

25 Years Ago

The 1983 Beirut Bombing

Who Did It and How It Has Affected History

By CWO-4 Randy Gaddo, USMC (Ret)

Twenty-five years after what many now believe was the first shot fired in the global war on terrorism (GWOT), new information is coming to light about exactly who did it, why it was done and how it impacted America's future. It was the highest loss of life for U.S. Marines in a single day since Iwo Jima.

For the FBI, it was the largest non-nuclear explosion they'd ever investigated. It was a defining event for Marines, sailors and soldiers who survived. It was the first major operation against Americans for Hezbollah and its Iranian backers and would establish the terrorist tactics that paved the path to Sept. 11. The 23 Oct. 1983 bombing of the U.S. military barracks in Beirut, Lebanon, was an unimaginable crime against humanity and a harbinger of the coming GWOT.

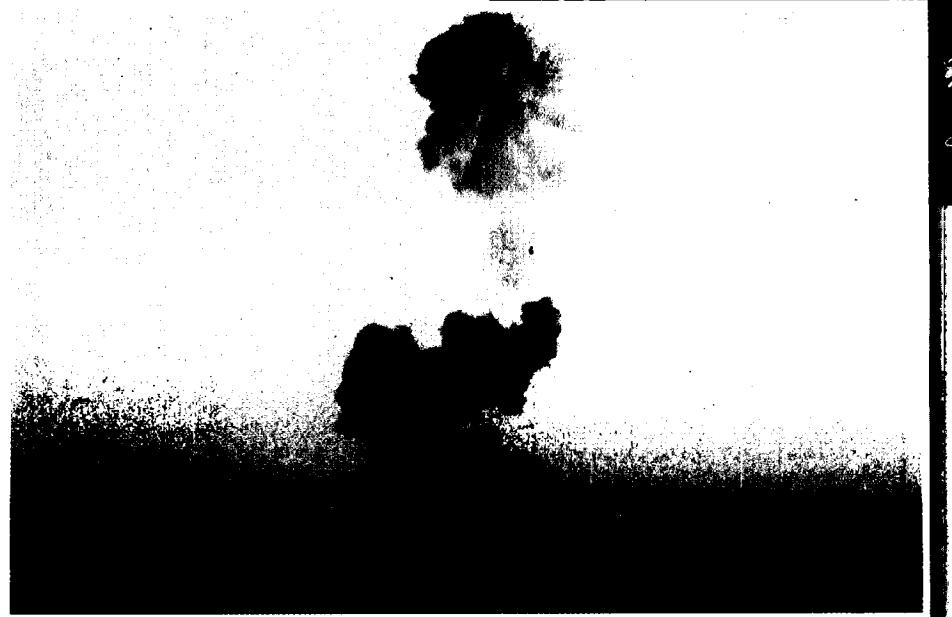
The U.S. Marine sentry in Beirut on 23 Oct. 1983 frantically snapped a magazine into his M16A1 service rifle, locked and loaded, hastily took aim and squeezed off passing rounds at the speeding 19-ton truck. He saw the driver clearly for a split second.

The driver was a young Middle Eastern man; court documents later would reveal he was an Iranian named Ismalal Ascari. In testimony his dark eyes were described as dazed-looking and staring straight ahead. Some speculate he may have been on drugs. He stiff-armed the steering wheel, and he was smiling.

The suicidal fanatic smiled as he smashed through perimeter barriers, overran the sen-

Inset: The 23 Oct. explosion was caught on film by a Marine in a Battalion Landing Team 1/8 company on the perimeter of the Beirut International Airport.

Right: Coming in for a closer look, the "unimaginable crime against humanity" is even more evident. (Photo by SSgt Randy Gaddo)



try's position, crashed through another guard post and drove the truck into the atrium of the four-story-tall barracks that was home to about 400 U.S. "Peacekeepers." No sooner had the truck stopped before it detonated, creating what FBI investigators later would describe as the largest non-nuclear blast that they ever

had studied. Three soldiers, 18 sailors and 220 Marines died, and dozens more were trapped in the debris, many severely injured. Some of those died months or years after the bombing. Most of those who survived still carry the mental and/or physical scars today.

Marines under the flag of the 24th Ma-



rine Amphibious Unit had been sent to Lebanon as peacekeepers. They first went ashore in early 1982 to oversee evacuation of about 15,000 armed combatants of Yassar Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization. Shortly after that, they went back in at the request of the Lebanese government as part of a multinational peacekeeping force after the Lebanese president was assassinated. Thousands of Marines, sailors and soldiers would rotate in and out of Lebanon for that mission between 1982 and 1984. During that time, 270 would die; hundreds would be injured. All this was in the name of peace.

That the driver smiled as he committed the heinous crime against humanity was shocking, perplexing and confusing at the time. Now, 25 years later, with the benefit of hindsight, it is clear why he smiled.

In that split second, the Marine sentry saw the face of the new menacing enemy—

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Islamic extremists. They would oppose the free world and define the lives of the next several generations. Many now believe this attack on Americans was the Islamic extremists' first real volley in the GWOT.

Who was the driver, and for whom did he work? What organization was behind him, and what was its goal? Why would anyone deliberately murder and maim so many men—operating as peacekeepers

under peacetime and highly restrictive rules of engagement—while they slept on a Sunday morning?

The answers are as complicated and entangled as the Middle East itself. The answers are rooted in history thousands of years old, dating back to prebiblical times. This history has formed a myriad of political, religious and ethnic beliefs and relationships of the dozens of varying governments, militaries, militias, sects and fringe groups involved in the Middle East. All these players have their own set of values and try to impose them on others who don't necessarily want them.

When the bombing occurred in 1983, these relationships and the true nature of the Middle East generally were known only to foreign-affairs experts at the highest levels. Marines, sailors and soldiers knew only that they were placed in the midst of this turmoil with a mission that

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Days after the bombing, as the clean-up effort concluded, the bombsite looked like a wasteland. (Photo by SSgt Randy Gaddo)



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was relatively new to the U.S. military: peacekeeping. The irony of that title can be appreciated only if one considers that in that part of the world peace has been elusive for thousands of years. Peace in the Middle East continues to be a paper tiger chasing its own tail.

In the years following the 1983 Beirut bombing, the relatives, friends and fellow servicemembers of those slain in Beirut have kept their memories alive with annual October remembrances in Jacksonville, N.C. The attendees now include the children and grandchildren of those 1983 heroes.

But dedicated descendants want more than memories; they want someone to take responsibility. Some have initiated lawsuits that establish blame and seek compensation from guilty parties.

"Vince would have said we must hold these men accountable," said Lynn Smith Derbyshire, whose brother, Marine Captain Vincent Smith, was killed in the 23 Oct. attack. She joined other family members of the 241 deceased servicemembers and injured survivors to become plaintiffs in a lawsuit entitled "Peterson v. The Islamic Republic of Iran." Deborah Peterson is



Marines survey the bomb-devastated unit vehicles, which were loaded on flatbed trucks to be removed from the barracks area.

the sister of Corporal James Knipple, who also was killed in the bombing.

The U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia conducted a bench trial on 17 and 18 March 2003 to determine the liability of the defendants for this "inhuman act." Defendants were Iran, the Iranian Ministry of Information and Security (MOIS), Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.

The court ultimately found the defendants were guilty and liable to the plaintiffs for compensatory and punitive damages totaling billions of dollars. In the course of the hearings, many significant facts came to light that help explain some of the core questions posed earlier.

Court documents confirm beyond doubt that Hezbollah was the lead agent responsible for the bombing. But, more significantly, Hezbollah acted under orders from Iran.

Dr. Patrick Clawson, a renowned authority on Iranian affairs, provided expert



1983, he was notified of a message between Tehran and Damascus, Syria.

The message was from MOIS to the then-Iranian Ambassador to Syria, Ali Akbar Mohtashemi, who in 2003 served as an advisor to the President of Iran. The message instructed Mohtashemi to contact Hussein Massawi, leader of terrorist group Islamic Amal (predecessor to Hezbollah), to have his group initiate attacks on the multinational coalition (Americans, French, Italians and British) in Lebanon and to take "spectacular action against the United States Marines."

This assertion was validated by videotaped testimony from a Lebanese Shi'ite Muslim known on court records only as "Mahmoud," who was a Hezbollah member involved in the 1983 attack. He testified that word was sent to go forward with the attacks against the Americans and French. (Dozens of French paratroopers were injured, and 58 were killed in an identical attack seconds apart from that on Americans.)

Mahmoud described a meeting where principal Islamic extremist leaders planned the attacks.

"They got the order ... they met and adopted the operation against the Marines



Above: Sailors from U.S. Navy ships offshore prepare to lend a hand in sifting through the debris to look for remains, information or anything that would help.

Inset: (From left) Col Tim Geraghty, Commanding Officer, 24th MAU; Vice President George H. W. Bush; and the 28th Commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen P. X. Kelley, survey the damage two days after the bombing.

testimony that in 1983 Hezbollah was a creature of the Iranian government.

"Both from accounts of Hezbollah members and from accounts of the Iranians and of every academic study that I'm aware of ... Hezbollah is largely under Iranian orders," he told the court. He added that in 1983 Hezbollah, consisting primarily of Shi'ite Muslims in Lebanon, acted almost entirely under the orders of the Iranians and was financed by them as well. Iran framed Hezbollah's primary objective: to engage in terrorist activities in order to convert Lebanon into an Islamic theocracy modeled after Iran.

Hezbollah originally was formed in 1982 as a direct response to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, confirms Robert T.

Jordan and Don Philpott in their 2006 book "Terror—Is America Safe?" Jordan was a Marine major in Beirut during 1983, serving as the public affairs officer and chief spokesman for Marines there.

"This Lebanon-based radical Shia group takes its ideological inspiration from the Iranian revolution and the teachings of the late Ayatollah Khomeini," they wrote in the book. "Hezbollah is dedicated to liberating Jerusalem and eliminating Israel and has formally advocated ultimate establishment of Islamic rule in Lebanon."

Iran's involvement was established further with testimony from Admiral James A. Lyons, who was Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Plans, Policies and Operations in 1983. He testified that 25 Oct.

and the French barracks at the same time," he said. He testified that one Iranian (the driver in the American attack) and one Shi'ite (presumably the driver in the French attack) were selected.

Mahmoud also gave testimony about the vehicles used in the attacks that is counter to what generally has been known in the past. Reports from the time of the attack described the truck used in the American attack as either a white or yellow Mercedes dump truck. However, Mahmoud provided different information.

"The cars [probably meant "trucks," but came out as "cars" in the translations] were built and equipped in Biralabin [phonetically spelled]," he stated. "One red Dodge was painted exactly like the

real Dodge that was providing water and other stuff to the Marines, and they moved it to the airport road where they put the hold on." He said the fabricated truck was modified to carry explosives.

Mahmoud described a plan where the second truck would replace the real truck that routinely was seen by Marines in their positions around the Beirut International Airport. He said that the morning of 23 Oct. 1983, members of Hezbollah ambushed the real water delivery truck before it arrived at the barracks. Ismal Al Ascar then drove the fake delivery truck to the Marine barracks.

The truck first drove by the barracks, then circled a large parking lot behind the barracks, increased speed, broke through barriers and detonated inside the barracks.

The force of the explosion was equal to 15,000 to 21,000 pounds of TNT, concluded FBI and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms explosives experts who examined the site. Here, another new piece of information was revealed. Initially, speculation was that a form of explosive was wrapped around gas cylinders,

Defenbaugh said the PETN is a primary explosive manufactured commercially, primarily for military purposes as the explosive material in detonating cord. Detonating cord is a plastic and fiber cord that has the PETN in white powder form extruded into the cord.

Evidence in the 2003 trial proved beyond a reasonable doubt that Hezbollah and Iran were responsible for the bombing.

Marines and Lebanese soldiers man a joint checkpoint in Beirut, 1983.



SSgt RANDY GODO

creating the force that brought the four-story, reinforced concrete building down to 15 feet of rubble and stretched the reinforced concrete support columns like "rubber bands."

However, experts testified that the explosive material was "bulk form" pentaerythritol tetranitrate, or PETN. Danny A. Defenbaugh, the on-scene FBI forensic explosive investigator, testified as to his findings.

"We were able to, through the forensic residue analysis, identify the explosive material, and it was unconsumed particles of PETN."

Defenbaugh explained that when the commercially produced PETN is detonated, it is completely consumed in the explosion, as it is designed to do. The presence of unconsumed PETN at the Marine barracks explosion led to the finding that the PETN used in this case had not been the standard commercial form.

Instead, it had been the raw "bulk" form of PETN, which, in the Middle East, is produced by state-sponsored manufacturers for military purposes. Court records state that in 1983 PETN was not manufactured in Lebanon, but was in Iran.

This and other evidence in the 2003

trial proved beyond a reasonable doubt that Hezbollah and Iran were responsible for the bombing. In September 2007, the court awarded plaintiffs in the case \$2.6 billion. However, getting the money won't be easy.

"Getting the judgement in these cases is just 20 percent of the work," said District of Columbia litigator Steven Perles, a successful lawyer who has won more than \$6 billion in civil-suit judgements for victims of terrorism. For all his success, he has managed to collect only about 1 percent of the damages for his clients or himself, for that matter, as he takes most of the cases on a contingency basis. He recently told *Newsweek* that existing laws make it difficult to trace and seize frozen foreign assets in the United States.

The shroud of "sovereign immunity" shields most countries from lawsuits. However, a 1996 bill passed by Congress allowed civil suits against countries deemed state sponsors of terrorism. Perles used this law to seek compensation for families of Americans killed or wounded in terrorist attacks.

An amendment passed by the Senate in January 2008 allows lawyers to go after property of countries that sponsor terrorism even if Americans run the property and receive all the profit. A Web-exclusive *Newsweek* article by Dan Ephron pointed out that this is a significant shift according to analysts and legal scholars.

"The upshot is that billions in assets here in the United States could fall within the reach of terror victims who have been awarded judgments against countries like Iran and Libya," Ephron wrote. The legislation has a long history and plenty of opponents. State Department officials say



The Beirut Veterans of America and their supporters erected a permanent memorial in Jacksonville, N.C., adjacent to Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, dedicated to those killed and injured in the Beirut bombing. Remembrance ceremonies are held annually at the memorial, but this year's 25th anniversary events, scheduled for 23 Oct., are special. Learn more at www.beirutveterans.org. (Photo by Bob Jordan)

it will deny them a key bargaining chip in dealings with so-called rogue states, while the business community fears it will expose U.S. investors in the Middle East to reciprocal measures.

Legislation attached to the 2008 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) signed by President George W. Bush on 28 Jan. brings victims of terrorism one step closer to victory.

"Yesterday was a great day; section 1083, based on the 'Justice for Victims of State Sponsored Terrorism Act' (S. 1944), became the law of the land," said Lynn Smith Derbyshire.

"By including section 1083 in the Defense Authorization bill, Congress and the Bush administration took a definitive step toward ending terrorism and holding terrorists accountable for their heinous crimes," said Derbyshire, speaking on behalf of the families of U.S. servicemen killed or injured in the Beirut bombing.

"The bells of justice now ring more loudly," said Judith C. Young, whose son, Jeffrey, was killed in the 1983 bombing, and who has been an advocate for terrorist victims ever since. "State sponsors of terror now know they must pay for their actions. We have told them that the lifeblood of the terrorist, the money that buys their weapons, gives them food and shelter and pays for their training and travel,

will be harder to obtain."

Those families, friends and fellow servicemembers know that the men who died in Beirut died as heroes, early combatants in the GWOT. Islamic extremists used the 1983 bombing as the first test of U.S. resolve against terrorism. The United States failed to heed that warning signal, as demonstrated on 11 Sept. 2001.

But the warnings were there. As far back as 1984, knowledgeable authorities confirmed that the Beirut bombing was a harbinger of what was to come. A DOD commission was convened on 7 Nov. of that year to conduct an independent inquiry into the bombing.

The Long Commission, named for its chairman, retired ADM Robert L. J. Long, concluded that the systematic, carefully orchestrated terrorism seen in the Middle East represents a new dimension of warfare.

"These international terrorists, unlike their traditional counterparts, are not seeking to make a random political statement or to commit the occasional act of intimidation on behalf of some ill-defined long-term vision of the future," the report pointed out.

"For them, terrorism is an integrated

part of a strategy in which there are well-defined political and military objectives. For a growing number of states, terrorism has become an alternative means of conducting state business, and the terrorists themselves are agents whose association with the state can easily deny," the commission report concluded.

While the struggle between terrorism and freedom rages on, victims of that battle fight back in their own way, savoring victories such as 1083 of the NDAA and pushing on for greater footholds.

"Get out your calendar and grab a red pen; mark the day in history—January 28, 2008—as the beginning of a new chapter in the war against terrorists," Derbyshire declared.

Editor's note: Retired CWO-4 Gaddo served as a staff sergeant 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.



Leatherneck—On the Web Learn more on the devastating Beirut bombing by viewing the slideshow at www.mca-marines.org/leatherneck/beirut