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Postcard from Kandahar

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Sorry, for security reasons I can't tell you exactly where in Afghanistan I am right now. As a matter of fact, for the same reasons I can't tell you exactly how I got here. I can tell you that I flew out of Montreal on a commercial flight last Friday night. After a plane change in Europe and another seven hours in the air we arrived midnight Saturday at an undisclosed location. We slept for four hours in a barracks, then got up just before sunrise, put on body armour (and I don't mean deodorant) and clambered aboard a Hercules C-130, shipping out to Kandahar.

As Chair of Canada's government task force on Afghanistan, I'm here with our Minister of Foreign Affairs for three days of meetings. Right now I'm somewhere over the Persian Gulf, earplugs firmly in my ears to muffle the drone of those big engines. I just had a briefing from my bodyguard and the other soldiers. My appointed protector (let's call him Mike) just asked me for my blood type, my next of kin and the serial number on the newly acquired 'dog tags' around my neck. He then showed me a military first aid kit and gave me a lesson on how to apply a pressure dressing onto an open wound.

"Hopefully you'll never have to use this," Mike explained matter-of-factly. "But if something happens while we're on patrol down there you might have to help with this kind of stuff." Right.

Later, I was up in the cockpit of this huge flying tank. The crew have my headphones

wired in so that we can talk and hear each other, along with a lot of the other 'chatter' going on in the Gulf. The pilots are friendly and relaxed, but as we get ready to take the standard evasive action on approach to the landing strip they are all business and truly 'top flight' professionals.

The captain eased that multi-tonne beast down onto the hot asphalt as gently as somebody setting a cup of tea onto its bone china saucer. It's no wonder Canadian Forces pilots do so well in international military competition. They are totally committed to excellence.

It's now 14 hours after arrival at Kandahar, 2:30 a.m. I'm in my bunk in our encampment near the city. All is very quiet. We just got back from a solitary tip-toe walk around the enclosure. The air is perfectly still. A bright half moon helps me find my way – no lights permitted after dark.

I walked past the hulking silent silhouettes of large armoured vehicles. At the camp's four corners I looked up at the watch towers. I could see the shadows of two soldiers, one Canadian and one newly trained Afghan at each posting. As I had done two years ago when I was here, I climbed the steel runged ladders and eased myself onto the protected platforms. I was able to spend some time in whispered conversation with our young troops.

One of them let me peer down the sights of the high powered machine guns that could 'reach out and touch' anyone foolhardy enough to approach the walls unannounced, even from hundreds of

meters away.

Back in my bunk, I'm reflecting on all the briefings and site visits I've had today. I find myself fighting my usual battle of frustration on the issue of what the media tend to emphasize and what they tend to marginalize. Today they were here with us to hear the reports of clear and measurable progress on the things we've accomplished for and with the people of Afghanistan. We heard from Canadians who are working on the giant

project of rebuilding the Dahla Dam. It will bring desperately needed irrigation and electric power to the people of this valley.

We also heard of the Canadian soldier who was killed at the dam site three days ago, while protecting the workers. We heard from those involved in rebuilding schools and training teachers. We heard about the girls on their way to school whose faces were doused in acid by perverted Taliban cowards and we heard how they and their families have decided they will not bow down to terror. They have returned to school, scarred but more determined than ever.

We personally watched the training of Afghan men who want to become police officers. Canadian RCMP and city police trainers are over here, risking their lives, working with these recruits towards the day when Afghans will do all of their own policing... soon.

Our soldiers are training hundreds who will be part of the new Afghan army.

Our corrections officers volunteer to come here at the request of the Afghan government to show Afghans how to operate prisons and how even the worst criminals have human rights. Civilian development officers with the Maple Leaf on their knapsacks are here, involved in everything from agriculture projects to micro financing of small local businesses.

This country, with its long history of devastating conquests and heartbreaking deprivation, is struggling back to its feet. Recovery is slow, but it is sure. A land that has been brutally exploited to export terror and heroin, uninhibited, all around the world is changing, one difficult step at a time.

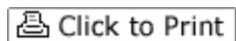
I predict the day will come when my grandkids will vacation here, openly and freely. They will see fruit farms and wheat fields. They will see clean hydro projects, colleges and even police training academies and at some point. And when they stroll through a beautiful city park on the edge of Kandahar they will see a bronze plaque indicating that a Canadian

Forces camp was once on this spot.

At that moment they will share solemn pride
and perhaps a tear or two as they read the
names of over 100 Canadians who paid the
ultimate price to make this happen.

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