



Artist Profile

Allen Eckman – Making Old Methods New

"Sculpture is just so comforting and it truly helps me relax," said Alan Eckman, a Marine Corps veteran from Rapid City, S.D., Eckman is one of nearly 130 veterans invited to this year's National Veterans Creative Arts Festival. More than 3,100 entries were received this year by veterans from across the nation, recognizing more and more the mental and physical benefits of creative arts therapy.

Eckman enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1965 just out of high school. He trained at Camp Pendleton in San Diego, Calif. for a year as a field radio operator. Then, in 1966, he was sent to a helicopter base in Chu Lai, Vietnam. As a radio operator, Eckman was trained to accompany the infantry units and provide communication – relaying messages for supplies and additional forces to the nearby helicopters. One of his most important responsibilities was to care for casualties. "We never left a man on the battlefield," Eckman said. "Not on my watch. Sometimes I helped carry soldiers out of harm's way myself and put out the first call for aid. I stayed with them until the chopper carried them away." Eckman successfully completed 43 combat missions and received numerous air medals for his courageous efforts as a gunner.



One day, while trying to cross a helicopter landing zone on a rescue mission, Eckman was hit in the ankle with shrapnel. "Everyone else around me was hurt so much more than I was," said Eckman. "I continued to stay in the field and didn't even see a doctor for the injury." Thankfully, his ankle healed on his own, and he returned to Camp Pendleton a year later. While back at Pendleton, Eckman continued to excel in both classes and field operations and was promoted to Sergeant in less than four years.

Discharged in 1969, Eckman immediately enrolled in college as an art major. After two years, he decided to study commercial art in Los Angeles' Art Center College of Design. While there, Eckman met his wife, Patty, and the couple formed their own small advertising company in the L.A. area after graduation. Twelve years later, the Eckmans moved to South Dakota and started their own fine art business which they now operate from their home. "When we first started our business, I went into painting," said Eckman. "But when I saw the art of cast paper sculpture, I was really intrigued by it. I found out that I am really good at sculpture and when our art started selling so fast, we knew we'd found a good thing. Eckman's winning artwork this year is entitled, "*Traditional Dancer*," and is a ¼ life-size cast paper sculpture of a traditional Lakota dancer. Cast paper sculpture has been around since the 1950s but the Eckmans have developed and perfected the medium far beyond any other artist in the world. In fact, the two invented the Eckman Method of cast paper sculpture to which they alone hold the trademark rights are now recognized as the premier artists working in the cast paper medium.

"My art has changed my life," Eckman said. "It has become a way of life for me. I work at home in peace, and I can put my whole self into it and focus on one thing. That is very therapeutic." Eckman has been invited to display new first-place sculptures at the Festival for the past three years.