

Canadian Forces Artist Program (CFAP) in Ukraine: A Quick Glimpse

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A year ago (January), I received an email stating that I had been officially accepted to participate in the Canadian Forces Artist Program (CFAP) with the 2018-2019 cohort. My proposal requested that I would be embedded with the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) in Ukraine on [Operation UNIFIER](#). The operation is a CAF mission to support the Security Forces of Ukraine. The operation's focus is to assist with security force training to help them improve and build their capability and capacity.



A cold morning at the Yavoriv Training Base: the CAF oversees the Ukrainian soldiers preparing for their final offensive during their week-long training exercise.

Through interdisciplinary means of photography, film, and painting, I would examine the overlapping military cultures, history, and architecture in the region against the mission's operational mandate. From the visual explorations and research conducted on site I would create a series of paintings and a large scale interdisciplinary work. Of course, as always, the work changes when you hit the ground. I definitely over

prepared but I am glad I did. I landed with a shot list for the video and prepared interview questions. I pretty much threw these lists out after my second day..

Three days before my flight, Ukraine declared Martial Law in the bordering oblasts (provinces) with Russia, the Black Sea, and the Azov Sea due to [Russia's Act of Aggression](#) in the Kerch Strait. I was not sure what this would mean for my travel (turns out absolutely nothing) but because the military was on a higher alert they did not allow me to fly my drone in or over the training area. So I had to adapt. I ended up relying heavily on audio and spent much of my time recording the ambient sounds around the training area and on base. I interviewed CAF members, a Ukrainian Tank Platoon Commander, and a Ukrainian Cadet Linguist while embedded at the Yavoriv training base. I decided to record only the audio and not video for these interviews.



Trench system in Yavoriv training area (above)

I was very keen to see the Russian trench systems in the training area. They are still actively being used in training and on the front lines along the Donbas Region in Eastern Ukraine. I am curious how the history of war and conflict in Ukraine continues to impact the current political and economic climate and push the war in the east. I wanted to see in action how the Ukrainian forces continue to use these dated Russian trench systems, bunkers, Cold War/Soviet tactics, and modern technology like drones and witness how these elements come together in the field and on the front lines. When it comes down to it, dirt stops bullets, and the Ukrainian army has had to be extremely adaptable and use what they have and to the best of their ability.



(Left) Bunker along the trench line

I was unable to get into the trench system during the training because it was actively being used by the Ukrainian soldiers as their defense position during their week long final exercise that we were privy to witnessing. On the last day our Sgt arranged for me to walk through the trench system as the Ukrainian soldiers had moved forward past the trench line. I set up my iPhone with my DJI Osmo Mobile gimbal and began to walk into the trench system. I spent almost 30 minutes walking along and could have disappeared much longer as the trench line continued to sprawl for what seemed like forever. When I got back to my starting point I turned around and began to walk back into the trench system. In doing this I hope to take this footage and create a

repetitive loop of this footage. I have decided that I will create a sound collage using the interviews and ambient audio and it will be paired with this footage. This is the only concrete idea that I left the military base with.

In addition to this program I decided to stay in the country and travel independently of the military for three weeks. I knew this time and experience would be vital to understanding the complex current political and economic climate in Ukraine.

I attended the Halifax International Security Forum the week prior to this trip and met two remarkable individuals who introduced me to contacts in Ukraine, who further introduced me to a network of people: politicians, diplomats, journalists, volunteers, NGOs, etc. I was able to secure quite a few interviews in the different cities I traveled to and still have a handful of interviews scheduled over the next couple of weeks via Skype.



Ukrainian soldiers settling into their defensive position.



(Left) Map of Ukraine, from the Australian Dept. of Foreign Affairs website providing safety precautions for travel to Ukraine.

I am very grateful for the time and the experience that these people shared with me. I was also shocked that people were interested in sitting down with an artist to talk about the war and the impacts it has had on the country. And for this I hope I can make a body of work that is fair and that will share their diverse insights when it

is exhibited at the Canadian War Museum (CWM) in Ottawa. I have a large amount of audio that is going to take a very long time to sort through and I have a feeling that a couple of the interviews will not be used because we met in cafes and the background noise was too loud. Even so, these interviews were instrumental in understanding Ukraine and the complex reality.

On top of all these interviews I met amazing people by happenstance who were so kind and shared so much with me. Each and every person I met inspired me in different ways and their perspective will shape this work. As one of my contacts said, and I cannot agree more:

"War is always grey, and the shining lights
are the people that you meet."

There is so much I wish to share about Ukraine and what I learned from the people I met along the way. I spent time in Lviv, Kiev, Odessa, Zaporizhia, Dnipro, and Kharkiv. Each city was different in their own ways. Ukraine is a beautiful country and I hope more and more people continue to travel and to begin to understand why things are the way they are and how the people in the country are trying to change and move forward and why this is so hard.

This trip was a whirlwind but in the best possible way. I did not stop moving the entire month away and when I had a free moment I was doing research, prepping for the next interview, or planning how I was going to fit everything into each day! I did not have time to reflect and I am craving some order for all the information that I documented and gathered during this time.



Now that I am home I can begin to go through all photos, video footage, and audio recordings and begin to connect the dots. Even with the video I am unsure how it will be presented. This will come with time and I am very excited to dig in and see where this work takes me.

With this post I wanted to provide a quick glimpse into my reasons for travelling to Ukraine.

I have much more to share and I will with time.

- Jessica Lynn Wiebe

