

BEIRUT, LEBANON

Marines Rescue U.S. Citizens From Middle East Crossfire



Left: A U.S. citizen calms her child once safely aboard a Marine CH-53E Super Stallion helicopter en route to Cyprus following their evacuation from Beirut.

Above: Members of the 24th MEU(SOC) ensure the orderly departure of Americans from the U.S. Embassy July 21 as they board a CH-46E Sea Knight helicopter headed to ships of the *Iwo Jima* Expeditionary Strike Group.

By R. R. Keene

With the smoke from air strikes, echoes of artillery and the city of Beirut as a backdrop, leather-necks of the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable) helped evacuate 15,000 American citizens caught in crossfires between Hezbollah militants and Israeli forces, without firing a shot and without a single American casualty.

Fighting broke out July 12 and escalated. A country of 3.8 million people, Lebanon has a large international population that includes an estimated 25,000 who claim U.S. citizenship. Most were advised against travel to Lebanon; few heeded the advice. When the shooting began, nearly half the Americans and most other foreigners bolted to their embassies demanding protection and a way out.

In Beirut, Americans with passports in hand impatiently waited and criticized their government as being unprepared and slow to respond to their desires. U.S. Army Brigadier General Michael Barbero, deputy director for regional operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, responded by telling reporters: "We are not going to sacrifice either safety or securi-

"We are not going to rush to failure."

—BG Michael Barbero, USA
Deputy Director
Regional Operations for the JCS



CPT JEFFREY A. COSOLA



MCT ROBERT J. FLUEGEL, USN



Above: Leathernecks of the 24th MEU(SOC) assist American citizens across the beach at Beirut to landing craft utility, which ferried them to USS *Nashville* and other Navy warships. (Photo by CT3 Taylor, USN)

Left: USS *Nashville* stands off Beirut ready to provide humanitarian assistance and support to U.S. citizens on July 21.

ty to achieve speed in getting American citizens evacuated. This is a war zone. ... We are not going to rush to failure."

The U.S. response was Task Force 59. A joint service force, it was spearheaded by 24th MEU(SOC) aboard the Navy's *Iwo Jima* Expeditionary Strike Group, which sailed from nearby Jordan. The MEU, with its 2,200 Marines and sailors, consisted of Battalion Landing Team, 1st Bn, Eighth Marine Regiment, the same battalion in 1983 that suffered most of the 241 deaths when a Hezbollah Shi'ite suicide bomber destroyed the Marine barracks at Beirut; Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 365 (Reinforced); and MEU Service Support Group 24.

The Navy's strike group included the amphibious ships USS *Iwo Jima* (LHD-7), USS *Trenton* (LPD-14), USS *Nashville* (LPD-13) and USS *Whidbey Island* (LSD-41) and the high-speed vessel USS *Swift* (HSV-2). Also ready to assist were warships with sophisticated antimissile and attack systems and contracted ships: the Italian-flagged carrier *Vittoria M*, the Greek cruise liner *Orient Queen* and the Saudi ferry *Rahmah*.

According to a *Los Angeles Times* report: "As the evacuation was stepped up, the White House notified congressional leaders of possible deployment of 'combat-equipped U.S. military forces' to Lebanon and Cyprus. ... The War Powers Resolution requires such notification.

"President [George W.] Bush's letter said 'a contingent of U.S. military personnel' had landed in Beirut on Sunday [July 16] 'to assist in planning and conducting the departure ... of U.S. Embassy personnel and citizens.' More troops may be deployed 'as necessary' to assist in the evacuation, the letter said.

"Pentagon officials said the deployment was solely to aid in the rescue efforts, but added that they were studying supplemental rules of engagement in case the troops were attacked or became embroiled in the fighting."

Consequently, on July 20, when the first Marines went ashore, they were lightly armed, with the heavy firepower standing by offshore. According to Staff Sergeant Demetrio J. Espinosa, MEU public affairs chief, "We're trying to be measured in our posture. We don't want to risk scar-

ing those we're trying to help."

This was the fourth time Marines landed in Beirut. A detachment from the cruiser USS *Brooklyn* (AC-3) was sent in 1903 to protect American interests. In 1958 President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent the 2d Provisional Marine Force on a contingency deployment. The third was the 1982-83 peacekeeping mission.

This mission is called a NEO, or non-combatant evacuation operation, an extremely complicated maneuver. Nobody does them better than the U.S. Marines, who've perfected procedures in historic evacuations such as Saigon and Cambodia in 1975; Somalia, 1991; Panama, 1989; Liberia, 1993 and 2004; Tanzania and Kenya in 1998; and Indonesia after the tsunami in 2005.

The Marines in Beirut provided order, calm and assurance as the exiting Americans were politely processed, issued necessary equipment and assistance, lined up to wait to board landing craft or Marine helicopters taking them to ships, and evacuated to secure areas for further State Department transportation.

