

The Haunting

He Couldn't Stop the Slaughter in Rwanda. Now He Can't Stop the Memory.

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Saturday, June 15, 2002; Page C01

What haunts his dreams are the eyes. They stare at him out of the darkness. Disembodied. Thousands and thousands of them.

He remembers the roadside ditches filled with tens of thousands of wriggling bodies, the church packed with 2,000 people who were killed with grenades, then hacked apart with machetes. The children living among the corpses of their parents because there was no place else to go.

"Time does not erase scenes like that," says Canadian Army Gen. Romeo Dallaire. "It makes them more vivid."

Dallaire, 55, lives daily with those memories, visited nightly by horrors of such enormity and dread he despairs of communicating what he witnessed. He saw all that and much, much more eight years ago in Rwanda. But what haunts him more terribly than the slaughter is his certainty that he could have stopped it.

As the commander of the United Nations peacekeeping force dispatched to oversee a previously negotiated end to the civil war in Rwanda, Dallaire found himself and his token force overwhelmed by a whirlwind of savagery so extreme it would claim 800,000 lives in little more than three months. This from among 8.3 million people in a country the size of Rhode Island.

On a day-by-day basis, he says, "the Rwandan extremists were far more efficient at genocide than the Nazis."

Dallaire had warned his U.N. superiors that massacres were planned. An official U.N. investigation later took note of that. He had begged for troops and ammunition and the authority to seize arms caches as well as those Rwandan leaders openly calling for their own "final solution" to the bitter tribal enmity between Rwanda's ruling Hutus and its Tutsi minority.

But his warnings were ignored and his pleas were rejected, and he found himself and his troops reduced to little more than spectators in the resulting bloodbath. Three years ago, an independent inquiry into the genocide found that a lack of commitment and resources had caused the U.N. to fail in meeting the primary obligation for which it was founded, resulting in one of the most abhorrent events of the 20th century.

A year later, the psychic weight of that failure led to a complete emotional breakdown. Dallaire was found drunk on a park bench with "no further desire to live." He was subsequently

diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and medically retired from the Canadian Army, in which he had virtually spent his life. He had been in line to become its commander.

"You can't just walk away from something like that saying you did what you could," he said this week during an interview at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. He was invited to appear in a program about Rwanda presented by the museum's Committee on Conscience.

"There is no conceivable way of being able to walk away from the immensity . . . the smell . . . the sound of dogs eating human bodies through the night."

The rest of the world may want to forget the Rwandan genocide and wash its hands of what it represents. But Dallaire employs a biblical name as a verb to describe that sort of moral schizophrenia: "You can't just Pontius Pilate 800,000 people."

With his bushy gray mustache, raptorial eyebrows and twice-broken nose ("never try to teach soccer to Marines"), Dallaire has the face of an embattled desert commandant in some film about the Foreign Legion.

In fact he was born in Holland, son of a French Canadian officer and the Dutch war bride he met during the Battle of the Bulge.

Raised at a succession of military posts ("they say even my diapers were khaki"), he was schooled at military colleges in St. Jean and Ottawa and took to the military with both zeal and promise.

He was fated to serve, however, in a peacetime army. The closest he came to combat before Rwanda was subduing French Canadian separatists in Quebec in the early 1970s and later commanding part of Canada's NATO force in Germany during the Cold War.

With the eruption of brushfire conflicts around the globe in the early 1990s, however, he found himself dispatching Canadian troops on U.N. peacekeeping missions from Cyprus to Cambodia. In Phnom Penh in early 1993, he found in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge an eerie foretaste of Rwanda.

"We were part of the U.N. contingent that virtually took over the country after the horrors there and tried to put it back together," he said. "That was my first experience with mass hysteria in the destruction of human life. They would point out a mass grave here and a mass grave there, and you really had no sense of what happened. But there's a museum in Phnom Penh where they did so much of the torturing and killing, and there are masses of bones and skulls and very gruesome pictures that give a terribly tangible sense of what happened. . . . Your visual and sensory capability just goes into overdrive."

A few months later, he found himself assigned to create and command what appeared to be a small-scale effort to oversee the negotiated end to the year-old Rwandan civil war. At issue was the reconstitution of a government and national army that would peacefully represent both the Hutu and Tutsi tribes.

"The agreement we were to monitor had already been drawn up, and it was very specific," he remembers. "The exercise was that the war was over and we were just supposed to make sure everybody played by the rules. But I was warned I was to do this on the cheap. Because there were 16 separate U.N. peacekeeping efforts underway at the time, from Somalia and the Balkans to Cambodia, Angola and all the rest, and the U.N.'s member nations were just 'peace keeping'd' out."

Because the war was supposed to be over, Dallaire was given a 2,600-man self-defense force of Senegalese, Bangladeshis, Russians, Hungarians, Poles and others to command, 350 of whom were unarmed observers.

But even before they all arrived, "my whole southern flank was a mess. I arrived in Kigali [Rwanda's capital] the day after a coup in [neighboring] Burundi, where the Tutsi-led army ousted and killed the president, who was a democratically elected Hutu. And all of a sudden I had 300,000 Burundi refugees to deal with and bodies floating down all the rivers."

About the time he arrived, Dallaire says, Rwanda received what he continues to believe was the most crucial factor in triggering and spreading the mass hysteria that would so devastate the little nation.

It was a radio station.

"You understand that there is practically no TV in Rwanda, and papers only in Kigali. Some of these remote villages were only just seeing white men. Communication used to be by word-of-mouth, then by drums or whatever, and that was replaced by radio. Even the poorest Rwandans seemed to have a portable radio. I could never figure out where they got the batteries, but they all seemed to have them."

Radio RPLN, Dallaire said, was established by Hutu extremists, principally businessmen, but it started out innocently enough. "First, it had the best rock music around. Second, it had these commentators who developed a big following among the youth. The first few weeks it spent just gaining credibility."

The effort to form the new Rwandan government broke down almost immediately, Dallaire said. The government ran out of money to pay its soldiers, there were banking failures and riots, and then the assassinations started. The principal victims were moderate Hutus in the government as well as Tutsi officials. "The night I was installed in my headquarters," he remembers, "we had 35 people killed in five different places. Several were shot, a couple were killed with grenades, and the rest were hacked to pieces by machetes with all the members of their families."

Dallaire had heard the bloodbath was on the way. He said he and his people had confirmed reports of large arms caches linked to Hutu extremists. He pleaded with the U.N. for a single battalion of experienced troops, with which he thought he could halt the killing in Kigali and prevent it from spreading.

He also asked for permission to make preemptive seizures of the arms caches and extremist leaders. He was refused, he says, on the basis that it would make the United Nations look biased to seize arms from only one side. And the biggest cache was in the home town of the Rwandan president, which would cause political problems.

He and his troops were able to halt a number of arms shipments from Uganda at the border and take a few other minor measures. But three or four months before the slaughter began, he says, the country received a mammoth shipment of new Chinese-made machetes. Machetes were considered a tool of life in a jungle country. Nobody thought beyond that.

On April 6, 1994, an airplane carrying Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana and Burundian President Cyprien Ntaryamira, both Hutus, was shot down as it prepared to land at Kigali. Though no one has ever determined who fired the missiles that downed the plane, both leaders were killed. As though the shoot-down was a signal, military and militia groups began rounding up and killing all Tutsis and political moderates, regardless of their ethnic background.

As the violence slowly escalated, Radio RPLN's commentators, who had started making the occasional derogatory comment about Tutsi and moderate "cockroaches," began not only inciting their listeners to kill but also telling them whom to kill and how to kill them.

"They would turn kids against parents, husbands against wives," Dallaire said. "They would urge splitting open pregnant women, cutting off breasts and ripping out the fetus. And people listened to it. And they acted."

The great fear of the Hutu extremists, Dallaire explained, was that the Tutsi rebels and their Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), based in Uganda, would take over the country again, as they had for four centuries. Thus while the government soldiers were battling RPF soldiers in conventional battles, local militiamen, deserters and simple violent opportunists were setting up roadblocks behind the lines, sometimes five to the mile, to kill anybody who might be a Tutsi.

Dallaire appealed for 5,000 troops. His own small force, he said, was begging for food and supplies, and "if we had had to open fire, we had only enough ammunition for a 30-minute firefight." When his appeal was denied he looked aloft at the electronic warfare planes circling overhead and appealed to the U.N. to tell whatever nation owned them to at least locate RPLN's mobile transmitter so he could force it off the air.

"And we never got that information. The argument was that [the U.N.] could not interfere in the sovereignty of another nation. So they all got on the sovereignty bandwagon, hired I don't know how many lawyers and started to debate whether sovereignty was still an issue in a nation overtly slaughtering its own population."

Dallaire pauses in the interview, his eyes dark with pain and frustration.

"Not one country on Earth came to stop this thing. The Western world provided me with nothing," he says. "I asked for satellite photos so I could see where the mass movement of people were occurring. They were herding people before they killed them. But I got nothing. In 100

days, 800,000 people were killed, 300,000 of them children. That's not counting 500,000 that got hacked a few times, maybe had a leg chopped off, but survived. There were more people killed, wounded, displaced or refugeed in 100 days in Rwanda than there were in the whole eight or nine years of the Yugoslav campaign. And the West poured 60,000 troops into the Balkans" to stop the "ethnic cleansing" there.

Why? Dallaire wants to know. "Were the people of Rwanda less human?"

Dallaire is judicious in finding enough blame to go around. He remembers President Clinton flying into Kigali after it was all over: "Kept the engines on Air Force One running, spent a couple of hours in the airport terminal and said he was sorry, he didn't know."

Didn't know?

"I saw the NATO electronic aircraft overhead. I've spent my life in NATO. I know what they do."

But he notes that the Italians and the Belgians were quick to send troops to rescue their nationals, even though they wouldn't help Rwandans. The French, he notes, evacuated not only their nationals but also politically sympathetic Rwandans, "including the bulk of the Rwandan president's family, who are not exactly the nicest people on earth."

The larger issue, he says, is one that equates the desirability of humanitarian intervention with national self-interest instead of consideration of one's fellow man.

The media reported what was happening in Rwanda, he said, but for the most part the stories weren't published prominently: "There was more attention paid at the time on television to Tonya Harding and her [Olympic figure skating] kneecapping escapade than to the Rwandan genocide.

"I believe there is far more concern over the fate of the gorillas in Rwanda in the general public than there is even today about the Rwandan people."

Dallaire, whose book on Rwanda is scheduled to come out in the fall, takes nine pills a day to live with his memories, he says. And he wonders about the mental and emotional scars on a 20-year-old corporal who was confronted with "a crowd encouraging a girl of 14 or 15 with a machete and a child on her back to kill another girl of 14 or 15 with a child on *her* back."

He asks: "What do my soldiers do? Do they open fire on the crowd, killing God knows how many to save that girl? Does . . . he shoot the girl with the machete and probably kill her child in the process? Does he simply walk away? What will he be held accountable for morally?"

In the end, Dallaire said, the corporal attempted to negotiate, while the one girl chopped up the other and her baby with the crowd cheering her on.

"And when that corporal comes home, he hears he can't be traumatized because that wasn't a war. It didn't affect our security.

"That's just what *we* went through," Dallaire says after a pained pause. "Imagine what the Rwandans went through."

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