

## ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Eileen Harrisson (née Cairns) *Continuum* - stories behind the work.

### The Beginning

*Continuum* was made at a time when I was thinking about how humanity suffered continually from the pain of conflicts. It seemed that, if one situation of conflict found resolution, another broke out elsewhere. I made the stitched work *Requiem, les Fleurs du Mal* in 2014 as it was approaching the centenary of the death of my grandmother's brother, Thomas Keith, in the Second Battle of Ypres, 1915. This piece commemorated not only his death but it expressed my sorrow at all the deaths that happened then. This war did not end all wars, as had been hoped, but my father, Walter Cairns, found himself fighting in the global conflict that happened so soon after, World War 2.

### A Survivor's Story

My father was born in Lisburn in 1922 and lived in Northern Ireland all his life, apart from a short spell when he worked alongside two of his brothers for a linen firm in Dublin in the late 1930s and then when he volunteered to join the RAF in World War 2. With the rank of Flight Mechanic Air Frame, he was stationed for a time on the Lleyn Peninsula, North Wales, where he felt very much at home. While stationed there, he started training for Flight Engineer on the bombers but he worried how the indiscriminate nature of bombs would result in the deaths of innocent members of the public, including women and children.

One day, the whole squadron went down with dysentery. Others recovered but my father's RAF service ended then when, aged just twenty-one, he was diagnosed with Ulcerative Colitis, a painful and debilitating illness that he was told would end his life by the age of forty. Shocked by this news, he nevertheless fought through to marry my mother, Grace, in 1950 and have a family, my sister and myself. He suffered from the pain of the illness every day of his life but lived through to reach the age of sixty-nine, dying just before Christmas in 1991. He had survived the war and he lived through much of the violence of The Troubles, though this was a violence that grieved him deeply. It is for me, a great sadness that he did not live to see the signing of the Peace Agreement in 1998.

The photograph here is of my father during his RAF service; the embroidery was stitched in 2014 from a pencil drawing I had made of him in January, 1971.

## Imagery and the Pain of Suffering

The imagery in *Continuum* is taken from my own family's history, from my experiences of the Troubles and from some of the many images in newspapers and broadcast media from this period. It recalls the two world wars through an image of a relative of my husband in World War 1 soldier's uniform and my father in his World War 2 RAF forage cap, his squadron indicated below. Alongside him is wreckage of buildings that, inspired by images from the Troubles, could easily be bombed buildings from a war, anywhere.

Northern Ireland is where I was born and grew up and I returned there in 1975 after graduating from the University of Aberystwyth, Wales. In Belfast, caught in the direction of a bomb blast, I was knocked unconscious and believed myself to be dead. A tale I tell in full elsewhere, suffice to say here that the explosion I experienced may be in part, or even fully, responsible for the neurological condition that affects my muscles and that has confined me to a power wheelchair, since 2006, for all mobility indoors and out. I carry the memories of this explosion and others in my body but others have lost loved ones and been more seriously injured than myself.

## Fragment

One of the greatest tragedies and cruelties of conflicts is, I believe, the suffering of children and *Continuum* features the figure of a crying child three times across the work. Originally from a worn-out nightie, the fragment of cotton cloth represents, in its smallness, something worn by a child and it speaks for the wounding of all innocent victims of hatred. I was a student nurse for a time in the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children and one day, as I was tending to a very ill baby, there was a flurry of activity outside the ward - a six year-old girl had just been shot through the head on the Falls Road. There was a great rush to get her to theatre; I do not know whether she lived or died.

I felt compelled to make *Continuum* to express my sorrow at how families, including my own, seem doomed to undergo the tragedy of suffering and killing through conflicts time after time. One of the reasons I use stitch as expressive medium, is that I regard stitching as symbolic of the act of healing in that the needle violates cloth in the act of stabbing and piercing the material but a network of stitches then 'heals' the wounded fabric, as stitches close over wounded flesh.

*Continuum* has also been made into a film of the same name. I did this in collaboration with my son, professional musician Ed Harrison and it is available to watch on YouTube on:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BTg20b00s-Y>

## ***Continuum***

Red of blood soaks into  
blanket while clamour of  
rescue *wails on* -

passer-by  
passes on hold on stunned  
victim while still the children  
cry and why do we allow

such *pain*? soldier and airman  
look through years and what do  
the poppies mean? more fears,  
more tears - killers, silent,  
secret, *hidden ghosts* walk  
until moment  
*of atrocity* -

but compassion, goal and  
legacy of sorrowing  
humanity, comforts  
broken lives *worn out* by  
grief, incertitude;  
*blaze* of

love engulfs deeper  
darkness of evil's clawing  
grasp, flows, *unwavering*  
*light* through healing hands  
inexhaustible,  
into eternity.

## ***For the Others***

In the white light,

I survived;

I didn't meet the others then,  
those who had gone on that day,  
or on other days, cruelly  
dispatched from this  
mortal life, *catapulted* from  
frame of bone and tissue;

ingestion in the mother's womb;  
the first breath, cries, smiles, growing,  
running, laughing, discovering - all  
the sing-song days of life bloodily  
torn apart, ripped and *shredded* into

silence;

no, I didn't see the others  
then, nor those who died of  
grief and consummate sorrow;

I survived;

but I hear their cries sorrowing  
in my head, so I stitch paths of  
remembrance, *red veining* in  
lines of silk and cotton, *blood*  
*red threads* that are life and  
death and hope

and grief

and resurrection.