

A memorable endeavour

By Kelly Gray | Photography: John Johnston



Putting names to the faces (L-R)

Captain Megan Couto is a serving officer with the 2nd Battalion Princess Patricia's Light Infantry. She is currently employed as Aide de Camp to the Governor-General of Canada. In 2017, Captain Couto made history by becoming the first female infantry officer to command the ceremonial Changing of the Guard at Buckingham Palace.

Private Lester Brown was with the Queen's Own Rifles in 1944 when he stormed the beach as part of D Company during the 'D' Day invasion. Private Brown was wounded in the action but carried on to marry, have a family and live to the ripe old age of 92. Lester Brown was a member of Nova Scotia's black community, and was, until his passing in 2013, the last surviving person of colour who was a member of the 'D' Day invasion force. Today, his family still lives in Nova Scotia and has plans to travel to Winnipeg to visit the mural.

Captain Jennifer Casey was a member of the Snowbirds aerobatic team when her aircraft malfunctioned this past May. She was killed in the

The Army, Navy and Airforce Veterans Association (ANAVETS/ ANAF) has been around more than a few years. The group is the oldest veterans' organization in Canada with an anecdotal history that dates back to the 1700s. Over these years, they have provided places to fraternize as well as sites to honour our service people. ANAF 283 in St. James Assiniboia (3585 Portage Avenue, Winnipeg) is continuing this recognition of service with a new mural on its east-facing exterior wall.

The mural, titled *Canadian Hero*, is a breathtaking work completed by Winnipeg artists Mandy van Leeuwen and Franklin Fernando. The pair took on the 12-foot by 85-foot expanse of wall beginning in late September (2020) and put their brushes and paints away by mid-October, just in time for the early snowfall and ahead of Remembrance Day.

The work features four portraits that include Captain Megan Couto, Private Lester Brown, Captain Jennifer Casey, and Sergeant Tommy

Prince. As well, the artwork shows details such as HMCS Winnipeg, a WWII armoured tank, a WWI biplane and a Peacekeeper's medal, as well as the ANAVETS impressive emblem.

The idea for the project came from the mind of ANAF 283 club member and retired Manitoba art and music teacher, Shirley Jean (SJ) Feasey. SJ brainstormed with club executive as well as Take Pride Winnipeg to come up with the overarching plan and then met with mural painter Mandy van Leeuwen to fine-tune the concept.

The idea came about after a Saturday afternoon gathering at the club. It was mentioned that Take Pride Winnipeg had funds for mural projects to beautify buildings and neighbourhoods. The club had a wall that had been defaced by graffiti. SJ liked the idea of a commemorative mural on the space. And, when ex-club president Bill Stradder told Take Pride Winnipeg the club didn't have dollars for this in the kitty, SJ agreed to pony up funds of her own to get the project underway. She remembers that she went home with the idea percolating in her head.

"I sat in my Lazy Boy and thought of what the mural should incorporate. I have no military background, but I do have a long-standing respect for our service people and saw this project as a good way to help us all remember their sacrifices. I knew I wanted to see two men and two ladies, as well as a ship, a tank and an airplane. The next time we met, I was even more committed," she says.

SJ met with Tom Ethans of Take Pride Winnipeg and artist Mandy van Leeuwen at the site. "We looked at the wall. Tom and Mandy suggested it would cost more than we thought to cover the huge surface. As I said, I was committed, so I agreed to take on the additional cost," she said, mentioning that her son Scott helped with a contribution and club members Bill and Barb Stradder also came forward with additional monies to help with some of the expenses. Next, she arranged for another meeting with Mandy.

"We got together a couple more times to discuss ideas such as multiculturalism and how important it was to Canada's identity. We



subsequent crash. Captain Casey was a resident of Halifax but was based in Moose Jaw with 431 Air Demonstration Squadron before her untimely passing. She was the Squadron's Public Affairs Officer and held Bachelor degrees in Arts and Journalism as well as Interdisciplinary Studies (MA). Boyfriend Scott Boyd has said that Captain Casey was passionate about art and would have been honoured to be included in this work.

Sergeant Tommy Prince, the great, great-grandson of Saulteaux Chief Peguis, was a Manitoban of legendary renown. Prince fought in both WWII with the 1st Canadian Special Services Battalion and the Korean Conflict with

Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. He was presented with many medals for his considerable service. Indeed, King George VI summoned him to Buckingham Palace for the Military Medal of Honour for his work with Special Services. Prince also received the Silver Star on behalf of the US President and was accorded six service medals (1939-1945 Star; The Italy Star; The France and Germany Star; The Defence Medal; The Canadian Volunteer Service Medal; and The War Medal 1939-1945). He was accorded the Korea Medal (Canadian) as well as the United Nations Korea Medal, and is entitled to posthumous laurels with the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal for Korea.

thought the mural should offer this element. I wanted the ANAVETS' crest in the center, and club members suggested the Peacekeepers' medal because they are so often forgotten in the mix."

Mandy van Leeuwen is a contemporary realist painter and is a Manitoba mural artist with more than 60 works on display on walls in Winnipeg and other centres. On the ANAF 283 piece, she states that goals were to embody images that showed Canada standing together in all her multi-cultural glory.

"The past meets the present in this piece," she says, noting that she and fellow artist Franklin Fernando worked from the center ANAVETS crest outward using Nova Color Artists' Acrylic Paint, a specialty product made in California that holds the surface well and resists fading and wear.

"I love this paint. It can handle our climate and has a 'glow' to it that is unlike other paints we have used. The wall also worked in our favour.

Dimensionally it was very good and the surface did not require any treatment beforehand."

Mandy reports that she contacted Franklin Fernando, an artist she has collaborated with in the past, to work alongside her on this project because of his skill with portraiture.

"Franklin and I each have unique styles. I wanted to see how we would let each other's individuality come through on this work," she says, adding that they played with colours until they got the exact right balance and then went with it freehand.

"This is different from what I normally do in art. I love the fact that murals represent an intersection of art and community. This piece is all about 'unity' and connecting people," she says.

According to Fernando, they used a projector as a timesaving aid. "The faces are six feet tall and we paint freehand. Without a projector, you have to get down from the scaffolding and go far away from the work to view it. The back

and forth takes a lot of time and we only had about two weeks of good weather," he says.

"Mandy is an artist that works to bring out the best in her collaborators. She allowed me to be myself. Together we thought about the blues and oranges, and blended and experimented before we hit the right balance. For example, we looked at three different paint combinations before we were satisfied with the colouration of the Jennifer Casey image. It was the same with the placement of each face. We discussed equality and gender balance for quite some time before any paint went onto the wall. I felt we created a very strong, positive message that tells a story," he says.

Mandy agrees. "SJ gave us a good starting point from where we could let the art unfold. In the end, what we achieved is a surreal image that is tacked to the reality of Canadians' commitment to multi-cultural values and service."