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FEATURES

City cenotaph inspires artist in unique project

Allan MacKay spends nine days in Somalia capturing images for painting series

BY SALLY COLE

Staff Writer

Spending six weeks as a visiting artist in Charlottetown opened up a whole new world for artist Allan MacKay.

About a year ago, while working out of a studio in the Confederation Centre of the Arts, he became interested in the cenotaph in the park adjacent to the building.

Whenever he would take a break from his work as a visiting artist, his gaze would fall on the statue. Looking at it in the fall and recalling childhood memories of his own brother going off to war left him musing about whether Canada had any current war artists.

He was familiar with war artist Alex Colville and had seen an exhibition of his war paintings in the early 1970s.

"Out of that idle thought, I made a few calls upon my return to Toronto to ask if there was an artist's program," says Mr. MacKay, who was P.E.I.'s artist in residence for six weeks last year.

A phone call to Laura Brandon, the curator of the Canadian War Museum, confirmed the existence of the Canadian Armed Forces Civilian Artist program (AFCAP).

She told him that the Canadian military was looking for an artist to travel to Somalia to do a series of paintings on Operation Deliverance.

He was invited to send his resume and slide portfolio to be considered. A few weeks later he learned he was accepted.

Within days, the Toronto-based artist found himself aboard a Hercules aircraft bound for Somalia, with a group of reporters from the Petawawa area. Among them was Jim Day, who now works for The Guardian.

"I wanted to tell the human side of the Somalia story," says Mr. MacKay, who used video and still



ALLAN MACKAY takes a break from the hectic pace of his recent tour of the Canadian peacekeeping mission in Somalia. Constantly gathering images of the war-torn country through sketchings, still photo-

graphs and video tape, Mr. MacKay waited until returning to his studio in Toronto to paint the many pictures formed from the military-sponsored trip.

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By travelling with soldiers on patrol in the communities and watching as they repaired hospitals and wells and secured areas, Mr. MacKay was able to witness first

hand the work of a peacekeeping mission.

"I didn't see any direct fighting. . . . The civil war was in a recession and any direct conflict had been dealt with."

The long sunny days provided

ample opportunity to gather the raw material necessary for the paintings that he would do on his return to Canada.

While there were plenty of military images to record during his nine-day trip, to his disappoint-

ment, there was no direct contact with the Somalis.

"We were completely immersed in the military envelope. . . . We were advised that things were still volatile, and we didn't venture into the village because people were

still armed."

The months that followed his return to Canada were busy ones.

The hot, bright sun and sandy desert of Eastern Africa inspired a wealth of images from his 10-day visit.

The most startling include a charcoal/pastel drawing of a brightly-dressed Somali woman, with an armored personnel carrier behind her. Another shows a herd of camels with the Canadian Forces Hercules aircraft in the background.

A show featuring paintings of his Charlottetown work and his Somali experience was recently mounted in Toronto. As well, six of his paintings have become the property of the Department of National Defence under the terms of the program that sent him there.

They will be on display at the University of Toronto in March as part of a tribute to Lester B. Pearson.

In the future, CBC plans to do a documentary on his work in Somalia.

Looking back, Mr. MacKay says the trip both troubled and impressed him.

For example, martial strength can be very useful in making humanitarian efforts work, he says.

However, the charges against the Canadian soldiers that arose while he was there were disturbing.

"There's a contradiction between human effort and military aggression.

"Canada is going to have to deal with this in the UN terms of peace-making. . . . One is left feeling that although it's very constructive, it was a malevolent event."

Would he like to go back again?

"Yes," he says. "This time I'd like to paint the reality of Somali people."

JIM DAY PHOTO

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