

# Letters from the killing fields inspire grandson to a \$20,000 art prize

■ Andrew Taylor

When Idris Murphy travelled to Gallipoli last year with a group of artists, the landscape painter carried letters written by a man he had never met but whose name he inherited.

Murphy's mother died in 2012, leaving her son 160 letters written by his grandfather Charles Idris Pike from the battlefields of Gallipoli and the Western Front to his girlfriend Violet, who later became Charles' wife. "She left 160 letters which she'd never told me about," Murphy said. "All she said was there was a letter I should keep."

Those letters detailing his grandfather's experience of war added poignancy to the journey that inspired his painting *Gallipoli Evening 2013*, which was awarded the Gallipoli Art Prize on Tuesday.

In one letter to Violet, Murphy's grandfather writes about how Australian and Turkish soldiers would exchange gifts of food and tobacco across the trenches when they were not engaged in bloody combat. When the Turkish soldiers wrote a letter asking for a knife to cut the meat, they signed it "Your soldier Friends Turks".

In his artist statement, Murphy said he had been prepared for a certain degree of melancholy when he visited the beaches of Gallipoli. "However, I was not expecting or prepared for this place of legends to also be beautiful," he said. "This work, painted back in my studio, is a response to that irony. *Evening* is both a sense of actual time and a metaphor for that experience of the place."

Accepting the \$20,000 prize at the Gallipoli Memorial Club, Murphy added: "Being there and seeing it's a day like today, a bright sunny day, a beautiful beach, Mediterranean water, very ironic kind

of stuff when you're walking around fields where there's bits of bone sticking up."

Murphy left on another journey to Gallipoli on Wednesday with a group of 20 artists who will create works for an exhibition whose title *Your Friend the Enemy* is inspired by his grandfather's letters.

Murphy's painting is one of 37 finalists in the Gallipoli Art Prize that will be exhibited at the Gallipoli Memorial Club until May 4.

Murphy said he hoped *Gallipoli Evening 2013*, which depicts a lone tree in a golden landscape, would stand as a memorial to his grandfather.

One of the judges of the prize, the *Herald's* art critic John McDonald, said Murphy's winning work captured the melancholy that touches every visitor to Gallipoli and conveyed his impressions through an unusual choice of colours.

"It's a variation on the classic blue and gold Australian landscape, transplanted to a distant shore that will always have a place in the Australian psyche."

The judges also highly commended Glen Preece's painting of a young soldier flying like a disembodied spirit and Hugh Ramage's *E.R. as a Digger*, a portrait of a friend who works as a labourer.

"There are aspects of contemporary life, particularly the treatment of asylum seekers, that suggest Australians are losing touch with the sense of compassion, decency and fair play we all take for granted," McDonald said. "If the Gallipoli Art Prize has a broader purpose it is to make us reflect deeply on our common humanity and hold fast to those beliefs that show national identity in the best possible light."

The Gallipoli Art Prize is on at the Gallipoli Memorial Club until May 4.





(main) Artist Idris Murphy poses for a photograph with his artwork 'Gallipoli Evening 2013'. Photo: AAP (Inset) Idris Murphy



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