The Art of Plastic War

By Blake Mathews

Searcy is not a city known for its guerrilla works of art. It’s known for having extremely high church density – and for being the only place where I ever thought to use the phrase “church density.” It was once known for having three McDonald’s restaurants within five minutes of each other. Though it is a college town, Searcy’s walls and streets are not known as the canvases of impishly creative college artists.

As the de facto nucleus of this town, Harding is not known for its untamed artistic spirit either. But, I recently discovered, we may be making strides toward unfettered, occasionally ridiculous expression.

Someone is leaving plastic army men all over campus.

It started with one dark green little soldier, crawling on his belly across the carpet of my apartment. Would I believe that my roommates had bought buckets of them and were spending their afternoons reenacting famous historical battles on our dining room table? Easily. But this was one army man separated from his bucket platoon. I asked around the room, and no one claimed it.

I had completely forgotten about the completely forgettable event until someone came to me saying he had a story idea for The Bison. By the way, my friends, I love it when you do that. He pulled out his phone and began to show me pictures of little green army men in strange places all over campus. There was a little radio guy at the bottom of the Heritage lobby’s winding staircase. Two mini-GIs were choked up on their plastic rifles inside a glass display case in the Pryor-England building. One of the white E’s on the side of the Stephens Art Center was a nest for a lone machine gunner.

I would have dismissed it as a juvenile prank, but that one little man crawling on his green plastic belly across my carpet brought it too close to home. Something organized, subversive and too wacky to be true was afoot.

Most of the places where army men had been sighted had been disturbed, my contact said, but the lookout up in the Art Center E was supposedly still at his post. I searched every vowel on the side of that building and found nothing.

By that point I suspected the whole farce was far less organized than previously thought, not deliberate enough to be considered art. But it was possible that the wind or a bird or plastic enemy fire could have knocked him out of his letter, so I checked the ground before heading back inside.

And there he was, buried up to his neck in soil under the shade of a shrub. Just finding one of the little soldiers made the whole thing believable. There had to be more out there, more of this experimental art form that challenged viewers to expand their imaginations and believe in an invading miniature plastic army. It was brilliant.

That’s one theory, of course. I’m now one plastic machine gunner closer to the truth, but what actually ties these army men together could be any number of things:

.Experimental art form

.Capstone project for psychology majors

.Naughty, naughty children

.Promotional campaign for new college Bible study (“Soldiers of Christ, Arise”)

.Public Safety’s new surveillance system

.Squirrels got into a bucket of plastic army men

.Military recruitment tool

.College Republicans recruitment tool

.First wave of actual invasion by plastic army