

Flying into Dubai really underscores the strangeness of this land for me. It's all a dusty brown and the haze hanging over this architecturally adventurous city makes it resemble a Ridley Scott movie, like Blade Runner meets The Mummy or something! We fly over the Palm tree islands, an artificial group of islands built to look like a palm tree... but seriously, who *builds* islands?? We also get a view of the tallest building in the world, the Burj Dubai, and once again the difference from home is very clear. When we land in the U.A.E. the first thing you notice is the heat, it's a humid, oppressive closeness that's a big surprise compared to Ottawa and Germany! In reality, there isn't any time for a nap, just enough time to be issued our frag vests, the body armour plates that go in the vests, and our helmets. Frag is short for 'fragmentation' and we're told, in matter of fact tones, that these pieces of equipment will protect our heads and *most* of our vital organs from serious injury by fragmentation weapons. MOST of our organs?!?!? Uhh...what about, well, arms and legs and all that other stuff? I think there might be a little extra drama for our benefit but I'm not really sure. It's pretty business like here @ Camp Mirage and there really isn't a whole lot of superfluous activity of any type going on here. After all, this is a multi national military base taking part in a major military operation so there isn't too much attention to anything unnecessary.

Our group splits into two and while one is visiting the Quarter Master (supply services) to get their 'kit', the other was being photographed for their on-base ID. When we'd all completed both tasks we were walked across the road from the airstrip, through a secured check point, to the base itself for a meal in the mess. We filed past the steam tables with the personnel of the International Security Assistance Force, or ISAF. I heard at least 3 distinct accents, Canadian, British and Australian, all here doing the same job, emphasizing the International aspect of this operation. The meal is pretty good and I learn that I really like Camel's milk yoghurt. I never thought I'd even have an opinion on that! I mentioned that this place is different, right? After our meal it was back across the road to retrieve our kit, surrender our passports and board a bus to take us to the final plane of our trip, the enormous C-17 Globemaster cargo plane. We're told that we have to wear our kit for 30 minutes after take off and for an hour before landing being as these are the times the aircraft is vulnerable to ground fire. We file onto the plane and the utilitarian nature of this monster is immediately obvious. The cargo is in the middle of the aircraft on skids piled as high as about 8 feet and maybe 10 feet wide. Our seats are nylon webbing afterthoughts that line each side of the Spartan interior. All over the inside of the fuselage are the workings of the aircraft, electrical wires and hydraulic lines and mechanical equipment is everywhere, no concession to esthetics whatsoever, just there for it's purpose, exposed for ease of service. I'm sitting typing this looking at the equipment for the show, everything from the stage to the PA and the lighting, our gear and luggage all on one skid. The next skid is full of containers labeled '155mm Howitzer M198 Propellant Explosives' and the next is full of 'Cartridges For Weapons, 7.62 mm, Inert Projectile' In a funny turn, I'm amused by the loud orange stickers stating 'DANGER!! DO NOT LOAD ON PASSENGER AIRCRAFT'. I suppose I'm not a passenger anymore. I don't think there's going to be movie on this flight.

Take off is startlingly fast for any size plane, let alone this enormous beast. Add to that the fact that it's a cargo plane and, as such, has no windows other than a couple of tiny portals used by a crew member to check the landing gear. During the flight we're free to get up and wander around although there isn't much to see it's still just cool to wander around on this thing! Closer to the end of our 2.5 hour flight I get the chance to go into the cockpit which is a mind numbing array of instrumentation. While talking with the flight crew about the flight they tell me that they will turn all of those dials and gauges onto a super low light setting and blackout the cabin for landing, again, to avoid enemy fire. It's that time so we're all back in our seats and as the lighting turns from the normal white to an ominous red (I have video...it's cool!) we're all reminded that this is serious stuff. Right after the lighting shift we begin what the pilots have warned me about, the 'combat landing' sufficient to say there isn't a long flat glide path on the way in, more like a ride at Canada's Wonderland. Again, there are no windows so we have only our ears to tell us that things are happening, in quick succession we hear the landing gear deploy and the solid impact of a successful landing. We're on the ground at KAF.