



# Waiting for First Light: My Ongoing Battle with PTSD

*Roméo Dallaire , Jessica Dee Humphreys*

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**Longlisted for the RBC Taylor Prize:** In this piercing memoir, Roméo Dallaire, retired general and former senator, the author of the bestsellers *Shake Hands with the Devil* and *They Fight Like Soldiers, They Die Like Children*, and one of the world's leading humanitarians, delves deep into his life since the Rwandan genocide.

At the heart of *Waiting for First Light* is a no-holds-barred self-portrait of a top political and military figure whose nights are invaded by despair, but who at first light faces the day with the renewed desire to make a difference in the world.

Roméo Dallaire, traumatized by witnessing genocide on an imponderable scale in Rwanda, reflects in these pages on the nature of PTSD and the impact of that deep wound on his life since 1994, and on how he motivates himself and others to humanitarian work despite his constant struggle. Though he had been a leader in peace and in war at all levels up to deputy commander of the Canadian Army, his PTSD led to his medical dismissal from the Canadian Forces in April 2000, a blow that almost killed him. But he crawled out of the hole he fell into after he had to take off the uniform, and he has been inspiring people to give their all to multiple missions ever since, from ending genocide to eradicating the use of child soldiers to revolutionizing officer training so that our soldiers can better deal with the muddy reality of modern conflict zones and to revolutionizing our thinking about the changing nature of conflict itself.

His new book is as compelling and original an account of suffering and endurance as Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* and William Styron's *Darkness Visible*.

## Waiting for First Light: My Ongoing Battle with PTSD Details

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# **From Reader Review Waiting for First Light: My Ongoing Battle with PTSD for online ebook**

## **Canadian Reader says**

It is impossible not to admire, even revere, Romeo Dallaire. Witness to the Rwandan genocide as the leader of UNAMIR, the peacekeeping mission to Rwanda in the early 1990s, Dallaire tried to convince the rest of the world to intervene to stop the killing before it had begun. The world refused to listen or respond, preferring to dismiss the problems in Rwanda as evidence of ongoing African (primitive) tribalism. Still, Dallaire worked tirelessly to save the lives he could . . . until it became clear that he was no longer functioning normally and he asked to be sent home to Canada. Back home, the psychological problems, the sleeplessness, mood disturbances, and vivid sensory flashbacks persisted--even intensified--and held him in their grip. Dallaire's PTSD continues to plague him--he is maintained on psychoactive medication and psychotherapy--to this day.

Dallaire's memoir largely focuses on the workaholicism that consumed him once he was back in Canada. Upon his return, he fairly promptly threw himself into major initiatives (associated with the Canadian military) in order to keep his demons at bay. He lived apart from his family for long stretches--ostensibly because of work, but possibly (the reader infers) because he really could no longer function well as a father, husband, and member of a family. Many Canadians are familiar with the episode in which he was found inebriated and suicidal in a park near the Canadian capital, which brought the issue of PTSD to the forefront of public attention.

I had hoped that Dallaire's memoir would deal more with the internal, psychological, personal experience of the disorder than it did. Instead, the book focused on the many projects and commitments (external details of Dallaire's life) that he has taken on since Rwanda. Work and service clearly are Dallaire's *raison d'être*. As well as shining the spotlight on mental health issues of the Canadian forces, and striving to get veterans the help they need, General Dallaire has done much to educate the public on the matter of child soldiers.

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## **Ian says**

In the closing chapter of his book about how he has battled PTSD since returning from his hellish UN mission--a mission that was tasked to supervise the Rwandan genocide without be able to stop it--retired General Dallaire asks his reading audience if they can still respect him since now he has revealed how far he has fallen from his original image of the ideal soldier. Monsieur Dallaire, as a Canadian citizen who has observed your dedication to Canada and the international community, who has noticed your untiring efforts to prevent child soldiery, who has seen you reach out to stop injustice in the military and raise awareness of PTSD, and who has now finally learned the gory details of the demons you have battled for over 20 years, I truly believe that you are the image of the ideal soldier. These efforts to make the world a better place should be the goal of all our military personnel. Canada is so proud of you!

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## **Andrew says**

Simply, we should be proud to call Roméo Dallaire Canadian. A great Canadian, who, in this book, has

publicly fought a personal battle in the hopes that others won't have to.

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## **Toni Osborne says**

A piercing memoir

Most of us are well acquainted with Roméo Dallaire (especially Canadians) and how he devoted his heart and soul to his work. This former Canadian senator, humanitarian and lieutenant-general who was the military commander of the UN during the Rwanda genocide in 1994 reminds us in his account how he will seek to explore what the events have done to him since he came back. The genocide is fully described in an early book "Shake Hands with the Devil" and a subsequent book "They Fight Like Soldiers, They Die Like Children" are a must to read.

In "Waiting for First Light", Mr. Dallaire takes us from the point he was relieved from his command through his release from the Forces on medical ground (PTSD) in 2000 till today as a civilian. He also served from 2005-2015 as a Liberal senator and how he tried desperately to influence the ways Veteran Affairs operates....and impossible task he later confirmed....

Traumatized by witnessing genocide his nights are invaded by despair and nightmare he simply couldn't sleep. In 1994 no one saw PTSD for what it was. At any moment he was pitched into a living memory back in Rwanda. He struggled day and night with visions. His mental and emotional anguish lead him on a path to alcohol abuse, overeating and many suicide attempts. Although his PTSD left untreated for too long became permanent but with medication and therapy he managed to push forward the many causes he had at heart and helped to comfort the others walking a similar path. He has risen from the depths and returned as an inspiration.

This book is quite an emotional journey: sad, heartbreaking and soul-wrenching. It is terrible to know that the Canadian government and military authorities do not recognize the negative impact PTSD has on its service personnel and are slow they are to provide all the help needed. Well maybe there is hope things will change.....

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## **Erin says**

**Rwanda will never end and I will never be free. I know there is no remedy for what I saw, what I did and did not do, during those three months of hell. There are no painkillers for the angst, the guilt, and the excruciating vividness of that time and place. The annual ritual of Rwanda in its foulest of times is the curse of the survivor.**

**Each night I take my pills, and try to sleep with the hope that I will not awaken again amidst the roaming souls who still wander the hills of Rwanda, asking me to join them.**

In his latest memoir, retired Canadian general and senator, Romeo Dallaire describes his twenty year battle with post-traumatic stress disorder(PTSD) and his tireless efforts to bring the Rwandan Genocide, the plight of child soldiers, and mental health support to Canadian military personnel to the eyes and ears of his reading audience. Those who have read Dallaire's previous books or listened to his interviews can expect the same

blunt honesty. Critical of those who were in charge of the United Nations and the Canadian government, this is not an easy book to read.

Each page had me sobbing and I hope those of you will forgive me because I am still reeling from the impact from 184 pages. See, in Canada, you either know someone in uniform or you don't. Born and raised in the Maritime provinces, I can list the number of men(and women) that I am related to or sat in high school or university classes with or invited to speak to my students on November 11th that have served or are still serving our nation in uniform. All of them have dealt with their service in one way or another. When Dallaire lashes out in his book about military cutbacks in the mid-90's, I once again mourn the closure of my community air force base and saying goodbye to a number of classmates as their fathers were re-assigned or "retired" because of government reduction.

Often I see critics claiming that an author has bared their "soul" to the reading audience and in this memoir it certainly rings true. One sentence uttered by Dallaire continues to play over and over again in my mind like a record, **Are all humans[human? Or are some humans more human than others?** [book:Waiting for First Light: My Ongoing Battle with PTSD|29236272] is such a powerful book, one which deeply moved me and educated me. PTSD is something that Romeo Dallaire wants us all to understand, that it isn't going to go away. It is also something that must be discussed, no matter how painful of a subject it is. **We must treat our veterans as soldiers throughout their lives, and give them and their families the care they need for the rest of their lives.**

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## Lexie says

Reading Roméo Dallaire's book about his experience of excruciating trauma and its relentless aftermath: I wonder if there *is* an after. The torment doesn't end, within. And after the Rwandan genocide of 1994, Roméo was further broken by his own strength ... paradoxically, by his principles and the tormenting resilience that held him so taut, so duty-bound, present to the end and beyond. Most of all, he was betrayed by the military and humanitarian institutions that he had served for most of his life, abandoned to command a patchwork force of about 400 courageous soldiers, all under the auspices of the UN, who could only witness a massacre of about 800,000 people while planes flew in and out of Rwanda to rescue elite ex-pats and other "important" people. Everyone else in Rwanda was left to die of thirst, starvation, and mass murder. The UN peacekeeping force was ordered to do nothing to stop the genocide, even when a reliable informant gave an accurate forecast of what was to come. When supplies arrived -- intermittently, at best -- they included useless items like flashlights without batteries.

Waiting For First Light gives a brief and devastating account of the Rwandan genocide (which Dallaire detailed in his first book, *Shaking Hands With The Devil*), while focusing more on the moral and existential injuries that Dallaire suffered -- and continues to suffer to this day ("I now accept that my injury will never heal. For me, treatment came too late."). His account of how the trauma mauled his spirit is heartbreaking. He worked himself nearly to death after returning to Canada ... and blamed himself for the mission's failure, when he was one of a very few people who acted with integrity through the carnage. He was, at first, judged harshly for his conduct through the genocide ... and eventually cleared of all judgment by all but himself. Such is the ruination that interpersonal trauma can cause -- the worst being betrayal. We blame ourselves for the heinous choices that others make, and for our own failure to act when we are entrapped and *cannot* act. Dallaire was nearly undone, in part, by his own moral fibre -- a paradox of trauma, that goodness and a strong moral constitution can nearly kill a person while at the same time sustain him. It is the agony of a strong conscience that cannot overcome evil.

Dallaire has since devoted his life to eradicating the use of children as warriors, as well as bringing the light of awareness to military institutions about trauma. The last chapter of his book is a passionate plea for governments and citizens to tend to our soldiers both during engagements and when they return home:

"Because veterans do not shy away, because they carry the moral norms of our society into immoral situations and then suffer the consequences, we all have a shared responsibility to care for them when they come home. They have performed a duty for the nation and for the world, and we all must acknowledge, not deny, what they have had to experience on our behalf, and on behalf of all humans."

As long as humans insist on going to war, there will be soldiers (and generals -- Dallaire was a three-star general on retirement) whose primary choice to enlist is a moral one. The paradox is terrible -- they are called to do battle, but also called to shelter and save lives. The best of them are characters of ethical magnificence, as is Roméo Dallaire. More than 20 years after the massacre, he still lives with horrific flashbacks, night terrors, explosive emotions. Certain existential injuries never heal; Dallaire is brutally honest in spelling out what extreme trauma leaves us with. At the same time, he emerges as an unstinting advocate for his fellow soldiers (his mandate includes trauma-informed veteran care, and advocacy for soldiers who have died by suicide to be considered with the same honour ascribed to soldiers who have died in battle), for children who are forced into slavery as soldiers for the most heinous of "leaders" (his Child Soldier Initiative is operant in more than 60 countries), and for all people to be more educated about PTSD.

Dallaire asks the reader toward the end of his book, "I wonder, will you now hold me in contempt, knowing as you do how far I fell? Or will my story help you empathize with others who hurt, or better understand your own pain?" This reader weeps for his torment, feels astonished at what he has accomplished, and is humbled by his massive heart. I am reminded of a verse from poet Mark Nepo as I ponder Roméo Dallaire, whose account, despite all, appears to arrive at this conclusion:

And what if we're meant to discover  
that caring for another is the summit?

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## **Diana says**

"I am still and always mired in the anguish of the genocide, and heartbreak over a world that still doesn't seem to care much about its most vulnerable people."

This book resonates for so many different reasons and topics. Regardless of what your interest was in picking it up, you will get so much more out of it.

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## **Lisa Mcquarrie says**

This is a must read, though it is highly challenging book to read. It is raw, real and I am so grateful for the level of honesty and vulnerability Dallaire demonstrated in these pages. This book - and the wisdom he shares has the potential to change lives. PTSD is real. It can be a deeply misunderstood condition but there is a tremendous number of people researching it, creating treatments and creating change. The stigma needs to go, and we as a community need to make trauma-healing a priority. Lives depend on it. Thank you Romeo Dallaire. You have my deepest respect. I support you're values and aim to help make a

difference in whatever way I can. How could we not.

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### **Susan says**

I could not put this book down. I was shocked by Mr. Dallaire's courage and frankness in outlining the effects that PTSD had on his life. The absolute chaos of his nights and the organized frenzy of his days was heartbreaking. At several times during my read, I had to just stop and absorb what he was shining light on. I know I will think back to this book and his experiences in life many times. He left me wondering what on earth I was accomplishing with my life...I know this was not his purpose. He is such a huge man and a great Canadian hero.

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### **Cassandra says**

This is the third book by retired lieutenant-general Romeo Dallaire and it is fascinating. It should be noted that I collect great Canadians- and it's because Dallaire so impressed me that I started- and that I have read all of his books and saw him when he came to speak at Memorial University of Newfoundland.

The writing in this book is so clear and concise that it makes for an easy read. A necessity when one considers how difficult it can be to read anyone's personal account of their mental health battles. Compounded to this difficulty is the fact that Dallaire was in charge of peacekeeping troops during a racial holocaust. I'm too young to remember Rwanda and it's time in the news- I was only five in 1994- but the fact that I was alive when it happened makes it easier for me to visualise than events like the Holocaust in WWII.

How distressing that genocides are a norm in this world of ours.

And how vital it is to understand that people must still be living through these events and that they will suffer from them. Dallaire's book is just one man's personal account but it shows some of the ways survivors and veterans are damaged in conflicts. And the accounts of anxiety, depression, suicidal tendencies and social isolation are universally applicable to our world because people suffer trauma in the so-called safety of our first world countries. Obviously not everyone can relate to a genocide but everyone knows someone who has suffered from a mental illness. You can get PTSD from surviving car accidents, sexual assaults, domestic abuse or natural disasters.

So read this book and remember that evil things still happen in this world. Read this book and see how PTSD affects people. And most importantly, read this book to the end and realise that Dallaire is surviving. That he still has hope. That we can still learn from people like him and better this world.

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### **Jane Mulkewich says**

This book made it to the Canada Reads long list, but not the short list. But it should be required reading for every Canadian - about the effects of trauma on the "peacekeepers" we send to war zones, and the effects of trauma on their families as well - and about how little we are doing about it. Change is coming slowly, but ever so slowly.

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### **Kate says**

It's fairly impossible for anyone who's met or cared for someone battling PTSD symptoms to write an unbiased review of this book. Add to that, I've had the pleasure of meeting Dallaire at one of his innumerable talks. That disclaimer aside, Dallaire writes with the brutal honesty that he's known for - an honesty that's critically important for what the book takes on. The gut-wrenching emotion of it comes and goes, but it hits hard when it does, and I suspect all the more so the closer the reader is to PTSD. His perspective is very much that of his command level, but the majority of his points behind it apply to most. Frankly, the man should get credit just for having the courage to write it, let alone the actual content.

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### **Sarah says**

This is a hard book to read but absolutely worth it. It's brutally honest and is his recollection of events immediately following his return from Rwanda. My heart broken many times and I cried. How this brave man is still alive I have no idea but clearly he is here for a purpose. We need to do better to support our military and first responders after they have been through occupational stress. The times are changing and it is no longer a requirement to 'put it in the past and never speak about what is wrong'. It's no longer seen as weak to need support. PTSD not only affects the person but their families suffer to, with long lasting consequences. I highly recommend this title.

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### **Christopher Farrell says**

I read the last third of this book with tears in my eyes.

The struggle that Dallaire went through upon his return with Rwanda is heartbreaking. He vividly accounts his fight against depression, PTSD, suicide attempts, overworking, and the frustration at "the system" for how much it underestimates mental trauma in our Armed Forces.

Talking about his anger at politics during his time in the Senate was particularly touching me to - as I've been on the front lines there and see how frustrating it is to get things done in an ever changing political environment.

If you've read Dallaire's first book, please pick this one up as well. It's a necessary epilogue to an already tragic story.

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### **Kathy Stinson says**

I thought I had some understanding of the causes and effects of PTSD. This book very much broadened it. That Romeo Dallaire has been able to accomplish so much, throughout his suffering, in his advocacy for better care for mentally and morally injured veterans and for an end to the use of child soldiers, and yet laments that he has not and will never be able to do enough, is astounding. One thing that surprised me about



this book (the first I've read by Dallaire but it won't be the last) is how very readable it is - a heartbreaking and powerful call for understanding, not just of this one man's injury, but of the suffering endured by many as a result of a different kind of mission from what soldiers have endured in the past (not to diminish that in any way). Quotes from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* enhance the impact.

Like many Canadians I turned a blind eye to what was happening in Rwanda during the genocide - we become numb to the many stories of atrocities that occur far from the comfort of our homes - but Dallaire appeals toward the end of this book to our better selves, who we believe ourselves to be as Canadians and as caring citizens of the world, in hopes we will not ignore the issues of child soldiers and traumatized veterans, or despair that nothing can be done. Something can be done. Few are in a position to do what Dallaire has done but I am hopeful that one impact of this book will be a rallying of effort among readers to do what they can. Support for Wounded Warriors and the Romeo Dallaire Child Soldier Initiative wouldn't be bad places to start.

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