

## Kai's Birthday Email

April 23, 2003

Dear Kai,

A very happy belated birthday to you, brother. I tried calling from the sailor phones but missed you at work and again at home, where at least I was able to speak with your wife Lynn and daughter Alex. The cell number Lynn provided led to a voice message that didn't sound familiar so I left a somewhat cryptic message. Perhaps I dialed it wrong. Or, who knows, maybe somewhere in the thousands of miles between us something got mixed up.

I wanted to tell you about your birthday flight. Seeing as there isn't much I can do from here to help celebrate your birthday (and let's face it, we're getting too old to actually be glad about birthdays anyway), I decided to instead describe for you the mission which took place that day. A story is about all I can offer from out here...

By now my regular wingman, Chopper, and I had flown so many missions over Iraq together that when the intelligence portion of the brief concluded I simply looked at him and said, "*standard, questions?*" There were none. The threat was minimal, we knew our tactics—a standard milk run.

Two and a half hours later we strapped on our jets loaded with 17,000 pounds of fuel, two 500-pound laser guided bombs, 500 rounds of 20-millimeter armor-piercing rounds for the cannon, and two AIM-9 Sidewinder air-to-air missiles. We launched at 1630 local (4:30 pm for you civilian types) and punched straight into the typical nasty haze which befalls the Arabian Gulf. It looks like the atmospheric version of toilet water after it doesn't flush completely.

Sorry, I digress.

We joined up and made our way to the notional highway in the sky coalition aircraft are obliged to follow to safely and expeditiously enter and exit Iraqi airspace. The first excitement we had was a cloud bank which we could not climb above since we were still so heavy from a mostly-full fuel load and all the other junk we carried (i.e. ordnance). So instead we flew straight through it, hoping we would not encounter icing.

Instead of trying to fly formation in that crap, I detached Chopper who dropped back a mile or so, locked me on radar, and followed my path laterally. We eventually broke out of the clouds as suddenly as stepping out of a dark room into a bright, sunny day—the front ended that quickly. Impressive.

Chopper joined back up and we flew another 30 minutes to the aerial tanker—our first stop. The coordination for this became laborious as several other flights requested fuel as we arrived. When we acquired the gaggle visually there were a pair of tankers in a two-mile lead-trail with

two fighters refueling from the one in front and four from the one in back. We joined on the lead tanker and waited for the two fighters in front of us to clear out.

Now, tanking is a tedious chore so to expedite the process some tanking aircraft have a hose mounted on each wingtip, thus facilitating the refueling of two aircraft simultaneously. This configuration always cracks me up because, invariably, despite how much concentration and constant flight control inputs are required to stay in the basket, you can occasionally steal a glance at your buddy on the other wing and normally get the finger right back at you for your efforts. I love this job.

Anyway, we topped off and proceeded to our station where our controller informed us, "*Lopez 47 [our tactical callsign that evening], we have no tasking for you tonight.*" Typical. Peace sucks.

So what do we do instead? Well, the sun is setting beautifully, we've got plenty of time and tons of gas (literally), so... how about some cloud surfing?! It's not every day you and your pal get to dance around cumulus build-ups over foreign territory. It was epic. I was just bounding through some clouds and rolling upside down when I suddenly remembered it was your birthday.

"*Kai!!!*" I yelled out to no one in particular, "*Happy birthday, man, you should see this!!*" (I didn't key the radio otherwise I can only imagine the mystified responses I may have received.)

We were just getting into some good cloud dancing when a controller interrupted: "*Lopez 47, flight, we need you to proceed to grid xxxx.yyyy to help out the Iris 13 flight, they've got some troops on the ground with a crowd getting a little too close.*" We told them we'd be there in 10 minutes and bustered over.

By the time we arrived on station the Iris flight had departed for the tanker after more or less dispersing the crowd. The sun was pretty close to setting at this point and I guess Iraqi's like to BBQ because small fires could be seen all over the nearby village. But, not knowing for sure, our troops asked us to take a look and see what was going on. Happy to oblige, my wingman and I go tearing up a subdivision of mud houses (or so they seemed) at 300 feet, 500 knots where we catch brief glimpses of natives cooking on the fires in their backyards. What with the palm trees and all, it actually looked like a pretty decent place. I'm sure they didn't think much of us, though. Or maybe they did—dinner and a show.

Pretty soon it was our turn to hit the tanker and we made our way back to the refueling track. On the 20-minute journey back east the sun set directly behind us, which made it difficult to fully enjoy but from what I could see it was beautiful, as usual.

"*Now might be a good time for supper,*" I radioed my wingie. He agreed and we both ate the few rations we had brought along: in my case a peanut butter and jelly bagel, a couple plums pilfered from the wardroom, and water. Certainly not a 5-star meal but it's the best you can do

with limited storage in those cockpits. With our stomachs, and shortly thereafter—our fuel tanks, topped off it was dark enough to put on our night vision goggles, which we did after removing the daytime visors (yellow in my case, as usual).

After 20 more minutes of hanging out east of Baghdad it was time to start heading home. Only, the direction of travel was blocked by a terrific line of thunderstorms we would have to penetrate. The RTB would take close to an hour and half way into it, we approached the storms.

It was magnificent, Kai. No kidding, in the probably 20-mile-long line of storms there was never a break in the lightning. As dark as it was, with that light show I felt like I was on a Disneyland ride. It was truly unbelievable...except, I suddenly realized that at some point we were going to have to get through that mess. We found a break in the clouds and passed through but had to climb to 37,000 feet to avoid losing each other in the clouds.

When we finally made it feet wet, I figured we were home free. Boy was I wrong.

Remember that bank of clouds we flew through on the way in several hours ago? Well it was parked right over the Gulf and giving the seas and ships below quite a licking. We began descending and did not break out of the clouds, rain, and turbulence until around 10,000 feet.

I could not hold for recovery where the ship told me to because my TACAN needle was spinning instead of pointing towards the ship, so I held at a location they passed me, which—oh by the way—was about two miles from yet another thunderstorm. I was getting tossed around with lightning bolts flashing across the sky every 20 seconds or so. It sucked.

In fact, it was so awful that for the first time in a long time it occurred to me that death was a very real possibility. I briefly entertained the notion that death might actually come as somewhat of a relief—but I quickly dismissed that ridiculousness since there is still so much more in this life I want to do.

When it was my time to commence it would have been fine had the ship told me where to steer to find them and land but half way there they vectored me around in a circle—ostensibly for spacing from the aircraft I was following but, in my mind, simply to make sure I was thoroughly disoriented (which I was).

When I finally lined up behind the boat and could see her from four miles away I thought, *thank God, this is almost over*. But, naturally, there was still wind shear to contend with. On the approach the crosswind was so strong the ship was outside the HUD field-of-view (aka “HUD limited”). This is not normal. Needless-to-say, such conditions do not help you get to an ‘on-and-on’ start for landing.

Coming down the chute I briefly harkened back to a night in the Caribbean not unlike this one while aboard the carrier John F. Kennedy some years back. That night, crossing the ramp, I

became underpowered, went too low, and tagged the one-wire bigger than Dallas (usually the LSOs are yelling at the pilot when this happens and that night—they were).

A lightning bolt across the nose not only brought me back to reality but temporarily blinded me too. Joy. My night vision returned and I wrestled the jet to salvage the approach when I suddenly heard, “302, three quarters of a mile, on course, on glideslope, call the ball.” *Wow, is it that time already? How did I get to an on-and-on start? I wonder what’s for MIDRATS?*

*FOCUS, JELL-O!*

I called the ball and kept flying the approach—amazed that the glideslope source was staying mostly in the center. About the time I figured the ball would drop like it did on JFK I goosed a handful of power and, lo’ and behold, the ball started climbing up the datums. *Oh crap!* I certainly don’t want to go around and do this again.

“*Don’t climb,*” says paddles, in their normal, smooth voice. I sucked off a handful of throttle which earned me a stern “*power back on!*” call, nosed over slightly and by the grace of God grabbed the four-wire on a wet, slippery flight deck.

\*Phew\*, it was over!

...Or was it? The deck was so slick from the rain mixed with the standard flight deck scum that although my nose wheel was turned right to exit the landing area, the jet kept sliding straight ahead towards the flight deck edge. I modulated the nose wheel steering to get the tires rolling instead of sliding and was able to clear out of the way before becoming a problem for the next guy trying to land behind me (causing a ‘Foul Deck’ wave off is decidedly not cool—especially on a night like that).

I parked, shut down, and headed below decks to debrief. The odyssey was over. All told, 4.9 hours of terror, bliss, remembering my big brother’s birthday, and—for the last 45 minutes—having to pee really badly. Done. Kaput.

The LSOs were generous and gave me an ‘OK-4’ because of the environmental conditions. Swell.

We’ve had two down days to regroup and have not flown since and, naturally, the weather has been beautiful. Tomorrow I am scheduled to go out on the very same cycle: take off at 4:30 / land at 9. I just hope this one is a bit less exciting...

Happy birthday, Kai.