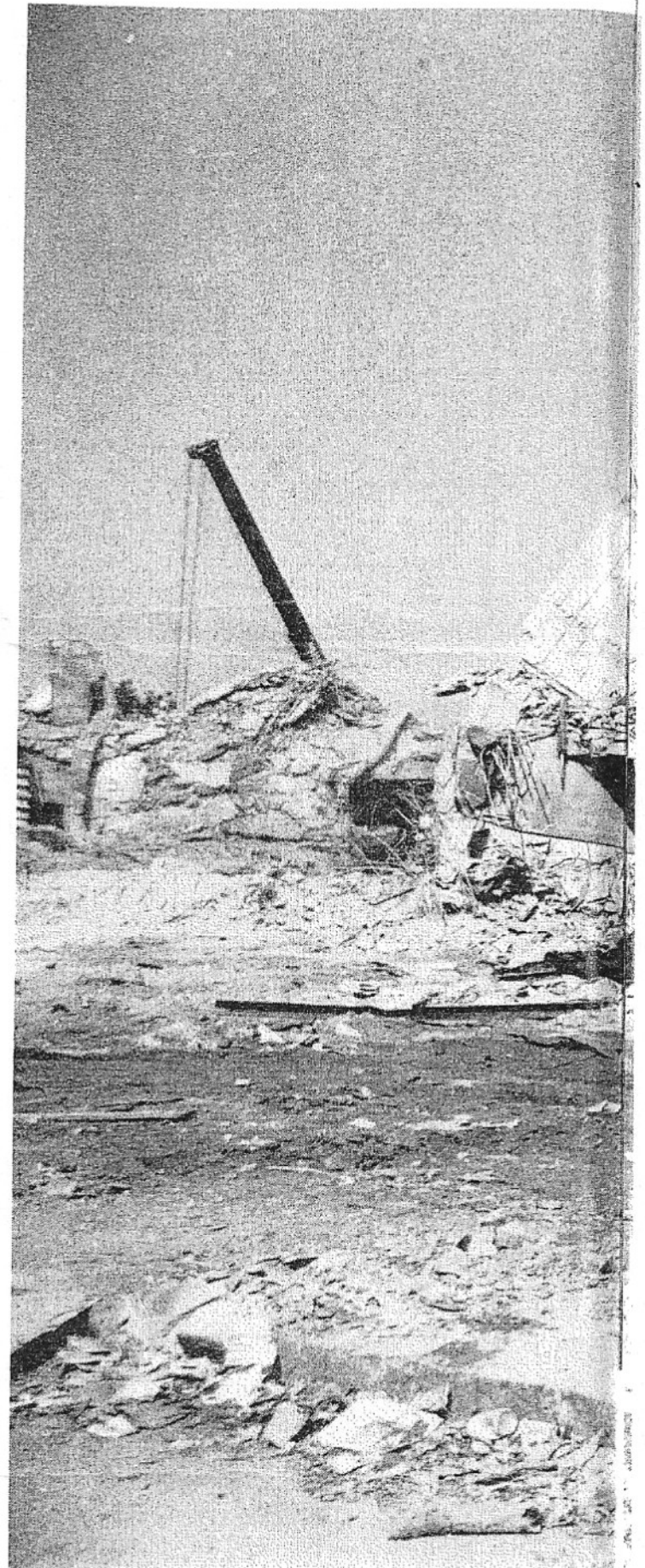

The Price They Paid...

Story and photos by SSgt Randy Gaddo

At 6:20 a.m. on October 23, 1983, a terrorist truck, laden with more than 2,000 pounds of explosives, crashed through the Marine defenses in Beirut, Lebanon, and exploded within the four-story Battalion Landing Team 1/8 headquarters building, killing 245 U.S. Marines and sailors as they slept. Stunned by the senseless act of destruction, a grieving nation tended its wounded and honored its dead—never to forget the devastating price they had paid in the quest for peace...



Old Glory was slowly lowered during Evening Colors in Beirut, Lebanon. A sandbagged bunker is in the background.

“**W**hen we first got here, we were spectators, watching fire fights in the hills. But, when the first rockets came in, we discovered we were a very real part of all this,” recalls GySgt Stephen Mellinger.

As he surveyed the moonlit silhouette of Shuwayfat, east of the Marine position at the Beirut International Airport (BIA) on a mild October evening, the platoon sergeant from Weapons Company, 1st Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment, reflected the thoughts of most of



Rescue workers searched through the wreckage for the bodies of American Marines and sailors following the October 23, 1983, bombing of the Battalion Landing Team 1/8 headquarters building in Beirut.

the 1,800 Marines and sailors who served in Beirut with the 24th Marine Amphibious Unit as part of a Multinational Peacekeeping Force (MNF).

What it all boils down to is that Marines in the 24th MAU underwent some heavy changes since their baptism under fire in Lebanon.

When the MAU landed in May 1983, they replaced the 22nd MAU at a time when the Multinational Force role was largely passive; peacekeepers, and from all appearances they were doing their job.

There was no shooting, Marines were not being fired upon, and things were relatively calm.

"We got here and assumed the same role as the previous MAU," said Capt Chris Cowdrey, Commanding Officer, "Charlie" Company. "We patrolled in the village and were well received there. We stood guard with the Lebanese Armed Forces and got along well with them."

From outward appearances, Marines were being well received by the Lebanese people. While on patrols, which were dis-

continued when hostilities heightened, Marines would be greeted by blushing young ladies and inquisitive youngsters, while the elders smiled approvingly. They were given flowers and fruit, and generally treated with respect.

While the picture seemed to be rosy when the MAU arrived, Cowdrey stressed that the Marines were not looking through rose-colored glasses.

"In Lebanon, I think everyone realized it was a real world situation, and there was a potential for such things as the em-



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bassy bombing. Many of the Marines would, for the first time, be carrying live ammo, with specific instructions on when and where to use it."

The captain recalls that on the ship en route to Lebanon, they had a large map of Beirut, and whenever a report came in about a stray round entering anywhere near a Marine position ashore, they would plot it on the map and study where they would be in relation to it. After they arrived and things began to heat up, Cowdrey recalls, "If there was just an occasional stray round we'd consider ourselves lucky."

Even before leaving Camp Lejeune, N.C., for the long ship ride, preparations had begun. According to Capt M.K. Hoover, Commanding Officer of "Bravo" Company, his Marines were eager to get on with it. "It was what we'd been training for," he says. "We had a strong idea we'd be going to Beirut, so we focused our attention in that area."

Months before departing the States, Marines of the 24th received briefs on the situation, the country, the people and their customs. They were well informed

Working under floodlights, survivors (many of them with wounds suffered during the bombing) helped during rescue attempts at the BLT 1/8 headquarters. Once a four-story building, the structure was nearly flattened by the destructive force of 2,000 pounds of dynamite.

on what to expect. "We even had Marines who'd already been to Beirut come in and talk to us to give us first-hand information," said Hoover. The BLT 1/8 intelligence unit prepared an unclassified pamphlet giving a complete scope of information.

"Human behavior tells you that unless you experience something first-hand, there's a feeling in your mind that it can never happen to you," related Capt Paul Roy, "Alpha" Company Commander. "We had many classes at all levels to prepare us for what could happen in Beirut. But, until a person experiences it, he can't fully understand what the Marines went through.

"Actually, we were fortunate that it was quiet when we went in," recalls Roy. "It gave us a chance to go on patrols and learn the city. It gave Marines the opportunity to get acclimatized not only to the weather, but to the people, their culture and to the feelings of the outside forces working in Beirut."

Then, on July 22, two Marines and a sailor were injured as a result of rocket attacks on positions around the airport.

That's when the seed of change began to sprout in the Marines' minds. But the injuries were not serious; the worst was yet to come.

It was August 28 when Marines began taking heavy direct and indirect fire, and the next day two Marines from "Alpha" Company were killed and 14 injured during a mortar and rocket attack.

"That was quite a shock," recalls Roy. "But Marines in the company didn't have much time to dwell on it because we continued to take sporadic small arms and indirect fire throughout the day."

As the situation became more serious, Marines adapted to meet the need. "The first couple hours after the two KIAs, there was a lot of grief," says Roy. "We needed that time to realize exactly what we were involved in, how the situation had changed. There would be no more walking patrols, no more waving at mothers, fathers and little kids. That time gave Marines the opportunity to convince themselves that this was for real."

The shelling was a development in the situation that everyone knew could hap-



Photo by SSgt Ed Warnick

Memorial services for the victims of the October 23, 1983, bombing in Beirut were held at Camp Lejeune, N.C. Among those attending were, left to right: National Security Adviser Robert MacFarlane; Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger; Treasury Secretary Donald Regan; Secretary of State (and former Marine) George Shultz; Mrs. Paul X. Kelley; Marine Commandant Kelley; Mrs. Nancy Reagan; and President Ronald Reagan.

pen, but no one really thought would.

"I was on liberty in Turkey when I got word the airport had been shelled," says Cpl Richard McClain, "Charlie" Company's training NCO. "I remember I was sitting at a little outside cafe, talking with a British guy, and there were pretty girls sitting around the swimming pool. Everything was peaceful, and then I heard about the shelling. It was hard to imagine because it was so quiet when I left."

Although Marines were taking casualties, they weren't sure who was doing the firing, and in many cases exactly where it was coming from or even if fire had been specifically directed at Marines, since Lebanese Armed Forces units were very near many Marine positions.

The Marines' first impulse was to fight back, but they were kept in check by the words on a small card each Marine carried in his pocket—the Rules of Engagement (ROE).

If anything caused Marines frustration while on duty in Lebanon, it was following the letter of the rules, which basically stated that they could fire back only

when they could definitely determine they were being directly fired upon and they could definitely identify a specific target. Even when these criteria were met, word had to be passed up the chain of command, and the reply passed back down, before return fire would be allowed.

The rules of engagement were devised to reinforce the purpose for the Marine presence in Beirut. When Marines (then with the 32nd MAU) first landed in August 1982, their mission was to assist the safe and orderly evacuation of thousands of PLO fighters from Beirut; they were not there to engage anyone in direct offensive combat operations.

Assisted by Italian and French contingents, the Marines oversaw the departure of more than 6,000 PLO soldiers. After 17 days, the 32nd MAU backloaded its gear onto ships offshore and carried on a normal Med deployment.

But the Marine role was not yet played out. About four days after the 32nd's departure, Lebanon's President-Elect Beshin Gemayel was killed in an explosion. The next day, September 15, the

Israeli army invaded west Beirut, and the following day, more than 300 Palestinian refugees were massacred in camps Sarra and Chatilla in central Beirut.

President Reagan immediately ordered the 32nd back to Beirut to assume a widened role in the area. This time they were to act as a stabilizing force in the region, to be highly visible as a presence in support of the Lebanese Armed Forces. Taking up defensive positions around the Beirut International Airport, the Marines dug in for an indefinite stay.

But, being a presence, a stabilizing force, meant that the Marines had to walk a fine line between acting as observers and becoming participants in what was happening.

This became especially touchy on walking patrols in the city. It was not uncommon to see armed men, women and even teen-agers in the streets. And because they were in a non-offensive posture, Marines had no magazines in their weapons.

Then, on March 17, 1983, after the 32nd MAU was replaced by the 22nd, Marines suffered their first injuries in a



At about the same time the Marine BLT headquarters (above) was bombed, the French headquarters was attacked in a similar manner, killing 58 French paratroopers and injuring many more.

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direct attack against the Marine contingent. Five Marines on foot patrol suffered superficial wounds in a grenade attack. It was only after this incident that Marines began carrying magazines in their weapons (no round in the chamber) when outside their perimeter.

The rules of engagement remained rigid as the situation worsened, until finally they were applied when Marines of the 24th MAU were forced to fire back to protect themselves.

On August 28, 1983, at about 2:00 p.m., small arms fire began in communities east and north of the BIA when armed militia attacked LAF positions. Fighting moved gradually closer to the airport and eventually swept over a Marine combat outpost manned by 30 members of "Bravo" Company and 12 LAF soldiers. It was the first Marine position to come under direct fire, and Marines were forced to fire back to defend themselves. On August 29, outposts were again attacked, and again Marines were forced to retaliate with small arms.

"We knew something was going to happen eventually, but no one wanted the responsibility of being the first to fire back," said 1stLt David Hough, commander of the second platoon, which

was at the first besieged post. "I knew we had to fire back. The rules of engagement applied, but I called company headquarters anyway. We'd been fired on for half an hour. It began sporadically, but we received five minutes of intense fire before we fired back."

Two Marines were killed on August 29, the first under hostile fire, and the situation had become serious enough for Col Timothy Geraghty, 24th MAU Commanding Officer, to respond. First, illumination rounds, then high explosive rounds were fired at the dissident faction positions, silencing them.

In the wake of the Israeli Defense Force withdrawal on September 4, Marines witnessed increased shelling in and around BIA... shelling that killed two more Marines and wounded ten. Much of the shelling was probably directed at an LAF offensive launched to the south and east to occupy vacant IDF positions, with heavy resistance by dissident factions. The LAF moved close to or directly through Marine positions on the offensive, drawing fire as they went.

But, in spite of the constantly changing situation, the Marines' resolve to carry out their assigned task remained unchanged.

"Our rules of engagement and mission remain the same," Col Geraghty told reporters at a news conference soon after the IDF pullout. "We won't initiate hostilities, but if there is fire against us, we will protect ourselves, and try to limit the engagement at the lowest level and terminate it in the shortest period."

When asked by reporters if the Marines felt any frustration by constraints of the ROE, Geraghty said, "Yes, I think so. Essentially, we are an offensive oriented unit. We like to take the fight to the enemy. This mission is one of restraint, and that does cause some frustration. But Marines here have been trained well, and they clearly understand the mission. I think the record shows we'll do what we're ordered to do, and we're carrying out that mission of restraint."

Reporters responded by asking if the colonel had any intentions of asking for revisions to the ROE, changes to give him more flexibility to deploy his forces as he saw fit.

"I see no reason for changes in the rules of engagement," he said. "They are well thought out...for this mission. For me to request a change would essentially be a change in the mission to one of an

offensive role, which we do not feel is the correct mission here."

After the IDF pullout, Marines withstood more than two weeks of almost continuous rocket, mortar and artillery attacks. Line companies were forced to return small arms fire and artillerymen of "Charlie" Battery, firing 155-mm. howitzers, were called upon several times to silence dissident rocket positions firing upon Marines.

When Lieutenant General John H. Miller, CG, FMFLant, and Major General Alfred M. Gray, CG, Second Marine Division, visited on September 8, their helicopter flight to "Bravo" Company at the Lebanese Scientific University library was delayed by an artillery barrage, part of which hit a few hundred meters from the Marine helicopter base. "Charlie" Battery fired again, and this time was joined by the five-inch guns of the USS *Bowen*, marking the first time naval guns had fired high explosive rounds since the U.S. commitment to Lebanon more than one year earlier.

Also backing up the 24th MAU Marines during this period were 2,000 Marines of the 31st MAU, plus ships, aircraft and personnel of Strike Force Mediterranean, which centered around the nuclear powered aircraft carrier USS *Eisenhower*, with its deadly arsenal of F-14s, A-6s, and A-7s. The 31st MAU remained on standby until it was determined its assistance would not be required.

The might of naval gunfire came into play again on September 17-19, when dissident rocket and artillery attacks threatened U.S. Multinational Force positions and the U.S. diplomatic mission in Lebanon. When long-range artillery began pounding the area around the American ambassador's residence in Baabda and the Lebanese Ministry of Defense in Yarze, as well as the American and British embassies, Col Geraghty and Commodore Morgan France ordered the USS *Bowen* and *John Rodgers* to fire. Firing began in late evening of the 17th and ended the morning of the 18th.

At this time, the LAF was involved in a push through the hamlet of Souk El Gharb, high in the Shouf mountains east of the Marine position at the airport. By September 19, the LAF was endangered by attacks from Druze militiamen and their allies. Because the loss of Souk El Gharb would place potentially hostile forces in a commanding position overlooking the 24th MAU, naval guns were employed against the targets. This time, the USS *Virginia* and *John Rodgers* answered the call.

The fire was effective, and the LAF was able to hold Souk El Gharb.

As a cease-fire was being negotiated in Washington, Beirut and Damascus,



Vice President George Bush (fourth from left) was flanked by Col Timothy Geraghty, 24th MAU Commander, and General Paul X. Kelley, CMC, during the vice president's visit to Beirut following the bombing.



(ABOVE) Sea Stallion helicopters, loaded with mail, arrived at Rok Base in Beirut. (BELOW) A Harrier hovered above the USS *Tarawa* near Lebanon.



THE PRICE THEY PAID (cont.)

fighting continued, and before the cease-fire officially went into effect at 6:00 a.m. on September 26, eight more Marines were wounded. As the time for the cease-fire drew closer, hostilities intensified, and by September 23, Marines were involved in the heaviest small arms fire they'd seen since late August.

When the cease-fire settled in, and the struggle moved to the conference table, the hills around Beirut became ominously quiet for the first time in months. But Marines viewed the cease-fire with reserve.

"It was good to have quiet for a while, and we certainly all enjoyed it," said Capt Cowdrey, speaking for his Marines in "Charlie" Company. "But we weren't about to go back to PT gear and relax. We stayed on Condition II every night, regardless of whether it was quiet or not." Pointing to the hamlet-studded hills surrounding his company's position, hills from which Marines had just recently received fire, he asserted, "Night seems to be the time they go a little high and to the right."

The cease-fire held tenuously, but Marines would occasionally hear the crack of small arms breaking the silence from up in the hills.

Then, as the peacekeeping effort moved into October, a series of small-scale, terrorist-style attacks directed on 24th MAU units killed two more Marines and wounded eight.

"The attacks may be the work of 'outsiders' dedicated to disrupting the cease-fire and the national reconciliation talks between the Lebanese government and dissident factions," Col Geraghty told reporters. He also surmised that the attacks may have been an attempt to draw Marines into making intemperate or provocative responses.

The attacks changed from rocket, mortar, artillery and small arms barrages of August and September to sniping incidents or short-lived, guerrilla-style grenade attacks. Sniping continued until it culminated with an attack on "Alpha" Company's position at the Lebanese Scientific University library, located about a mile from the airport. Five more Marines were injured and one was killed by sniper fire.

Firing died down shortly after 11:45 p.m. on October 16, and it remained quiet, giving Marines hope that the possibility of a permanent peace was near.

Then, at 6:20 a.m. on October 23, hopes for peace were obscured when a terrorist truck, laden with more than 2,000 pounds of explosives, crashed through Marine defenses and exploded within the four-story Battalion Landing

Team 1/8 headquarters building, killing 245 Marines and sailors and injuring 130 more.

At about the same time, the French headquarters was hit by a similar vehicle, killing 58 French paratroopers and injuring many more.

Working endlessly in shifts, day and night, Marines and sailors, as well as other MNF members and Lebanese soldiers and rescue agencies, dug through the pile of rubble, looking for survivors and removing fatalities.

The BLT bombing once again represented a time of change for 24th MAU Marines. It changed the face of the situation, but the mission remained the same.

Speaking at a press conference soon after the bombing, Col Geraghty characterized the attack as a "Quantum change in the whole picture, in that it was a well-planned, coordinated terrorist attack specifically directed at the Marines and French." He added that there had obviously been reconnaissance of the position, "but then, our area has been relatively the same for the past year because we are not here on a combat mission.

"It is important to understand that...we are more committed than ever to carry out the mission we came to do."

Geraghty pointed out that security measures are constantly reviewed, but "it is complicated by our location next to an international airport, with all the accompanying civilian traffic. Appropriate increased security measures have been taken, essentially sealing our location."

The mood of Marines and sailors ashore was one of quiet fury in the wake of the BLT explosion, and it had quite a sobering effect.



Lebanese Army LtCol Hisham Jaber saluted General Kelley upon the Marine Commandant's arrival in Beirut.

For many, their first view of the devastated building will be a sight that is imprinted on their memories forever. "I used to walk around the corner of a hedge, and turn left, and there was the BLT building," recalls one lance corporal from the MAU headquarters. "That morning, right after the explosion, I remember as I approached the hedge the first thing I noticed was that all the leaves had been blown from the bushes. Then I came around the hedge, and what was once four stories was about a story and a half of rubble.

"I just stopped momentarily and stared until I heard the yells for help. Then we all joined in the rescue effort."

The days following the tragedy left those ashore numbly carrying out their duties, whether it was their normal jobs or assisting in the rescue and cleanup. Although more than 200 of their comrades had been killed while they slept, the mission still remained.

Life went on, but not unchanged.

Marines in the 24th, most of whom had never experienced a hostile environment, had received an overdose of reality. Their first view of their own mortality was glimpsed when the first two Marines were killed in action on August 29, and each death or injury after that brought home a deeper understanding of life and death.

But, on the day of the BLT bombing, boys earned the right to be called men, and men learned a stark lesson in the reality of the Beirut mission.

It was the kind of lesson learned without realizing it; the kind of lesson learned while pulling bodies out of still smoldering rubble...bodies that were once buddies, that once laughed and felt pain and pity...bodies like everyone else's...mortal, and so easily snuffed from life.

It was a lesson that is hard to put into words, but anyone who experienced it knows. And even days afterward, when all the bodies were extricated, and only a faint smell of death remained, a walk through remaining debris around the building brought fresh reminders of the lesson—a picture of someone's family, one of a girlfriend and another of a Marine in dress blues, fresh out of boot camp. A scrap of paper amid the rubble with a familiar name on it, the name of one of the doomed in the building. A tennis shoe cast carelessly atop a pile of deuce gear, lying next to the burned hull of a jeep. And if that failed to touch home, at the center of the circle of rubble was the skeleton of the BLT building, a constant reminder of what had once lived.

And knowingly or not, Marines changed.



"I don't notice a change in my personality," reflects LCpl Matthew Wilhelm, a Chicago native with one year in the Corps. "But I have changed my view toward life in general. I have more respect for it now. I also have more regard for other countries. This is my first overseas duty, and to see how other people live day to day with war has opened my eyes."

"I don't think a person can go through something like this without changing," commented Capt Cowdrey. Prophetically, he continued, "I think when the Marines here step back on the ship and get back to Lejeune, they'll see themselves in a different light, and in a different environment, and maybe see a change."

But, as they prepared to leave and relinquish their positions to Marines of the 22nd MAU in the waning days of November, Marines could look back with heads held high.

"They've done something special. They've fought for freedom, and to protect their fellow man," said Capt Roy. "But, any Marine in any MAU could have come here and done the same job. A Marine is a Marine."

Marines of the 22nd MAU now stand watch over a situation much changed since the last time they had the duty. It is a situation destined for more change, and the Marines in Beirut are destined to change with it.

Marines took cover behind sandbags as sniper fire zeroed in on their positions near the Beirut International Airport. The Marines, governed by the Rules of Engagement, had to walk a fine line between acting as observers and becoming active participants in shooting incidents.



Two American flags, one on the side of a tower overlooking Marine positions and the other attached to an antenna, left no doubt as to Marine determination to carry out their mission as peacekeepers in war-torn Lebanon.

