

# How's this for a game of soldiers?

For this extraordinary project, *Simon Brann Thorpe* photographed troops posing as toy soldiers during the ceasefire in Western Sahara





Mounted on green plinths and set out in formation, they could be straight from a toy box — but these are real soldiers, not plastic figurines. They are from the Polisario Front, an independence movement of tribal people, the Saharawi, who oppose Moroccan rule in Western Sahara. The two sides fought in a war over the disputed territory from 1975

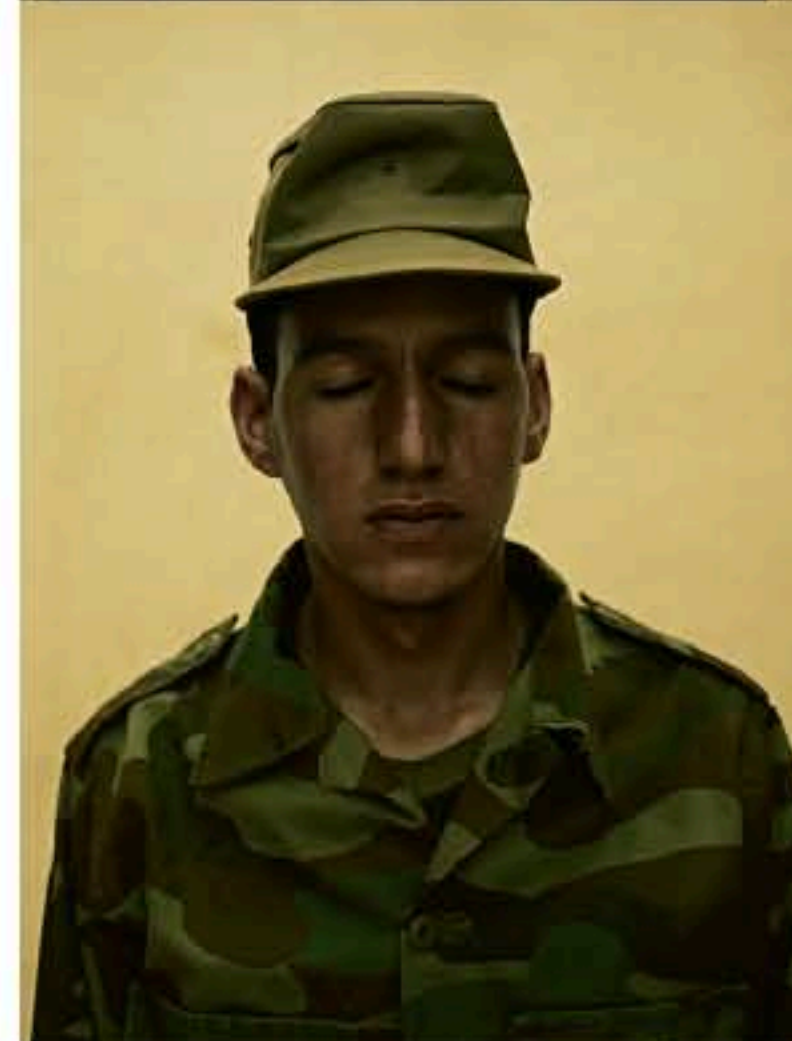
until a United Nations-monitored ceasefire was established in 1991. Morocco controls most of the region.

The photographer Simon Brann Thorpe hand-picked troops from the Algeria-backed forces and photographed them in the guise of motionless toy soldiers “to create a dialogue by viewing modern conflict as war games”, he says.



The Polisario Front soldiers were willing participants — even helping to construct the platforms they stood on, from old oil drums. “Though conceptual art is not readily part of their culture, they all identified with the narrative of being voiceless

and played with,” Thorpe says. Over a five-week period, Thorpe worked with up to 50 troops at a time. With the help of their commander, he positioned the men in the arid landscape and then used a wide-angle lens to capture each image



The London-based photographer also shot portraits of the soldiers with their eyes shut — “like a death mask”. “Their dormant existence has been placed on them by a conflict without end,” he says

Thorpe hopes the images in his book will help bring attention to Western Sahara, and how society has become desensitised to war. "Toy Soldiers is a reaction to the consumption of images of conflict in a digital age," he says. "People are ravenous for content but short on attention span."

*Toy Soldiers* by Simon Brann Thorpe will be published by Dewi Lewis in June. Advance copies will be available at Photo London, Somerset House, London WC2, from May 21-24, with a book signing on May 23. Visit [simonbrannthorpe.com](http://simonbrannthorpe.com)

