[Coughing]

From where I was daylight, broad daylight was turned into darkness. The air was so thick with the soot from the oil fires. It was difficult to breathe. It's like all hell broke loose.

In February of 1991, Saddam Hussein’s Iraqi forces set fire to Kuwaiti oil wells. It was seven months after Hussein had invaded the nation, and his forces were in retreat. But the oil reserves, crucial to the invasion that sparked the Gulf War, would continue to burn for months. The morning of August 2nd 1990, more than 100,000 Iraqi troops invaded the neighboring nation of Kuwait. Iraq was in debt from the recent Iran-Iraq War, which had ended two years earlier. Saddam Hussein claimed that the rich reserves of oil in Kuwaiti oilfields near the border belonged to Iraq.

American President George H. W. Bush responded to the invasion of Kuwait by forming an International Coalition. Canada was one of more than 30 nations who pledged military support. That's a lot of nations of the world getting together and saying, look, Saddam Hussein has not acquiesced and left Kuwait, we cannot have a nation just invading its neighbor and taking over. That's not the way the world should operate. To some extent, I think it was necessary for Canada to get involved in the conflict. There was a real threat at that time of destabilizing the Middle East. Given that Canada is part of a blocking coalition force. Canada had to go to conflict there. I'm not saying I'm for war, but we had to do it to avoid destabilizing the Middle East.

The goal of the Coalition was to force the removal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait. Over the next seven months, the Gulf War would consume the Middle East, with coalition forces stationed around the Gulf and in neighboring countries. The conflict involved two phases. The first, Operation Desert Shield, enforced UN sanctions against Iraq. The UN gave Iraq a deadline of January 15th, 1991 to leave Kuwait. After Iraq ignored this deadline, Operation Desert Storm, the combat phase of the war, began.

Canada’s involvement throughout the war was known as Operation Friction. The Navy was the first branch of the Canadian military to deploy. Three warships left Halifax for the Persian Gulf on August 24th 1990. Petty Officer 2nd Class Richard Austin served in HMCS Athabaskan.

We had 14 days to get ready. To put new equipment on and to trial everything and get it all ready and outfitted. We didn't know when we were coming back. The navy was responsible for enforcing embargos on ships to and from Iraq. We were trying to keep oil coming out of Iraq. But we were more concerned with other illicit weapons going into Iraq from other countries that weren't part of the coalition. And so we had to determine which ships might be disguising, taking contraband into or out of Iraq at the time.

The ships were equipped with new defense systems to protect against attacks. As a “tail gunner”, Austin operated and maintained the Close in Weapons System, or CIWS Phalanx.

It was basically a multi-million dollar self-contained anti defense missile it could even shoot down fast aircraft. It was the last line of defense. If it detected a threat, then my weapons panel would light up. I had a 30 second window before anything coming in at Mach one would hit us. Early on in the war, HMCS Athabaskan was tasked with rescuing USS Princeton, a stranded American warship. She hit a mine which basically broke her back so that she could not navigate, she could not move. And my ship, HMCS Athabaskan under Captain Dusty Miller, he volunteered to help escort her back. And so we had to transit through more dense minefields that were put in the Persian Gulf as a present from Saddam Hussein. I was at the stern. And I could always hear the, the melody, if you will, of the props right underneath me, normally it's just a whoosh, whoosh, whoosh. And all of a sudden there was a clang. And I remember waiting for the bang, looking at the two pictures of my sons on the top of the weapons panel. The bang never came.

Canadian Air Force personnel began deploying in October 1990. Canadian CF-18 fighter jets were stationed at so-called ‘Canada Dry’ bases in Qatar. Canada Dry was simply a nickname. And there were several bases in the Middle East where Canadians were. And it was a kind of joke about ginger ale and it being dry, as in no alcohol, because of the cultural restrictions of where they were.

The CF-18s performed a variety of roles, including providing air cover for the naval warships, reconnaissance, patrols, and later, bombing missions. Operation Desert Storm began with a war in the air on January 17th. Captain Bob Crane experienced the beginning of the air war first-hand, during his return flight from a reconnaissance mission in Saudi Arabia.

We took off like four o'clock in the morning. We couldn't have been no more than 20, 30 minutes into the flight when our pilot was contacted and said, "boys, you better head back to Canada Dry One, now". The air was filled with coalition aircraft that were just about to attack Saddam's forces. We had to get out of the air. And on descent, we were all changing into our nuclear, biological, chemical warfare suits. When the aircraft landed on the tarmac, we were all instructed to run to the nearest bunker, the noise was, was extremely frightening. The light show was beyond belief. Patriot missile batteries were being fired at incoming Scud missiles. Sirens were wailing. There was smoke and noise everywhere.

Bob Crane then served as a Reconnaissance Officer with Signals and Communications during the war. He was stationed at the 1 Canadian Field Hospital, known as 1 CFH, in Saudi Arabia. We were actually partnered with 22 UK Field Hospital to provide medical services and in a leapfrog fashion for the 1 UK Armored Division. I had to provide the commanding officer of 1 CFH with all of the communications systems that he would need to talk to his own troops, to give orders, to talk to his British superiors and the Field Hospital that we were paired with. Crane was also responsible for identifying potential sites for the Canadian field hospital to deploy and operate from, should they need to relocate.

It's really tough to do that job because first of all, don't forget, we are in a desert. it's featureless. And after a windstorm, what you thought you saw yesterday is not there today. We didn't have G.P.S. All we had was a map, a compass, the odometer on a jeep, a gut feel, the stars, my driver's intuition. And that's all we had. The Military Police were among the Canadian Army personnel.

Master Corporal Gilles Lavoie was stationed at the Canadian Embassy in Damascus, Syria. Military police, we were posted to the Canadian Embassy in Damascus to ensure the safety of Canadian government personnel and assets. And since we were deployed urgently because of the Gulf War conflict, we had another mandate to prepare an evacuation plan to evacuate our Canadians along with other allied embassies. Because the Coalition was made up of many countries and branches of the military, managing and sharing intelligence became critically important for strategy.

Major Susan Beharriell worked as an Intelligence Briefer for NATO generals at the Allied Air Forces Central Europe in Germany. As an intelligence officer, I was dealing with the capabilities, actions and intentions of Saddam Hussein and his Iraqi forces. I was responsible for gathering the available NATO coalition and U.S. eyes only intelligence materials. I analyzed them. And then I gave a daily briefing to the commander and those senior officers at the headquarters. It needs to be as accurate as possible. It needs to be timely. In other words, if it comes after the battle and it's about a battle that's not much good to the bosses. I ate, slept and breathed Gulf War all the time. Looming among the dangers for the Coalition in the Gulf was the threat of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons. Iraq had certainly used chemical and biological weapons in past conflicts. But did Hussein still possess them? Were they still viable or old and broken? Did his troops still know how to use them? Did they have the means to deliver them? And out to what range? Could he attack Israel, for example?

Yes. In the beginning, it was very tense because we didn't know what the Iraqis were going to throw at us. We almost expected anything. Each person had their own equipment. We had our own gear, our gas masks and everything that comes with it to be ready. Now was the time to put all that learning and practicing into action. It was no longer an exercise. This was for real.

For the Canadians Forces stationed in the Middle East, the threat of these chemical weapons was constant, most notably in the form of Scud missiles. The principal threat from the Scud was the potential to hold chemical or biological agents. So they could shoot the missile when the missile hits the ground, out comes this dangerous chemical and that would kill your troops. When Iraq launched its Scud missiles, all of us Canadian military ingested what they call a pyrodostigmine bromide, it is a drug, that was used during the Gulf War as a pre treatment to protect troops from the harmful effects of nerve agents.

And then you had to don your nuclear, biological, chemical warfare suits. You wore them until the all clear was sounded on the air raid siren system. And that could be hours, could be a long time. We lived on a daily basis with that threat and we took it seriously every time - it weighed heavily on everybody's mind. Shortly after the air war began, Iraq launched missiles at Israel in the hope that Israel would retaliate. That retaliation might break the international coalition by causing its Arab members to withdraw.

For Military Police like Lavoie, stationed in neighbouring Syria, this posed a serious threat. We experienced “blackouts,” no lights, but the city of Damascus was black and it was full of soldiers on the streets, almost every corner had military. We were wondering why the military army is on the streets. They're part of the coalition force, is there a threat? Is there a danger of an attack or whatever it is? It was at that point that we learned that there was a real threat from Israel to get involved in the conflict. The more Scuds Israel received, the more we started to be afraid. When there was no retaliation from Israel, we thought, “OK, Israel decided not to get involved in the conflict.”

On February 24th, 1991, the Coalition launched a ground war. Within four days, a ceasefire was announced. In a final act of defiance, retreating Iraqi forces set fire to Kuwaiti oil wells, which burned until November of that year. Canadian troops assisted with cease-fire operations in Kuwait after the war. It was basically like a permanent eclipse at sea. We didn't see the sun for three or four weeks after the oil fires were lit. There was dangers everywhere.

Minefields aren't just rolled up like a roll of paper. They have to be cleared. And minefields were everywhere. An old adage in the military, Canadian military, is that it's never over until it's over. You don't relax until you arrive home.

Canada’s contributions to the Gulf War have largely been overlooked by their fellow Canadians despite the participation of more than 5000 soldiers. Returning veterans faced the perception that they hadn’t participated in a “real war” because no Canadian soldiers were killed overseas. The conflict also saw criticism for not deposing Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

There weren't a hell of a lot people hurt throughout the coalition. Canada never had anybody killed. And we should be thankful. And that's what I want Canadians to remember.

While there were no Canadian deaths from enemy action,mmany Canadian veterans were left with the lasting effects of PTSDmand other significant long-term health issues as a result of the war.

I remember I was one tired puppy when I arrived home. But I have to admit, I was also a very angry, angry individual. And it became evident at this time that I had a touch of PTSD, there's a constant threat of how you're going to perform in front of enemy fire. How are you going to take care of your troops? Are they OK? Do they know their job well enough? You never get enough sleep. Well, there was a lot of adjustment to going from working a wartime mentality in the military to a peacetime mentality. That's the cost of defending your country.

The Gulf War was a massive international undertaking, with nearly one million members of the Coalition working together. And as part of that coalition, Canada’s forces helped liberate Kuwait from Iraqi forces. Despite different countries all coming together, there was an incredible amount of cohesion. Canada proved to be a key player with other nations in the operations. The Gulf War marked the first time that female Canadian armed forces members performed combat duties. And Canadian women proved that they could and can operate in war.

I think it's good to keep people informed. So that it isn't forgotten. People forget quickly, the soldier does not forget, but people forget quickly.

I'd like to acknowledge all my fellow Gulf War veterans for the exceptionally fine job that they did. And I hope that any of them that are suffering out there that their suffering comes to an end. I'm very proud of them.