

17 Jan 1920: Harold Hindle James to his mother

Transcribed and annotated by John Barnard
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This letter gives an interesting slant on the social life of Cairo-based RAF and army officers after the First World War, and also reveals something of Huck's intense devotion to his "little mother". It covers:

- *work as commander of Special Instructional Flight*
- *first flight for over a year*
- *new aircraft delivered*
- *New Year's Eve celebrations at Shepherd's Hotel*
- *Robert Hartman's birthday dance, and return to England*
- *cutting back on expense of social life*
- *family enquiries*

Special Instructional Flight
Headquarters T.B.
R.A.F.
Almaya. Cairo.

17.1.20

Darling Mother o' Mine

Thank you so muchly for all your dear thought for me at Xmas, & for the most useful gift. I had been feeling very "lost" without the use of a fountain pen, & to possess one again is a great luxury. I am finding it so convenient, especially now that I am busy making out orders, signing warrants, passes, vouchers, etc. in my daily duties in organising this new flight!

All goes well with me, & I think the situation is becoming rather more definite and satisfactory by degrees.

Of course, just as I expected, & as I mentioned to you, the practical working of the Special Instructional Flight (as it is now officially termed) is far different from the theory of it on paper. In theory it was to be a highly specialised organisation, & a model in each of its departments, with every man a skilled worker in his particular branch. I was to be the only permanent flying officer, but I was to have always a number of officers attached to me to help me, & at the same time to gain fresh knowledge in correct flight routine. As it is I am not only Flight Commander as arranged, but am also sole Instructor, & I have to run my Technical Stores – a separate department in itself – my transport, the armoury, & all organisation & administration. I have no skilled clerks, & the Flight Sergeant & I have to do all the letter filing etc. in the office, & in the Stores we have also to

supervise in detail all indenting, receipting & book-keeping with the assistance only of two quite unskilled men.

Of course in theory the Brigade Equipment Officer, & the Brigade Quartermaster do most of this for me, but actually they have ample work already, & can only give me such technical assistance as is absolutely essential. It's not altogether an agreeable state of affairs, and would have been distinctly discouraging, had I not been fully prepared for something of the sort in my own judgement of the situation.

However I intend to carry on for a while at any rate, & see how things shape. If success is probable I shall remain on permanently, but if the position proves undesirable in any important point, then I shall apply to go elsewhere. Just now prospects are brighter again. The Middle East H.Q. are waking up a bit & taking notice, & the Colonel also has a renewed enthusiasm, now that flying has actually started! My first machines arrived a few days ago, & have been in daily use ever since. I had not flown at all for over a year, so naturally I looked forward to my first venture into the sky with not a little inward trepidation! I did not mention that I had been so long out of practice, for then I might be forced to undergo a course of "dual control" which I should have hated, but I went up alone on the first opportunity. Directly I was in the air, I felt entirely confident, & went through all the usual "stunts" just to make sure of my nerve etc. I looped six times in succession, & also did a spin, [unreadable] etc. but I did not "roll" the machine, as it was a very old one, & had not at that time been carefully examined. I now felt just as much "at home" in the air as if I had never stopped flying at all! So that's all right!

I have most of my establishment of personnel by this time, & most of my transport vehicles – a light tender, heavy lorry, motor bike with side car, & workshop lorry. I have not my full number of machines yet however – only two rather ancient Avros, & one rather nice Bristol Fighter. My full establishment of machines will include two new Avros, two Bristol Fighters, two DH9s, a Sopwith Snipe, & a Sopwith Camel. A fairly varied assortment – so you may imagine, my technical stores are pretty varied also in their contents! Soon however I hope to have officers to help me. If only the next few weeks can be successfully passed, I think the scheme will be placed on a sound footing. But there are still certain "uncertainties"! It is of no advantage to work hard over an enterprise that is not looked upon favourably by those above, & if signs of this become apparent I shall try to make other plans. This is the Colonel's scheme entirely by origin, & it is up to him to back me up & help me – especially after the manner in which he pressed me to take on this command. However I am very wary and awake, & take nothing in too trustful a spirit!!

A certain gentleman – you know who – is becoming if possible more erratic than ever, His eccentricities are at times almost intolerable – & he makes small effort to control or even conceal them. I am very tolerant, but there are limits!! However I believe it very probable that this may be satisfactorily settled ere long, by his departing elsewhere! It's a pity he's so odd, for he has many sound qualities, & has proved himself a gallant pilot during the war. Selfishness & lack of self control are, however, distinct blemishes, & may lead to much that is undesirable.

Dear me, what a lot of “shop” I do write! Please forgive me, but sometimes I feel I want a sympathetic & understanding listener – & who could I find more kindly & helpful than my Motherling, – & the Dad!

I have as a matter of fact many friends out here, quite sympathetic & well disposed – but it’s not like one’s own “folks at home”.

I am on excellent terms at present with all the squadrons & their commanding officers, in this Brigade, which is fortunate, as it saves much ill feeling when they have to hand over some of their best personnel for the S.I. Flight! So far everyone is amiable, & I have had several offers of advice & assistance which have proved most useful.

I have just received your dear letter describing your Xmas Day & New Year’s Eve. Your Christmas day seems to have been spent most cosily & pleasantly – more of the real Xmas spirit than ours out here.

On New Year’s Eve I was in Shephard’s Hotel, & as the New Year came in, I was standing alone in a comparatively quiet alcove in the ball room – & my thoughts were very far away from Egypt – you can guess where. At midnight all the lights in the hotel were switched out for one complete minute – you may imagine how carefully some people had arranged their partners in anticipation of this!! – & when the lights came up again, there was a good deal of singing, cheering, etc.!

The reception rooms of the hotel emptied comparatively early, but countless private parties kept up revelry most of the night, upstairs. I went first to a private suite where there was some excellent singing, then when this party broke up, I became involved in another & far more sprightly one – which included two cavalry generals, with their wives, & a number of other ladies & officers. Everyone was very gay, & at times the humour became a trifle “risqué”. In one room I entered, I found a lady in bed, apparently holding a mixed reception, & with members of the opposite sex in almost compromising proximity. After much merriment the lady suddenly leapt out of bed, & discovered herself to be fully dressed – so that was all right – at least I suppose it was. – & anyhow the lady was the wife of a general, so not a word!

Paget – another Flight Commander – & I finished up the evening by picnicing in the room of a Staff Major & his wife, & at 4 a.m. the said Major sang, to the accompaniment of a mandolin, a most ardent love song to a lady who appeared at a window in the opposite wing of the hotel. At the conclusion of the song the fair apparition bowed us her thanks – & then shortly afterwards we all went off to our own rooms to bed! And that was that, & the finish of a rather mad & frivolous, but quite cheery & I think harmless evening of “New Year’s” festivity.

Bobby Hartman’s¹ birthday dance went off quite successfully. Instead however of being a small private dance as first arranged, it developed more or less into an 11th Hussar regimental ball, & I did not enjoy it so much as I expected – it was too formal. Hartman has now left Egypt & is on his

1 Major Robert Alexander Lister Hartman (1896-1969). His entertaining memoirs (*The Remainder Biscuit: An Autobiography*, London: André Deutsch, 1964) describe his time in Egypt (chapter 8), where he contracted malaria and spent most of his time convalescing in Shephard’s Hotel, but make no mention of Harold.

way home! This has happened rather unexpectedly, tho' he has been trying to get to England for some time. It has now been decided that his health would not stand another hot weather season out here, & he has been given a post at the Cavalry School in England – just what he wanted. I am very sorry he has left, as we had become very friendly. Before leaving he gave me a most handsome leather bound volume of Shakespeare – a really delightful volume – as a parting present. He is a great lover of literature, & we used to discuss the subject a good deal. He writes quite good verse himself – in a light witty vein – & he is also something of an artist in pen and ink sketching.

Of late I have been living a quieter life than I had done since coming to Egypt – I don't think I have dined in Cairo more than twice in the last fortnight! I usually find it too hard work dining out or dancing several times each week – & it's far too expensive. It is so apt to be a case of doing everything or nothing in a place like this however – either full in the social round, or out of it entirely. I have plenty to occupy me in camp, & I must also recuperate my purse a bit, according to Cox's² last announcement! So I shall indulge only in inexpensive amusements. As a matter of fact I am not in any real scarcity of cash – Cox I think have been paying out too much money to the Walmer bank. I have now written to them giving full instructions.

I visited Nasarieh Hospital the other day. George Paul is there now, & has been rather ill with jaundice. Borthwick – Lord Allenby's A.D.C. – is also there, but was too seriously ill to be visited – & I don't know him very well. George is well on the mend, & seemed very cheery but rather weak – he will have to live with rather less rash celerity for a bit when he comes out, poor lad! He finds the hospital a great trial, & I can sympathise!

I hope my card announcing the safe arrival of my suit has reached you. It is in excellent condition. Poor wee mummie, having to make a special journey to T[unbridge] W[ells] to fetch it, & then to be so discourteously treated! There are comic people in this world everywhere it seems! I wonder how Dad's speech making went off. I am looking forward to hearing. How brave of him to undertake this! To make any sort of speech terrifies me beyond telling – but then dad knows he can make speeches, & I can't!!

Now dearest I think I will close! Please pardon my sending post cards only last mail – I really was rather rushed! Soon I hope to have more spare time especially as I intend to avoid the lures of Cairo for a while – not that it lures me very much really! You know yourself the type of people in this kind of official and semi-official society & many of them are rather trying – the more I have to do with them, the more truly proud I become to possess a mother who found it a rather difficult task to tolerate them, & an impossible task to demean herself by giving way to their absurd selfish snobbishness! One lives and learns indeed!

Dearest love to you. What ages it seems since I felt your dear Mother-Kindliness about me, & saw your dear Mother-self really near me & within reach! However, happy & cosy meetings are still in the future for us.

2 Presumably Cox & Co., the Army Agents and Bankers (Cox's & King's from 1922, and taken over by Lloyds Bank in 1923)

Love to all. Have sent cards of thanks, & will write to all soon. I have had a letter from Anne Slack addressed "via" the "Brembles" asking me to stay with them for a week for some dances!! Not easy I fear! I must write soon & explain my whereabouts.

Au revoir, my Mother

Harold

Will you please have more of the same hair lotion sent on to me.

Also I should like a duplicate of the typed copies of my diary and letters³ some day if possible.

Did you get my cheque – for £7 I think – all right?

³ These are presumably his diaries and letters from his World War I service. They are mentioned elsewhere in his writings, but I have been unable to trace any extant copies.