

CONTRIBUTING TO THE LEGACY: GERTRUDE KEARNS, *THE ART OF COMMAND*, AND THE DEVELOPING MEMORY OF THE AFGHAN WAR

By Dr. Craig Leslie Mantle

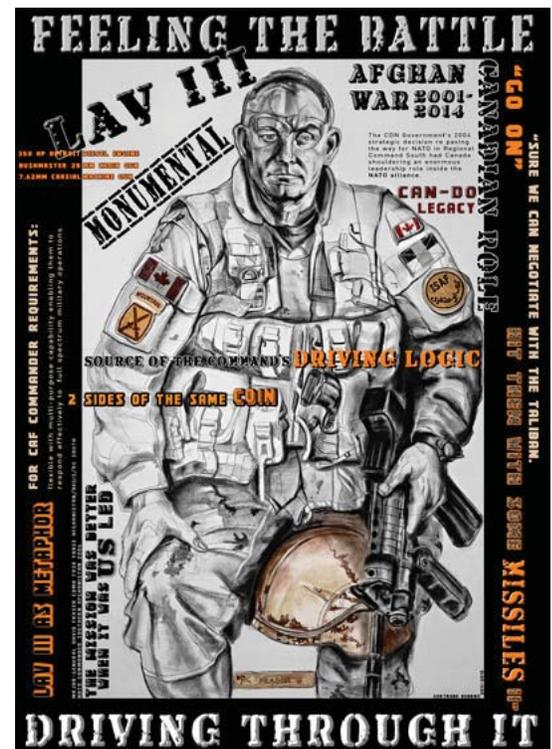
How will future generations remember Canada's mission in Afghanistan? What will be its legacy? It is perhaps too early to tell. Combat operations ceased in 2011 while complete withdrawal of Canadian military personnel occurred only in 2014. But the lasting memory of Afghanistan has already started to take shape. The images of ramp ceremonies in Kandahar, repatriation ceremonies in Trenton, and the long convoy of black vehicles somberly rolling down the Highway of Heroes have assumed something of an iconic quality. The participants themselves have ensured that their voices will be incorporated into whatever narrative emerges by contributing their thoughts to anthologies¹ or publishing their own full-length works.² The growth of charitable organizations to aid the military community is yet another important dimension. And so the list goes on.

Without a doubt, art strongly influences how conflicts in which Canadians have participated, as either combatants or peacekeepers, are remembered. One need only visit the Canadian War Museum (CWM) in Ottawa, where pieces from its extensive collection of war art are on display – encompassing prints, drawings, sculptures, and paintings – to see the truth of this statement.³ Artists such as Frederick Varley, Charles Comfort, and Ted Zuber

have documented through their work elements of Canada's major wars of the 20th Century – the First, Second, and Korean, respectively – and in so doing have influenced how each conflict has and will be remembered. The same also applies to artists who have recorded aspects of Canadian peacekeeping missions, like Ian Harding MacKay and his work on Somalia.

Through *The Art of Command ~ Portraits and Posters from Canada's Afghan Mission*, Gertrude Kearns has done something similar, contributing to the developing memory of Afghanistan by exploring the “inner-soldier” of many of Canada's senior military leaders from this conflict and describing the intellectual, even personal, challenges that they faced as commanders.⁴ Afghanistan will surely be remembered, at least partially, as the “Difficult War”⁵ or the “Long War.”⁶ Kearns's art begins to explain why.

The Art of Command premiered at the Fort York Visitor Centre in Toronto from 5 March until 14 June 2015. The exhibition was divided into two main sections, seemingly for reasons of space. Head-only portraits of nine senior Canadian



LAV III AS METAPHOR [Major-General David Fraser], 2015. (Image credit: Gertrude Kearns.)

commanders, all colonels and generals, were located in a separate room that began the installation. Painted on a black background, the heads are colourful and bright, mixing flesh tones and CADPAT camouflage in varying proportions. As a consequence, the portraits have a digital feel that in some instances borders on the slightly abstract. Some of the subjects gaze off into the distance, while others stare directly into the viewer's eyes. No



L-R: Lieutenant-Colonel Steve Jourdain, 2013; Lieutenant-General (ret'd) Marc Lessard, 2014; Lieutenant-Colonel François Dufault, 2014. (Image credit: Toni Hafkenscheid.)

one smiles.

The remaining pieces were located in a nearby corridor. At the entrance to the hallway, ten full-length drawings of various soldiers were presented. It is from both the head portraits and drawings that come what is arguably the most interesting part of the exhibition, the 23 texted war prints. Incorporating single words, pithy catchphrases, or complete sentences that pertain to the sitter and his experiences, each print offers a partial window into the mind of the subject. Although the prints are specific to individual commanders, in many cases they also reference the broader period in which these soldiers served. Interestingly, a few pieces include either attributable or anonymous criticism of the subject by fellow soldiers.

This selection of text was, to varying degrees, a collaborative effort between Kearns and her subject, alternating between her own sound bite-like conceptualizations, denser more journalistic text, and even script-like blocks of dialogue. The officers

did not control the text as has sometimes been assumed; the artist always drove the discussion and set the research agenda. In some cases, she asked for specific text in an officer's own words; in other instances, she morphed commentary from many officers into one voice. As a result, the text is exceptionally personal and uniquely crafted to each image, and if read carefully, gives insight into the individual as a commander and the multitude of challenges, some ultimately unresolvable, that he was forced to confront. Indeed, this body of work is as much about military concepts that interest Kearns, as it is about what actually occurred on the ground in Afghanistan. The decision to link text and image was deliberate and far from hasty – certain words simply “worked” better with certain leaders for both personal and professional reasons (and in a few cases, so that a clever play-on-words might be employed!).

For some, the prints may be endlessly distracting because in many cases so much text accompanies a subject's portrait. One

has the feeling of reading a disjointed, yet fascinating, book when viewing the pieces relating to Brigadier-General Richard Giguère (*THE WAY AHEAD*, artist's collection) or Colonel Ian Hope (*THE LONG FIGHT*, artist's collection). Viewers certainly have to work at appreciating this art. Yet, the inclusion of so much text may be a strength. In a very real sense, the texted prints are historical documents in and of themselves, recording what each soldier thought about his Afghan experience at the time that the piece was created. Like the memory of the war itself, their impressions of their own experiences may, perhaps will, change.

Early on, Kearns made the conscious decision to identify each commander on his respective piece and to secure his approval of the final product. The latter decision challenged the creative process, as there was occasionally some “push back” – some things were perhaps better left unsaid or phrased a little more diplomatically – but she wanted that. In her estimation, the back-and-

forth exchanges, when they occurred, strengthened the end result and forced her to continue learning and considering different perspectives throughout. She ultimately wanted to present an image with dynamic yet unsensational text that felt “right” for each officer, and of course, “right” for her.

The exhibition's offerings, as is usual for major shows like this, included more than just the passive display of art. During these three-and-a-half months, Kearns gave a number of lectures and guided tours to interested visitors, providing a degree of insight and behind-the-scenes commentary that would not otherwise be available. That the artist was so readily accessible was a boon for all, organizers and patrons alike. Owing to the success of the show, Kearns is hopeful that national or provincial galleries across Canada will opt to host her exhibition in the near future. By so doing, they will inevitably help preserve the memory of the war in Afghanistan through contemporary military art and simultaneously offer a

window into the myriad professional challenges that Canadian soldiers faced – and will surely face again.

The City of Toronto certainly did its part to further both of these ends. Aside from providing an *apropos* venue, it paid for both the printing and framing of the large texted prints, thereby ensuring uniformity throughout the exhibition. The City's Museums & Heritage Services also contributed to the accompanying catalogue, with Dr. Larry Ostola, the director, writing a short introductory foreword and Mr. Wayne Reeves, the chief curator, authoring an insightful essay on Kearns and her war art from the Gulf War to Afghanistan. (Kearns's own essay followed his, as do various statements from the soldiers featured in the exhibition that she gathered.) Publicizing the exhibition through both traditional and social media ensured that it received notice within and beyond the city's contemporary art scene and military garrison. Reeves and his team even suggested the title of the exhibition, Kearns having proposed something

entirely different (*CORE COMMANDS: Senior Leadership, Canada's Afghan Mission*). It is safe to say that without the City of Toronto's wholehearted support, *The Art of Command* would not have come off as well as it did. In Kearns's estimation, this exhibition was an exemplar of cooperation between artist and the expertise resident in community galleries/museums.

Gertrude Kearns has deep connections to Toronto, her home since she was three-months-old, having been born on her father's (Frederick Steiger) business trip to St. John's, Newfoundland in 1950 on the invitation of Premier Joey Smallwood. Apart from three years (1979 to 1982) in South America, predominately in Brazil, she continues to reside in the city and maintains a home/studio there. Previously affiliated with several commercial galleries and the Propeller Centre for the Visual Arts, a member-run and community-oriented gallery in the heart of downtown, she has been independent of commercial representation since 2005; the intense

L-R: SCIENCE OF WAR [Lieutenant-General Andrew Leslie], 2012; JUST WAR THEORY [Brigadier-General David Fraser], 2012; HOPE OF WAR [Lieutenant-Colonel Ian Hope], 2012; LIGHT 'EM UP [Captain Jon Hamilton], 2013; CONCEPT AND WAR [Brigadier-General Jonathan Vance], 2013 (Image credit: Toni Hafkenscheid.)





ANCIENT/MODERN 2006 Col M Hussin Andiwali (ANP PRT Kandahar after the VBIED hit Jan 15 2006). (Image credit: Gertrude Kearns.)

and particular nature of her military work has not meshed easily with their outlooks. Given her need for completely independent access to the military and flexibility in terms of both the content of her pieces and deadlines, she has preferred to remain autonomous. This approach, the consequence of which is that she manages every aspect of her career, strongly influenced *The Art of Command* – she desired to have a comprehensive body of work finished before mounting an exhibition, and to avoid altogether both commercial pressures and the need to justify her work to a civilian audience prematurely, which an association with a gallery would have occasioned.

Kearns has worked, both officially and unofficially, as a Canadian military/war artist for over two decades. Perhaps owing to her independence, private collectors, national institutions and universities, more so than commercial galleries, have gravitated towards and shown her work. Her paintings can consequently be found at the CWM; Canadian Forces College,

Toronto; National Defence Headquarters (NDHQ), Ottawa; the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax, and so on. Significantly, she has also been the “war artist in residence” at the Royal Canadian Military Institute (RCMI) in Toronto, a private members’ organization that promotes education on matters related to defence, security, and foreign affairs. Since 1989, she has had numerous solo exhibitions in Toronto and has won several awards from such organizations as the Ontario Society of Artists and the National Aviation Museum. From 2003 to 2005, following a decade of researched projects, she participated in the Canadian Forces Artists Program (CFAP), a military-run initiative designed to record military activity both at home and abroad through art.

Working completely outside of the CFAP framework, Kearns travelled on contract to Afghanistan in 2006 and spent four-and-a-half weeks with Task Force Afghanistan (TFA), Rotation 0, being embedded with the Canadian Battle Group centred on the 1st Battalion, Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry in Kandahar. And, just prior to returning to Canada, she also found herself in Kabul with the Strategic Advisory Team, a Canadian undertaking to build capacity within Afghan government departments through mentorship. Then Colonel Steve Noonan, the commander of TFA in 2006, conceived of and organized the contract, the time spent in Afghanistan being an opportunity to collect material for the art that would follow later that year.

While overseas, Kearns completed more than 50 small sketches and took reference photographs “outside the wire.” She completed many large paper studies in her Toronto studio afterwards. The body of work that resulted – six canvases, all three feet by four feet – were produced within six months of her return to Toronto and have since been installed in six different locales throughout the Department of National Defence (DND). The canvases were framed and delivered to Colonel Noonan at NDHQ in the fall of 2006. These six canvases, it should be noted, were very different from the subsequent independent (i.e., non-commissioned) works that make up *The Art of Command*; they incorporated a minimal amount of text and, in Kearns’s words, were “basically image pieces.”

Kearns’s exposure to the Canadian Afghan mission via TFA was the genesis for what would culminate in 2015 with *The Art of Command*. This latter undertaking had the full support and unprecedented cooperation of DND despite it being conducted outside of its purview and control. It took about 10 years to create, with the last piece completed in early 2015, just in time for exhibition. (For the sake of comparison, that’s the entire length of Canada’s combat mission and follow-on training mission, plus a few more years on top of that for good measure!)

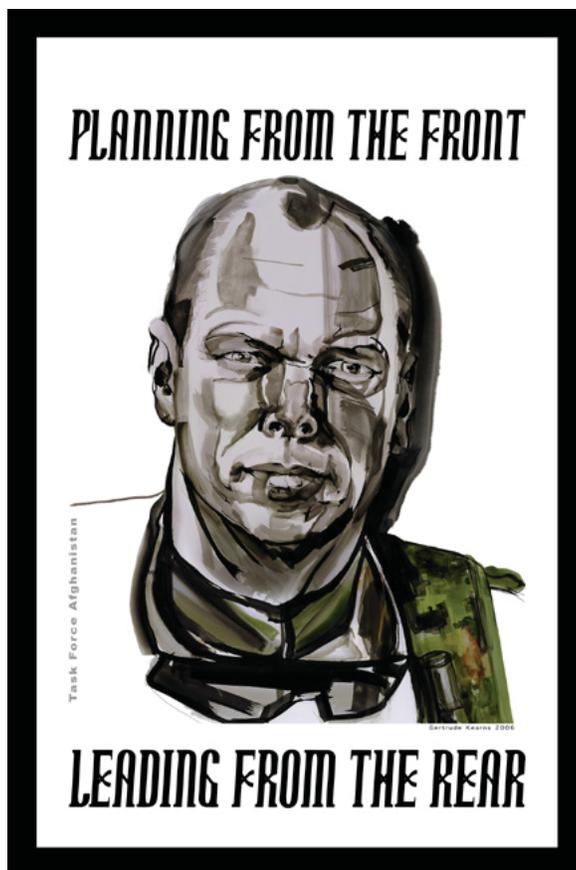
And there is ample reason why the entire project took a decade. Kearns first had to find her subjects. She approached many of them on her own initiative; her connection to the RCMI facilitated a number of introductions, but it was mostly her already-established reputation as an artist that opened the door. Additionally, she “harassed” some officers whom she hoped would participate (Major-General David Fraser finally relented after three years of hounding!), while sympathetic officers, like Noonan, exerted influence from within the military. To quote Lieutenant-Colonel Omer Lavoie, the commander of Task Force 3-06, “But gentle coercion by my superior chain of command and even

less gentle persuasion by Gertrude prevailed, and here I am [appearing in the exhibition].”

Then, multiple sittings in Kearns’s studio had to be scheduled. For senior officers in an army still engaged in Afghanistan, whether fighting the Taliban or training Afghan security forces, this was not always an easy task. Indeed, sittings were sometimes scheduled up to a year in advance. Colonel Ian Hope found time *en route* from Stuttgart, Germany to Edmonton in 2014 to meet with Kearns. No one ever cancelled. Kearns always acknowledges the respect and commitment these officers showed to her and her project: “It never ceased to amaze me that these commanders were willing to schedule work time for the project. I never took it for granted.” And then the difficult task of capturing images and deciding on text began!

In the exhibition at Fort York, Wayne Reeves, the curator, gave an appreciative nod towards Steve Noonan, Kearns’s initial 2006 “employer.” Although Noonan is featured throughout *The Art of Command*, Reeves installed a 2006 ink head study of Noonan with the collection of head-only portraits, all of which date between 2011 and 2014, to recognize his seminal role in facilitating an in-theatre contract that would ultimately provide Kearns with a foundation from which to expand in order to realize a much larger goal. Although stylistically the piece was “the odd man out,” as the nine large heads, all the same size, formed a visually-cohesive group, the ink study satisfied his sense of context and orientation. In a somewhat removed sense, Noonan was responsible for the project, and this responsibility had to be acknowledged.

But Noonan did more than just get Kearns to Afghanistan, where her larger and more ambitious ideas began to germinate. He reaffirmed that she was onto “something.”



PLAN/LEAD 2006 Colonel Steve Noonan. (Image credit: Gertrude Kearns.)

The ink study, which Reeves installed as an homage, proved to be a turning point in the progression from the TFA contract to the independently-pursued and more intellectual and conceptual works that followed. Kearns used this image as the ground to create her first and most visually-simple texted print, with the digitally-overlaid words “PLANNING FROM THE FRONT” appearing at the top, “LEADING FROM THE REAR” at the bottom, and Noonan’s head and shoulders squarely in the centre (PLAN/LEAD, artist’s collection).

Among other meanings – like where is the front in an asymmetric war? – the poster, based as it is on an ironic and supposed oxymoron, is meant to suggest that many operations had an Afghan-face, that Canadians may have planned them, but that it was Afghans (with help) that saw them through. Noonan initially questioned her wording, but after Kearns defended the content, he stated over

email, “You have created a working concept.” This print proved to be a watershed, establishing a starting point for the larger body of work to come, one that would explore through image and text the tactical, operational and strategic considerations that Canada’s leaders faced in Afghanistan. As Kearns said, Noonan was “the hinge into the concept.” “Once that initial piece was under my belt,” she recalled, “I knew I had a unique direction for my art that would include both leadership and mission concepts; I could breathe a sigh of relief.” The many texted prints that followed, when combined with the portraits, comprise *The Art of Command*.

Mixing recent military history with contemporary art, Gertrude Kearns has used large format portraits and texted prints as the jumping-off point to explore the complexity of command in modern, asymmetric warfare. *The Art of Command* is far from a passive exhibition, for it invites viewers to engage with the history of the mission and a handful of its protagonists, admittedly a very important handful. For Kearns, personally, it is imperative that her work challenge traditional notions of military art; all of her art has done that, and this material is no different. If nothing more, the collection prompts viewers to think about the awesome responsibilities that Canada’s soldiers held in Afghanistan and the complex and ever-changing environment in which those responsibilities were exercised. How this art will influence the memory of Afghanistan in the decades to come – significantly, marginally or not at all – remains to be seen. Only time will truly tell. ■

Dr. Craig Leslie Mantle is a Research Fellow at the CDA Institute. He was most recently employed at the Canadian War Museum as the post-1945 historian. He is the principal editor of In Their Own Words: Canadian Stories of Valour and Bravery

from Afghanistan, 2001-2007 (*Kingston: CDA Press, 2013*), a collection of first-person narratives by 23 Canadian soldiers who earned some of the nation's highest honours for their actions in Southwest Asia. He would like to thank Ms. Gertrude Kearns for her assistance – without it, this article would never have happened.

Readers interested in acquiring collectable small edition, original fine art prints in various sizes from *The Art of Command* are encouraged to contact the artist directly at gertrude_learns@hotmail.com.

Notes

1. For instance, Melanie Graham, ed., *Afghanistan: A Canadian Story, 2001-2014* (Ottawa: John McQuarrie Photography, 2014); Kevin Patterson and Jane Warren, eds., *Outside the Wire: The War in Afghanistan in the Words of Its Participants* (Toronto: Random House, 2007); and Craig Leslie Mantle et al., eds., *In Their Own Words: Canadian Stories of Valour and Bravery from Afghanistan, 2001-2007* (Kingston: CDA Press, 2013).
2. For instance, Harold Ristau, *At Peace with War: A Chaplain's Meditations from Afghanistan* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2012); Robert Semrau, *The Taliban Don't Wave* (Toronto: J. Wiley & Sons, 2012); Ryan Flavelle, *The Patrol: Seven Days in the Life of a Canadian Soldier in Afghanistan* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2011); Ray Wiss, *FOB DOC: A Doctor on the Front Lines in Afghanistan: A War Diary* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2009); and Ray Wiss, *A Line in the Sand: Canadians at War in Kandahar* (Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2010).
3. A glimpse of the CWM's collection is to be had through Dean F. Oliver and Laura Brandon, *Canvas of War* ~ *Military Art Treasures from the Canadian War Museum* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2000).
4. See also, Craig Leslie Mantle, "Commanding Art: Gertrude Kearns and Canada's Afghan Mission," *CDA Institute Blog: The Forum*, 9 June 2015, <https://www.cdainstitute.ca/en/blog/entry/commanding-art-gertrude-kearns-and-canada-s-afghan-mission>.
5. A phrase that has already seen some use. See Emily Spencer, ed., *The Difficult War: Perspectives on Insurgency and Special Operations Forces* (Kingston and Toronto: CDA Press and Dundurn Press, 2009).
6. Lieutenant-Colonel Ian Hope, "Agility and Endurance: Task Force Orion in Helmand," in Patterson and Warren, eds., *Outside the Wire*, p. 163.

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