 2014, conveying his ideas to Shore, and the two developed the concept for the *Volare Optimos* statue. Shore was so excited about the project that he occasionally worked through the night to send charcoal sketches to Witzler after receiving suggestions. They soon agreed on a common concept.⁶

It was important to Shore and Witzler that the sculpture was replete with carefully chosen symbols. The centaur signifies the synergy of man and machine, while the drawn bow and disembarking warrior represent the assault and attack roles that are hallmarks of special operations aviation (SOA). The concept of unified air and ground forces is further represented in the harmony between the centaur and Ares, with both figures' eyes and weapons focused on the same target. The sculpture respects the "offensive nature of Army Special Operations Aviation," with the horse's reared legs and the forward lean of the warriors exhibiting frontward motion.⁷ As a testament to the ethos of the SOA community, aviators are not the primary character in the monument dedicated to honoring them—the winged centaur is silent, while Ares is screaming as he descends and engages the enemy. The monument is a tribute to the culture of SOA, and to the dedication and humility of the quiet professionals who realize that they exist to support ground-based 'customers'.⁸

Most of the time spent revising and finalizing the design was dedicated to fine-tuning the several subtle icons that quietly represent all of the 'clans' within SOA.⁹ This includes a piece emotionally significant to the regiment. When Shore suggested incorporating an emblem in the nocked arrow, Witzler worked with the Airborne and Special Operations Museum (ASOM) to attain a small piece of titanium from *Super 61*, one of the two MH-60L Black Hawks lost during the Battle of Mogadishu in 1993.¹⁰ Shaped like the Special Forces insignia, the arrowhead bears the inscription "People sleep peacefully in their beds at night only because rough men [and women] stand ready to do violence on their behalf."¹¹ Shore and former USASOAC CCWO Dennis N. Ireland* chose this quote because it was applicable to all special operations forces.¹² With the concept developed, Shore provided the American Bronze Foundry a clay model of the proposed statue.¹³

At the foundry, twenty artisans worked on the project for eight months. The statue went from a maquette to reality.



One of several charcoal sketches Artist Jim Shore created of the concept with USASOAC Command Chief Warrant Officer, Robert D. Witzler. (Photo courtesy of CW5 (Ret) Robert D. Witzler, with the permission of Mr. Jim Shore.)



The 2,500 pound, 10-foot-tall monument first took shape as a meticulously sculpted clay model (*maquette*) that stood about 12 inches in height. (Photo courtesy of American Bronze Foundry.)

*"People sleep
peacefully in their
beds at night only
because rough men
[and women] stand
ready to do violence
on their behalf."*

— The arrowhead inscription, paraphrased from novelist George Orwell



Top The Centaur's nocked arrow is forged from titanium recovered from a Blackhawk helicopter shot down in Mogadishu during Operation GOTHIC SERPENT in October 1993. One side is inscribed with Gothic Serpent dates and with units involved; the other with the paraphrased Orwell quote.

Bottom A side-view of Ares dismounting to engage in battle.



L-R Artist James G. Shore; Deputy G1, Chris Hopkins; USASOAC CO, BG John R. Evans; and USASOAC CCWO, Mark A. Meyer; after unveiling the *Volare Optimos* statue. (Photos Courtesy of the USASOAC Public Affairs Office.)



Brigadier General John R. Evans was the fourth Commanding General of USASOAC, from July 2016 to May 2018.

Initially, workers digitally scanned the mold, enlarged it, and then made a foam frame. Then they assembled it and applied clay for details. Due to its size, the mold was cut into about fifteen pieces before creating the shells, which were used to cast the bronze piece in separate castings. The elements were then welded together, and grinders smoothed the join marks. An application of chemicals created a “museum brown bronze” tone.¹⁴ Finally, artisans created highlights and shadows, before buffing and waxing the statue with sealant. With assembly complete, the statue was stored at the foundry for a year while the base was constructed, permission was granted by the Secretary of the Army, and a dedication ceremony was coordinated.

Cooperation between the Green Beret Foundation, the Directorate of Public Works at Fort Bragg, and the USASOAC engineers facilitated construction of the base, while CCWO Mark A. Meyer supervised progress.¹⁵ In September 2015, the Green Beret Foundation made a donation to construct the pedestal from local granite.¹⁶ The creators wanted it to be modest; the statue was the center of attraction. This was done in late-spring 2016.¹⁷

The statue’s base was installed in the spring of 2017, and preparations made for a dedication during Memorial Day week. Seven days before the ceremony, the statue was delivered to the USASOAC HQ at Fort Bragg. There,



(Images Courtesy of American Bronze Foundry)

Foundry Process of the USASOAC Statue *Volare Optimos*

- 1 Foam is applied to the pieces of the statue after the maquette was digitally scanned and scaled to ten feet.
- 2 The molded statue parts are assembled together.
- 3 Clay detailing is added before the bronze casting.
- 4 Due to its size, the statue is disassembled before bronze casting.
- 5 The bronze sections are welded together after casting.
- 6 A chemical treatment is applied to create the statue's "museum brown bronze" color.

it was lifted by crane onto the base.¹⁸ Shore then installed bollards connected by a chain to accentuate the site, leaving an opening on each end so soldiers can observe the statue up-close.¹⁹ Three years of collaboration between dozens of individuals culminated when BG John R. Evans, Jr. officially dedicated the statue on 23 May 2017.

Federal law defines the sculpture and base as non-revocable donations of time, labor, and money furnished as a gift to the U.S. Army. In his remarks at the dedication, however, Jim Shore emphasized that he did not view the statue as something given free of cost, but as a small return on the payment for the daily sacrifices made by the men, women, and families of the special operations community.²⁰ The *Volare Optimos* statue ‘stands guard’ in front of the USASOAC headquarters as a reminder of the spirit of special operations aviators, and that Americans appreciate their devotion to the nation. ♣

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Joshua D. Esposito served four years in the U.S. Navy before earning an MA and PhD in Diplomatic History from West Virginia University. He was a historian at U.S. Southern Command for two years prior to joining the USASOC History Office in July 2017. His current research is focused on Special Operations Aviation.

Endnotes

- 1 Details about the height and weight of the *Volare Optimos* statue were provided by Shawn Ganim, project manager at American Bronze Foundry. See: Project Manager, American Bronze Foundry, Shawn Ganim, interview by Dr. Joshua D. Esposito, 2 November 2017, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited by name and date. Email from Shawn Ganim, Project Manager, American Bronze Foundry to Dr. Joshua D. Esposito, 2 November 2017, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC. The explanation of symbolism embedded in the statue was provided by former USASOAC Command Chief Warrant Officer (CCWO) Robert D. Witzler. Retired CW5 Robert D. Witzler, interview by Esposito, 21 September 2017, USASOC History Office, Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited by name and date. Robert D. Witzler, “Sculpture Brainstorming,” PowerPoint Slide Deck, undated, copy in USASOC History Office, Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited by author and title.
- 2 Email from Robert D. Witzler to Dr. Joshua D. Esposito, 20 November 2017, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited by names and date.
- 3 MG Clayton M. Hutmacher, former Commander, USASOAC interview by Esposito, 9 November 2017, USASOC History Office, Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited by name and date. Since that time, BG Hutmacher has been promoted to Major General.
- 4 Witzler to Esposito, 20 November 2017.
- 5 Witzler, 21 September 2017.
- 6 Witzler, 21 September 2017.
- 7 Witzler, “Sculpture Brainstorming,” quote from slide number one.
- 8 Witzler, 21 September 2017. CW5 Mark A. Meyer, CCWO, USASOAC, interview by Esposito, 22 September 2017, USASOC History Office, Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited by name and date.
- 9 Witzler, 21 September 2017; U.S. Army Special Operations Aviation Command (Airborne), “*Volare Optimos*” Statue Dedication Ceremony, 23 May 2017, PowerPoint, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited by title and date.
- 10 Witzler, 21 September 2017.
- 11 The quote is attributed to novelist George Orwell, though the words “and women,” are not in the original quote.
- 12 “*Volare Optimos*” Statue Dedication Ceremony, 23 May 2017; CW5 Dennis N. Ireland*, former USASOAC CCWO, interview by Esposito, 24 October 2017, USASOC History Office, Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC
- 13 James G. Shore, remarks at “*Volare Optimos*” Statue Dedication Ceremony, 23 May 2017, hereafter cited by name and date; Ganim, 2 November 2017.
- 14 Ganim, 2 November 2017.
- 15 Email from James G. Shore to Robert D. Witzler, copied in Witzler to Esposito, 20 November 2017. Shore’s email to Witzler, generously made available in response to a question from the author, specifically referred to the three CCWOS as the “driving force that enabled the statue project to come to reality.”
- 16 Chairman of the Board, Green Beret Foundation (MG [Ret.] David A. Morris) letter to Commander, U.S. Army Special Operations Aviation Command (BG Erik C. Peterson), 15 September 2015, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC. Since that time, BG Peterson has been promoted to Major General. LTC Terry L. Stewart, USASOAC Engineer, interview by Esposito, 10 October 2017, USASOC History Office, Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited by name and date.
- 17 Stewart, 10 October 2017. Concurrently, engineers were working to divert groundwater from the front of the building, where the statue was to be placed. The groundwater issue was vital to assuring the aesthetic of the landscape on which the statue was placed. DPW completed installation of the crushed rock and a French drain in the fall 2016.
- 18 Ganim, 2 November 2017. Half-inch steel rods from the statue were set into epoxy-filled holes drilled in the granite to secure the bronze to the base.
- 19 Bollards are posts, connected by chains that surround the statue area. Email from Deputy Chief of Staff, ARSOAC, Patrick O’Hara III to Dr. Joshua D. Esposito, 2 November 2017, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Shore, 23 May 2017.
- 20 Shore, 23 May 2017.