

# Peace for our time

*As part of this year's Christian Arts Festival in Cheltenham, Major-General Andy Salmon will be returning with his moving experiences of life as a negotiator and peace-maker in the world's conflict zones*

WORDS BY CANDIA MCKORMACK

At Cheltenham's Christian Arts Festival last year, Major-General Andy Salmon CMG OBE put on a startling and thought-provoking show. As the last British general in Basra, with three campaigns spanning 19 years of turmoil in Iraq, his story is an emotional one of conflict, but with an important message of resurrection, redemption and hope.

By popular request, he will again be taking us with him on an emotional and personal journey through conflict, set against a backdrop of three works of art, and suffused with live piano improvisations. Part of the experience will be a Call to Prayer by Ismail Ginwalla MBE.

## How did the idea for Journey Through Conflict come about, Andy?

In my previous life I was a Royal Marine for just short of 36 years; I served quite a lot in different conflict zones and in different



Major-General Andy Salmon CMG OBE

campaigns, and one of those straddled 19 years. I was in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1991 as part of the operation to rescue the Kurds from the mountains at the end of Gulf War One, and then I went back to Baghdad in 2003 working for the Americans in the Green Zone. I then became the commanding general of coalition forces in South East Iraq between 2008 and 2009, to close down the campaign for the Brits and to get us out. As one of the things I do is tell stories, I'd often thought about doing something called 'Return to Iraqi Kurdistan', telling the story of what happened, and meeting all the people again. A kind of retrospective analysis.

## What part do the paintings play in the performance?

When I've been on campaigns I've often brought back art or asked people to paint something, as I love art, music and all things cultural. In Basra there was an artist who came out, called Xavier Pick, who was only supposed to have been there for a couple of weeks but ended up staying six weeks, and he painted everything he saw. He called himself a 'peace artist' and was so prolific and brilliant in getting everything we were trying to do in changing the situation in Basra from being quite violent to incredibly peaceful. Part of that was by bringing people of different faiths together using music, food and culture as a medium to help people discuss how to create a much more optimistic scenario in Basra.

## How did you join forces on returning to this country?

When Xavier came back, he'd been so prolific he held a massive exhibition of his art and had done several Radio 4 stories about the whole journey. We got together in a nightclub in Soho where I did a speech using one of his pictures to tell the story; we had about 60 people come in and I said what was actually happening behind the painting. That was very well received, but I didn't think much more



Al Amadiyah, by Lincoln Rowe



Meeting, by Serwan Baran



On Patrol in the Land of the Marsh Arabs, by Xavier Pick

about it until I retired from the Royal Marines and spent a few years in Cheltenham. I was going to church at Christ Church and Nikki [Seville] said "We've got an art exhibition coming up, so have you got any paintings?" I put two forward and she asked whether I'd like to speak about them, which I did. It was pretty much off the cuff, but as it was so well received, I did it again about a week later.

## How did this then become part of the Christian Arts Festival?

Beck [Donaldson] and Nikki – the creators of the Arts Festival – said, "Oh, do you think you can do something with the paintings to do some fundraising?" From that, I suggested we use three paintings,

and it would become a 'journey through conflict'. Beck thought about it some more and said, "actually we don't want this just as a fundraiser; we want you as part of the festival, and we'll have it on the last night."

## And how is music integrated into the evening?

Beck introduced me to this amazing guy, a concert pianist, jazz improvisario and film composer, Tom Donald, who had won a number of awards with the music he scored for a film called Leaving Baghdad, so he already had that Iraqi connection. That's when we started working on creating this experience called Journey Through Conflict. Basically, that is joining up the three stories of the different campaigns, set against the backdrop of the art.

## Can you describe the paintings that will be shown?

One is painted by Lincoln Rowe – Al Amadiyah – which is a biblical looking place, around 2000BC, where Assyrian Christians, Jews and Muslims lived together harmoniously in this extraordinary cliff-top town until the '50s [when Saddam Hussein expelled the Jews from Iraq]. That's part one of the journey.

Part two is Baghdad and is a painting by an Iraqi artist called Serwan [Baran]. I bought that painting from an art gallery in Baghdad, where I was only able to make the journey twice before it got too dangerous.

The third painting is one of Xavier Pick's multi-media montage works showing what we were trying to achieve in Basra. It's a huge painting – about 10' x 6'.

We then suffuse all of the narrative with live piano improvisation from Tom.

## What do you hope people will learn from the experience?

Because it's taking the example of the things that I've been part of, it's replicating some of the techniques I've been using for negotiation in conflict. As I'm sure you're aware, when you're negotiating in difficult situations, creating the right environment and getting people to relax – food, music, stories... all of those things are an essential precursor to getting people to have a sensible conversation.

For example, I brought the Royal Marines band in armoured vehicles to conduct the Christmas Service in Basra. The service was in Aramaic and some of the carols we were singing were ancient and not even recorded in our books. The whole thing was quite an extraordinary, emotive thing for everybody involved, and so I've used music several times to help create the right atmosphere in lots of the things I've done.

I've been in many conflict zones over the world and have always found great music, poetry and art to be a good medium to open the soul and mind. ♦

## JOURNEY THROUGH CONFLICT

Journey Through Conflict with Major-General Andy Salmon CMG OBE is on Saturday, April 29, 6.30pm, at Christ Church, Malvern Road, Cheltenham. Tickets: £14; concessions: £9 (full-time students) from [www.tickettailor.com](http://www.tickettailor.com)

For more information on Cheltenham's Christian Arts Festival visit [christianartsfestival.org](http://christianartsfestival.org)