

A Marine on post in Beirut left no doubt as to which nation he represents as part of the Multinational Peacekeeping Force.

Beirut Bombing

Story and photos by SSgt Randy Gaddo

Sunday, October 23, 1983, had much in common with Sunday, December 7, 1941. Both sneak attacks took place early in the morning, and both left many American servicemen dead or wounded.



Routine events of days immediately before and after the terrorist bombing of the Battalion Landing Team 1/8's headquarters in Beirut are probably blurred from the minds of most Marines who were there...blurred by the horror of the incident.

But once a person gets away from the situation, gets back to the States and is able to reflect on it from a more objective point of view, the small, often ironic details start to come back.

The thought that keeps coming back to me is that had it not been for a cup of coffee, I would have been in our photo lab on the third deck of the four-story building when an explosive-laden truck reduced it to a story and a half of rubble.

The morning of Sunday, October 23 dawned clear and still. There wasn't even the familiar sound of small arms, rockets or artillery ringing from the hills surrounding the Beirut International Airport.

Sundays had become the one day of the week when sailors and Marines in Beirut were able to adopt the schedule of a modified day off; that included sleeping late. They could look forward to getting up at their own pace and having a late breakfast at the chow hall on the ground floor of the BLT building. Sunday's menu normally included omelettes, a meal most looked forward to.

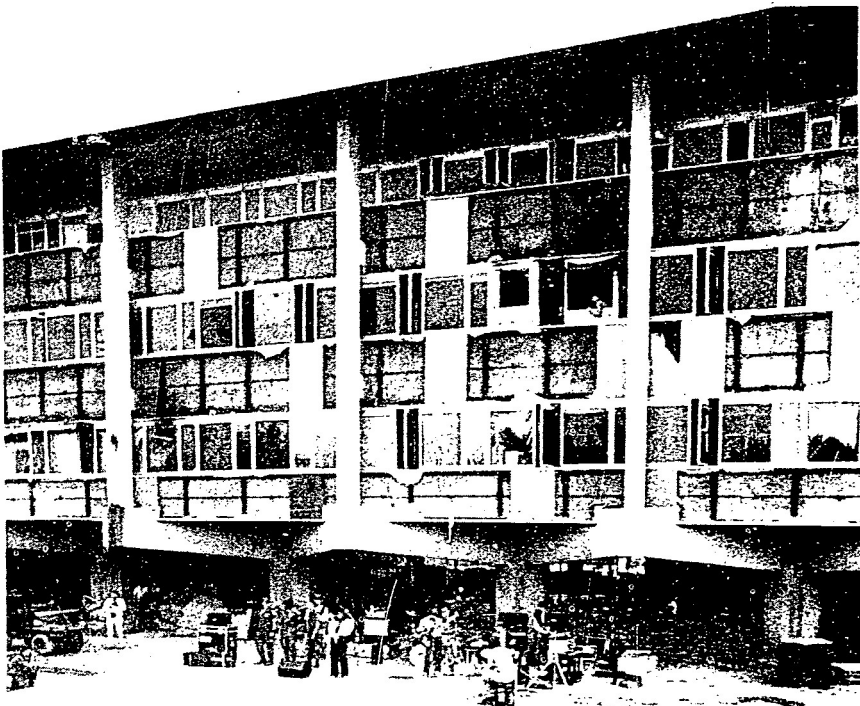
Sunday was normally the day people could anticipate reading a book, writing a letter, or passing a football around. Later in the afternoon, everyone would normally enjoy a cookout, featuring hamburgers and hot dogs with all the trimmings. Ironically, it was after such a cookout on another Sunday (August 28) when the first shells began landing near Marine positions, beginning a barrage that would last for weeks.

For the Joint Public Affairs Bureau (JPAB) team I was part of...two officers and six enlisted...Sunday meant the one day of the week when the usual hordes of press were barred from the camp. There were occasional exceptions to that rule, but on October 23, there were none expected. Over a time, Sunday had also become the media's day off.

I had gotten up early that day to get a start on what was expected to be a busy day off. Our JPAB team had a bunker close behind the tent where three other staff NCOs and I lived, and the plan was to waterproof the bunker, expected to take a better part of the day.

I'd gotten up early to go to the photo lab in the BLT building less than 250 meters away. My goal was to finish developing and printing eight rolls of film early enough to allow me to help waterproof the bunker.

As I went through the routine of shaving and cleaning up, I noted (after look-



On Saturday, October 22, 1983, a USO troupe entertained Marines of BLT 1/8 in front of their headquarters building. Compare this photo by Sgt Randy Gaddo with the same building on the next page, where Marines and sailors carried out rescue attempts.

ing back on it) that there were almost no others up and around. Our tent, which was next to the 24th Marine Amphibious Unit (MAU) headquarters building, was surrounded by trees, and the birds made the only noise as they did their usual early morning serenade.

After getting dressed and stuffing the film into a pocket of my cammie trousers, it was still only about 5:45, and still no one was stirring. I started to head over to the BLT (a walk I later timed at one

minute, 23 seconds from my tent to the door). But it was so peaceful, I decided it would be a good time to sit at the field desk with a cup of coffee and make a list of what I wanted to accomplish at the photo lab.

It was a little after six when I finished the coffee and started to push back the chair to go to the photo lab. I was stopped in mid-air by the sound of small arms fire in the direction of the BLT, im-



mediately followed by a sound I will never forget; an explosion—a dull, powerful thud that echoed off nearby hills.

About two seconds later, I recall a sensation of heat on my face—a warming of the air that seemed to pull the skin on my face back, like pictures you've seen of astronauts experiencing the pull of G-force. Then I was knocked backwards by the concussion of the blast, like someone had hit me in the chest with a sledgehammer. That concussion, I later learned, knocked everyone within a 400 meter radius out of their racks or off their feet, blew every door in the MAU headquarters off the hinges and shattered windows hundreds of meters away.

I was momentarily stunned, but because I had been awake, I was one-up on GySgt Herman Lange and SSgts Cal Openshaw and Al Hernandez, the other JPAB Staff NCOs in my tent. They were thrown from their racks, and were wrestling inside their sleeping bags on the wooden deck of the tent when I began to yell at them to get out and into the bunker. At the time, I thought we'd received a very close rocket or artillery hit.

Having all my gear on, including helmet and flak jacket, I ran to the Combat Operations Center in the MAU headquarters to try to find out what had happened. As I headed from the bunker to the MAU about 50 feet away, two things happened which stopped me in my tracks. First I saw, rising from behind the MAU headquarters building, two columns of smoke and dust about 200 feet in the air. At the same time, a Marine

came running wildly around the side of the MAU building from the direction of the smoke, yelling, "The BLT is gone!"

The BLT is gone...those words would be repeated many times in the next few minutes as people regained their dazed senses and realized what had happened. But they were words that, at the time for sailors and Marines there, were no more than words. It was inconceivable that a four-story building housing hundreds of people could be "gone." For someone who was not there, it would be like saying, "The Empire State Building is gone."

It wasn't until we saw it that the truth was driven home.

Running toward the BLT from the direction of headquarters, we had to go around the MAU building, down a stone path, past a tall hedge which obstructed the view of the BLT, and down a set of steps to the BLT's northeast entrance. The first thing people later recalled as being unusual was that all the leaves on the hedge had been blown off. The hedge was about 100 meters from the BLT.

The sight awaiting us as we rounded the hedge is one that will be etched on our memories forever.

Where there had once been a four-story building blocking the view of the Beirut International Airport control tower was now a story and a half of still smoking rubble; the control tower was clearly visible in the background.

I got to the scene about three minutes after it happened, and there were already about 20 others there, walking amidst the rubble in dazed shock, not believing what they were seeing.

I double-timed back to the MAU headquarters to find the Public Affairs Officer, Maj Bob Jordan, and report what I'd seen. When I told him, he turned without a word and headed for the site. I told the staff in our bunker, and they headed there too, carrying field cots to use as stretchers. I grabbed a cot and my camera, thinking I'd be remiss in my duties as a Marine photojournalist if I failed to document the tragedy. But when I got back to the scene, the camera remained strapped on my back untouched for about six hours. Not only were there more important things to think about, but I was too close to the subject to feel "right" about taking pictures. After we could no longer get to bodies or survivors without using heavy equipment, I did a once around the perimeter taking pictures.

As I rounded the corner of the hedge the second time, armed with cot and camera, I don't think I had yet fully realized the reality of what had happened. Somehow, the whole scene seemed too surreal. Huge chunks of concrete laced with three-inch steel rods, many weighing hundreds of pounds, had been tossed almost to the hedge by the force of the explosion. The dust still had not settled, giving the whole area a misty, dreamy-like appearance.

As the air slowly cleared, a brief blanket of silence came down. Then the situation was brought into the realm of reality as cries for help and groans of the injured began drifting out from the debris.

It was almost impossible to walk through the rubble, especially with a

After sailors and Marines had rescued as many of the wounded as possible by hand, heavy equipment was used to move heavier sections of the rubble.

loaded stretcher. Many Marines and sailors began to clear a path, while others made trip after trip to the building to retrieve dead or wounded.

There was a large V-shaped cavity—about 50 feet by 75 feet—that had been formed when the roof, keeping its basic horizontal plane, fell onto the sides of the building. There were many survivors trapped in the cavity, and it was relatively accessible. Digging with bare hands, rescue workers began the difficult job of extricating dead and wounded.

Everyone became a rescue worker. It didn't matter what occupational specialty or what rank; virtually everyone on the scene was an equal with a common goal. They were members of a team helping other members of their team.

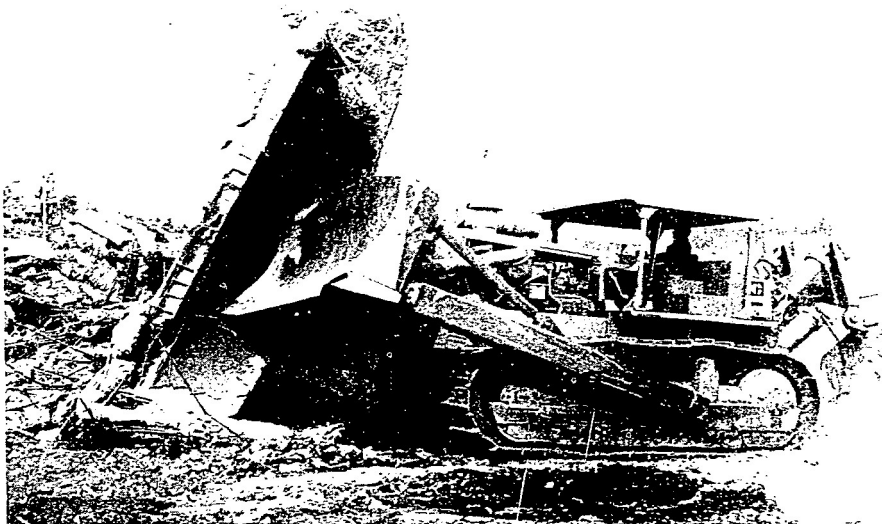
There were many heroes. Working under hazardous conditions where smoldering debris, dust and smoke from small fires kept air to a minimum, rescuers made trip after trip into the building; a building that could have further collapsed at any time.

There are other scenes that flash across one's memory, stop-action, freeze-frame like the shutter of a camera stops an image on film: a young Marine wandering aimlessly amid the chaos, apparently in mild shock over the scene before him; the frustration on the faces of sailors and Marines as they silently cursed the maniacs who had caused such chaos.

There were many who died, but there were many stories of those whose time was not yet meant to be up.

One Marine was trapped, out of sight under a slab of concrete, but he was in a cavity which enabled him to breathe and talk. He yelled for help, but it was difficult to hear exactly where his voice was coming from. We told him he had to keep talking so we could pinpoint his position; in the loudest voice he could muster, he began to belt out "The Ma-

The guns of the USS New Jersey have answered the mortars and rockets that have fired at American Marines in Beirut. The battleship mounts 16-inch guns....



rines' Hymn" until he was located. He walked out with the help of two Marines.

There were two Marines on the roof, manning an observation post. Because the roof came down horizontally, they were able to slide off virtually unharmed.

Another Marine was in the outdoor head about 75 meters from the blast, and the sides of the outhouse collapsed around him. He was fully conscious and unharmed. He watched as rescuers went by, only feet away, with stretchers. Finally, after two or three hours, when he felt the more seriously wounded had been helped, he calmly asked one of the passing men if they could get him out of there.

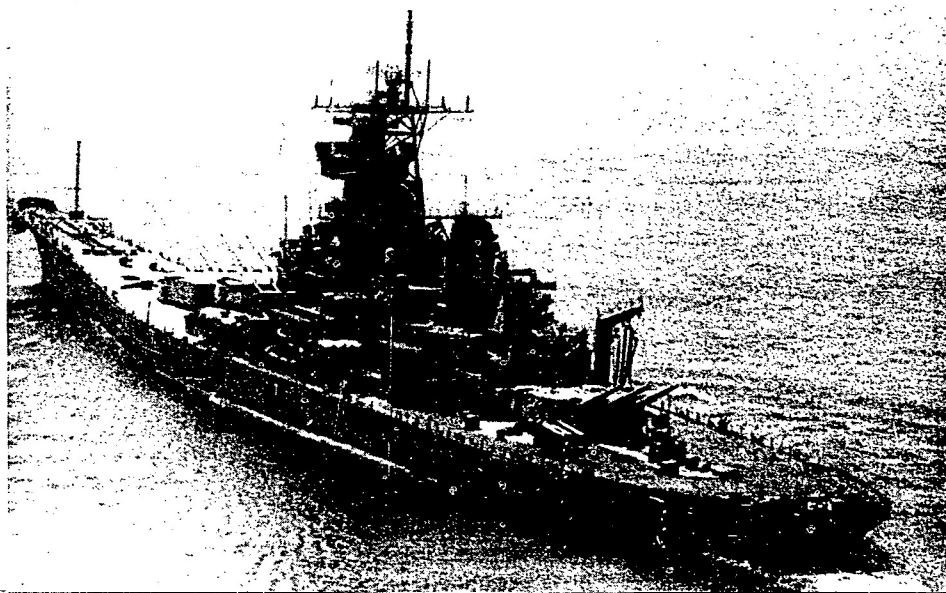
Talking with others later, I discovered there were many cases like mine, where people would have been in the building, except for...

For instance, one corpsman from a line company was at the BLT the night

before the bombing, to get supplies. He got stranded when his ride left, and as it was getting dark and no vehicles were supposed to move after dark, he had just about accepted the fact that he'd be spending the night. But at the last minute, he saw a truck loaded with Marines from a unit close to his, and they were headed his way. Little did he know how vital that ride would be.

A captain, a forward observer who normally stood post atop the BLT headquarters, said he'd switched with someone else the day before the bombing, so he was manning a Marine position at the Lebanese University library instead of atop the building.

The world media was predictably interested in what was happening at the bombing site. Starting late in the afternoon, we began to take them in small groups to the area, where we would





BEIRUT BOMBING (cont.)

escort them in a wide circle around rescue efforts, keeping out of the way.

In the week following the fateful day, we took a different group of 10 or 15 media around the BLT about every hour.

Many of the media people have been in Beirut for two or more years, and in many cases the Marines are their "beat," their assigned area to cover. They visit the Marine compound almost every day, and get to know the Marines on a first name basis. Many had friends in the BLT. Several hardened, experienced journalists commented that covering the bombing was one of the most difficult assignments of their careers.

Those walks around the BLT with the media gave me and other JPAB members a step-by-step view of rescue and cleanup operations. It also gave us constant reminders of the fact that, a short time ago, Marines had lived in that building.

Each step of each trip revealed a dif-

ferent reminder strewn amidst the debris: a picture of someone's family; a snapshot of someone's girlfriend; a Bible; a pair of PT shorts; a desk plate with someone's name on it....

Seeing these things really hit home. These had been men we'd all worked with, lived with and laughed with. Just the day before the bombing, in front of that very building, a USO band had performed. Many of the men had been sitting on the steps in front, laughing, singing and clapping their hands, not knowing that there would be no tomorrow. I took pictures at the band concert, and even now when I look at them I get a strange feeling.

These were Marines like any other Marines. It could have been any one of us instead of them. I think those who saw the bombing disaster also saw a new view of their own mortality.



...In Memoriam....



"...As I wept inside, I asked: 'Lord, where did we get such men?' And I was reminded if a nation is to be great, if a nation truly is to be the land of the free, that it also must be the home of the brave."

So spoke General P. X. Kelley, Commandant of the Marine Corps, during Memorial Services saluting the dead of Beirut.

Cpl David L. Reagan died September 30, 1982, while clearing ordnance off the beach at Lebanon. Cpl Robert McMaugh was killed on April 18, 1983, while manning post at the American embassy, there. 2ndLt Donald Losey was killed on August 29, 1983, as was SSgt Alexander M. Ortega.

On September 6, 1983, LCpl Randy Clark and Cpl Pedro J. Valle were killed as the result of hostile fire. On October