



Action Stations. Painting by John Horton.

THE ART OF OPERATION “APOLLO”: WORKS FROM THE CANADIAN FORCES ARTISTS PROGRAMME

by John MacFarlane

It is logical that artists should be a part of the organization of total war, whether to provide inspiration, information, or comment on the glory or stupidity of war.

A.Y. Jackson¹

The important task of recording in art the work of Canada’s Armed Forces at home and around the world has recently been revived by the Canadian Forces Artists Programme (CFAP). As part of a pilot project for the programme, three artists were selected to accompany members of the Canadian Forces (CF) to the Southwest Asian theatre on Operation “Apollo” in the summer of 2002. This article will provide a brief summary of their experience, and the lessons learned for the future of the programme.

The first official Canadian military art programme was launched in 1916. Over 100 artists working for the Canadian War Memorial Fund produced more than 800 paintings, sculptures and printed works. The driving force behind the programme was Max Aitken, who hoped to record the war from a Canadian point of view.² In the words of historians Dean Oliver and Laura Brandon, not only does this collection “illustrate, commemorate

and illuminate the major events of the First World War as experienced by Canadians, but it also forms a major building block in the development of Canadian art.”³ Several members of the Group of Seven (Fred Varley, A.Y. Jackson, Arthur Lismer and Frank Johnston) were deeply affected by their experiences as war artists. Varley explained to his wife that “you in Canada...cannot realize at all what war is like.” He told her that he would “paint a picture of it, but heavens, it can’t say a thousandth part of a story. We’d be healthier to forget, and that we never can.”⁴

During the Second World War, the Canadian War Records Programme recruited and hired 31 official war artists (many of whom were already in uniform) to serve alongside Canada’s soldiers, sailors and airmen.⁵ It was a different war, and this programme produced different works. According to Oliver and Brandon: “There are no huge memorial compositions focussing on destruction, tragedy and misery. Instead, most of the more than 5,000 small paintings record the locations, events, machinery, and personnel of wartime on all fronts,

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A Dawn Boarding. Painting by John Horton.

in an often de-personalized manner.”⁶ However, as with the sponsors of the previous programme, those who insisted on the presence of war artists realized the importance of them being there.⁷ Alex Colville, for one, provided a lasting, personal account of what it was like to be at Bergen-Belsen shortly after its liberation: “It was a profoundly affecting experience. Obviously it would be, unless a person was an absolute fool. You were bound to think about this quite a bit.”⁸

From 1968 to 1995, the Canadian Armed Forces Civilian Artists Programme (CAFCAP) recorded the work of the Canadian Forces of that era. There were approximately 40 artists involved in the programme, and they created some 250 works of art.⁹ Mostly working in times of peace, these artists helped capture the activities of the CF in a variety of situations, at home and overseas.

On 6 June 2001, then Chief of the Defence Staff General Maurice Baril announced the creation of the CFAP. The objective was to provide artists, working in a variety of media, the opportunity to document the Canadian Forces at work, at home and around the world. Such a lasting record of our military men and women at work will be of great value to complement photographic and other records. Veterans of the Canadian military often remark that it is difficult for them to put into words, or to see through photographs, what it was like for them to be where they were. Artists can capture many aspects of life too elusive for the photographer’s lens. As the writer Suzanne K. Langer explains: “Art is the objectification of feeling, and the subjectification of nature.”¹⁰

The first step was to organize a selection committee to ensure that the artists of the CFAP were supported by the military and artistic communities. The knowledge

and experience of this group was impressive. Serge Bernier of the Directorate of History and Heritage led the committee, which included Joe Geurts (Director of the Canadian War Museum), Jean-Louis Roux (Chairman, Canada Council for the Arts), Roch Carrier (National Librarian), Pierre Th  berge (Director, National Gallery of Canada), Senator Lucie P  pin and artist Michael Flahault. This group, which also selected 21 new artists in the spring of 2003, remains as an advisory committee to guide the CFAP.¹¹

NAVY ARTIST: JOHN HORTON

John Horton remembers being intrigued by the announcement of the programme, and expressing his interest in participating. Born in England, he graduated from the Poole, Bournemouth and Wimbledon schools of art and later served in the Royal Navy and the Canadian Naval

Reserve. Since 1964, he has lived in Vancouver, working in design and architecture and, since 1970, as a marine artist. He was soon identified as an ideal candidate for the programme. In early 2002, he had received some positive feedback and believed that the ‘wheels were in motion’ but no specific dates had been established.¹² Finally, in the spring he was contacted by the programme and asked if he could go in two weeks. “It was really quite short notice.”¹³

Mr. Horton arrived on board HMCS *Algonquin* in the Arabian Gulf in July 2002, and quickly adapted to his environment. “I’m ex-Navy myself” he notes, and, while some aspects were new, “...I knew what to expect when joining a ship.” His integration was facilitated by the warm welcome he received from the crew: “In fact, on my last day on board, I even got in line on the lower deck to replenish the ship with food and supplies, and I felt close enough to everybody to just help with the rest of them. I really did feel sorry to leave the ship. They were so kind to me, and treated me as one of their own.”

After settling in, one of his first tasks was to decide what to paint. “I went out there with a blank canvas,” he remembers, “and in the notes I made I kept saying to myself how do I paint this? How do I paint modern warfare?” He sought to illustrate two points. First, he wanted to paint from “a totally different perspective to how things have

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been painted in more recent years.” And second, he hoped “...to show what was being achieved and a little bit about what life was about in the modern Navy.”¹⁴ He gradually came to believe that boarding activities were key to the operations, and this theme comes out very well in *A Dawn Boarding* and *Go Fast Interdiction*. He believes that “...those two paintings alone show what the Canadian operation was about out in the Arabian Gulf.”

“The objective [of CFAP is] to provide artists, working in a variety of media, the opportunity to document the Canadian Forces at work, at home and around the world.”

Mr. Horton’s attention to detail, apparent in each work, was achieved by following his usual routine. “I always start with rough sketches; I may do many sketches,” he explains. “I think with a pencil in my hand. Gradually, I will refine it to the story. I’m still thinking in purely tonal values, in black and white. When that works, I go to my canvas and rough it in. All of this is done in acrylics so that I can work very fast; I do this to obtain spontaneity in the painting. When I achieve that, and am happy with the design of the painting, I then concentrate on atmosphere: time of day or night, temperature, drama and what needs to be emphasized. This is where colour starts to come in. Then, and only then, do I start into the oil painting, which goes right over the top of the acrylic and then all of the final fine detail is put on.”

While he was identifying themes and sketching, Mr. Horton would also be taking pictures for details; however, this proved to be difficult. “The humidity was very high, and so when I came out of the ship, which was air conditioned, all my cameras would immediately fog up.” He also had problems capturing the fine technical details for some paintings while on board. Because the lighting had been inadequate for *Action Stations*, he made arrangements to visit the ship after it returned to Esquimalt. For *Apollo Patrol*, he had many photos of Sea Kings, but not from the angle he wanted, and: “I needed technical details since I was extremely close to the helicopter [in the painting]. I ended up going over to the Pat Bay squadron and getting up on a ladder with one of the helicopters sitting there, and I was able to get the right angle.”

ARMY ARTIST: ALLAN MACKAY

“The first time I heard about the programme relating to Afghanistan was a phone call I received in May 2002,” says Allan MacKay. He was born in Charlottetown, and graduated from the Nova Scotia College of Art before beginning his multifaceted career in the visual arts as a gallery curator/director, arts administrator and professional artist. He is currently curatorial consultant with the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery. “I was aware that the Canadian Forces Artists Programme was being re-activated,”

he remembers, adding that “...during the course of that conversation, I thought actually Major André (Levesque, Program Manager of the CFAP in 2002) wanted some assistance with determining which artists might be suitable to go on the programme, and then realized, in actual fact, that he was interested in my going to Afghanistan. At that point, I became interested and I accepted.”

Arriving at Khandahar airport in July 2002 was memorable for Mr. MacKay: “Flying inside the Hercules into Afghanistan was certainly interesting: the view through the oval windows of the parched landscape, the landing and drama of the doors opening onto the tarmac and first entrance into that airfield space where my work began on the ground.” He walked around, spoke with soldiers and developed his impression of the living and working environments: “I was immersing myself in the context of where I was.”¹⁵

While he was determining which themes to portray, he was also filming. “I use a video camera, so my images to create art works are photo based,” he notes. “I shot about five hours of video in Afghanistan, and with the present video digital technology, one is able to download any number of still images. So in reviewing the video, I decided on twelve images that I downloaded and had black and white images printed onto paper. These images then became worked over with a combination of charcoal, chalk pastel, oil pastel and wax. So the result is a hybrid between photography, and drawing and painting.”

His use of wax is particularly unique, and effective for conveying the sense of his interpretation of what the environment was like. “I use a broad brush dipped in a molten wax and damar varnish mix, splatter the wax in an even or semi-even coat over the surface of the drawing.”



Armoured Fighting Vehicle on the way to Tarnak Farm. Painting by Allan MacKay.

Canadian Forces Artists Programme



Three Silhouettes unloading a Hercules, Khandahar Airport. Painting by Allan MacKay.

It is a very sensuous material and creates a very interesting texture on the surface in combination with the charcoal and the pastel. Because of the nature of dust and grit in that environment, this method helps to, in a sense, replicate what the visual appearance and air was like.”

After arriving back in Canada, Mr. MacKay had no problems completing the works, using his characteristic techniques. However, one way that he believes his experience in Afghanistan could have aided his works involves access to the troops in the area. He acknowledges the need to have personnel accompany the artist, but suggests that giving the artist greater freedom to determine his agenda would allow him to more accurately identify the appropriate themes that symbolize the mission, and reflect the work being accomplished.

AIR FORCE ARTIST: ARDELL BOURGEOIS

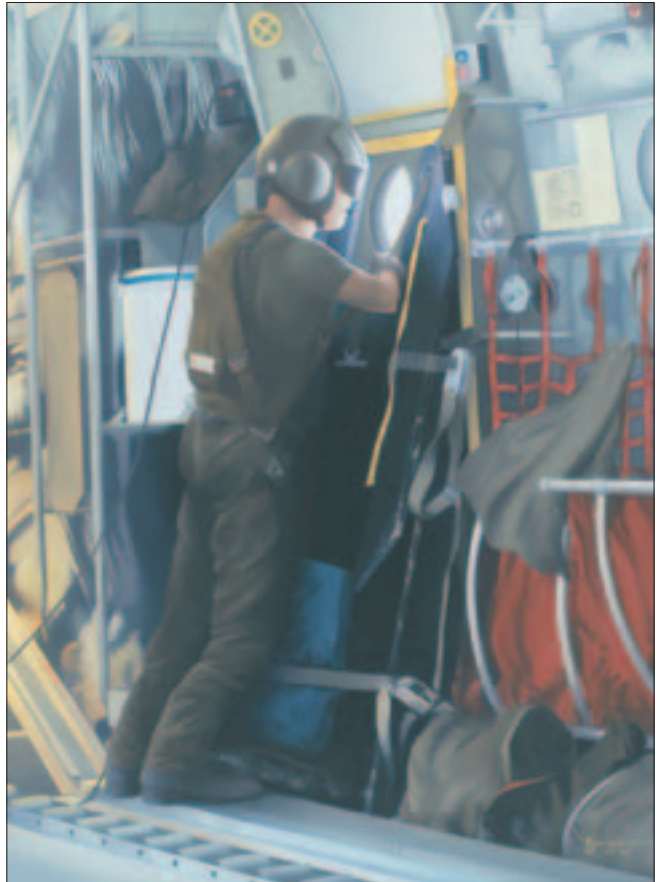
Ardell Bourgeois had heard of the programme when it was being announced in June 2001: “So I had put my name in as a potential artist that would be able to take part. When I heard that John Horton from Vancouver had been sent over with the naval contingent, I assumed I had been passed over.”¹⁶ Born in Alberta, Mr. Bourgeois moved several times before settling in British Columbia, after his father retired from the military. He graduated from the Emily Carr College of Art and Design. He remembers receiving a phone call near the end of May 2002 from Major André Levesque “...who asked me if I’d be interested in the programme, and telling me that I was one of the people they would be interested in having go.”¹⁷

Mr. Bourgeois arrived in theatre in July 2002 and began to get acquainted with his surroundings. “There were a lot of things that I was looking at,

and trying to capture some of the events that were going on there,” he remembers. “So what I ended up doing was trying to pick things that stood out in my mind; things that I was involved with directly.”

Once the themes were established, he took photographs and made sketches to be developed once he was back in Canada. In the case of *Aurora Time*: “I used a computer to help put the camp back together, based on photographs. The 3-D modelling programme that I have is quite useful, and I just built a series of rectangles that represented the buildings and their spacing so that I could get a reasonably accurate match-up with the photograph. And then I painted on hardboard because I wanted a smoother surface so that it would be a little easier to put in some fine details. And it’s all painted in oil.”

One painting, *Queen Without a Hanger*, was done on location, and this caused some headaches. “The heat was a problem,” he explains. “That was the main thing I had really underestimated — how much that would affect oil paint, and the light. I had brought my painting



On Guard for Thee. Painting by Ardell Bourgeois.



Queen Without a Hangar. Painting by Ardell Bourgeois.

kit with me so that I could do some sketching, and maybe try to do a finished piece while I was there. But the temperature getting up to 48 degrees Celsius on the tarmac by ten in the morning, the paint would literally come out of the tube so thin that it wouldn't attach to the board properly. So I would lay a brush on to try and put some paint over top of paint that was already there and it would literally lift the other paint off because it was just too thin to adhere. It limited my painting time. Because of operations I had to wait until aircraft were off the tarmac and things like that, and, once they were gone, I was clear for quite a few hours to paint. But then again I could only paint until about ten in the morning before it got too hot to actually use the equipment."

THE FUTURE OF THE CFAP

The feedback from the pilot project has been very positive and hopes are high that future trips will go equally well for the artists and for the Canadian Forces. One possible area that may be modified involves the time period spent in theatre. Mr. Bourgeois considered that the time frame "was just about right,"¹⁸ although in hindsight he would have spent less time in camp and more time flying. However, Mr. Horton believes that his trip was "...definitely too short. I would have liked to have been out there for a month."¹⁹

For Mr. MacKay, the amount of time in theatre was not as important as the activities occurring during that time. "What I found was, and I think this is going to have to be more of a criticism, in a sense the Canadians were getting ready to come back. By July, they knew they were going to be back by August, so what was happening was there were no more trips out beyond the airport by Canadians, even into the city of Khandahar,

or to the villages. Because there was no movement outside of the airport I was circumscribed by the situation. Evidence, socially or culturally, of being in Afghanistan was almost non-existent because I was basically at a military installation airport."

Something all three artists agree on is that they experienced aspects of military life that, although well known to military people, can only be discovered on-site. Allan MacKay enjoyed his experience²⁰ and was particularly impressed when leaving Afghanistan as "... Hercules, if I have this right, would fly at a fairly low range and then straight up in the air, and I think they go up to 6,000 feet. It's like you're in a rocket. It feels like you're in an earthquake when you are floating, and the whole plane is shaking."²¹ John Horton "...was extremely impressed by the way

that the men and women of the Navy worked together under the extreme pressure of the operation. I was also struck by the humanitarian side of things. At the end of one particular interception I was on, we handed over two large plastic bags full of water to the boats. It was just a little touch of humanitarian concern for the welfare of our fellow beings in a part of the world, where water is a most precious commodity. It really touched me to see this being done."²² Ardell Bourgeois noted that the atmosphere was more relaxed and informal than he had expected,²³ and that he came to have greater appreciation for the work done — not only by the fighter pilots but by so many others involved in transportation and intelligence work.²⁴ "There were a lot of things that opened up my eyes, even though I've been interested in the military and history for approximately 34 years now. But I was still able to learn something by actually going there and experiencing it. So that was really important."

The paintings produced during the pilot project were officially unveiled by the Chief of Defence Staff in Ottawa on 13 November 2003. The next group of artists has already been selected, and they will be beginning their participation in the near future. These experiences, as those for the pilot project artists, are coordinated by representatives of the three services.²⁵ The success of such activities depends on the contribution of many people in the CF and, as the pilot project has confirmed, the effort produces tremendous results. In a few years, the Directorate of History and Heritage hopes to be able to organize a travelling exhibition of some of the more representative works produced by the CFAP. Future generations will have access to a more complete picture of what it was like to be a member of the CF at the dawn of the 21st century.



NOTES

1. A.Y. Jackson, *A Painter's Country: The Autobiography of A.Y. Jackson*, (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1958), quoted in Dean Oliver and Laura Brandon, *Canvas of War: Painting the Canadian War Experience, 1914 to 1945*, (Ottawa: Canadian War Museum, 2000), p. 19.
2. On the programme see Maria Tippett, *Art at the Service of War: Canada, Art and the Great War*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984). She explains the attempts to bring in more Canadians in 1918, and describes the work of the 55 artists working with the fund in 1918. She concludes that the programme heightened the international appreciation of Canada's contribution to the war and the domestic feeling of pride (pp. 91-2). Oliver and Brandon, *Canvas of War*, pp. 58, 62 and 70, specify the role of Sir Edmund Walker and Eric Brown of the National Gallery of Canada in emphasizing the Canadian role, the home front and women. Aitken, who became Lord Beaverbrook in December 1916, was first attracted to the idea of artists in order to have important Canadian actions recorded – particularly actions that had not been photographed (such as the Second Battle of Ypres in 1915).
3. Oliver and Brandon, *Canvas of War*, p. 54.
4. Varley, quoted in Oliver and Brandon, *Canvas of War*, pp. 5, 66.
5. Robertson, *A Terrible Beauty: the Art of Canada at War*, (Toronto, 1985). Oliver and Brandon, *Canvas of War*, pp. 74-167.
6. Oliver and Brandon, *Canvas of War*, p. 156.
7. Oliver and Brandon, *Canvas of War*, p. 168. They add that the people responsible for this programme included Vincent Massey (Canada's High Commissioner to Great Britain), Col. A.F. Duguid and Major C.P. Stacey (National Defence) and H.O. McCurry (Director of the National Gallery of Canada).
8. Colville, quoted in Oliver and Brandon, *Canvas of War*, p. 153.
9. Canadian War Museum archives, CAFCAP files, folder 1251-8.1: "CAFCAP History." This file brings the CAFCAP story to 1992, when 34 artists had created 231 works of art.
10. Suzanne K. Langer, *Mind: an essay on human feeling* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1967) vol. 1, part 2, ch. 4.
11. Since that time, Senator Pépin has left the group while Laura Brandon of the Canadian War Museum and François-Marc Gagnon of Concordia University have been added. Also, Marianne Heggveit has replaced M. Roux and Kitty Scott has replaced M. Théberge. Michael Flahault played an important role in initiating the programme.
12. Mr. Horton recalls being at a dinner and introduced to Art Eggleton, then the Minister of National Defence. They discussed a recent *Globe and Mail* article that expressed the opinion that Afghanistan was too dangerous for artists. Art Eggleton said that's nonsense because his walls were covered in works done by artists who were in the trenches and that there was no point in sending artists once the action is all over: Interview with John Horton, 9 July 2003.
13. Interview with John Horton, 9 July 2003.
14. John Horton: "I am always looking for a story rather than just a portrait. There has to be a story line behind it because I find with any painting it is the story that sells the painting very often and makes it more appealing. That is my starting point." Interview with John Horton, 9 July 2003.
15. Interview with Allan MacKay, 22 July 2003: "In other words, just trying to capture as much as I could, the totality of the experience, visually and also I was interested in the various contexts."
16. John Horton, during an interview, 9 July 2003, recalls that the television interview Ardell Bourgois saw was aired as he was arriving on ship: "Public Affairs here in Vancouver had arranged for me to do an interview on television prior to me going. It was aired while I was on the way to Dubai. Of course, I didn't see it, and, as I was going up the gangway, I was greeted by people saying that they had just seen me on TV."
17. Interview with Ardell Bourgois, 9 July 2003.
18. Interview with Ardell Bourgois, 9 July 2003, "To be honest, if I had the opportunity again, I probably would have taken more flights. I would have gone out more than just staying around the camp as much as I did. As far as time, I think somewhere around two weeks worked fine."
19. In fact, one of the first questions Commodore Leery asked me was, 'How long are you here for?' When I told him he said that it wasn't very long and maybe we could get that extended.
20. Interview with Allan MacKay, 22 July 2003: "Going to Afghanistan, I had the experience of travelling with the military, a very good experience too."
21. Interview with Allan MacKay, 22 July 2003: "That is the manoeuvre to get over the danger zone, and then they can ease up into 2,200 feet or whatever. So that was pretty visceral. It was quite an interesting experience."
22. Interview with John Horton, 9 July 2003: "Here they were on a very serious mission and yet at the end of it they had compassion for these people in these open boats and the conditions they were under. That will always be a lasting memory with me."
23. Interview with Ardell Bourgois, 9 July 2003: "It was a little bit different on the base. One thing I will comment on is that I've never seen so many Colonels on one base in my life...You had Colonels from every branch. So there was a lot more brass than I ever expected. At the same time, because the base was not a saluting base, nobody had rank insignia. You never really knew if you were talking to a Major, a Colonel or a Private or whatever. So it was pretty relaxed. There wasn't any level of formality that was oppressive or anything like that."
24. Interview with Ardell Bourgois, 9 July 2003: "There are so many strong memories. It was a real eye-opener for me – to get an understanding, especially with the transport guys, how much preparation they have to go through. And the intelligence guys giving them information on SAM sites and threats and everything else that's involved all along with the flight path. And the preparation they have to make to get into an area where there is a potential threat."
25. The heritage departments of each service assure the coordination: Lieutenant-Commander G. Arbuckle of the Navy, Lieutenant-Colonel R. Duchesneau of the Army and Mr. Don Pearson of the Air Force.

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