



Features

Chroniques

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MD at centre of Somalia controversy finds peace in Northern Ontario

Michael O'Reilly

En bref

APRÈS AVOIR SUBI PENDANT DE NOMBREUSES ANNÉES l'attention des médias en raison de son rôle clé dans la révélation du scandale militaire en Somalie, le Dr Barry Armstrong a trouvé la sérénité au civil à Dryden (Ont.), petite ville qui a accueilli à bras ouverts le chirurgien général.

Dryden, Ont., is a long way from most everywhere, but it is light years away from Somalia. For Dr. Barry Armstrong, that is one of its main attractions.

Since becoming the only general surgeon in this northwestern Ontario town of about 6500 residents, Armstrong has dealt with everything from orthopedic problems to cesarean sections. The scope of surgical practice in the north was one of the things that drew him to Dryden, but it is the people who made the move irresistible. "Everyone has been very welcoming," he said. "They're an honest, kind people who really appreciate me and my work. It's a nice change."

A nice change indeed. In 1993 Armstrong, then a major in the Canadian Forces, was sent to Somalia with the elite Canadian Airborne Regiment. The 900 troops were on a United Nations mission that was supposed to bring peace to a ravaged land. Not all members of the regiment embraced the peacekeeping ideal, however, and Barry Armstrong blew the whistle on them. The move made him a pariah within the military but a hero outside it.

Today, as the only general surgeon serving a huge chunk of Canadian Shield, Armstrong faces long, unpredictable hours and a caseload that would leave many physicians feeling stretched. For him, though, it's a nice change.

On Mar. 4, 1993, Canadian paratroopers shot 2 Somalis inside the Canadian compound. One, Ahmed Afraraho Aruush, was killed. After first dealing with the wounded man, Armstrong examined the body of the 29-year old Aruush. He concluded that he had been shot in the back and had been killed by a bullet or bullets fired through the neck and head from close range. (Armstrong based his diagnosis partly on the amount of omentum that had flowed out of the abdominal exit wound. He concluded that Aruush had breathed for at least 2 to 3 minutes before being killed by a final shot.)

Originally Armstrong had intended to use the incident to train some of his staff in pronouncing death — he would have discussed how the man died and lethal versus nonlethal wounds — but the scene in the medical compound quickly evolved from an academic exercise to one of confusion, shock and eventual horror. "In my 20 years in the military I'd seen a lot," he says, "but [this was] something you can't forget, or forgive."

His conclusion not only changed his world but also ushered in the political and moral crisis that became known as the "Somalia affair." Later, because of a subsequent royal commission, Canadians learned a lot more: not only had the 2 Somalis been shot while fleeing but also they had been baited with food and water.

The commissioners heard that Aruush and his companion, Abdi Hunde Bei Sabrie, had been under surveillance for at least 15 minutes and could have been stopped at any time. They also heard

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Dr. Barry Armstrong appears before Somalia inquiry shortly before leaving military



that the 2 intruders had no weapons, save for a ceremonial dagger that was never pulled, and that they never posed a threat to the Canadians.

The Somalia inquiry's final report, *Dishonoured Legacy*, concluded: "It is clear from the actions of the recce [reconnaissance] patrol that evening that the Somalis posed no threat to patrol members or to Canadian installations. . . . The evidence leads to the conclusion that the shooting of Mr. Aruush was motivated purely by the goal of completing the mission by preventing his escape, not by the need to respond to a threat."

Even without knowing the full details, Armstrong's medical team was surprised by its findings that first night. Some junior personnel wanted to take action right away, perhaps by going to the press, but Armstrong warned them against taking that step. He said he would see that justice was done.

"It would have been very dangerous for the lower ranks," he explained. "Their careers would have been finished. When I see what happened to me I know it would have destroyed the careers of junior people."

He went to his commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Carol Mathieu, and detailed his findings. He believed that this conversation would lead to an investigation and punishment for those involved. He was wrong.

Within hours, Armstrong received a call from a Canadian officer in Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia, who asked for further details. The officer told him that a "damage-control operation" was under way.

"I guess that 4 days after the incident I knew I wasn't going to get any support from the military," said Armstrong. Today, 4 years and a Royal Commission later, he feels vindicated, even if many questions remain.

In their report the commissioners stated: "We find that the chain of command's response to the administrative, operational, and disciplinary problems manifested in the March 4 incident was weak, untimely, inadequate, self-serving, unjustified and unbecoming. . . . From an initial damage-control approach, through subsequent distortion and suppression of relevant or incriminating information, and through inaction when positive action was required, the chain of command covered up its undeniable responsibility for the March 4 incident, avoided public accountability and possibly set the stage for a 16-year-old Somali boy to be tortured to death 12 days later."

That boy was Shidane Arone.

Armstrong was the last witness to appear before the royal commission. The commissioners' request for a further deadline extension was denied by the federal government, so investigation of the Mar. 4 incident remains incomplete.

One major controversy is the discrepancy between Armstrong's conclusions and the findings contained in a

later pathology report. A Canadian pathologist examined Aruush's remains 2 months after his death and described wounds consistent with Armstrong's findings. He concluded, however, that all shots had been fired from some distance.

His conclusions coincided with testimony given by troops involved in the shooting, and Armstrong claims that the defence department [DND] used them to discredit him and his deductions. "I tried several times to get a copy of the report but was told I had to go through access-to-information [legislation] to get it," Armstrong explained. "Meanwhile, DND was freely giving it out to journalists and refusing these same journalists my report."

Armstrong, like the Somalia inquiry commissioners, believes there was a concerted effort to cover up the truth. "How high does it go?" Armstrong asks. "Well, our highest form of inquiry says there is a cover-up and the prime minister and minister of defence says there isn't. You figure it out."

Four years after the incident, support for Armstrong keeps pouring in via the post office and over the phone. "Maybe the ones that think everything is fine with the world don't talk to me, but everyone who does talk to me or who writes letters to the editor thinks there is something rotten at the top."

As Armstrong sees it, the disease of incompetence that led to the Somalia débâcle is winning out: "It is a running sore in the body of the Canadian Forces that won't heal." However, he is optimistic that the truth will out. Then, he said, and only then can Canada's military begin the real healing process that is necessary to leave its "dishonoured legacy" behind.

"There are certain things you can't hide. . . . There are lots of people who are involved and as the years roll on they'll have religious conversions or join Alcoholics Anonymous and decide to make amends."

Armstrong, who spent 20 years in the armed forces, may have spent more had he not become involved in the Somalia affair. However, 6 months after that posting he decided to retire.

The military may have been happy to see him go, but outside the armed forces his actions have been applauded and recognized. This month he and his wife, Jennifer, were named to *Maclean's* 12th Annual Honour Roll because of their efforts to ensure that the misdeeds in Somalia came to light.

Meanwhile, the town of Dryden is more than delighted to see him, a feeling that appears to be mutual. Even though private practice means that he never knows what each day might bring and despite having to cope with the challenges of remote practice in a small town, just being appreciated again means that Armstrong goes to work smiling.?