

Love letters inspire Gallipoli Art Prize

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SAVE

IN the early 20th century, from the trenches of Gallipoli and the Western Front, Charles Idris Pike penned weekly love letters to his sweetheart Violet.

He lived to return home and marry her, and one century later those letters have inspired their grandson, Sydney artist Idris Murphy to paint the work that has won the 2014 Gallipoli Art Prize.

Murphy's piece, Gallipoli Evening 2013, depicts a solitary tree in a golden landscape of Gallipoli's crumbling cliffs of rock and sand.

It earned him \$20,000 in prize money on Wednesday, when judges picked it from a field of 37 finalists plucked from 166 entries.

The title, Murphy says, is a metaphor for both "the melancholy of walking on bones against the surprise of Gallipoli being so beautiful".

Murphy decided to visit Gallipoli himself for the first time last year after he discovered the 160 war-time letters his grandmother had kept secret until her death.

"I knew my grandmother really well and she never said anything about them," he told AAP at the announcement in Sydney.

"When you think about it, no one alive today can talk about that war. It's finished. Memory is what we have left."

The letters, written by Pike during his active service years of 1914-18, depict some "pretty heavy-duty" graphic portrayals of World War I.

But they also record a touching truce between Australian and Turkish soldiers in closely positioned trenches.

"Only a few yards separates us from the Turks," reads one.

"So we threw some tinned bully and jam over to them and they soon raked them into their trenches. And in return they threw tobacco and cigarette papers.

"A couple of the parcels had notes in them written in French. One ran something like: 'Our friends the enemy, we received your presents of preserved meat, and we send you tobacco. We'd be pleased if we could send some other souvenirs'.

"And we'd do the same: 'Do you have a spare good knife?'"

Murphy, 65, will return to Gallipoli this Anzac Day with some of Australia's leading artists to paint more works for a centenary exhibition aptly titled My Friend The Enemy.

Murphy has been an exhibiting landscape painter for more than 30 years.

His work is on show at Sydney's King Street Gallery, including his current exhibition "Landscapes inscapes".

The Gallipoli Art Prize rewards the work which best perpetuates the Gallipoli virtues of mateship, respect, loyalty and comradeship.

Highly commended in the 2014 prize were Glen Preece for his piece Soldier - Flight to Heaven, and Hugh Ramage for R.E. as a Digger.

The award is open to painters from Australia, New Zealand and Turkey and is sponsored by the Gallipoli Memorial Club, which also runs a parallel version of the prize each year in Turkey.

