

Doha, February 11, 1991

Dear Mom and Dad,

Thank you so very much for your letter. Words cannot express what a boost it is to receive letters from home. You must excuse this "form" reply, but time will not allow me to write separate replies. Until a week ago, 15 to 18-hour days were the norm. I collapse into bed and awake to face the next day. I'll try to give you a word picture of what is happening here.

Since the Allies gained total domination of the air several days ago, we have been at much less risk, and the mood has been more relaxed. It was pretty scary for a few weeks after January 16, when air raid sirens wailed at all times of the day and night. The frequent rude awakenings (e.g. Jan. 17 at 0130, 0330, 0415, 0605 - from my war diary) put a lot of people on edge although we have not been hit. Nonetheless, the combination of 12-hour shifts 7 days a week, interrupted sleep, and high anxiety resulted in many personal breakdowns. One newcomer to the camp left his IPE (individual protective equipment) in a truck, and someone drove away with it. Ten minutes later, the poor fellow found himself with no protection among thirty masked men in a shelter. He wept. One man, one mask. His IPE will never leave his sight again. Many tough lessons are to be learned here. We are walking the fine line between terror and excitement. You keep yourself psychologically on the right side, and this really is the most exciting place in the world right now. I love it for that aspect. You cannot beat this place for excitement! I love the people who have risen to the occasion.

We feed off each other's enthusiasm. Our excitement reached its peak during the first weeks of the war, despite extreme fatigue. I slept for 45 minutes, half upright on a wood bench, watching CNN one day. Now, the flying program has become more of a routine. But changes are expected.

The camps have comfortable living and dining facilities. We all have a roof over our heads and sleep on wood plywood beds with foam mattresses. We consider ourselves lucky because the Americans are in tents. There is also a rest area where you can watch CNN or videos day and night.

My job here has been the challenge of a lifetime. We had one month to meld two squadrons into one from two extremes of the fighter community (Cold Lake and Germany). Furthermore, there were no written procedures for anything, so we wrote them all: a one-inch thick volume was produced in 48 hours, so that every member from every trade would know precisely what was expected of him. Next, lack of adequate aircraft supplies was keeping aircrafts on the ground. We have 261 technicians working around the clock, but without the right parts, the aircrafts will not fly. So, we fully reviewed every single holding, studied usage rates and consulted our resident technical experts. Within a week, we had received more than 150 essential items at new maximum/minimum levels. Since then, we've had consistent 95% serviceability. Also, personnel sharpness on the line was a problem. It took a lot of tough talk and inspirational words to get everybody highly motivated. I had a sign made which read: "Sharpness on the line, i.e. flightline, begins with sharpness in appearance". The technicians are noticeably being aware of this.

Necessity has again proven to be the mother of invention. We have solved many technical challenges: data link, 977 interrogation, new configuration for a never-flown missile, modification to disable emergency bail-out and identification spotlights. These may mean nothing to you, but they were all essential operational requirements, which we solved within days. It has been fun to disregard orders from headquarters and proceed according to my best engineering judgement with what was thought as the best course of action to follow. It's an AERE officer's dream. I feel that we can handle anything, and we are on the edge of our seats awaiting the next challenge.

On the lighter side, the weather has been perfect, and I mean perfect. During daylight, it is typically 26°C and drops to approximately 13°C at night. The few clouds that we have seen lately became the topic of conversation because they are so rare. It has rained once since October 6, so you can appreciate that nothing grows, except the trees and shrubs watered daily by the Zataris. Although this area is all desert land, I was surprised to find no loose sand around here. The surrounding terrain is flat, very rocky and hard like concrete. Sand around here is more like talcum powder. South of here, the typical sand dunes can be seen.

A few days ago, over a break period, some of us drove to the dunes where we saw some almost as high as 15 stories. Huge! The wind was strong, the sand blasted our legs. That area of suicidal sand dunes, is so-called because the dunes migrate and eventually blow out to sea. We climbed to the top of the dunes, which is not easy, and ran down out of control. Fun! Fun! Fun!

There are many wild camels in the desert. One colleague tried to fake a close-up picture and was chased at high speed back to the truck. It was hilarious!

The flying is very exciting from the ground crew perspective, so you can imagine what a rush of adrenaline it must be for the pilots (again the line between terror and excitement)! Here, we share the airfield with American, French and Zatari forces. I will never forget the first departure of 16 USAF F-16s heavily loaded with various types weapons. Everyone was on the flight line, cheering them on, shaking their fists in the air as if to say "Go get them"! A mass launch of 16 F-16s in full afterburner is a sight to behold. Your rib cage rumbles with the roar of the jet noise. We counted only fourteen upon their return. Very sad. Four others took hits. My technicians helped with battle repairs to the flight control surfaces. The feeling of closeness and common purpose is unbelievable.

I have become very good friends with the Zatari officers. I eat lunch with them 5 days out of 7. They are extremely hospitable, friendly and well-educated, and also very well paid. They are the highest paid government employees because they put their life on the line and protect their leader, the Emir. A lieutenant earns the equivalent of \$48,000 US tax free a year. A new lieutenant had just ordered a Lexus as a second car. Many of them drive Mercedes 560 SEL.

They teach me four words every day, so I am learning a few basic phrases. I can exchange greetings, jokes and shop in Arabic. I spent at least an hour over lunch discussing their culture, religion (Islam) and the Gulf War. It is fascinating to hear their perspective. The Arab world has very strong mixed feelings about US involvement. It is too complicated to talk about right now.

All in all, this has been a character-building experience. Leading 261 people who are overworked and suffering various degrees of combat fatigue is a great challenge. Your insight becomes sharpened for sure. A few things I have learned: cling to basic principles and persevere, take it a day at a time, foster a positive attitude, as it is contagious, grant leadership at the lowest level possible, etc. We are doing OK. It's not easy, but extremely fulfilling. I cling to the bright hope shown by certain positive people. I asked one technician how he felt the other day. He replied "Sir, if things were any better, there would have to be three of me to enjoy all this!" We laughed. They deliberately exaggerate because they think I overdo the positive. It rubs off though.

So all is well and we are in good spirits. We deeply appreciate your moral support and the support of the Canadian public.

Pray for Peace

Love, James

P.S. Enclosed is my favourite letter from a Canadian well-wisher. I always carry it with me.