



The explosion of the Marine Corps building in Beirut, Lebanon on Oct. 23, 1983, created a large cloud of smoke that was visible for miles. (USMC photo)

Beirut Bombing 1983

MAU Marines Race to Help the BLT

By Dick Camp

The Bomb

At 6:22 a.m. on Oct. 23, 1983, Iranian national Ismail Ascari drove a yellow 19-ton Mercedes-Benz stake-bed truck, crammed with thousands of pounds of explosives. He turned onto the access road leading toward the four-story Battalion Landing Team 1st Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment (BLT 1/8) headquarters and barracks building in Beirut, Lebanon. He drove into and around the parking lot in excess of 35 miles per hour, crashed through a 5-foot high barrier of barbed and concertina wire passing between

guard posts six and seven. He entered an open gate, maneuvered around one sewer pipe barrier and between two others, flattened the sergeant of the guard's sand-bagged booth at the building's entrance, penetrated the lobby of the building and detonated the explosives.

The BLT 1/8 Headquarters was located in a bombed-out, fire-damaged, four-story building constructed of steel and reinforced concrete at the Beirut International Airport. At one time, large plate glass windows encompassed the second, third and fourth stories. All of the windows on the upper three floors had been replaced with an assortment of plywood, sandbag cloth,

screen and plastic sheeting. The ground floor was an open area that had been enclosed with substantial sand bagging and barbed wire. At the center of the building, an open courtyard extended to the road with a ventilated covering to protect against rain while providing for cooling and illumination of the building's interior. There were two inoperable elevator shafts with severe fire damage. Access to upper stories was gained via two concrete stairwells located on the east and west ends of the courtyard. At the time of the attack, approximately 350 men occupied the building.

Lance Corporal Eddie DiFranco was

manning post number six. “Soon as I saw [the truck],” he recalled, “I knew what was going to happen.” The sentries had been warned to be on alert for suspicious vehicles that might be terrorist vehicle bombs. As the truck roared by, LCpl DiFranco said, “He looked right at me ... smiled, that’s it.” By the time he managed to slap a magazine into his M16 and chamber a round, the truck had sped through an open vehicle gate, and was headed straight for the main entrance of the building on the south side.

Sergeant Stephen E. Russell heard the truck’s revving engine as it headed straight for him. “What is that truck doing inside the perimeter?” he thought. Immediately recognizing it as a threat, he ran from his guard shack across the lobby toward the rear entrance, yelling, “Hit the deck! Hit the deck!” Glancing over his shoulder as he ran, he watched as the truck smashed through his guard shack into the open atrium lobby and erupted in a “bright orange-yellow flash at the grill of the truck.” The explosion blew him into the air and out of the building.

The blast was so powerful that it lifted the entire building upward, shearing the base off of its four main steel-reinforced support columns—each 15 feet in circumference—and caving the upper 50 feet of the structure into about 10 feet of rubble. A massive shock wave and flaming gas hurtled in all directions. More than 300 dead and wounded Marines were sandwiched between the collapsed floors and ceilings. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Forensic Laboratory would later describe the bomb as the largest conventional blast ever seen by explosives experts. It was the worst single-day death toll for the Marine Corps since the Battle of Iwo Jima during World War II.

Severely injured, Russell regained consciousness and found himself in the road outside the BLT headquarters with debris from the explosion all around him. Among the luckiest was LCpl Adam Webb, one of four guards posted on the roof. “I heard a sentry down in the parking lot holler for someone to stop the truck and then it all blew up,” Webb said. “I never left the roof until it hit the ground and then I wound up sitting upright in a jeep.”

The aftermath of the attack left a scene of severe injury, death and destruction. The dust and debris remained suspended in the air for many minutes after the explosion, creating the effect of a dense fog. A distinct odor, described as both sweet and acrid, lingered in the air. The carnage and confusion made it difficult to establish control immediately—the explosion had eliminated the entire BLT



The four-story barracks was photographed a day earlier when a USO band performed for Marines and Sailors of the BLT.

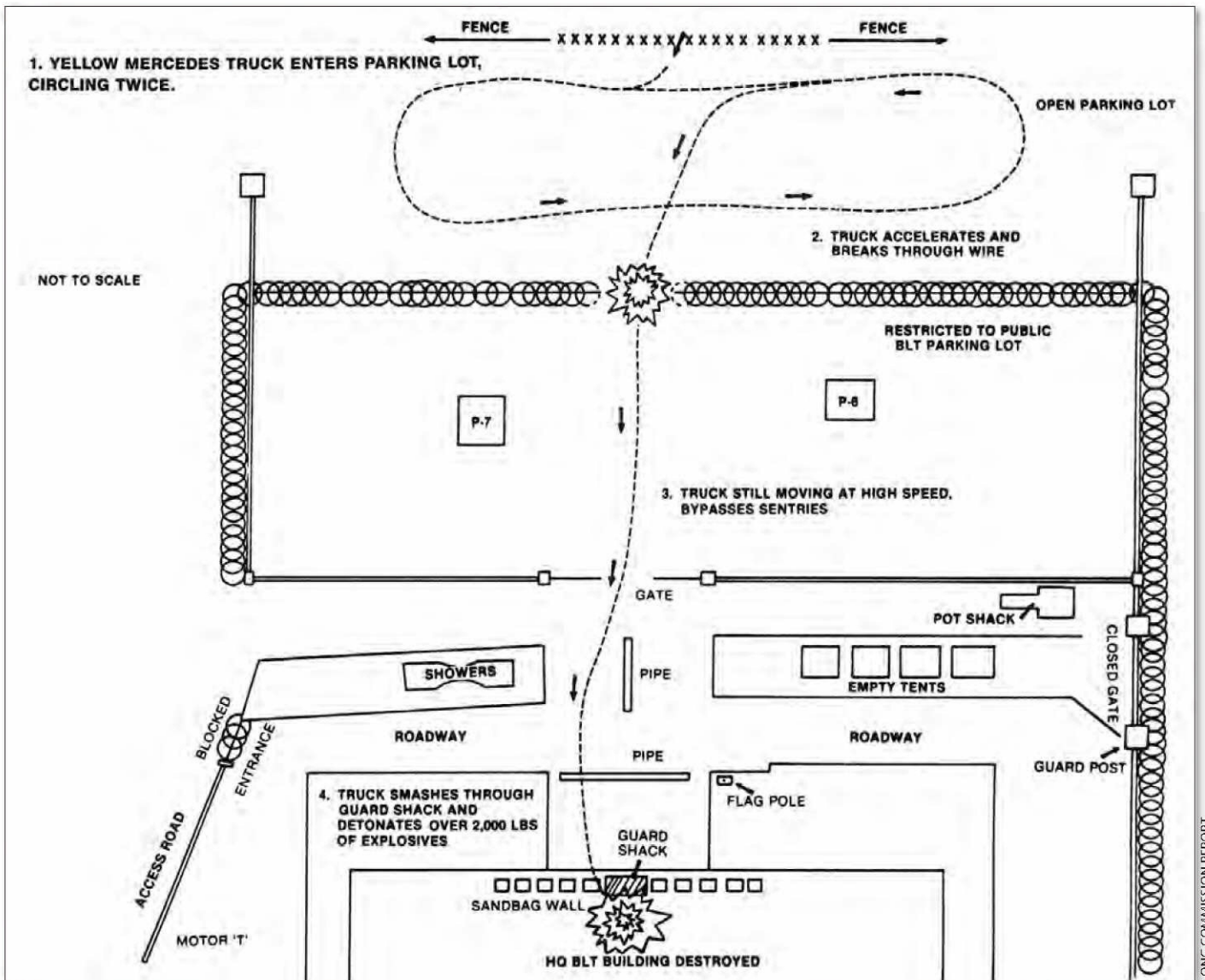
1/8 headquarters command structure. Almost simultaneously with the attack on the U.S. Marine compound, a similar truck bomb exploded at the French Multinational Force headquarters, killing 58 paratroopers and wounding scores of others.

Help is on the Way

Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 162 (Reinforced), the Marine Amphibious Unit’s (MAU) air combat element was onboard USS *Iwo Jima* (LPH-2) located about 10 to 15 miles offshore. First Lieutenant Anthony Pais was on medevac standby. “It was pretty early, not quite pre-dawn, but still pretty early for a Sunday morning routine,” he said, “when I heard an APU [auxiliary power unit]

fire up and the steel helicopter tie downs being dragged along the deck.” He started getting out of bed—medevac standby could sleep on the ship—when the Squadron Duty Officer (SDO) burst into his room shouting, “Get up! Get up! The BLT’s been hit!”

Not realizing what had happened, Lt Pais replied, “So what’s new?” Taking hostile fire was a routine occurrence for the Multinational Peacekeeping Force. The SDO responded, “No, this time they’ve really been hit!” Pais threw on his flightsuit and rushed to the ready room. “I remember walking down the passageway after signing for the airplane and seeing about 15 men who [volunteered] to go in with me.” They rushed to the flight deck where the “crew chief had already



LONG COMMISSION REPORT

spread the rotors. The bird was ready to go in pre-flight.”

Sgt John Snyder, a squadron aircrewman, volunteered to help with the rescue operations. “It was announced that there had been an attack on the Marine barracks. None of us had any idea of the extent of the damage, the lives that had been lost, or the fact that the growing cloud of dark smoke on the shore line was what was left of where we had, only weeks before, eaten chow every day. As the extent of the disaster ashore was realized, the squadron called for a working party to go ashore. I jumped at the opportunity to get off the USS *Iwo Jima*, and volunteered. A handful of us, maybe 10 or so, flew by CH-46 helicopter back out to the airport to an area known as LS [Landing Site] Brown. I didn’t really have any idea at that point the amount of damage that had been done. I didn’t really know what to expect. All I knew was some Marines had been hurt and ‘Top’ was looking for some volunteers.”

Pais and his copilot, Captain Michael J. Hagemeyer, flew the CH-46F medevac

aircraft, together with a second CH-46, east into the early morning haze at about 6:45 a.m. As the two aircraft flew closer to shore, “All I saw was a pillar of smoke,” Pais recalled. Then, he could make out what had been the BLT 1/8 headquarters. “It was just a smoking hole!” He tried to reach someone on the radio. “There was nobody to talk to ... nobody on the radio.”

Pais landed his bird on the north end of the north-south runway. “We had set up an LZ that was in defilade and was pretty much secure from small arms fire,” Pais said. He shut the aircraft down and started walking toward the MAU headquarters. “It was just silent,” he recalled. “There was activity but there was just shocked, stunned silence.” Pais saw that the MAU headquarters was relatively undamaged—the blast had cracked the reinforced concrete foundation and caused relatively minor injuries—and continued walking. A jeep picked him up and drove him toward “The Pile,” as the destroyed BLT 1/8 headquarters came to be known.

“I remember a line of blasted fir trees

that were filled with debris,” Pais vividly recalled. He noted that before the blast, “the four-story building was open—you could look through the trees and see cots, mosquito nets and hanging clothes ... see how the Marines lived”

The Pile

“On Sunday and subsequent days, I remember being on The Pile,” Pais recalled. “There was a big sloping mound of non-reinforced concrete in a big pile. They asked for volunteers to go in and dig through the rubble ... we were in a lifesaving phase to pull Marines out. We found lots of [dead] Marines and body parts.” The rescuers were prepared for possible sniper fire. “I remember we had our flak jackets and helmets and we were trying to stay out of the line of possible fire,” he explained.

Sgt Snyder recalled, “Our working party worked out of, and around, the small, empty Lebanese hangar. Trucks would bring the bodies of the dead from the blast site, down the road and to the



SSGT ROBERT E. KLINE, USMC

A view of the destruction following the bombing of the BLT headquarters building.

hangar. My job was to unload and stack the bodies as they were brought down the road from the blast site. We would then, with great care, stack the bodies—some in body bags, some not—into aluminum shipping containers which we would eventually load on aircraft for their final flight home.”

Lance Corporal Emanuel Simmons was sleeping on the second deck of the BLT 1/8 headquarters. “I woke up and found myself buried. I was a bit confused and was trying to figure out what happened,” he explained. “The ceiling had collapsed and my thought was that we got shelled. I heard a lot of yelling and moaning. I just lay there and tried to humor myself. I had no feeling in my left arm and believed it to have been severed. On my left hand, I had been wearing a ring with a cobra snake on it. I felt the ring and grabbed hold of my arm thinking I was going to keep it and give it to a doctor to reattach to my body.”

Simmons heard heavy machinery and he yelled for help. Somebody shouted back, “Hey, are you OK, bud? We’re coming to get you.” He could feel dirt roll down his neck and cool air hit his body. “I started feeling I was going to get out of this,” he said. Simmons was pulled from the rubble with a broken left scapula, collapsed lung, burst eardrums, second- and third-degree burns, severe lacerations to the face, embedded shards of metal to his body, temporary blindness and paralysis—but he was alive.

Prepare for Mass Casualties

Navy dentist Dr. Gilbert U. “Gil” Bigelow, a former Air Force commando, took one look at the destroyed building and ran to the Marine Expeditionary Unit Service Support Group (MSSG) headquarters to help prepare an aid station with his colleague Dr. James J. Ware.

According to “The Root, The Marines in Beirut, August 1982-February 1984,” by Eric Hammel, “Ware asked, ‘What happened, Gil?’ Bigelow gasped, ‘Jim, the BLT has been hit. The aid station is gone. There’s a lot of wounded people. Prepare for mass casualties.’ ”

While Ware set up an aid station in the



CWO-4 RANDY GADDO, USMC (RET)

Memorial services for the victims of the Oct. 23, 1983, bombing in Beirut were held at Camp Lejeune, N.C. Among those attending were, left to right, National Security Adviser Robert MacFarlane; Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger; Treasury Secretary Donald Regan; Secretary of State (and veteran Marine) George Shultz; Mrs. Paul X. Kelley; 28th Commandant of the Marine Corps Gen Paul X. Kelley; Mrs. Nancy Reagan; and President Ronald Reagan.

MSSG headquarters building, Bigelow “grabbed his emergency medical kit, counted off four corpsmen, and charged back in the direction of the BLT to set up an on-site triage station.”

The explosion killed the BLT 1/8 medical officer and killed or wounded 19 hospital corpsmen.

Pais joined dozens of BLT 1/8 Marines, Navy corpsmen, Lebanese civilians and Red Cross and Italian soldiers at the pile. “I did a lot of stretcher bearing,” Pais explained. “Most of the men on stretchers were unconscious and they had to be stabilized with IVs to keep them alive. At first, it was hard to separate the dead from the injured. Their swollen limbs and faces just made them unrecognizable. We triaged until we finally had enough injured to take to the USS *Iwo Jima*. They unloaded the casualties on the flight deck and used the elevator to lower them to the hanger deck where a field hospital had been set up.”

Hammel in “The Root,” described, “... a blood-covered surgeon dressed in combat boots, white T-shirt, and khaki trousers working over the waist-level elevator, simultaneously caring for three victims. The doctor had one hand in one victim’s abdominal cavity, was talking to another patient over his shoulder, and

palpating the abdomen of a third victim.”

Sgt Snyder recalled, “Wave after wave of our squadron’s helicopters flew ashore, each time returning with bodies which quickly stacked up on the hanger deck below decks. Many of us were tasked with carrying the dead and wounded, and helping out as best we could—holding a hand here and there and trying to calm those who could not be calmed. I remember watching one Marine—a victim who had a small sliver penetrate his temple—with swollen purple eyelids that for some reason gave me the impression of a frog. As I held his hand, he slipped into unconsciousness. I later learned that he had died. It was a very sad, busy, and chaotic time.”

A total of 62 wounded in action were treated aboard the USS *Iwo Jima* (LPH-2).

Within 15 minutes of the explosion, aeromedical evacuation was requested. “When the casualties were stabilized enough, they were flown from the *Iwo Jima* to the Beirut International Airport,” Pais explained. The first injured were evacuated by a Royal Air Force (RAF) C-130 to their facility at Akrotiri, Cyprus, followed by a U.S. Air Force C-9 to the Wiesbaden Air Force Hospital, Germany, a U.S. Navy C-9 to Naples, Italy, and a C-141 to the Landstuhl Army Hospital.

The RAF hospital proved to be especially useful because it was only an hour flight, while the flight to Germany took four hours.

They Came in Peace

On Oct. 23, 1986, a memorial was dedicated to the 241 American peacekeepers—220 Marines, 18 Sailors and three soldiers. The simple memorial, located just outside the gate of Camp Johnson, N.C., consists primarily of two large walls, separated by the statue of a Marine in combat uniform with his rifle at the ready. The left wall features inscriptions of the names of the Americans killed in Beirut and the names of three Marine pilots from Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune who were killed in Grenada. The right wall is inscribed with the words, “They Came in Peace.”

Editor’s note: The Beirut Veterans of America are dedicated to keeping alive the memories of those who were killed in the U.S. peacekeeping mission in Lebanon. Visit www.beirutveterans.org for more information.

Author’s bio: Dick Camp, a retired Marine colonel, is a frequent contributor to Leatherneck. 🇺🇸



A Beirut Memorial was erected to honor the memory of the 271 Marines who were killed in the bombing. The memorial is located at MCB Camp Lejeune, N.C.

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