

# Courage in the Face of Terror

By MAJOR ROBERT T. JORDAN, U.S. MARINE CORPS (RETIRED)



Thin streams of a new dawn's first light poked through the bullet holes in the corrugated doors of the fire truck bays that now served as billeting for the 24th Marine Amphibious Unit's (MAU) headquarters staff. Birds chirped merrily, giving little warning of the horrendous carnage about to be wreaked on Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines of the Battalion Landing Team, 1st Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment (BLT 1/8) asleep 100 yards to the south in the Lebanese Aviation Safety Building at Beirut International Airport.

Sundays meant a more casual routine. Normally, I would begin with a hearty breakfast in the battalion mess hall of made-to-order omelets, French toast, and lots of coffee followed by relaxed conversation. But today—23 October 1983—was different.

I'd been invited to dine later in the day with the French Foreign Legion's *3ème Compagnie, 1er Régiment de Chasseurs Parachutistes* (3rd Company, 1st Parachute Infantry Regiment). I pulled my camouflaged "Snoopy" blanket over my shoulders and rolled away from the light to catch a few additional precious moments of sleep.

Twenty minutes later, at about 0620, BLAM!

The loudest, flattest sound I've ever heard shook me full awake

PETER JORDAN/GETTY IMAGES

*U.S. Marines pull survivors from the wreckage of the battalion landing team's headquarters and barracks building in Beirut after a terrorist truck bomb leveled the structure on 23 October 1983. The catastrophic blast claimed the lives of 241 American servicemen, including 220 Marines.*

## On the 25th anniversary of the terrorist bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut, a veteran of the 1983 U.S. military mission in Lebanon recounts the events that led to the horrific blast.

as a steel door next to my canvas cot imploded, narrowly missing Rabbi Arnold Resnicoff, Catholic Chaplain Father George W. Pucciarelli, and me. Pieces of mortar and broken glass crashed around us as louvered windows disintegrated from the penetrating blast wave. Unknown until hours later, Lutheran Chaplain Danny Wheeler lay prostrate amid huge blocks of reinforced concrete and rubble praying for God to rescue him or let him die quickly. A suicide terrorist had driven an explosive-laden truck past guard posts and into the lobby off the Aviation Safety Building—the BLT's headquarters as well as barracks. The subsequent blast turned the four-story building into a gray-dust and broken-concrete heap barely 20 feet high.

Six kilometers to the north, the huge blast attracted the attention of French soldiers, who gathered on the balconies of the eight-story building that housed their barracks. About two minutes later another suicide bomber drove into the basement of that building and detonated his truck's explosives, killing 58 soldiers.

I knew none of this as I put on my battle dress and picked my way through debris. A quick check of the Command Operations Center confirmed that this was serious business. Communications wire dangled everywhere like shiny black spaghetti. Across the hall, I found both my local and direct lines to the Pentagon were dead. I then proceeded toward the sound of the blast, running into my press chief, Staff Sergeant Randy Gaddo, who told me, "Major, the BLT is gone!"

What weapon could do such a thing, I wondered. Classified message traffic had told of thousands of Russian "advisers" attached to Syrian forces in the Shouf Mountains to the west, where hundreds of artillery batteries and Soviet SA-5 Gammon missiles capable of long-range targeting were reportedly aimed at our three-quarter-square-mile triangular position. "Have they gone crazy?" I asked myself.

### *The Marines' First and Second Deployments*

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Beirut, the capital and chief port of Lebanon, had become a popular tourist destination during the 1950s, but in the summer of 1958, it was threatened by civil war. With 3,700 British troops on standby in Cyprus, President Dwight D. Eisenhower ordered two U.S. Marine battalion landing teams ashore. Among them was 21-year-old Sergeant Dick "Gunner" Driggs, who is now a retired Marine Chief Warrant Officer-5. "Our mission was to ensure there was

no interference with the Lebanese government by outside countries," Driggs said. "Our rules of engagement were not to shoot back unless we had a clear target." According to this description, the Marines' 1958 mission was much the same as the one they were ordered to carry out in 1982.

The 1958 operation was validated on 23 October when the Lebanese formed a government that included representatives of all major parties. Ironically, 25 years later to the day, the Corps would suffer its greatest loss of life in a single action since Iwo Jima when its Beirut barracks were blown up.

Eisenhower's initiative delayed the Lebanese civil war until late 1975. Beirut's citizenry quickly aligned along religious lines. As the conflict continued, Palestinians flowed in through Lebanon's porous borders, with the Palestinian Liberation Organization using the country as a sanctuary where it could regroup and refit for hostile incursions into Israel.

In 1982 Israel struck back at the PLO by invading Lebanon. After the Israeli forces closed in on Beirut, the Lebanese government requested a multinational force to oversee the Palestinian fighters' withdrawal from the city and to set up a permanent base of operations for future elements of the international force. U.S. Marines of the 32d MAU, along with French and Italian troops, began arriving in Beirut on 20 August. Israeli forces, meanwhile, dug in outside the city. On 10 September, with the PLO withdrawal accomplished without incident, the Marines headed back to sea.

### *Back for a Third Time*

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Four days later, however, Lebanon was again thrown into turmoil when President-elect Bashir Gemayel was assassinated. Israeli forces encircled the Sabra and Shatila Palestinian refugee camps and allowed Phalangist Christian militia units trained and equipped by Israel to enter them. Within 48 hours more than 700 Palestinian men, women, and children were executed, prompting the Lebanese government to ask the United States to return its troops to Beirut. On 29 September, the Marines arrived back in Beirut, again joining French and Italian forces.

Relative calm returned until 18 April 1983, when explosives hidden in a delivery van detonated near the front of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, collapsing the building and killing 46 people, including 16 Americans. Fighting between Lebanese Christian and Muslim militias gradually escalated as the U.S. forces trained and equipped the Lebanese Armed Forces, which were increasingly perceived as a pro-Christian, anti-Muslim force.

By late summer, Muslim sniper and mortar fire was targeting the Marines. Battles in Beirut's southern suburbs spilled

over into the Marine compound the Sunday afternoon of 29 August. The next day rockets, artillery rounds, and small-arms fire raked Marine positions. Second Lieutenant Donald G. Losey and Staff Sergeant Alexander M. Ortega died instantly from multiple head wounds when a rocket made a direct hit on a supply tent. Fourteen other Marines received shrapnel wounds in the “untargeted” attack.

On 13 September, President Ronald Reagan authorized Marine commanders in Lebanon to call in air strikes in support of embattled Lebanese Armed Forces units fighting Druze militiamen in the Shouf Mountains at Suq el-Gharb. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger vigorously opposed the new policy, fearing it would make American troops far more vulnerable. “I urged as strongly as I could—apparently not strongly enough—that we shouldn’t be there, that we should take those troops out . . . at the very least put them on ships offshore,” Weinberger later said. “They were sitting in the middle of a bull’s eye.”

I had begun serving as the 24th MAU’s public-affairs officer on 16 August. One month later on 16 September, the unit’s commander, Colonel Timothy J. Geraghty, called



U.S. NAVAL INSTITUTE PHOTO ARCHIVE

*Observers from the 24th Marine Amphibious Unit search for hostile artillery positions in early September 1983. On the 16th, after the Marines had been subject to shelling and sniping for weeks, U.S. forces went from neutral peacekeepers to active participants in Lebanon’s civil war.*

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my attention to a classified message ordering him to place observers at Suq el-Gharb. I advised him that the action might be risky from a public-affairs and strategic viewpoint. It would place Americans in close proximity to the belligerents, thus compromising our stated mission of neutrality. Geraghty agreed and asked me to write a message supporting our conclusion. During a meeting at the U.S. Embassy, its public-affairs officer, Jon Stewart, asked me to prepare a similar response for the State Department. Unfortunately, events rapidly escalated before either the Departments of Defense or State could respond.

### *A Fatal Step is Taken*

At 0845 on Friday, 16 September, small-arms fire erupted around the Marine positions at Beirut airport. The Marines went to the highest level of readiness—Condition 1—which meant that we would be in full combat gear and hunkered down in our bunkers.

At 1105, three rockets slammed into the U.S. ambassador’s residence. Condition 1 was ordered again at 0935, and at 1004 the USS *Virginia* (CGN-38), USS *John Rogers* (DD-983), and USS *Bowen* (FF-1079) began a gunfire barrage in support of the Lebanese Armed Forces troops pinned down at Suq el-Gharb. Meanwhile, the USS *New Jersey* (BB-62) was steaming toward Lebanon, soon to add her big 16-inch guns to the bombardment.

Colonel Geraghty would later testify that “The support that was provided at Suq el-Gharb was, in my opinion, a departure from our neutral peacekeeping role to direct support of the Lebanese Armed Forces.” We anticipated some form of hostile response and knew that a sustained artillery barrage could easily pound our positions into dust. A series of grenade fraggings, car bombings, and sniping events that followed resulted in only minor injuries. Then, on 14 October Staff Sergeant Allen Soifert was killed by sniper fire as he drove a jeep on the airport perimeter road.

Staff meetings held the next day stressed increased security as the 24th MAU’s deployment drew to a close. On the 16th, helmeted, heavily armed men wearing Syrian camouflaged uniforms and red headbands appeared across from where Soifert had been killed. That evening belligerents probed Alpha Company positions at the Lebanese Science and Technical University building, wounding three and killing Captain Michael J. Ohler.

Friday, 21 October, was a solemn day as Rabbi Resnikoff conducted memorial services for Sergeant Soifert, the first Jewish Marine killed in Beirut. The next day, however, spirits were lighter. A Liberty ship departed for Cairo with Marines, Sailors, and Soldiers on board bent on a bit of R&R. Others gathered along the north ridge behind the BLT building to listen to a country-western “MegaBand,” compliments of the USO, and eat pizza prepared by the crew of the USS *Iwo Jima*



COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

*The author addresses other veterans of the 1982-83 Beirut peacekeeping mission as well as their family members and friends during the 2007 anniversary remembrance ceremony at the Beirut Memorial in Jacksonville, North Carolina, near Camp Lejeune. For more information about the memorial visit [www.beirut-memorial.org](http://www.beirut-memorial.org)*

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(LPH-2). That evening was punctuated by random .50-caliber machine-gun fire along the Shouf Mountains and at Khaldeh Junction to the south. I retired early, hoping to get a good night's sleep before meeting with my French hosts on Sunday.

*The Bombing's Aftermath*

As I approached the steps leading down to the BLT barracks early on the 23rd, I found myself whispering, "God, how could you let this happen?" Debris four feet deep filled the space between the steps and the base of the building. Body parts were scattered about, 30 feet in the air an ammo box jutted from a palm tree, and a dozen or so Marines who somehow survived the horrific blast stood silently in shock facing the rubble. Pulverized gray cement covered everything as far as one could see. Time and space do not allow a description of the full impact. But within the rubble 241 of America's finest—220 Marines, 18 Sailors, and 3 Soldiers—had been sacrificed in a noble but naïve quest for peace. Scores of others were physically wounded, and even more carry psychological wounds to their minds and within their souls. In total, 266 men died and more than 100 were

wounded in Beirut before President Reagan ordered our forces home on 7 February 1984.

We were tested. The military was not intimidated or defeated, but our political will was found wanting. Had we been permitted to finish our mission, history may have been much different. "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."

Unfortunately, this first skirmish of the United States' long ideological war with radical Islamic terrorists emboldened Osama bin Laden. When interviewed by ABC News in 1998, he said: "We have seen in the last decade the decline of American power and the weakness of the American Soldier, who is ready to wage Cold Wars, but unprepared to fight long wars. This was proven in Beirut in 1983 when the Marines fled after two explosions. It also proves they can run in less than 24 hours, and this was also repeated in Somalia [in 1993]."



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