Nichola Goddard
When she arrived in Afghanistan for her tour of duty on Feb. 1, 2006, Capt. Nichola Goddard had already developed a stellar reputation as a brilliant officer, a view held by both her superiors and the soldiers who served under her.

When she was killed on May 17, 2006, after being hit by shrapnel from rocket-propelled grenades during a firefight with Taliban insurgents, she became the 16th Canadian soldier to die in Afghanistan. Nichola Kathleen Sarah Goddard would go into the history books as Canada’s first female combat soldier to be killed in action.

But there is another quality of Goddard that will distinguish her long after her passing.

During her three-month tour, she became a prolific and eloquent letter writer to family, friends and supporters.

Her family estimates these letters to be possibly in the hundreds; weeks after she died, people from all across the country were still receiving letters postmarked before May 17.

An English graduate with a love of words, Goddard wrote colourful, descriptive letters of her time in Afghanistan, letters that were filled with humour, compassion, intelligence and humanity.

Parents Tim and Sally Goddard decided to share their daughter’s letters home to family with fellow Canadians and in sharing her letters, that they hope Canadians will see not just Nichola, but her fellow troops as a new breed of 21st-century soldier, or as Tim says: “passionate, patriotic, thinking people — people we are so blessed to have looking out for us.”

LETTER ONE
Capt. Nichola Goddard’s first letter home:

Hello Everyone!
Well, as you all know, I arrived safe and sound into Afghanistan on 1 Feb. 2006. It took us four days to fly here — quite an adventurous four days!

The Trip
The first stop was Trenton, Ont., where our plane got held up for four hours because of problems with the fuel tank. That got fixed and we finally left for Prestwick, Scotland. Upon arrival there, duct tape fell off and the fuel tank gave up completely. We ended up spending 36 hours in Prestwick. For those of you who haven’t been there, there isn’t a lot to do for a bunch of soldiers without civilian clothing who aren’t allowed to drink or leave the immediate metropolis of Prestwick. Anyway, got our own rooms in a local hotel and, as usual, managed to have a good time. I had never been to Scotland and have decided that it would be lovely to go back and do some hikes.

From Scotland, we flew into Zagreb, Croatia. That was really different! It was fun to be somewhere completely different from the U.K. or North America. It made me realize that I really haven’t seen much of the world (that I remember, Mum and Dad!). The stopover was only a couple of hours and we were ready to do the final big leg to Dubai, UAE.

Dubai was amazing. It was too bad that we arrived at a crazy time in the middle of the night (0200 local) ... the base is set up like a resort. Complete with mini-golf, movies, mini-bar, etc. Wow. Even at 0200 it was impressive. I need to highlight this because of the huge contrast to KAF (Kandahar Airfield). More on that in a minute. Oh, I should also mention that there were beautiful showers, air conditioning, heat when you needed it, and all the guys had their own rooms. The location seems amazing ... I can’t wait to stop over there when we fly back.

As you know, I was pretty apprehensive about the trip into KAF. I knew that we were going to fly “tactically” and was a little concerned that I’d totally embarrass myself and throw up all over some of my soldiers. I’d never been in a Herc (the big planes that the military uses to lift heavy equipment and move personnel — Herc stands for Hercules). It was HUGE. They crammed in so much kit, it was
amazing. They drove the tractors right onto the plane to drop off the crates with our kit in them. Then, we got on. I discovered that the reason they can fit so much stuff is because they cram the people all together in the smallest space possible. We sat in four rows, the centre two with our backs to each to other, facing the other row. We had to sit with our legs alternating, because otherwise we didn’t fit. The flight was three-and-a-half hours long. I didn’t sleep much! The tactical flying part was pretty tame. The Pang Screamer prepared me well! No one from my flight threw up, which was nice. We arrived into KAF around 0830 local time.

The Camp
I need to emphasize that the camp is HUGE. It is about 16 km long and employs 5,000 civilians. There are about 7,000 troops here from many nationalities. I have seen American, Dutch, Romanian, and British troops so far. The Canadians aren’t quite all here yet — they should finish arriving by the 3rd or 4th of Feb. The local Afghans get paid $1 day (US). Initially, they tried to pay them $3/day, but the workers kept on getting killed. I guess that the unemployed guys would ask for a job and be turned down. He’d then wait outside for the next guy to come in, then he’d shoot him. Unemployed guy would then walk in and ask for a job. After a couple of incidences, they lowered the salary.

It really makes you think.

The camp is separated into chunks, with each nationality organizing their camp the way they see fit. There are three kitchens spread around the camp, and you can eat in whichever one you are closest to. The food seems to be OK. There is a lot of deep-fried stuff, but an OK selection of salads and vegetables. I won’t get fat, but I shouldn’t starve, either. The hours are very flexible, so you can basically eat whenever you get hungry.

The bathrooms get their own paragraph. I thought that I was pretty realistic, but even I will emphasize that it is pretty bad. There are two cesspools in the camp where all the raw sewage is dumped and purified. Depending on which direction the wind is blowing, it can be quite strong. The guys in charge of it definitely deserve to be on that show The Worst Jobs Ever. We are about 300m from the closest bathrooms.
You walk into the room and there are 10 toilets, each surrounded by a curtain that never shuts the whole way.

We are about 500m from a row of porta-potties. Depending on my mood, I can choose company or not. The showers are about 1000m away, but they are great.

There is lots of hot water for the women’s showers and the water pressure is great. The showers aren’t coed, so don’t worry, Dad. I guess the guys are usually out of running water; it sucks to be them, I
The camp was originally sand, but I guess that was pretty hard to walk on and got really dusty. Someone decided that laying down a bunch of gravel would be a better decision. I guess it is, but the result is that your feet always hurt from walking on the big gravel chunks. Plus, the danger of rolling an ankle is ever-imminent. I imagine it is like walking on the beach — I will get used to it.

There are a fair number of facilities spread about the camp. There is a Canada house, where I called Mum and Dad from. There are 10 phones right next to each other. There is a pretense of privacy given by the paper-thin boards that are put up between people. The ideal is to end up between two people speaking French, that way you don’t get distracted by their conversations. The phones have the added benefit of being right next to the airstrip, so any planes taking off or landing cut out all conversation. They also get cut off periodically, so don’t panic if I’m on the phone and it dies. I guess the wires are above ground, so they get tripped all the time by vehicles. There are also 10 computers there. My computer account is set up now (that is how I am e-mailing) ... I should emphasize that the 10 phones and 10 computers are for the 1,200 Canadian troops that are in KAF. So, I’ll apologize ... for not calling/e-mailing often and for calling at weird times. The trick seems to be typing out the e-mail on my laptop, and then e-mailing it as an attachment. This way, I can write a lot more and not take up a lot of time on the Internet. I really don’t like talking with all the people around, so I’ll apologize now for being pretty quiet.

Other facilities include the gym, which I haven’t been to yet but apparently is quite nice. There is also an American house, Dutch house, etc. I haven’t visited those. There is a Subway and a Burger King on the American side ... there is also a huge U.S. department store that I haven’t been to yet. I’m going to get the big tour this afternoon. I’ll tell you all about it in my next letter.

What else? Oh, there is no power. There is power in the camp, but it hasn’t been run to our tents yet. They expect it to take a couple of weeks. Right now, there is a communal building where we can recharge stuff. The downside is that you have to sit there while it recharges because theft is a problem. I’m glad that Jay got me the computer that re-charges in a much shorter amount of time.

I think that is it that I can think to tell you about the camp. Tonight, I will be meeting with the American unit that is currently working in our area — it will be interesting to hear all of their stories and get their take on the area.

The Area
Wow. I knew that we were going to be on a desert surrounded by mountains. I knew that it was going to be hot. I knew that there would be a lot of sand. I knew that we would be about an hour from the city. I didn’t know that it would be so beautiful. It is kind of like cutting out a piece of southern
Manitoba, filling it with sand and putting it in Canmore’s location. It is beautiful. The mountains seem close, but I know they are at least 50 km away. The air is very dry, which is lovely. Even when it’s hot, it’s a dry hot. I am very glad that we came in the winter, because it is not unbearable. I can’t wait to get out to see more of the country. Tory — I will find you a great rock. I am going to start taking pictures today, and I will send them home as soon as I get a good collection.

The Mission
I know that I told you guys a fair bit of stuff before I left about where I will be working and what my routine will be like. Not too much has changed from that. I can’t e-mail any details about where I’ll be going or when. Nor can I tell you over the phone when I’ll be in the camp or when I’ll be gone. I’m sorry about that, because I know you all worry. But we need to be pretty secretive about it so that no one finds out ahead of time where we are going or when. I know that you all understand. I will keep a journal and tell you all when I get home. In the meantime, please understand when I am very vague!!

The Guys
I am in a small tent right now with nine other officers. There is about a foot between our cots, so it is pretty tight. This morning, I put my lock inside my combat boot. Then, I picked up my boots and yelled out “Scorpion check” as I tipped my boot upside down beside my buddy’s cot. There was a big “thump” as the lock fell out. My buddy, Howard Han for those Shilo folk, shot out of bed like he’d been shot. It was pretty good. The good news is that I no longer need to worry about being the first one to scream like a little girl.
Morale is pretty high, as we are all glad to finally be here. The last check was 196 days (give or take) until we come home.

I think of you all often and can’t wait to see you all again. I hope that life on the home front is interesting as usual and that you are all remembering to smile.

Nich

LETTER TWO
Week two in Kandahar

Hello Everyone,
I am writing from my bunk bed — we have moved up in the world and now live in a BAT (which stands for Big $$ Tent) which is pretty cosy. There are about 200 people in each tent. There is also power, which is awesome!!

I got a top bunk, so I’m happy. I haven’t really had time to appreciate living inside a tent with power,
though, because I have been so busy.

Overall, the quality of life in KAF is improving daily. The females now have their own bathroom, which is really nice. There’s a lot to be said for having your own cubicle. Each bathroom/shower room has its own water supply. Because there are far fewer females, we always have hot water and lots of it. That is really nice, because the guys still complain about running out all of the time. I think I mentioned that in the last letter — but it’s worth saying again.

I also bought a little mat for my feet in the morning. It covers up the big gravel chunks so it’s not quite as bad to get off my bunk. The bunk beds are pretty little. My Sgt. is 6’4” and he has to sleep diagonally — Jay would hate it! They are also quite flimsy. I almost knocked mine over climbing in without the Sgt. down below to anchor me. We have a SOP (Standard Operating Procedure) established now so there haven’t been any other incidents. My crew all gets to sleep right beside one another, which I really like. The only thing to really complain about is the smell. Two hundred men in one tent after a busy day rivals the cesspool outside. I don’t think my nose hairs will ever be the same again.

I can’t believe that we have been here for only a week. The days are all so full, time seems to fly by. On the other hand, you are never far from my thoughts. I got a letter from Victoria today (thanks! My first one). It was great to have news from home. I find that I am very cut off from the outside world. I have absolutely no idea what is going on outside of Afghanistan and even my knowledge of Afghanistan is very restricted to the Kandahar area. So — any news articles or stories would be really appreciated.

My crew is doing really well. Our morale is pretty high and we are keeping very busy. It is an amazing feeling to get out and actually do our job. I knew that we were well trained, but I didn’t realize quite how well until we started actually doing road moves and patrols. I am very confident in my crew and in our equipment. Don’t worry Dad, confidence does not equal carelessness. We are very careful. I find our trips “out of the wire” very tiring mentally. We are all keyed up and super alert for the whole thing, so we’re all really tired when we get back. But, it is great to get out there and see the country.

Leaving KAF (Kandahar Airfield) is like moving to another world. First, we cross about 2 km of garbage. The field of garbage always has people “shopping” as Mum would say. It is quite sad. There are a couple of apartment buildings that have half collapsed. When you get to the other side, you see that they don’t have a back at all. Apparently, they were hit by 500 lb. bombs sometime ago. They are filled with people. The kids all run out to watch us drive by. Sometimes they wave and smile, but other times they swear at us and throw rocks. I still find it pretty shocking to see young children so full of hate at us being here. But others wave and smile and seem to want us around. It is hard to know who is right. I just have to believe that we are doing a good thing, especially when I hear our intelligence updates about the widespread violence and I see the terrible poverty.
I have seen several herds of wild camels. I’m still trying to find a tame one so that I can go for a ride. I think that must be one of those “gotta do it” things. The opportunity hasn’t come up yet, but I’m only in week two.

Other bizarre things — the donkeys are hobbled. Their front legs are tied so close together that they can’t even walk, they have to hop. Gundy would be horrified. I found it very sad to watch. On the other hand, these people have so little, it is easy to understand that they don’t want their only donkey to run away.

I can’t begin to describe the poverty that I have seen here. It actually makes me sick to my stomach to see how little these people have. In the countryside, there are lean-tos made out of old tarp and almost seethrough cloth. It seems like dozens of people fit into them. We went to practise shooting our weapons and the locals all gathered around to watch.

That was fine, but as soon as we were done, they came to scavenge … they collected all of the used casings from our weapons. They were actually pushing and shoving each other to get at it. I have also never seen so many people maimed and wounded. People with crutches and people without who should have them.

I have seen about 100 men in our trips and easily double that in children, but no women so far. I don’t think they realize that I am a woman when we drive by, which is fine by me.

I can see why people dream about visiting here. It is stunningly beautiful in areas. I got to see the red desert to the south — it was amazing. I don’t think any description or photo could do it justice. It was silhouetted on both sides by the mountains to the east, and the plains to the west. It stretched south for as far as we could see. It wasn’t flat, like the deserts in the movies. Instead, it was rolling and a blood red colour. The sand was so fine, you couldn’t even pick it up. I will find you a cool rock, Tory, don’t worry!

So far, my most interesting stories involve the insects and animals that I have seen. Still no camel spiders or scorpions, but I did see a wild stick bug — it looked just like they look at the zoo. It must have been a baby one, though, because it was very small. We’ve also seen some pretty cool lizards and spiders, but all small. I’ve got to say, I’m not really disappointed.

It has been getting steadily hotter. It reaches about 35 C in the afternoons, but drops down to about 5 C at night. As soon as the sun goes down, the temperature drops completely. I am definitely working on my tan!! We have air conditioning in our vehicle, which is awesome. Anything without our vehicle sucks more than I could ever describe. My personal protective equipment weighs about 40 lbs., plus the weight of a rucksack (between 40-60 lbs.) … that is two-thirds of my body weight and I feel every pound of it. “Living the dream” as we all say. I’ve got to admit, the LCF (look cool factor) is pretty...
good. I will take lots of pictures.

I guess that is it — hopefully, the weeks continue to fly by. I trust that all is well on the home front. I miss you guys.

Nich

LETTER THREE
Week three in Kandahar

Week three seemed to fly by. Just one more week and we’ll be one month down, five to go. Really four to go, because one month is dedicated to leave.

Exciting details from this week included the final arrival of the remainder of our military kit. We also received an air hockey table for our BAT (Big J$$ Tent, for those who missed letter 2) that is located about five feet from my bed. It makes for a great sleeping environment. Fortunately, I am usually so tired that sleeping is not a problem!

We still haven’t gotten our UAB (unaccompanied baggage). Apparently, it’s in the camp but they won’t give it to us until all of the ROTO 0 guys leave. No one is sure why that is, but there is a big lottery going around as guys pick days when it will arrive. I have laid my dollar for March 5th. We’ll see if I’m right.

Week Three is marked by a series of small yet critical events:

1. The complete and total disappearance of all toilet paper in our area of the camp. This resulted in raids onto other camps and good PR statements such as “the Americans don’t really use it anyway.”

2. Wed night was the first karaoke night that I’ve made it to. It turns out that my sergeant is a hidden karaoke superstar. He wouldn’t get up in front of the crowd, though. In case you’re curious, I didn’t either (there are advantages to it being a dry camp).

3. My HLTA was moved from April to June. June seems like a long way away, but I think Jay is happy that he’ll have more uninterrupted study time. It is nice that I’ll be missing one of the hottest months and also that I’ll only have a month to go at that point. I just hope that the next four months continue to fly by.
4. I saw my first Afghani woman. She was in a full burka and walking back from the gas station/bus stop. I don’t know how they can see or function. I can’t imagine never feeling the sun on my face or not really being able to see where I’m going. Imagine not being able to go out for a run or a relaxed walk! Then I remind myself that these people are primarily concerned with survival — they would never waste energy on a run or go for a relaxed walk, there is enough walking to the nearest water source! I remind myself to be open-minded; we have some pretty whacked cultural idiosyncrasies, too.

5. A “female quarters” was established within our BAT. It is sectioned off by tarp so that we are completely isolated from the males. Personally, I think that we have taken a benign situation and created a fantasy. The original intent was to move us to a completely different BAT. I wrote a memorandum protesting the move to the Commanding Officer. He actually wrote back to me personally, and agreed to compromise but wanted us in a segregated cell. I guess it is OK. Girls generally smell better than guys and I get my own bunk now so I’m not complaining too much. It is more for when the imbedded media arrive, the female reporters might be uncomfortable, I guess. Mind you, both of my roommates are open lesbians, so I think that my chances of being gawked at are actually higher now. It’s all good.

6. We received a huge crate of books and magazines donated by helpful Canadians for the troops overseas. When the box was first opened, there was a huge line to get a book. It quickly dissipated. The donations included almost the entire Harlequin Romance series, the majority of Danielle Steel’s novels and Canadian women’s magazines. I’m sure they were sent with the best of intentions but they didn’t really meet with the soldiers’ idea of what is “cool.”

On a more serious note, on Tuesday we attended the “ramp” ceremony for the four U.S. soldiers that were killed by an IED this week. It was quite moving. A “ramp” ceremony is where they hold a huge parade and the soldiers’ coffins are loaded up the ramp onto the plane heading home. Soldiers from the deceased’s unit line the route from the vehicle delivering the coffin to the plane. The coffins were carried by fellow section members and friends. The rest of us, close to 5,000 strong, formed up along the runway and saluted them as they were carried onto the plane. It was short, very serious, and terribly sad.

I hope that it was my last one.

My crew continues to do really well. We have our vehicle sorted out and have been working on crew drills. Tonight we’re having a “party pizza night” which I’m pretty excited about. The food here is OK, but it is repetitive and usually pretty greasy. I find that I crave steamed (as opposed to stewed) vegetables. Still, anywhere that you can order pizza delivered to the “Canadian Camp, second BAT to the East,” is pretty cool. I sure miss Bubu’s quiches and soups, though!!!
I have started to get mail now, which is awesome. Every day this week I’ve gotten a letter. I will write individual responses to them all, but e-mail is a much faster way of getting the weekly message out. It makes me feel so much closer to home — thank you for everyone who has made the effort to send mail. For those of you who haven’t, don’t feel too guilty. I’m just sitting here on my bunk bed, smelling a wonderful combination of sweaty feet and sewage, thinking of home ... no need to write, sniff! Sniff!

Seriously — life here is great. I think that we have more amenities than I remember having in Black Lake and the heat hasn’t been too unbearable. We’re going to be doing some dismounted stuff in the future that will suck, but I should come away with some good pictures and great stories.

I hope that you are all doing well and will write again next week.

Nich

LETTER FOUR
WEEK FIVE

Hello All,

I am afraid that this week’s letter will be neither long nor particularly cheerful. There is a lot to say, but most of it is pretty serious and depressing. But, you are all in with me for good or for bad, so I’ll launch into this week.

This week started off quite slow. My crew and I went out for a couple of routine patrols around the area. They were uneventful. We got to fire off some mortar rounds at one of the ranges and generally had a good time being gunners.

Early this week, I attended my second American ramp ceremony. The service was virtually identical to the first one, except that it was emotionally much harder because the feeling that this wasn’t going to be the last one was unavoidable. I’m not sure exactly how many American soldiers have been killed in theatre (between here and Iraq), but I know that it is in the mid-2,500s ... it was difficult to accept how matter-of-fact they were about the whole thing. It was also harder because this time it dealt with a normal soldier, just like us. The time before it had been for American special forces guys — it is easy to think of them as different from “us.” But this soldier was just like any one of us, and it was horrible. I was in the first row behind the American troops that were lining the route, and I could hear a couple of them crying. That was really tough.

Two days later, we attended the first Canadian ramp ceremony held in theatre. This time, it was a
soldier that I had lived near and worked with in Shilo. This time, I knew the pallbearers, and I was one of the soldiers lining the route. Our service was longer than the American one, but I found it very moving. The casket was driven onto the parade, and soldiers from his section acted as pallbearers. The four Canadian Padres serving in theatre said a brief blessing and short prayer, and the procession moved onto the plane. I ask that your thoughts and prayers go with the young man’s family. He is survived by his wife and two young daughters.

This week was also notable in the several IED strikes and confirmed rocket attacks against coalition vehicles/convoys. Overall, it was a very emotional and high-stress week.

I don’t want you to feel that I am depressed or defeated. Far from it. The longer that we are in theatre and the more that we actually interact with the Afghan people, the more I feel that we are serving a purpose here. I think that these people, through the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police, are trying to achieve something that we in Canada have long since taken for granted. They lay down their lives daily to try to seize something that is so idealistic it is almost impossible to define. It goes beyond women wearing burkas and children being taught to read and write. The Afghan people have chosen who will lead them.

Their new government is striving to make Afghanistan a better place. I had never truly appreciated the awesome power of a democratic government before. We are here to assist that legitimate and democratically elected government. It is easy to poke holes in that statement and say that the system is corrupt and that violence and poverty make people easy targets for our own agendas. Those statements are true; however, we have to start somewhere. With the best of intentions, we have started in Afghanistan. There is nowhere else that I’d rather be right now.

Nichola

LETTER FIVE
WEEKS SIX TO EIGHT

25 March 2006

Hello Everyone,

I am afraid that this letter will be a long one, so go and get a coffee (Tim Hortons if you can swing it; I really miss my Single Singles) and pull up a chair. There is so much to say, I am not even sure where to begin. The good news is that you can feel free to skim if your eyes start to glaze over.

I just got back from Operation Sola Kowel (Pashtu for Peacemaker). I was deployed north of Kandahar
city for the last two weeks. It was an incredibly challenging and rewarding experience. I feel like a poster child for why people should join the military — it was an amazing 15 days.

We did not stick to any type of routine, as hard as that may be to believe for those who know me well. One of the biggest challenges here is trying not to set a pattern. The local informant system is better than any CSIS network imaginable, so we try not to give them any more help than necessary. We make sure that patrols always go out at unpredictable intervals and that our routes change at bizarre places. This is not as challenging as it sounds, as a vehicle breakdown (very common) or road on the map that doesn’t actually exist (happens all the time) force us to change our timings and routes frequently. The big joke is that there is no way for the bad guys to guess our next move, because we aren’t sure yet, either. One of those “funny because it’s true” statements.

Anyway, our mission was to move into isolated areas, either by foot or with our vehicles to meet with the local elders and conduct shirras. Shirra is the Pashtu word for “meeting” or what we are calling “leader engagements.” Essentially, a group of 30-50 soldiers shows up on the outside of town. A smaller delegation of five-to-10 soldiers and three-to-five Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers (depending on the size of the town) goes forward under the remainder’s watchful eye. They ask to speak to the village leader and/or elders. In every village that we visited (I lost track after 10), this was absolutely no problem. A group of three-to-10 men would show up, with one designated leader. They would sit down somewhere in the open, watched by the remainder of the men in the village. We would watch our emissaries very closely for security reasons. Then, the shirra would begin. In most of the villages, after about 10 minutes of pleasantries, the chai (sweet tea) and bread would be brought out. They would also bring out candy and sometimes soup. Then, the real business would begin.

I was honoured to be invited to two different shirras. I really thought that the whole female thing would be a huge issue. It was, but not in the way that I thought it would be. The first time, it was an ANA commander who insisted that I be included. It was not that my leadership was excusing or excluding me — as an artillery officer, I was set in a position of overwatch doing my job ... the infantry officers were involved in the actual shirra. Anyway, I had to climb down from my precarious perch on the side of a mountain to drink chai. I am not sure how serious the discussion was before I got there, but once I arrived it quickly centered on my marriage status. The big shock was not that I was in the army, but that I was married and in the army. The fact that my husband was not also a soldier was even more disturbing (don’t worry, Jay, I said that if you were strong enough to handle me, you didn’t need to be a soldier, too.) The remainder of the discussion revolved around my inexplicable lack of children. The elder offered to go inside and get me some milk and bread, as diet was probably the issue. He was 67 and had two wives and several children under the age of 10 ... I said that my husband would definitely say that one wife was enough. He thought that was hysterical, and I was a hit.

The second shirra that I was invited to was quite large. About 15 elders turned up with close to 20
children. We are always relieved to see children, as it means that the meeting will probably go smoothly. Anyway, here the issue was not my lack of children, but my availability. My boss was apparently asked if I was available to marry one of the elder’s sons who looked to be about 15. After we’d established that I was already married, the issue turned to the all-important one of baking bread. When I confessed that I could not make the delicious flat bread that they serve (like a flat naan bread) the elder asked, “Can you at least boil water to make chai?” I was quite indignant in my response “Yes!!” which amused them all.

Working with the ANA and interpreters was eye-opening, to say the least. I am always astonished at the way that the military acts as a great equalizer. It doesn’t matter where you are from, or how much money you had growing up or the size of your family. It doesn’t even matter what country you’re from or your level of education. Once you’re out with other soldiers, doing your thing, we are all the same. We respect each other based on ability, not background. We value a positive attitude, determination, and a good sense of humour. The ANA possessed all of those qualities to a high degree.

The ANA soldiers are very professional and very competent. They are also in amazing physical shape. Watching them run up and down the mountains with all of their gear was phenomenal. Seeing how proud they are of their country and how determined they are to work towards peace was inspiring. They are paid very little and do very dangerous work — it is not rhetoric for them. They really do want to get rid of the Taliban and al-Qaida to make their country a better place.

The interpreters are even more idealistic. They are paid quite well by local standards, but many of them risk their lives by coming out with us. Some don’t want to go into specific areas, because of past family conflicts. One interpreter was born in Afghanistan, but his family fled to Pakistan in the mid-’70s. He came here two years ago to be an interpreter, as he feels it is his way to help Afghanistan. He spoke Farsi, Pashtu and English without any problems at all.

I think that my proudest moment over the last 15 days was after a 10 km march with a 2,000 foot altitude gain. I was carrying approximately 100 lbs. of kit. It was a lot. It was the most physically challenging thing that I have ever done — and I’ve done some crazy stuff. There were two points where I almost gave up. After we had done the climb up, and were coming down through the valley, one of the ANA soldiers came up to me with an interpreter. The interpreter said, “They want me to tell you that all of the ANA are talking about you, because you have done this march with us.” I said, “Tell him that I am talking about them, because they can run up and down the mountains.” After this message was translated, the ANA soldier came up to me and said in broken English (better than my Pashtu): “I fight Taliban. I fight al-Qaida. You fight also. Dersi. Mananna” (Dersi is Pashtu for “very good” and Mananna is Pashtu for “thank you”).

Another proud moment: we were in a village and were just getting on our kit to walk to the next town.
I had attracted a crowd of five men aged 15-60 who were watching me. It is kind of funny, I can sort of see why the Afghan women cover up their faces. The men are pretty bold. I am not sure how I am going to feel walking through a town without attracting a crowd — it will be quite humbling after all of the attention that I am getting here.

A man that must have been at least 60 came over to help me put on my rucksack. He almost took a knee lifting it up, but he did it. It was really neat.

Anyway, the interpreter came up and had a two-, three-minute conversation in Pashtu with the five men who were watching me. Then he turned to me and said, “Please excuse their staring. They are just very surprised that you are a woman working with all of these men. I have told them that you climbed over the mountain with us with your heavy bag and that you had no problems. They think that you must be very strong. I explained to them that you are just like the men, and that you can do everything that they can do the same as them.”

It was perhaps the greatest statement of equality that I have ever heard — and it was given by a Pakistani-raised, Afghan male in the middle of an Afghan village that is only accessible by a five km walk up a mountain. It just goes to show that anything is possible and that stereotypes are often completely wrong.

A few other highlights that I should mention. Last week was the Afghan New Year. I, along with about 15 other people, was invited to the Afghan National Army New Year’s celebration while we were out. They slaughtered three goats in celebration. I’d never had goat before. It tasted sort of like chicken ... just kidding. It was actually quite good. They roasted it over an open fire and served it wrapped in the flat naan-style bread. Then there was the soup. The soup was like a chicken broth except that it smelled and tasted like you had just dug the goat up from under a rock. I was lucky enough to get an extra serving of fat in mine. Wow. The only thing that I can even remember tasting as bad was the dead seal that we had in the N.W.T ... and that had been left decomposing for days. It was completely disgusting. I don’t know where I got the intestinal fortitude to finish it off, but I drank my cup without making a face or anything. It took about 12 hours for me to get rid of the taste, though. Ugh. Talk about memories that I’ll never forget.

I keep thinking about my grandparents, and what they must have gone through in World War I and II. This is nothing compared to that. I have an end-date. I know that I’ll be home sometime in August. I have the ability to come back to a warm tent and call home to hear my Mum’s voice. I have the ability to check e-mail and send a message instantly. I am so proud of all of the veterans that I know, but especially both of my grandfathers and grandmothers. I am in such good company in uniform. It truly is an honour to be wearing a uniform overseas.

What I want to talk about is the importance of family and friends. I think of you often, especially when
I see especially different or funny things. When I got back there was a stack of mail. I’m not kidding. Like, over 25 envelopes. I’ve written back to about half of the people now, and hope to get through the rest of the letters tomorrow. It means so much to me that so many people have taken the time to e-mail/write/mail newspapers and letters. Thank you.

Home sometimes feels very far away. Especially when it is Saturday night and we have deep fried catfish at the mess, because our mess is an American one and they eat some strange stuff ... your letters make me feel that much closer. Thank you.

Finally, I ask that you all think, pray, meditate, whatever it is that you believe works about Capt. Trevor Greene, the soldier who was attacked by an axe at a shirra several weeks ago and seriously injured. His condition remains serious but stable. Please think of his family and of him. He is an excellent person.

Nichola

**LETTER SIX**
**WEEKS NINE THROUGH 12**

May 3, 2006

Hello All,

I am feeling a certain amount of performance anxiety as I sit to write the latest letter ... I have received so much positive feedback from the other letters, I don’t want this one to be a disappointment. I know that I have been gone for a while, so I will try to recount the last month’s activities as accurately as possible. On the 29th March, a soldier from Charlie Company, the infantry company that I work with, was killed in action in a forward operating base (FOB). Three others were injured.

The ramp ceremony was especially moving, as it was the first time in a long while that a Canadian has been killed overseas in a firefight. I was in the front rank, standing beside the three injured soldiers as we saluted someone who epitomized everything that Canadians in Afghanistan represent. Private Costall was killed in a firefight, defending the FOB from over 100 Taliban soldiers. The gate that he died defending has since been renamed, “Costall Gate.”

Three days after Private Costall’s death, my party with the remainder of Charlie Company moved into the forward operating base (FOB) to assist in its defence. We were told that we would be going for one-to-seven days. Twenty-nine days later, we came back to KAFJ. This latest letter will be about my time in the FOB.
Although the FOB is not physically that far from KAF, it took us 30 hours to reach it. We had intended to leave at first light from KAF, but the powers that be conspired against us, and we had a hard time tracking down all of the interpreters, medics, etc., that are “must haves” prior to rolling out of the wire.

Finally, we were ready to leave ... just in time for the Sunday afternoon market in Kandahar city. Our vehicle convoy was huge, almost 50 vehicles. To make it a little more manageable, we left in five packets of eight-10 vehicles. I was in the second packet.

Just prior to my packet hitting Kandahar city (or KC, for those who are in the know), packet 1 hit and killed a donkey. They were unable to properly secure the area, so they pushed on, directing packet 3 to deal with the donkey and owner. My packet took a different route. I can’t quite describe what it is like moving our huge armoured vehicle through a city teeming with people, kids, donkeys, dogs, carts, shops, and cars on streets that are designed for small cars. To mitigate the risk of suicide bombers cutting between our vehicles, we drive very close together and move quite quickly. My hat goes off to our drivers — mine kept us within five feet of the vehicle in front for the hour that it took us to drive through the city; amazing.

Anyway, just prior to my packet getting out of the city, packet 4 discovered that they had taken a wrong turn and were now about halfway up a one-way street, going the wrong way. To make matters worse, packet 4 was made up of the guns and gun trucks ... about 70 feet in length per truck. There were two of them, plus the other vehicles in their packet. A three-point turn was not an option! I was impressed by the lieutenant who came over the radio and said, very calmly, “Um. We seem to be going the wrong way up a one-way street. We are trying to convince the traffic in front of us to turn around. Any security you could send us would be appreciated.” That took about an hour to sort out. In the meantime, my packet was stopped on the edge of KC ... not a great place to be. That was when the intelligence hits reporting a suicide bomber in a white Toyota Corolla heading our way started to get sent in.

As we knew we were going to be stopped for a while, we pulled over to the side of the road, and started marshalling vehicles. They had to be quickly searched and then allowed to pass through. KC has a LOT of vehicle traffic, and we were trying to do a thorough job without holding up people ... a big traffic backlog is the worst PR move ever, as you big city readers can appreciate. After about 10 minutes, we realized that we had pulled over in front of a boys’ orphanage. There were about 100 boys of all ages outside, ostensibly playing soccer. I couldn’t count the number of times they kicked the ball over the wall and had to come out to get it, en masse. It is funny to me that boys are boys, no matter where you are.

Anyway, as the threat of suicide bombers continued to escalate, every second car seemed to be a white
Toyota Corolla with one person in it and suspicious packaging in the back. Everyone remained calm, and once again, I was amazed at the professionalism of our soldiers. We had been moving traffic for about an hour when Packet 4 eventually met up with the rest of our convoy ... only to discover that one of their vehicles was incapable of going more than five km/hour ... recovery had to be called.

Packet 3 had also met up with us at this point, after unsuccessfully trying to locate the dead donkey and owner. I’m not sure why the guy wouldn’t have stuck around for two hours, waiting for more military people to show up and question him about his donkey ... although I understand why we can’t just pay off guys when stuff like this happens, it makes the remuneration process very long and frustrating for everyone involved. Recovery arrived about an hour later for the downed vehicle, and then we were ready to roll.

We had moved about 20 minutes outside of KC when the next incident happened. You have probably all seen pictures of the LAVs and the cannon on the front? Well, we have the ability to traverse the cannon in all directions. When we are driving, we usually alternate sides that we are pointed at, to maximize coverage. For example, my vehicle will take from 12 o’clock to three o’clock. The vehicle behind will take from 12 o’clock to nine o’clock, etc. Anyway, one of the LAVs passed too close to a truck, hitting the truck. Fortunately, the truck was static, and no one was in the front of it. The turret was knocked right around, hitting the two soldiers standing in the back. Both were seriously injured and were sent back to Canada for reconstructive surgery — but both will be OK. The high point of that was the one guy with a smashed in jaw, concussion, broken nose, and serious whiplash who said to the medic, “Doc, my head really hurts.” To which the medic replied, “no $H!T, buddy.” They were airlifted out, and will both be OK.

We were then ready to carry on ... oh! I should mention at this point that I then saw my first honest-to-goodness unmarked minefield. It really wasn’t that exciting. It is hard to believe that such small and inanimate things can cause such pain and destruction. The mine was an anti-tank mine, and definitely off of the road, so it didn’t cause us any difficulty.

At this point, we were ready to carry on. We stopped to refuel, and then began our last 30km cross-country portion around suppertime. We thought it would take us about three hours. 15 hours later, we rolled into the FOB.

Why did it take so long, you may ask ... well, let me tell you.

We were going cross country, which wasn’t too bad. The area was hard-packed sand with rolling hills, and was quite easy to drive on. It was just getting dark as we started, so we had to slow down a fair bit when it got dark. We were driving without any lights, using our thermal and night vision devices to see. It worked OK. We had been going about an hour when someone realized that we had lost a
vehicle. As in, it had completely disappeared off the face of the planet. To make it even more bizarre, it was a big truck about the size of a semi-trailer that we had “lost.” We started to look for it, and ended up getting two helicopters to come and help us to a search. Two hours later, we found it. I guess that when everyone else turned left, these guys turned right. They then drove off a 10 foot drop, where they scared the crap out of themselves. As perhaps anyone would do in this moment of crisis, they then turned off the engine and all the lights, and sat in their vehicle, waiting for help ... finally, we found them.

As we started to move forward again, the vehicle in front of me hit a huge hole, scaring the crap out of their driver. Their communications gear was also knocked out. They stopped and sat there. This might sound stupid to you, but please keep in mind that we had been traveling through pretty stressful ground for about 20 hours now, and tempers were wearing a little thin. As everyone who knows me well can attest to, I am quite patient and understanding of indecisiveness in others, especially when I am tired and hungry and just want to get to the end point. I must confess to using words that would shock my parents as I climbed out of my vehicle to go and sort out the vehicle in front of me. It was at this point that we started seeing the tracer fire ...

My sergeant started to yell at me to “get in the f*cking vehicle,” as I was busy yelling at the vehicle in front of us to start “your f*cking vehicle” ... Anyway, what the tracer fire didn’t do for the vehicle in front, my-ah-words of encouragement seemed to do the trick, and they started up. The tracer fire really wasn’t aimed at us, so that was OK ... we think it was likely being used as a way of signaling between the villages that we were en route. Anyway, no one was hurt by it, which is the important thing. We carried on ...

Finally, we arrived at the FOB — which is where the adventure truly begins.

I can’t talk about the security of the FOB, or its exact location, or its name. But I can tell you that when the 150 of us showed up, there were two toilets. Oh, the toilets were also communal (ie., No walls around them) ... that was it for amenities. The toilets were also like the ones in Jarhead, where some unfortunate soul gets to burn the contents of the bucket once a day. Needless to say, a high priority for everyone was to build more toilets. They were completed by the third day there, which was awesome. Showers came about two weeks later, as we settled into the realization that we were there for the long haul.

The area itself was beautiful and the wealthiest area that I have seen yet in Afghanistan. Houses had basements and some even had second storeys. Some would not have looked out of place in downtown Brandon, (Man.); it was amazing. Most houses had electricity, virtually every house had a generator and reliable water source. I saw my first poppy fields, and was amazed at how beautiful they are. They also don’t look anything like the poppies that we wear on Remembrance Day, in case you were curious.
They grow like tulips, very tall and very straight with big flowers. Not that I am an expert, but I can now tell you which ones produce the best heroin ... it was an interesting few weeks!

It was a lot warmer in the FOB then back in KAF. It got up to 57 C at one point — I kept on telling myself that it was a “dry hot,” but I’m not sure how much that helped. I think that the worst was that we had no way of freezing anything. We were drinking bottled water, but by lunchtime, it would be at least 50 C ... you were so thirsty, you had to drink, but it was almost too hot to drink. Crazy. We experimented with keeping it in the shade, in a wet sock ... but it was still gross, warm water.

Two high points that are worth mentioning at this time. We had been there about two weeks when a team of specialists came up from KAF to check out the area. They flew in by chopper (no 30-hour road move for them!). The officer asked me how I was finding things; I said that they were pretty good as we now had showers. I pointed with pride to the four-stall shower booth that the engineers had built for us. The officer said, “Wow, that would be amazing. Do you have a towel that I can borrow?” I stared at him in stunned disbelief, and then responded, “Buddy, I came out here with four sets of clothes. I have been here for 20 days, and I don’t know when I’m going back to KAF. Even if I had a towel, I wouldn’t let you use it.” I didn’t see him again after that.

Another high point — we were on hard rations throughout, which is about as exciting as it sounds. Anyway, we had been there about two weeks when a couple of Americans came over. They had a refrigerating unit with them. Apparently, they had thawed out some steaks, but they had thawed “way more than they could eat.” They wanted to know if we wanted any. We, of course, said yes ... they were delicious! I don’t think that I’ve ever had steak that good.

The trip back was, if anything, longer and more exciting than the trip out. I won’t go into all the details ... basically, take the trip out but add a couple more serious vehicle breakdowns and an IED strike that didn’t hurt anyone, double the length ... and three days later we were back

All in all, quite a month.

LETTER SEVEN

A letter Nichola left in the care of her husband Jay, only to be read by her loved ones in the event of her death. These are her parents’ favourite passages:

“I’m off, I’m pretty tense, if something happens please know I did my best not to get shot/killed.”

“Tell my crew to soldier on, they really are the best. Tell my sergeant that I didn’t try to lead the charge, but sometimes it just happens.”

“Strength and honour.” Love, Nic.