

# DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

BY KAREN POJMANN

Sergeant/art student finds creative freedom in military order

# TOP GUN OF DESIGN



## Medical Illustr+ra+or

AIR FORCE MEDICAL ILLUSTRATOR AND MILITARY GRAPHIC ARTIST OF THE YEAR

### STAFF SERGEANT JEREMY CASKEY

If you watched ad spots on MTV rather than news coverage on CNN, you might begin to think of the military as an extreme sport. An army of one. A chance to accelerate your life. A nonstop adventure embarked upon by a multiculti in-crowd of hard-bodied snowboarders, skydivers and other thrill-seeking daredevils—who've been waiting for you.

Whether this image is an accurate characterization of life in the United States Armed Forces is open to debate. But one thing is clear: The branding of the U.S. military is growing increasingly hip.

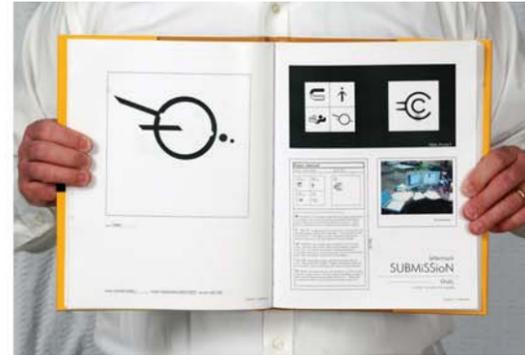
No one knows this better than Jeremy Caskey. The 28-year-old staff sergeant and 2004 Department of Defense Graphic Artist of the Year always has found the combination of edgy image making and dedicated military service to be a neat fit. In his 10 years in the United States Air Force, Caskey has created everything from Web sites and air-base posters to a 9/11 museum exhibit and a Pentagon multimedia presentation. And while he does, of course, have to wear a uniform and stay in shape and do a lot of saluting and go wherever the government sends him, as a designer, Caskey has found Air Force life surprisingly liberating.

"The thing about being in the military that's really nice is that I'm not going to get fired for messing up a project," he says. "You can push yourself a little bit further; you don't have to play it safe necessarily. You know that you're going to have a job at the end of the day, so you can stretch yourself and grow."

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Jeremy Caskey, Sam Donaldson and parents



Moreover, he says, because the work is always done for one client, the U.S. Air Force, nearly every job holds both the comfort of familiarity and the challenge of concocting original ideas that work on multiple levels within the established parameters.

"The Air Force already has a brand, but it's such a big 'company' that there's more room within that brand. You can dig a little deeper," he says. "There can be a brand within a brand."

Branding, Caskey says, is his favorite part of graphic design.

"Whatever I'm doing, I like to sneak it in as much as possible," he admits. "I try to make a logo out of everything."

In his downtime, Caskey works on identity design, as well as Web design and other projects, for non-military clients on a freelance/contract basis. He has even tried civilian life. After the first four years of his decade in the Air Force, Caskey left the service and took a job with a Pittsburgh, Penn., design firm. But he was quickly disillusioned and returned to life in uniform.

"The studio I was working for just kind of sucked me dry creatively," Caskey says. "I felt like I didn't have much more to give, so I decided to go back. I really liked the creative freedom that I had in the military."

Caskey has always felt a natural association between the military and creativity. He discovered a love for art through his childhood experiences as a military dependent (or "Army brat," as those of us on the inside say). While other kids were piddling away on backyard swing sets or playing Kick the Can out in the alley, Caskey was watching artists paint village scenes on the side of a cobblestone German road or exploring an ancient civilization near the Mediterranean—seeing the world and absorbing what he'd later use in graphic art.

"The military life has given me so many diverse experiences to draw from that I can't help but be thankful for them," Caskey says. "I draw inspiration from a life spent playing in the ruins of ancient Roman cities in Turkey, only remembered for the place they hold in the Bible and the passions of archaeologists; hiking in the Black Forest and riding horse-drawn carriages up to castles in the mountains of Germany; boogie boarding the North Shore of Hawaii and riding the back of a sea turtle (not the smartest thing to do as a teenager, considering turtles are sharks' favorite food); climbing the mountain pass that the Japanese flew through to bomb Pearl Harbor; kayaking in the ocean of Puerto Rico, and on and on."

It's not too hard to see the appeal. But following in his father's footsteps to the military wasn't always part of Caskey's master plan. He had visions of art school and film school and a life of unchecked creativity in a place like California. But joining the Air Force proved to be a more practical move. The service promised job training and money for college, as well as perks such as travel and health care.

Going in, Caskey wasn't sure he would be assigned to his chosen career field, the graphic arts program. But once the higher-ups got a look at Caskey's portfolio, he was on his way to the Defense Information School in Washington, D.C., where soldiers, airmen, sailors and marines learn graphic design, photography and videography. From there, he took up with a mentor/supervisor and worked his way through the skill levels of apprentice, journeyman and craftsman.

"The military is very systematic about it," he explains. "They don't really leave you out there to flounder."

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For now, those hands are toiling away at Offutt Air Force Base in Omaha, where Caskey supports the hospital's residency program as a medical illustrator, creating collateral design, training aids, anatomical drawings and whatever else the program requires. And since he lives and works on one base, he's able to go home for lunch with his wife and infant son every day—an opportunity he doesn't squander.

Once he has his degree in hand, Caskey will be eligible to become an officer. And in a dozen years, he'll be eligible for attractive retirement benefits. By then, he'll be only 40 years old, but he'll have a wealth of experience under his belt. With it, he says, he might open his own design firm.

But coming from the military (widely regarded as a conservative organization), does he see himself fitting in with civilian designers (a largely liberal lot)?

So far, he says, though ideological differences may arise, "I think everyone has been pretty respectful. I guess one thing people don't realize is you can be in the military and not necessarily be in a particular political party. I know some very liberal people in the military."

What drives his career is not a political agenda—or even a gung-ho attitude toward national defense. It's a passion for the work itself.

"I love design. I love the field as much as I love the employer I work for," Caskey says. "I'm thrilled to be a graphic designer." ■ CMYK

In addition to receiving structured professional training, Caskey has been able to use the tuition help the Air Force offers to earn a bachelor's degree. Now a senior at Bellevue University in Omaha, Neb., Caskey has gradually accrued credits toward his degree, putting in some of his time at Louisiana Tech University while stationed at a nearby base. And he still wants to go to art school—for a master's.

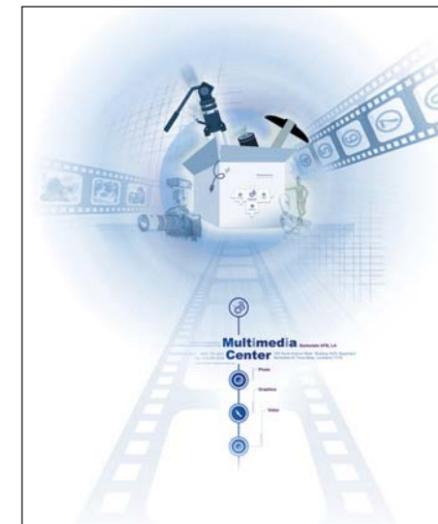
But in his current line of work, what helps him more than his education is that shiny Graphic Artist of the Year award. To get it, he had to submit a year's worth of graphic design work and compete with designers from all four branches of the military; he estimates that as many as 1,500 other designers were eligible. It's not hard to see how Caskey won. His portfolio boasts the simultaneous starkness and perfectionism the military is reputed to encourage. Though spotted with occasional boyishly sketchbooky illustrations, it mostly tends toward clean, angular shapes, sparseness of color and a masterful use of typography. The chic simplicity gives some pieces a sci-fi feel.

Whatever the Department of Defense liked about his work, the award it won was career-changing. No matter what field you specialize in within the military—engineering, avionics, intelligence—a D.O.D.-level award is, well, a big deal.

"My name is out there in the military design community, so people know who I am," Caskey says. "With customers, there's this trust because they feel like they're in better hands."



Thomas Jefferson Type Composition: Typographical representation of Jefferson's famous words.



Multimedia Center: Display poster and brand package for the Barksdale Air Force Base Multimedia Center in Louisiana.



Wings Over Pittsburgh: Logo created for the annual airshow in Pittsburgh.

Shoeleather Express: Graphite illustration developed to feature the number of base personnel, and their respective squadrons, walking on base due to DUI.

