

✕ Memoir



The art of war

THIS YEAR, NOVELIST **SHARON E. McKAY** BECAME THE FIRST CHILDREN'S WRITER TO SERVE AS A CANADIAN WAR ARTIST. HERE ARE HER IMPRESSIONS

MARCH 8 I am at Pearson International Airport in Toronto, waiting to board a plane and then another that will ultimately take me to Kandahar. After a frantic month of preparations, I finally have time to think.

I am a 55-year-old grandma. I am also a war artist, the first children's writer to hold the title. I got the gig because of my novels *Charlie Wilcox*, *Charlie Wilcox's Great War* and *War Brothers*, a book about child soldiers. I also know from conflict: I spent six summers in a house between two warring areas in Belfast, Northern Ireland, in a nasty skirmish dubbed the Troubles. In the words of Leon Trotsky, "You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you." So it would seem.

War artists go to war; it's in the job description. I'm on the heels of a long line of artists, most of whom are visual: Alan Sorrell, A.R. Thompson, Arthur Lismer, Alex Colville and my personal fave, Gertrude Kearns. More recently, the list boasts a cartoonist, and the current lineup includes a choreographer and a poet. There's not a propagandist in the bunch — no flag-waving, blank-eyed soldiers or pre-approved narratives. Canadian war artists *interpret* war; they don't have to support it. No one has asked me what I think of our role in Afghanistan. No one has told me what to write or requested to preview my material, and no money has changed hands. How Canadian.

MARCH 10 Today, we are in Camp Mirage, Canada's staging area, located in a coalition-friendly country. It's the leaping off point to Kandahar Airfield (KAF). The security is tight, accommodations are comfortable, movies are alfresco, and we dine under sand-colour tarps. But just as the whole experience starts to feel like an exotic vacation, the war intervenes. A soldier approaches and says, "There's a ramp ceremony at 0200 hours. You're invited."

Hours later, as bagpipes whine through the still air, I stand on an airfield in the shadow of massive planes and watch as soldiers hoist a flag-draped case onto their shoulders. There is the body of a young man in there. My sons are 19 and 26. I can't help but think of this young soldier's mother. All those thousands of diapers changed, bedtime stories, years of sitting in freezing hockey arenas, nights standing in front of the window waiting for his return from a school dance, a game, a party — all given up for a war that our prime minister says we cannot win. How did we get here? When did we blink?

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Later, I discover that every Canadian casualty can receive up to four such ceremonies. When I ask soldiers, "What do you think of them?" the reply is often a shake of the head followed by a sombre, "But I would never miss one."

MARCH 11 I have been issued body armour, a helmet, gloves and eyewear for my time on the ground. It's midnight and I've just boarded a troop ship. Destination: KAF.

I sit with my back to the windows, strapped in, facing soldiers. They all carry guns the size of nine-year-olds. It's too loud to talk but steady enough to write. Four women dressed in full battle gear sit across from me. One might be 20, the rest look to be in their forties. The "females" (their word, not mine) eventually doze off, heads resting on the nozzles of their guns. The Forces take women seriously. Ten per cent of the Canadian soldiers on the ground, or "in theatre," are female and 15 per cent make up the Forces. We now have the right to die alongside men in battle.

MARCH 12 With the dawn cresting, I'm in a Griffon helicopter over the desert. There are two gunners manning two different machine guns. We use earplugs. A gunner has written on a whiteboard: "Testing guns. Don't panic."

Here's how I got to fly in a Griffon: I landed at KAF last night, deplaned at 3 a.m. and was told, "You are going to a FOB, be ready to leave in two hours. Get some sleep." Sleep? Are you kidding? What's a FOB again? Right — forward operating base (a 10-year-old would call it a "fort"). The FOB we are going to is called Ma'sum Ghar and it's in Taliban country.

My "babysitters" showed up at 4:45 a.m. Master Warrant Officer Gail Sullivan, 47, is from Newfoundland and Cpl. Greg Van Sevanant (whom I dub "Dad" because he looks like a 1950s sitcom dad) is a 21-year-old from Alberta. Apparently their role is to keep me from doing too many stupid things.

The Griffon lands inside the FOB. It's a gravel pit. If there is a sound to Afghanistan, it's not the *boom-boom* of war, it's the *crunch-crunch* of rocks underfoot. With no trees in sight, Afghanistan has been called "the moon with goats on it." The moon part is right; I see no goats.

The FOB is the length of about 20 football fields and is surrounded by bald, pale mountains. Massive tanks stand on guard at strategic points on the mountaintops. Road construction is everywhere. This war is not being fought by soldiers, it's being built by engineers. The other thing about the FOB is that it looks permanent, as though it and we will be here for a long time.

The ANA, or Afghan National Army (FYI, we have stumbled into acronym hell), mans the FOB's main gates. Tucked into a makeshift home/office beside the gates are three females. Lieut. Brenda Andrews, Master Cpl. Stephanie Emond and Master Cpl. Michelle Neilson make up the clerical side of the outfit, but really,

they run the joint. "Will you come for a barbecue tomorrow night?" asks Michelle. Absolutely.

We hop into a Jeep to cross the compound. My quarters are a combination tent and metal container.

MARCH 14 Today, I went out on a foot patrol. The purpose? Commune with the locals; see and be seen. But first, I got a briefing. On the agenda: how to identify an IED (improvised explosive device). Conclusion: There's no way to spot them. It's a crapshoot.

Dressed in body armour and helmet, we walk in a line leaving a good 10 paces between one another to minimize the damage should one unlucky sot step on a land mine. "We have you covered," a soldier says. "Don't be afraid."

I'm not afraid. I'm hot.

The land around us is parched, the air is yellow, and the ground is red and as hard as cement. Russian souvenirs — rusted tanks and bits of vehicles — emerge from the ground like kicked-over tombstones. Children play on them.

We head into a village. Walls and homes appear to have sprung fully formed from the earth. An old man combs his beard in a polluted small stream. Dusty, smiling children emerge from behind broken gates. "Salaam," I say with a smile. Girls cover their faces and giggle. Most of the children wait for a handout of candy; others sneer and turn their backs. War may be-

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gin with hope of restoration and eventual peace, but inevitably it plants seeds for the next war. If there is any doubt, look into the eyes of an Afghan child.

"Where are the adults?" I bellow to a soldier.

"Asleep. It's too hot to walk around," he yells back. Just what I was thinking.

The last few yards before re-entering the FOB are the most dangerous. We walk through a line of gaily decorated transport trucks driven by Afghan men. They glare at us; we move faster.

LATER I just got back from the barbecue with the "females" by the front gate. The food in the FOB is fantastic. The females have been based here for five months and have rarely been outside the gates. "What's it like

out there? Did you talk to anyone?" I have seen more outside the FOB in a few days than these soldiers will see during their entire tour. As Brenda, the boss, explains it, "There is no reason for us to put ourselves in the line of fire." The message is clear: They are not here to sightsee; they are here to do a job.

I'm sitting outside my tent/trailer, looking up at the stars. The sky is breathtaking. Hours ago, I stood on the wall of the FOB and watched women shrouded in burkas walk down a dirt road. I looked back over my shoulder and saw Canadian female officers tapping on computer keyboards, talking into cellphones and making decisions, then glanced back at the cloaked women. A wall divides them.

MARCH 15 "Do you want to ride in a tank?"

Do I? Hell yeah.

After taking in the tank's size, my first thought is, How does one get in it? The ladder is at nose level. In other words, I am supposed to put my foot up past my chest and slot it into an inch-long metal "step" — and then what?

Let's review: I am 55 years old. Add 40 pounds of armour and a massively heavy helmet to my not so svelte self and you see my predicament. It isn't pretty, but I do it.

Standing at the top of a mountain, I look out over the FOB to a huge Canadian flag made out of painted red and white rocks. Then a roar. I turn. Coming at me: a tank at full throttle. A few feet away from me, it suddenly stops. A female in battle gear flings off her helmet, goggles, mask and shouts, "You the children's writer?" I say yes. She pulls out a picture of her three-year-old.

MARCH 16 We have arrived back at KAF via a Chinook helicopter. Civilization is defined as Tim Hortons and an American PX (store) with a Walmart layout. (FYI, the Canadian PX is a walk-in closet that sells maple leaf-shaped cookies.)

Giant guns hang off UN soldiers like Christmas tree ornaments. Every soldier is armed to the teeth. Funny how quickly one gets used to the sight of weapons. They are carried everywhere — to the latrine, the gym, the cafeteria. It's in the caf that I meet up with a group of females.

Surprisingly, our conversation turns to sex. Surprising because there is an uncompromising no-sex rule for deployed Canadian soldiers — even among those who are married. Flirting is out too. Soldiers caught with their pants down may find themselves on the next flight home, in disgrace. One young female described her deployed married life, sans sex: "When my husband's here at KAF, he calls the kids at bedtime, goes over

their homework and reads them a story. Our kids are with my parents during the week and his parents on weekends. After the kids have gone to bed, we meet, work out together and go to Timmy's for a coffee. I do the morning phone call with the kids."

Many female soldiers have children under 10. How do they cope? "I was a soldier before I was a parent," I hear more than once. "I am a soldier and my kid is a soldier's kid. We're in it together," I hear too, and it's inevitably followed by a look that screams, "You're a civvy. I don't expect you to understand."

MARCH 17 I visit an Afghan school where, in an effort to get children to laugh, I tell them that I have a grandson and ask if they can guess how old I am. The teacher translates. When I announce my age, the teacher stops and stares, her eyes wide, her mouth a gaping hole revealing black stubs where teeth should be. In that instant, I realize she is perhaps 20 years younger than me, and looks 10 years older. Sharon, you are an idiot.

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I make origami cranes, show them snaps of my giant standard poodle wearing a hat and we all reel with laughter. I take pictures and let them see themselves on the viewer. We play pat-a-cake. We don't need the interpreter for this.

If I have any regrets about my stay in Afghanistan, it's that my time with children was so limited.

MARCH 20 It's over and I don't want to leave. In a few hours we will be back in Camp Mirage.

I arrived with the iconic image of this war as the ramp ceremony. I leave with the memory of a female I'll call Rebecca, a grandmother of six who has, arguably, one of the most dangerous jobs in the war, one not discussed in the media. "Do your children know what you do?" I had asked her. She'd laughed as she shook her head.

When I was younger, I'm sure I would have viewed military life as the polar opposite of a creative life. Now I feel privileged and responsible: privileged to have had the chance to stand on the perimeter, peering in; responsible for placing these remarkable people in harm's way in the first place.

I blinked. We all did. **M**