

# ▶ WHAT THE LENS COULD NOT CARRY

## Israel, Palestine, and a Canadian photographer's attempt to write what he could not frame

By David Batten, MSM

**I WENT** to Israel in January 2025 with a camera, but I came home understanding that the photographs were only the beginning. In truth, I had struggled for more than a year with how to write what I had seen, what I had felt, and what I still could not fully settle in my own mind. I had been to Israel before, but this journey, centred on the October 7 experience, asked something different of me. Normally the lens gives me discipline. It chooses a border. It decides what belongs inside the frame and what must remain outside. It lets light do what argument cannot. But on this journey the images would not settle themselves. They stayed open, unfinished, asking for words.

I was there at the invitation of Larry Maher of the Exigent Foundation. Larry had assembled a small team of Canadians – military, political, and civic-minded – to journey through the ancient lands that now form the modern State of Israel, with the week focused primarily on the events of October 7, 2023, during the Jewish holiday of Simchat Torah. But the journey was never only about one date. It became a movement through grief, security, memory, faith, and the Palestinian lives also held inside that contested geography.

I did not go to write a policy paper. Too many policy papers have already been written, and still the ground has not quieted. I did not go to solve a problem that greater minds, tougher diplomats, and braver local voices have laboured over for generations. There is no convenient sentence that can deliver peace between Israelis and Palestinians. The waters have been muddied by empire, faith, conquest, exile, terror, law, grief, fear, and memory. Rome left its marks here centuries ago, and many hands have added their own since.

This was not my attempt to argue facts from a distance. It was my attempt to walk through a week of experience and ask what I was really seeing. I went as a Canadian, shaped by a country that teaches



ABOVE: Hasidic Jews and other Orthodox worshippers pray, read from Torah scrolls-Western Wall.

ABOVE RIGHT: October 7<sup>th</sup> Nova music festival massacre Memorial.



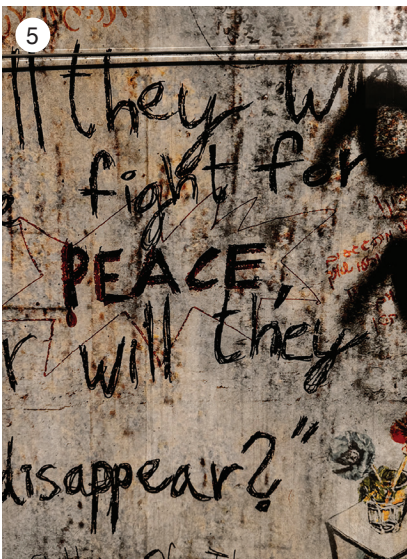
distance, civility, law, and compromise. I went as a soldier, shaped by battlefields far from home and by the knowledge that war always looks different from the ground than it does in language. And I went as a photographer, trained to trust the eye, then forced to admit that some things require more than sight.

The contact sheets from that week now look to me like a map of my own confusion. Cemeteries and memorial flowers. Burned rooms and empty chairs. A child's shoe. A tunnel disappearing into darkness. Concrete walls. Watchtowers. Smoke across a distant horizon. Hillside towns folded into stone. Soldiers, guides, officials, pilgrims, shopkeepers, old men at prayer, tourists standing where prophets and armies have passed. The pictures are real, but they do not explain themselves. They only begin the conversation.

I do not want those photographs to become exhibits in a prosecution or a defence. They were never taken to win an argument. They are points of contact with discomfort. A photograph can make something unforgettable, but it can also make it too simple. It can beautify ruin, dramatize grief, crop out responsibility, or turn another person's suffering into composition. That is why I felt the need to write. The words are not here to replace the images. They are here to confess what the images cannot confess by themselves: where I hesitated, where I was moved, where I was troubled, and where I did not know what to think.

The first images that stay with me are the graves and the red fields of remembrance. A cemetery asks for silence before it asks for opinion. As a soldier, I have seen how nations bury their young and how families stand at the edge of a hole in the earth while everyone around them tries to behave with dignity. The camera can photograph a flag, a stone, a wreath, a row of names. It cannot fully photograph the absence that sits beside each grave.

In those moments I could understand the Israeli wound not as a slogan, but as a national nervous system. October 7 was not



an event I was reading about from Canada. It had entered walls, kitchens, bedrooms, roads, orchards, and families. It had changed the air. You could feel how a country built around survival had been forced to ask whether survival itself had failed for a day. Security, in that landscape, was not an abstract word. It was a tremor in the body.

But the next frame complicated the first, as the honest frames always do. Looking toward Palestinian spaces, seeing the walls, the separation, the compressed towns and guarded roads, I felt another human pressure. The landscape seemed to ask what happens to a people when movement, identity, authority, humiliation, memory,

and hope are all filtered through someone else's power. I do not offer that as an argument. I offer it as an observation that would not leave me alone.

A camera teaches you that distance is deceptive. With the right lens, a far city can appear close enough to touch. With another, two people standing near each other can seem worlds apart. Israel and Palestine live inside that distortion. They are intimate and unreachable, interwoven and divided, familiar with one another's fears and yet often unable to recognize one another's grief.

The destroyed rooms affected me differently from the public memorials. A burned house does not speak in political language. It speaks through a broken sink, a blackened wall, a chair left in the wrong place, a sandal separated from the foot that once needed it. Domestic objects are ruthless witnesses. They remind you that violence is not only measured in death. It is measured in the interruption of ordinary life: a meal not finished, a door not locked, a child not collected, a family photograph turned to ash.

ABOVE: 1. Hostages Square – In front of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 27 Shaul HaMelech Street. 2. Media reports in Hostages Square-Hostages Square – In front of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 27 Shaul HaMelech Street. 3. 7<sup>th</sup> October 2023, around 250 Hamas and other Palestinian militants attacked Kfar Aza, an Israeli kibbutz. 4. Larry Maher's Canadian delegation – IDF Base Julis. 5. Wall graffiti downtown Tel Aviv Israel. 6. The Stone of the Anointing – old city of Jerusalem.

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In those rooms my military memory returned. I thought of other places, other battlefields, other civilians caught in the machinery of men with weapons and causes. I thought of famine, fear, bodies, mothers, boys pretending not to be afraid, and old people reduced to waiting. War has a way of stripping people down to the basic work of staying alive. It also has a way of making language too clean. We say operation, response, security, resistance, collateral, deterrence, occupation. The words can become a second wall between us and what happened.

Perhaps that is why I kept reaching for the photographer's vocabulary. Frame. Focus. Exposure. Shadow. Negative space. What is included? What is cropped out? What has been overexposed by politics? What has remained underexposed because it makes the preferred story harder to tell?

It would be dishonest to pretend I arrived empty. I have long admired Israel's discipline, inventiveness, argument, resilience, and civic energy. I understand the soldier's instinct to protect civilians and the state's obligation to defend its people. Jewish fear is not paranoia. History has made it rational.

But it would also be dishonest to move through Palestinian spaces and see only threat, only failure, only background. Palestinian suffering is not a footnote to someone else's survival. A people can be poorly led, divided, manipulated, and still remain a people. A child does not choose the slogans painted over his future. A mother does not become less human because the politics around her are broken.

That was the moral difficulty of the week. Every frame corrected another frame. The grave corrected the slogan. The burned room corrected the analysis. The wall corrected the easy sympathy. The market corrected the despair. The holy sites corrected the arrogance of outsiders who think this is only about land. The faces corrected everything.

Jerusalem was its own exposure problem. Light struck stone, gold, rain, shadow, police barriers, prayer books, old steps, narrow doors, and faces turned toward God in different languages. The city is too beautiful to be left alone and too sacred to be shared easily. I walked through it feeling both wonder and claustrophobia. Every stone seemed to carry a claim. Every claim seemed to carry a wound.

At the Dome of the Rock, in churches, near Jewish prayer, in markets full of colour and noise, I felt the strange closeness of devotion

and danger. Faith can soften the human heart, but it can also harden possession. When land becomes holy, compromise can feel like betrayal. When memory becomes sacred, the dead are never only dead; they become witnesses, judges, and sometimes weapons.

I was travelling with Canadians, and that mattered. We came from a country that often imagines conflict as something that can be managed by procedure, committee, law, and good faith. Those instincts are not wrong. They are part of what I value. But in Israel and Palestinian spaces, I felt the limits of the Canadian imagination. We are used to distance. This place offers none. History is close. Fear is close. God is close. The other people are close. The past is not past enough to become polite.

Still, ordinary life kept appearing. A fruit stand glowing with colour. Men gathered around coffee. A guide making a joke. A soldier checking his phone. Pilgrims waiting in line. A man sitting alone at night beneath stone walls. These small scenes mattered because they resisted the drama imposed on the place. People still buy food, wait for friends, complain about weather, pray, work, flirt, grieve, and go home tired. The conflict is immense, but life is stubborn.

That may be the closest I came to an answer, though I do not want to call it one. Peace cannot begin by asking either people to abandon the story that makes them feel human. But no peace can survive if those stories remain weapons against the humanity of the other. Israelis need safety that is not dismissed. Palestinians need dignity that is not deferred forever. Both need recognition that does not arrive as pity, accusation, or theatre.

I came home with photographs I can show and photographs I still cannot explain. The contact sheets are full, but the meaning remains unfinished. This essay is my attempt to stand beside the images and let words do what the lens could not carry alone. I am not offering a solution. I am offering a record of attention.

I went to Israel thinking I would photograph what I saw. I returned knowing that the harder task was to write what I could not frame: grief beside beauty, faith beside fear, security beside humiliation, memory beside ambition, and two peoples still trapped inside stories that are true but not complete.

The camera taught me to see. The journey taught me that looking through a lens alone is not enough. 🍁

## HISTORY ... CONTINUED FROM PAGE 29

Beyond honours and strategic outcomes, the story of Kapyong is ultimately one of individuals. The soldiers who fought on Hill 677 were young men, many of them far from home for the first time, operating in a landscape and climate that bore little resemblance to Canada. They endured not only the violence of combat but also the cumulative strain of fear, fatigue, and uncertainty. Their ability to function under such conditions speaks to the professionalism instilled in them and the bonds formed within their ranks.

In the decades since, Kapyong has taken its place among the defining moments of Canadian military history. It stands alongside battles such as Vimy Ridge in the First World War and Juno Beach in the Second as an example of what Canadian soldiers have achieved under extreme pressure. For the regiment itself, the battle remains a central part of its identity, a reminder of the standards set by those who fought in Korea.

Today, the legacy of 2PPCLI at Kapyong continues to resonate. It is studied in military academies, commemorated by veterans and historians, and remembered as a moment when a small force made a disproportionate impact on the course of a war. In a remote valley half a world away, on a hill marked by hardship and courage, Canadian soldiers held the line when it mattered most—and in doing so, they helped shape the outcome of a conflict and the legacy of a nation's service abroad.

**Editor's Note:** *The 75th Anniversary Commemorations of the Battle of Kapyong in Korea were attended by Publisher Scott Taylor. They were a part of the Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs' Return to Korea initiative.*

*Those stories appear on pages (?) and (?) respectively. Esprit de Corps wishes to thank the Ministry for their support in attending this year's commemorations.* 🍁