

Airman entertains seniors with his stories

By Tim Smith
staff writer

One of the patches on the khaki flight suit of Air National Guard Lt. Jon Stevens reads "Victory," the code word he'd use in combat to identify himself if and when the call came to fight in the Persian Gulf.

"It's the code name that you know if you're talking to and you know doesn't know who you are," the 30-year-old Farmington Hills pilot said Monday in the red-white-and-blue-decorated cafeteria at Southfield's Bedford-Villa Nursing Center.

But 89-year-old Minnie Aaron thought of a different word after listening to Stevens talk about getting prepared to fly his single-pilot F-16 fighter plane into battle.

"I think he's a very brave man. I appreciate his bravery. But I just hope and pray that more of our young boys have to go," Aaron said moments after the presentation from Stevens, who is part of the Michigan-based 107th Tactical Fighters Squadron.



JERRY ZOLINSKY/staff photographer

Carole Stevens shows Bedford-Villa Nursing Center resident Pearl Johnson a photograph of the F-16 fighter plane that Stevens' son will fly if he is summoned to war in the Middle East.

Marine's mom: 'He was the light of our life'

By LeAnne Rogers
staff writer

Bruce and Sandie Benz have a hard time trying to put one thing to describe their son, Kurt, a Marine corporal killed Sunday in Saudi Arabia.

He was so many things to so many people. He was the light of our life," said Sandie.

He was funny. He had a great sense of humor. Naturally, we think he was wonderful. He was an average kid, dependable, responsible.

He was a good kid," added Bruce. Kurt, 22, was the oldest of the couple's three children and their only son. Their daughters, Kim, 18, and Kelly, 16, attend Gordon City High School, from which Kurt graduated in 1987.

A MARINE crew chief, Kurt died in a non-combat helicopter crash along with three other Marines.

"It was the worst feeling in the world," said Bruce, about answering the door at the family's home on Arcola before dawn Monday and seeing a Marine representative there. "I did appreciate them coming when they did, so we would both be home. I wouldn't have wanted just one of us to be here."

Candle awaits woman's return

A candle in the window of Leonor Ardila Brooks' Farmington Hills home burns for her daughter, Army Capt. Janice Higuera.

"It will be going until she comes back," Brooks said.

Higuera, who grew up with her parents in Farmington Hills and graduated from North Farmington High School and U.S. Military Academy at West Point, is stationed in the Persian Gulf.

Brooks, said Monday she hadn't heard from her daughter since Jan. 13, three days before the U.S.-led forces attacked Iraq. "She told me she would call next week. But if I don't, don't worry."

Brooks told her daughter that friends and family members here and her grandmother and relatives in Colombia were calling frequently and praying for her. "She said, 'I need it. I know that I will be back.' And, because I started to cry, she said, 'I will be seeing you.'

CAPT. HIGUERA IS a civil engineer stationed somewhere in Saudi Arabia — she couldn't tell her mother just where. She told her mother the food there was good, she needed underwear that was lost probably during washing, and asked for videotapes since their unit got a video-cassette recorder. Brooks sent her daughter two features, one of the "Indiana Jones" series and "Married to the Mob."



Leonor Ardila Brooks, left, worries about the safety and whereabouts of her daughter, Janice Higuera, an army captain serving in the Persian Gulf.

Brooks, a microbiologist at St. Mary Hospital in Livonia, said she raised Janice, 28, and her two other children, Olga Cook, 32, and Gilbert Higuera, 27. She was divorced from Dr. Gilbert Higuera, their father, who lives in Bloomfield Hills with his wife, Margaret, and their children Mike and Philip. (A previous story in this newspaper had incor-

rectly indicated Margaret was Janice Higuera's mother.)

Brooks, who was remarried but has been widowed for 13 years, said she hasn't seen her daughter in 1½ years. Nevertheless, she's told her the family is worried. "She said, 'You don't have to worry. We are well prepared.'

number of other topics, such as air combat training, why he and other pilots wear flame-resistant flight suits, and what the 107th squadron would do in the event the call to the Middle East comes.

"Because of the fact we could be called to active duty at any time, we're gearing up" so the entire unit of 40 to 50 planes and 2,000 ground support personnel could be overseas within two days, he said.

Speaking about the ground support troops, who handle everything from mechanical action on the fleet to essential squadron-related paperwork, Stevens said, "These people are every bit as important as the people who fly the airplanes."

Stevens, a 1974 graduate of North Farmington High School, said the squadron would assemble at Selfridge Air Base near Mt. Clemens.

SINCE LAST summer, Stevens has received training in air-to-ground target destruction at the Air National Guard's Grayling base. The training entails dropping large smoke bombs on various targets.

Stevens also said pilots in the air guard receive training in "learning how to get out of a plane that's been shot down."

He detailed the importance of wearing a fire-resistant flight suit to survive such an ordeal.

"If the airplane were to catch on fire, you put the sleeves down. Then you put on the gloves and helmet. If the suit doesn't catch on fire, it's the exact material worn by race car drivers."

The pilot, who has logged 1,000 air hours with the Air National Guard since joining it in November 1984 and an additional 4,000 air hours commercially, opened his talk by assuring the residents that the United States is doing the right thing in the Persian Gulf. He also asked for their continued support.

"EVERYONE WHO'S over there now wants to be there," Stevens said. "And they won't leave until the job is done."

Stevens also told the group that "the air and ground war you're seeing on TV these days is going according to plan," which was well thought out over two years.

"We want to take our time and do it right, so we minimize the casualties," Stevens said.

That goes for both sides, said audience member Aaron.



JERRY ZOLINSKY/staff photographer

Lt. Jon Stevens, a pilot in the Air National Guard's 107th Tactical Fighter Squadron, talked to senior citizens Monday at Bedford-Villa Nursing Center in Southfield about what it takes to prepare for war. Stevens was invited to be the guest speaker as part of the center's regular activities program.

"I feel sorry for the people on Hussein's side," Aaron said. "They're innocent people and they have to do what he tells them to do."

AFTER THE talk, Stevens said he became interested in aviation as a career, he said. Eventually, while at Purdue University, he learned about military aviation.



JERRY ZOLINSKY/staff photographer

Rally for the troops

Ryan Anderson, 6, of Farmington Hills, holds a flag while sitting on the shoulders of his father, Greg, during a rally for Persian Gulf troops Saturday morning at the Pontiac-

Oakland Airport. About 2,000 attended the rally, held in an airplane hangar and organized by former Oakland County prosecutor L. Brooks Patterson.