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On this day, one of six spent in Somalia in March 1993, Charlottetown-born artist Allan Harding MacKay makes observation notes he used later to help create video montages, collages, live stage performances and hundreds of paintings, all of which are based on this brief immersion into Somali culture and Canadian peacekeeping life.



Allan Harding MacKay's painting of a Canadian soldier and three members of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan was created after the Charlottetown-born artist was commissioned by the Canadian military to document Canada's contribution to the war on terrorism. MacKay spent four days in southern Afghanistan with the Canadian section of the Allied forces base in Kandahar.

"He came back to me and said, 'OK, we're interested in your work. We have two assignments: Saint John (N.B.) and Somalia. 'And I said,' well I've been to Saint John,' " he remembers.

So he arrived in Somalia in March of 1993 with few, if any, preconceptions about what his artistic tour of duty would be. "What you have to realize is that I haven't had a television for many years, so I don't feed off images of various locations of wars or whatever. Not that I don't see it on occasion, like you would see something still images in a newspaper or a magazine perhaps" he says. "So when I went to Somalia, I really wasn't pumped up about what to expect."

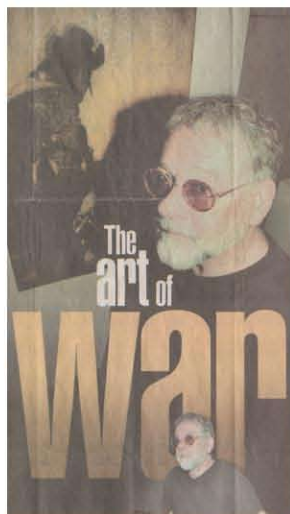
What did happen was unexpected for all Canadians, if not the world. Entirely by coincidence, MacKay was based at the now-infamous compound in Belet Huen where Somali youth Shidone Arone was tortured and beaten to death by Canadian soldiers. By chance he was there the day the soldier accused of the crime, Master Cpl. Clayton Matchee of the now disbanded Canadian Airborne Regiment, tried to commit suicide by hanging.

In his art, in images such as a short series on Matchee's holding cell in the compound, MacKay tries to make sense of the tragedy. "Obviously it became more emblematic than if it was just a structure in the camp. It actually was the location where the attempted suicide happened ...," he says. "Once a person knows that the holding cell was (the location of) the attempted suicide of the soldier who was accused of torturing and killing (the 16-year-old Somali), that image becomes very key in terms of telling a story about something. It's like a projector. The image of that gets bigger and bigger in terms of it as a symbol for something."

MacKay used video and a 35-mm camera to visually document his time in Somalia. One dramatic series in the *Somalia Yellow* exhibit is based on video footage of an early morning event at a local abattoir. In a time-honoured Somali ceremony which is proposed to have healing effects, a woman took a bowl of blood from a freshly slaughtered calf and slowly poured its contents over the head of a small boy who was not well.

"It's the bloodbath of healing, which for me became so metaphorically resonant because it's completely opposite to our usual way of using the term bloodbath, which, of course, was the civil war situation then. So that was great to be able to witness something that is important to these people and a kind of sense that life goes on," MacKay says. "(For example) this was in the abattoir and that had to happen every morning - not necessarily the blood bath but the rendering of the animals and taking the meat into market. So it was kind of an affirmation within all of the warfare that was going on - the sun goes down, the sun comes up. Activity goes on."

Life after Somalia also went on for MacKay. Then this July at the invitation of the Canadian military, he was commissioned to



To date, Allan Harding MacKay, who is shown with his exhibit, has taken a civilian artist's view of Canada's role in wars in Somalia and Afghanistan. Some of these (images are on display at the Confederation Centre Art Gallery and Museum until Dec. 15. The *Somalia Yellow* exhibit was curated by Shauna McCabe and organized by the centre with the assistance of the Canada Council for the Arts.

artistically document Canada's contribution to the war on terrorism. He spent four days in southern Afghanistan with the Canadian section of the Allied forces base in Kandahar. Five of these Afghanistan images are included in the Confederation Centre exhibit.

"With the Afghanistan situation, Canada was at war officially. With the Somali situation we were there as humanitarians, the military was being used to deliver humanitarian aid. In Afghanistan, they wanted us to deliver bullets. So there's a big difference," MacKay says. The two military art expeditions also differed in MacKay's access to the local populations in each country.

"When I was in Somalia, I could see Somalia people. I was in a village, I was in an abattoir. You drive through the desert and you will see nomads with their camels. I was in Mogadishu, so it's a major urban area with many Somali. So even though I was in the military envelope, I could witness people living their lives in this country that is Somalia," he says. "But I had very little evidence that I was actually in Afghanistan in terms of any social or cultural (interaction). I was basically among primarily Canadian soldiers and other coalitions."

Though each experience was no longer than 10 days in total, they proved to be both physically and mentally taxing. "You've already gone through major time zone changes. You're in a physical environment that is very taxing in terms of you're drinking nine litres of water a day. It's very hot, very windy. And you're in an institutional culture which you're not used to, which is the military," he says. "So those are the layers of strangeness or distance that happens and it happens very quickly. You're kind of numb in a way. "You get your imagery and then you're gone."

Since 1993, Somalia has featured prominently in MacKay's art as well as his personal and professional life. In 1996, a CBC documentary on his Somali experience entitled *Changing Perspectives* aired on national television. He is now working with the same producer to potentially do something similar with the Afghan project. A touring theatre collaboration that resulted from his *Somalia Yellow* series is headed for Prague and Glasgow this fall.

One ongoing souvenir of Somali is that MacKay has become more politically aware, especially concerning Canadian military activity abroad. In fact, in 2000 he felt personally compelled to destroy one of his Somali pieces a day for 53 days to protest Canada's involvement in an active bombing of the former Yugoslavia.

"I felt it was completely unnecessary. From a military strategy point of view, who needed our four F-18s or whatever? "And I felt we had given up a very important part of being somewhat of an honest broker in the world, that our contribution should ... try to at least use the military to deliver humanitarian effort, not join in the bombing,"

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"(On the 52nd day) I think I had one more left of that (series) and decided if I ran out I would make new work and then I would destroy it. "Then Day 53 came, I ripped it and that's when the bombing stopped. That was kind of a little bit eerie."

In addition to gaining an appreciation for the conditions Canadians in the military endure on missions, whether they be peacekeeping or wartime efforts, MacKay has developed a heightened interest in what happens here at home.

"The reality is there are two major prongs to our military: one is strictly humanitarian and combat roles; the other is domestic, dealing with disasters, whether it was the ice storm in Quebec, or the Red River in Winnipeg and it's about time that they got appropriate monetary compensation for the efforts they make and the resources they need to do their job."

If there were any lessons to be learned, MacKay came home from Somalia and Afghanistan with these thoughts. "I've become much more aware of what the role of the military is and also the political decisions (that dictate) how our military is used and, in the face of the frustration that the troops face, how highly motivated, professional and effective the Canadian soldiers are."