

**"The BLT is gone!"**

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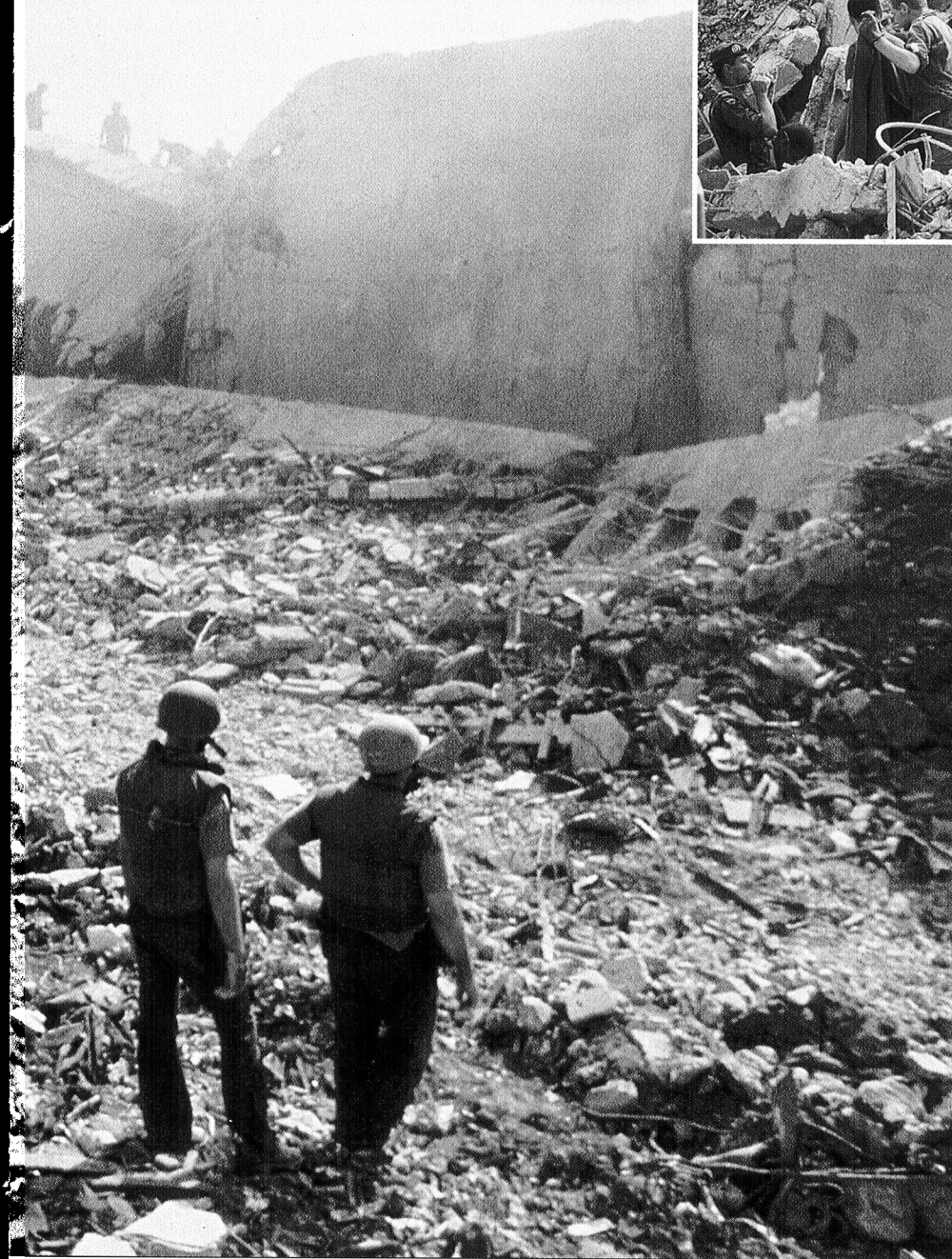
# **“The BLT Is Gone!”**

**One Marine Remembers His Beirut Brothers 20 Years Later**

Story and photos by CWO-4 Randy Gaddo, USMC (Ret)

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**Left:** A weary 24th MAU leatherneck waited his turn to assist fellow Marines, sailors, Lebanese soldiers and civilians who continued rescue and recovery efforts in the days following the terrorist truck bombing of the 1/8 barracks on 23 Oct. 1983.

**Inset:** Huge chunks of reinforced concrete had been hurled hundreds of feet, and the explosion broke windows miles away.

firmed, not yet knowing how or why, but sure the building that had stood four stories tall the day before was now a smoldering pile of concrete and twisted metal.

Thus, at 0622 on 23 Oct. 1983, the Marine mission in Beirut took a disastrous turn. A terrorist truck bomb carrying dynamite wrapped around gas cylinders exploded inside the BLT barracks, killing 241 and injuring more than 100 while they slept. FBI investigators would determine later that it was the largest non-nuclear blast they had ever studied.

For Marines, it was the largest loss of life in a single action since Vietnam. For the nation, it was the worst act of terrorism against Americans ever recorded. Perhaps in hindsight, it was a harbinger of what was to come.

Yet the deaths and injuries were not the first for Marines in Beirut, and they wouldn't be the last. Three different Marine amphibious units (MAUs), the 22d, 24th and 32d, suffered a total of 268 deaths and hundreds of injuries over the two-year "peacekeeping" mission from August 1982 until August 1984. Keeping peace in the midst of this Middle Eastern hotbed indeed proved to be mission impossible.

To understand how Marines became the targets of the terrorist bombing and why they suffered such high losses, it is important to understand the mission that brought them there.

In 1982, many Marines—indeed, many Americans—didn't know exactly where Beirut was, let alone what strategic im-

"The BLT is gone!"

The staff sergeant bellowed his message to the major as the officer watched a billowing mushroom cloud rise hundreds of feet in the early morning air behind the enlisted man's back.

In October 1983, in Beirut, Lebanon, these words were as unfathomable as was saying, "The World Trade Center is gone" on Sept. 11, 2001. The BLT was the nickname for the four-story building that

housed nearly 400 members of Battalion Landing Team (BLT) 1/8 and attached Marines, sailors and soldiers.

"Gone?" the major shot back in confusion, having been rudely awakened by the impact of a door torn from its hinges and thrown across the room onto his rack where he had been sleeping. "What do you mean 'gone'?"

"Sir, it's just gone, blown up. It's not there anymore!" the staff sergeant con-



portance it might have held for the United States. Yet in August of that year, Marines of the 32d MAU stepped ashore under the Stars and Stripes to become embroiled in a mission that was new and undefined to them and to the armed forces: peacekeeping.

"I was 18 years old and didn't have a clue where I was going or what I was getting myself into," said John W. Nash, now an active-duty master sergeant, who at this writing was serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom. "But once I was told our mission, to help the Lebanese people and their government get back on their feet ... I was proud and wanted to serve."

The five ships of Mediterranean Amphibious Ready Group (MARG) 2-82 arrived off the coast of Rota, Spain, on 6 June 1982. On board were 1,800 Marines comprising the 32d MAU, commanded by Colonel James M. Mead. Second Battalion Landing Team, Eighth Marine Regiment, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Robert B. Johnston, was embarked as the landing force. There also were air, artillery and logistics support units aboard.

On the same day, Israel invaded southern Lebanon in an attempt to rout out Yasir Arafat and his Palestine Liberation

Organization (PLO) army so that, as Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin declared, "they would never again be able to attack settlements in northern Israel." What was to be a 10-day liberty in Rota for the Marines and sailors of the 32d lasted 10 hours. President Ronald Reagan ordered Marines in, fearing for the lives of Americans in Lebanon and especially concerned about the American Embassy in Beirut.

Two weeks later, about 800 Marines of the 32d MAU would help evacuate nearly 600 civilians from two dozen countries from Jounieh, a port city about 10 miles north of Beirut. It was a flawless evacuation, conducted in a permissive environment with no problems.

Two days later the Marines were back on MARG ships and heading for Naples for 15 days of rotating leave. They received only four.

In mid-June Israel had ordered massive air and artillery strikes on West Beirut in an attempt to totally destroy the main body of the PLO. Hundreds of Lebanese and others were killed or wounded; apartment houses, shopping centers and other structures were destroyed.

Still, the PLO remained hunkered down and would not budge. Syrian air and

ground forces also began to clash with Israeli forces as they advanced into the Bekaa Valley.

In July Israel instituted a military blockade of Beirut, leading to intense diplomatic efforts to avert an all-out battle for the capital. The siege of West Beirut continued, and by late August it was clear to PLO leadership that they could not remain there. Finally, they agreed to a withdrawal plan drafted by President Reagan's special envoy, Philip Habib, and endorsed by Syria and Israel.

At 0500 on 25 Aug., the first landing craft dropped its ramp and Marines, with Meade and Johnston in the lead, went ashore greeted by the flashes of media cameras and about 100 news people. The leathernecks were part of the multinational force (United States, France, Italy) that would evacuate thousands of armed PLO and Syrian fighters. French troops had gone in four days earlier and already had evacuated 2,500 fighters.

Meade was especially impressed with the level of destruction in the city, saying it was "like pictures I've seen of Berlin at the end of World War II."

Marines took over the duty, and by 1 Sept. about 15,000 armed PLO and Syrian personnel had been evacuated safely.

**This attack—a harbinger of similar bombings of U.S. Embassies in Africa, the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, the Kobar Towers in Saudi Arabia, and the Pentagon and Twin Towers on Sept. 11, 2001—was so powerful that the force of the blast demolished military vehicles parked nearby.**



By 10 Sept. all multinational forces (MNFs) had been withdrawn, and the 32d was back aboard ships and headed to Naples.

However, normalcy was not to be part of the MAU's deployment. On 14 Sept., Lebanon's newly elected President, Bashir Gemayel, was assassinated by a bomb in East Beirut. Amin Gemayel, his older brother, was elected President by the Lebanese Parliament. Almost immediately Israeli troops took control of West Beirut and the Palestinian refugee camps on the southern outskirts of the city. On 16 Sept. Phalangist Christian militia entered the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps where they ruthlessly murdered hundreds of Palestinian men, women and children.

Based on these events, Amin Gemayel requested that the MNF be called back to help stabilize the situation until the beleaguered Lebanese Armed Forces could be in a position to defend the capital. Within 48 hours, the MNF was reformed, and the 32d was steaming back to Beirut.

The French, Italians and Americans would slice West Beirut into three sectors of responsibility; the Marines were assigned the Beirut International Airport area, the Italians took the middle area that included Sabra and Shatila, and the French controlled the port and downtown area.

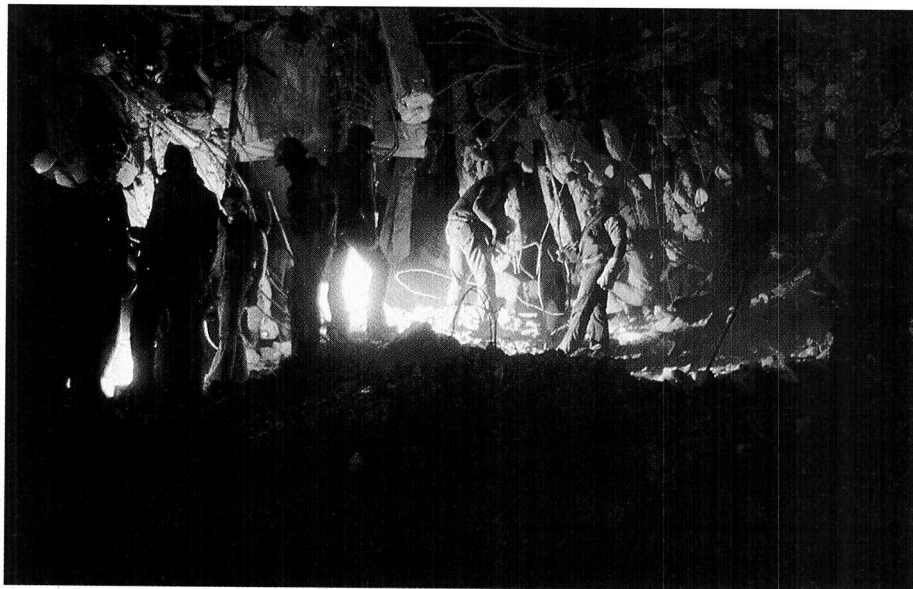
The MNF forces were positioned between several national armies and factional militia groups all armed to the teeth, as a presence with a mission that was cloudy at best. The rules of engagement (ROE) severely restricted use of force, not allowing Marines to carry loaded weapons, and only allowing them to shoot if they could verify that their lives were in danger and only if they could clearly identify a specific target.

"I had personal reservations about the ROE from the outset," said retired Marine Maj Robert T. "Bob" Jordan, who was the public affairs officer and chief media spokesman with the 24th MAU during the time of the bombing.

"My briefings in Washington were oriented towards concern for accidental discharges rather than combat dynamics," he recalled. "The ROE definitely placed commanders on the ground at a disadvantage."

President Reagan's decision to deploy Marines in Beirut triggered the process to define a mission statement. His Middle East special envoy, retired Marine Lieutenant Colonel Robert C. "Bud" McFarlane, visited Marines ashore on 16 Sept.

He explained to them, "The situation reached a point where the Lebanese Army



**Marines went with no sleep and little rest, working 24 hours a day for several days as they attempted to find survivors or recover bodies of their fellow leathernecks buried beneath the rubble.**

controlled only about 10 percent of the land in the hills around Beirut. It was at that point that the President decided to help the established Lebanese government get back on its feet." McFarlane, himself a retired Marine lieutenant colonel in earlier years, went on to clarify U.S. interests in the region, pointing out key waterways, oil routes and deposits and the value of having friends in this part of the world. "It's good to have a democracy anywhere. They are becoming an endangered species."

**T**he Secretary of Defense tasked the Joint Chiefs of Staff to develop the mission statement and to issue the order to the Commander in Chief, United States European Command (USCINCEUR). From there it was transferred to the Commander, United States Naval Forces Europe, and continued on to the Commander of the Sixth Fleet. The Commander of Amphibious Task Force 61 became the Commander of U.S. Forces in Lebanon, and the MAU commanding officer was named Commander of U.S. Forces ashore.

As the mission statement made its way along the chain of command, the original statement was modified formally on four occasions, although the original version remained largely intact. However, the intent was ambiguous, and in hindsight, this appeared to be a key contributor to the BLT bombing.

The original mission statement provided by the Joint Chiefs of Staff read: "To establish an environment which will permit the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) to carry out their responsibilities in the Beirut area. When directed, USCINCEUR will introduce U.S. forces as part of a multinational force presence in the Bei-

rut area to occupy and secure positions along a designated section of the line from south of the Beirut International Airport to a position in the vicinity of the Presidential palace; be prepared to protect U.S. forces; and, on order, conduct retrograde operations as required."

A special commission was appointed by the Secretary of Defense in November 1983 to conduct an independent inquiry into the 23 Oct. terrorist bombing. Named the Long Commission after its chairman, retired Admiral Robert L. J. Long, the commission of five flag-level officers concluded that the mission statement and concept of operations were passed down the chain of command with little amplification.

As a result, the commission concluded that "perceptual differences as to the precise meaning and importance of the 'presence' role of the USMNF [United States Multinational Force] existed throughout the chain of command. Similarly, the exact responsibilities of the USMNF commander regarding the security of Beirut International Airport were not clearly delineated in his mission tasking."

The inquiry clearly established that the MAU commanders on the ground in Beirut interpreted their "presence" mission to require the USMNF to be visible, but not to appear to be threatening to the populace.

"This concern was a factor in most decisions made by the MAU commanders in the employment and disposition of their forces," the report concluded. "The MAU commander regularly assessed the effect of contemplated security actions on the 'presence' mission."

"The mission from the start was





opaque, nebulous,” said now retired Col Timothy J. “Tim” Geraghty, who was CO of the 24th MAU during the time of the bombing.

“It was intentionally written that way, in generic terms,” he said. “It was a complex mission, and the presence concept was relatively untested. It required a special kind of discipline on the part of the troops exercising it.” He believes that is why Marines were sent in.

“But when you look at this sort of mission in terms of what we all learn as Marines, it flies in the face of all our doctrine. The decision to send us in was made with good intentions, but it was made from the heart rather than from the facts,” he concluded.

From the beginning, Marines were supposed to be a neutral force, there to pro-

vide a buffer between warring sides. And there were many sides. At that time, Lebanon contained 17 officially recognized religious sects, two foreign armies of occupation, four national contingents of a multinational force (Britain joined the MNF later), seven national contributors to a U.N. peacekeeping force and some two dozen extralegal militias.

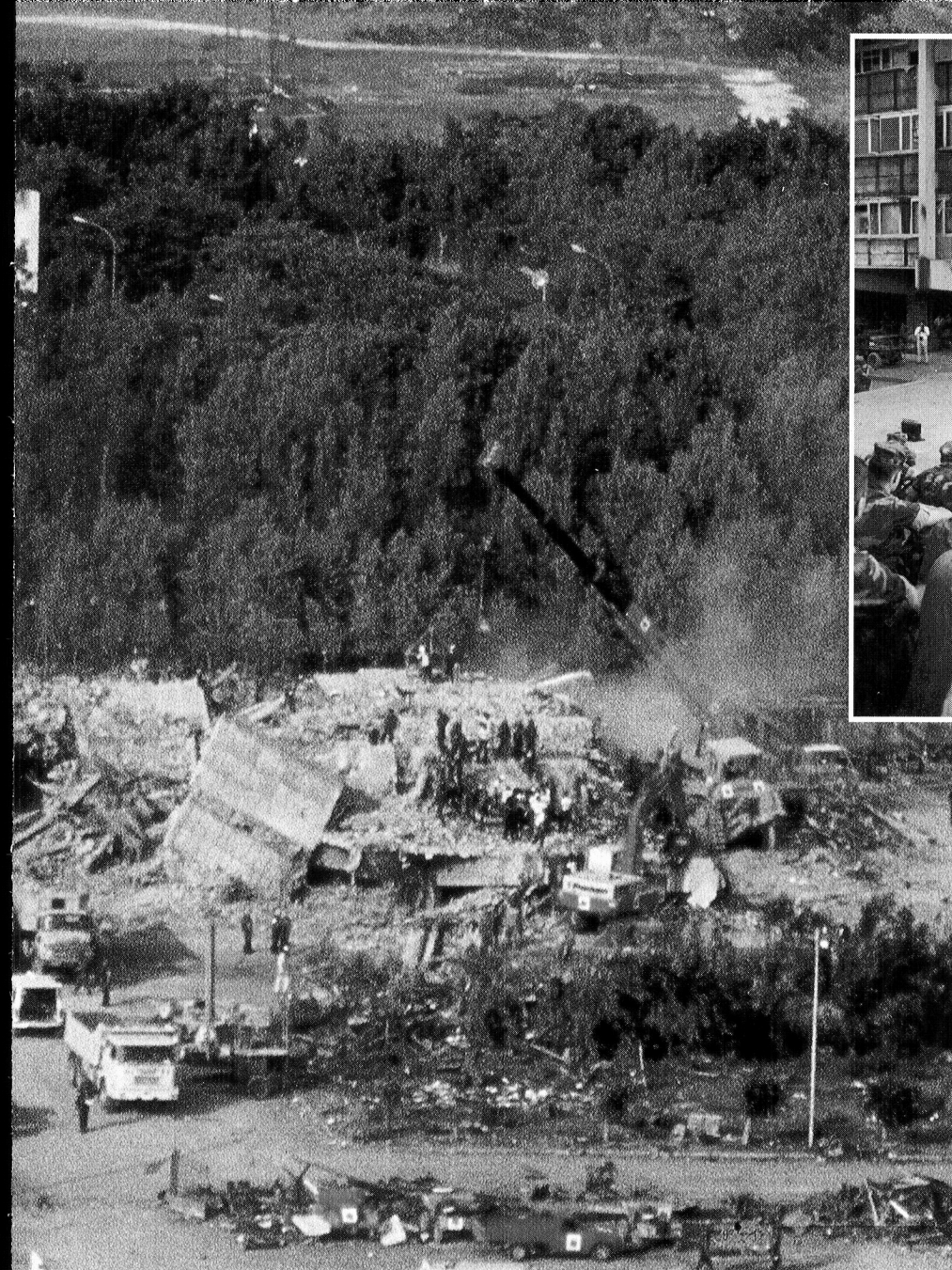
“Marines are an assault force, trained to bring the fight to the enemy,” said Geraghty. “We hadn’t heard of this sort of mission. The mission was palatable at the time the decision was made for us to go in, but the situation changed, and the mission wasn’t allowed to change with it.”

One of the first duties Marines undertook was to conduct individual and small-unit training for the LAF. That, plus the fact that Marines began manning joint outposts with the LAF, gave the impres-

sion that the United States was favoring the established Lebanese government. This did not set well with many of the warring parties, including Israel.

In January 1983, the Israelis began testing American lines, and there were at least five attempts that month to penetrate Marine positions. One noted incident involved Marine Captain Charles “Chuck” Johnson.

On 2 Feb., the captain observed three Israeli Centurion tanks moving on the LAF checkpoint outside the Lebanese University. In his view, the tanks were moving at battle speed. Johnson interjected himself bodily between the tanks and the checkpoint, stopped them and informed the Israeli tank commander that they would cross that checkpoint “over my dead body.” When two of the tanks attempted to ram past him, he jumped on



**Left:** This photo demonstrates the massive and total destruction the bomb had on what had been a large building of steel-reinforced concrete.

**Inset:** The four-story barracks was photographed a day earlier when a USO band performed for Marines and sailors at the BLT.

factional firefights. "Stray rounds" impacting in Marine positions became a regular occurrence.

Marines returned fire for the first time on 28 Aug. after intense interfactional fighting became direct fire on Marines, beginning a spiraling departure from neutrality. On the 29th, Marines took their first casualties as a result of direct fire when "Alpha" Company's Second Lieutenant George Losey and SSgt Alexander Ortega were killed by a direct hit from an 82 mm mortar.

"The lieutenant and staff sergeant had gone into the command post tent to get radio batteries because we'd lost comm on a couple of radios," Sergeant Donald Williams told reporters afterward. "They were only in there for 30 seconds," said the Alpha Co squad leader who witnessed the event. The direct mortar hit also injured five noncommissioned officers who were checking the lines.

Capt Paul Roy, Alpha Co commanding officer, told reporters later that day, "The LAF was moving through the area and stopped to reconsolidate in our position, bringing intense artillery and mortar fire down on us.

"Our Marines had to make very sure that the fire was directed at them, and that their lives were in danger," said Roy. "They followed the rules of engagement

the commander's tank with a locked and cocked .45 and demanded that the commander order the tanks to stop and turn around. They did.

The 24th MAU, with BLT 1/8 as the landing force, relieved the 22d on 30 May 1983. For the MAU and many of the Marines in it, this would be the second tour in Beirut, but the situation had changed considerably since their first time.

Minor incidents had been occurring early in 1983, and on 16 March several Marines received minor injuries from a grenade attack on their routine patrol. But on 18 April, the American Embassy in Beirut was bombed, killing 17 U.S. citizens, including a Marine security guard, and about 40 others. The 2,000 pounds of explosives were delivered by a pickup truck.

In June, Marines began conducting

combined patrols with the LAF. The patrols proved to be nerve-wracking, as local youngsters tested Marines by hurling objects at them or pointing at them with the barrels of toy weapons, which looked very real.

In July, Lebanese President Amin Gemayel traveled to Washington and obtained a promise for expedited delivery of military equipment for the LAF. On 22 July, militia mortar and artillery shelled the Beirut International Airport (BIA), wounding three Marines and closing the airport temporarily.

On 28 Aug., a Sunday, the situation took a drastic turn as the Israeli military initiated a withdrawal from the Beirut area, and the LAF scammed to take up their positions before one of the competing factions did. This jockeying for position put Marines in the crossfire of many





The Marine Corps flag hung limp and motionless under the Lebanese sun, seemingly reflecting the mood of the men who wandered through the scene of utter devastation left by the bombing.

and got permission before they fired back.”

This sort of restraint and discipline under fire is what Col Geraghty hopes is never forgotten.

“I was then, and still am, extremely proud of the Marines in Beirut,” he said. “They carried out a very tough mission, under extremely trying circumstances, and their discipline under fire was magnificent. I would put their performance up against any other fighting force in history.”

Through September the fighting remained intense. Marines who were decorated Vietnam veterans declared that they had never been through such intense mortar, artillery and rocket barrages. Ma-

rines were forced more and more into escalating weapons duels. In late September, a light antitank assault weapon (LAAW) was used to take out a sniper bunker—the first time a LAAW had been fired in combat since Vietnam, according to Eric Hammel in “The Root.”

Naval gunfire was employed, to the point where on 25 Sept., the battleship USS *New Jersey* (BB-62) with her mammoth 16-inch guns was brought to bear on Syrian artillery batteries pounding Marine positions.

Not coincidentally, on 26 Sept. a ceasefire was negotiated between Saudi and Syrian mediators. It was the first and wouldn’t be the last, but none of them lasted more than the time it took for one

of the factions to become impatient and start the fray again. These serious games of cat and mouse continued into October.

Then, on the still and quiet morning of Sunday, 23 Oct. 1983, a Marine sentry would try in vain to flip the magazine into his M16 and chamber a round to fire at the white Mercedes dump truck that was barreling down on his position. He would manage to get a couple rounds off, but too late. His post was just outside the “Beirut Hilton,” the four-story building that housed more than 400 sleeping Marines.

Seconds later, 241 military personnel, mostly Marines, were dead, and more than a hundred others injured. It was a day that, for those who were there, would go down in infamy. Eighteen years later, as the Twin Towers in New York fell to terrorist plane bombs, Root vets could identify.

“Seeing the towers fall and the dust that enveloped the city did bring back memories for me, and I felt the adrenaline rush just like I felt on 23 October, 1983,” said William J. Sickles, a CH-46 helicopter crew chief who saw the aftermath as they were evacuating wounded.

“At first they told us the French contingent had been hit, but we noticed as we brought wounded on board that there were American flags on their sleeves,” he recalled. The French were also hit with a terrorist truck bomb at the same time, killing 58 French paratroopers.

Michael L. Toma was a 20-year-old lance corporal asleep on the first floor, about 100 feet from where the truck exploded. He didn’t know what hit him. “When I came to, I remember they were carrying me out on a stretcher head first, and I saw the sunlight and blue sky. I should not have been able to see the sky so quickly. The building was gone.” The scenes of the 9-11 rescues were reminiscent of those on 10-23-83 to Toma, who survived with relatively minor injuries.

“Even before the first tower fell, my throat was closing up. I could smell the cement dust, the residue from explosives, the smell of bodies,” reflected Reggie Fields, who was a Navy chief journalist assigned to the mobile broadcasting service ashore in Beirut. “It was just like being there on that Sunday morning in Beirut.”

“Beirut was the first major attack in what has now become World War III,” observed Bob Jordan, who, in 1992, founded the Beirut Veterans of America, whose motto is, “Our first duty is to remember.” The organization will conduct a 20th year remembrance at Camp Lejeune, 21-23 Oct.

After the bombing, the mission in Bei-

rut took on a whole new level of gravity for the remainder of the 24th MAU's time there and for the members of the 22d MAU and BLT 2/8 who came in as replacements.

**B**etween the bombing and the time Marines would be totally pulled out of Beirut in February 1984 (except for 100 at the embassy who left in August 1984), more Marines were killed or wounded. Stories of bravery and combat valor rivaled those of any other in Marine history from the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli.

Take Sgt Manuel A. "Manny" Cox, for example. He was a squad leader in Golf Co, 2/8. His squad manned Observation Post 76 on 4 Dec. 1983. That was the same day the United States lost two fighter-bombers in air strikes against Syrian targets, with one pilot killed and the other captured.

Cox's squad came under fire by Shiites bent on killing them all and stealing their weapons and ammunition. By all accounts the fighting was ferocious. It lasted for hours, and Sgt Cox conducted himself in a manner that was described by one observer as "simply awesome."

"He called for and adjusted artillery fire and mortars, gave fire commands to his Marines, the whole deal. He and his Marines fought like hell that night," said Mike Ettore, a fellow Marine who said he was monitoring the fight on radio. "Somebody got an hour of the fight on a tape recording. I've always thought they should have that tape in squad leader school and say, 'OK, listen to this. Here's how Marines should be led in combat.'"

Tragically, the last enemy round of the night made a direct hit on OP 76, killing

Cox and seven of his Marines.

Then there was Lance Corporal Harold Clayburn, who crawled 300 meters on his belly, as the Shiites tried to shoot him, to get to Cox's position to assess the situation. The scene at OP 76 was utter carnage. When he crawled back to inform his CO, he had to return, this time with the CO, to bring back the crypto gear he'd forgotten to retrieve.

Even after the MNF left in August, there were deaths, such as Army Warrant Officer Ken Welch and Navy Chief Petty Officer Ray Wagner—killed by a terrorist car bomb at the East Embassy Annex in September 1984. The sacrifices continued until the day everyone left.

Looking back, one has to ask, "Was it worth it?"

"We were making a difference; that's why they had to attack us," said Geraghty. "We were providing the stability that was allowing the various factions in the military and the government to begin to pull together."

How does that translate into today's terms?

Geraghty said, "9-11 woke the sleeping giant. Things will never be the same again."

*Editor's note: Retired CWO-4 Gaddo, as a staff sergeant, served in Beirut, Lebanon, with the 24th MAU in 1983. He had established a photo lab on the third deck of the Marine barracks that was destroyed by the terrorist truck bomb. He retired from the Marine Corps in 1996 and is director of Parks, Recreation and Library Services for Peachtree City, Ga.*

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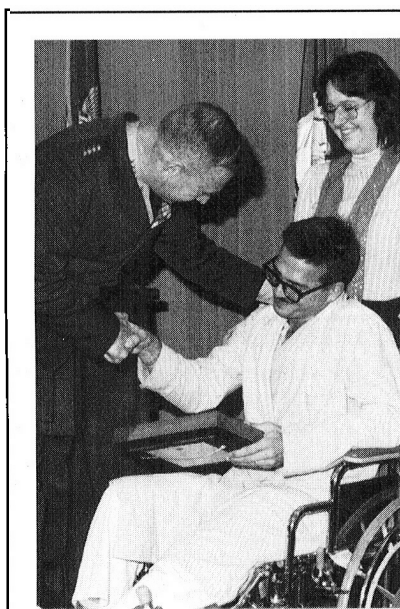
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SSGT E. R. GIDDENS

"LORD, WHERE DO WE GET SUCH MEN?"—General Paul X. Kelley, 28th Commandant of the Marine Corps, wondered aloud after presenting LCpl Jeffrey Lee Nashton, a survivor, with a special gift at Maryland's Bethesda Naval Hospital, 15 Nov. 1983, while Nashton's wife, Laurie, looked on. Gen Kelley previously had visited with LCpl Nashton in the intensive care ward at Frankfurt, Germany, 25 Oct. The general said he observed Nashton "with more tubes going in and out of his body than I have ever seen. When he heard me say who I was, he grabbed my coat, went up to the collar and counted the stars. He squeezed my hand, and then he wrote, 'Semper Fi.'"

In Bethesda, Gen Kelley presented Nashton with his four stars, the Marine Corps emblem and the words "Semper Fi" inscribed on a plaque. Gen Kelley later said, "When I left the hospital, I realized I had met a great human being, and I took off those stars because at the time I felt they belonged more to him than to me."