

Beirut 1983: Have we learned this lesson?ⁱ

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Agostino von Hassell

Following is a report from the 'Can't Shoot Back Saloon.'

The facts are stark. Twenty years ago, very early at 0622 on 23 October 1983, a lone suicide bomber drove a Mercedes truck-packed with the equivalent of 12,000 pounds of TNT-into the building housing many of the Marines of the 24th Marine Amphibious Unit (24th MAU) killing 241 Marines and members of other U.S. Services. Most of Headquarters and Services Company of Battalion Landing Team, 1st Battalion, 8th Marines (BLT 1/8) was wiped out. At the same time, another suicide bomber drove a van into the barracks housing the French Foreign Legion killing several dozen Legionnaires.

Reading and watching the news coverage now of the efforts by the Marine Corps and the Army to keep the peace in Iraq brings back many memories of peacekeeping in Beirut in 1982-84. Beirut also comes to mind when talking to veterans who tried to keep the peace in Somalia.

Only time will tell if we have learned the bloody lessons of Beirut. This article does not recount the specific events. Marines know them well enough.

Exhaustive detail can be found in *U.S. Marines in Lebanon: 1982-1984*, published by the History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1987, and in the seminal investigative report of the Long Commission.¹

The five-member Department of Defense Commission on the Beirut International Airport Terrorist Act, 23 October 1983, was established by then-Secretary of Defense Casper W. Weinberger on 7 November 1983. It was chaired by ADM Robert L.K. Long, USN(Ret), who had retired in July 1983 after 40 years of service.² Details of this scathing report may be found at . (See p. 44.) posture of the USMNF constituted tacit approval of the security measures and procedures in force at the BLT Headquarters building on 23 October 1983.

With the benefit of hindsight, it has become apparent that the Beirut bombing was a failure of intelligence, a clear failure of command and control, a failure of effective rules of engagement (ROE), a failure of clearcut mission orders, and a failure in Washington to understand the Middle East, and Lebanon specifically.

It was not, again with 20 years of hindsight, a failure of the 24th MAU and its commander, Col Timothy J. Geraghty. His only fault may have been to bunch too many Marines into one building, creating an attractive target for terrorists.

This writer jotted down a sign at Echo Company, BLT 2/8:

They sent us to Beirut, to be targets who could not shoot. Friends will die into an early grave, was there any reasons for what they gave.³

This was not too far from the "Can't Shoot Back Saloon."⁴ The Root Scoop-the six page newspaper of the 24th MAU-on 22 September 1983 published a cartoon showing a Marine in a foxhole with incoming artillery from all directions. The Marine, on the radio, asks, "Yes Sir, it's hard to tell if we're the target. Do I draw?"

In October, and days before the bombing, this writer was trooping the lines with SgtMaj F.B. Douglass of Cataumet, MA, and the BLT commanding officer (CO), LtCol Howard L. Gerlach. SgtMaj Douglass was killed on 23 October while LtCol Gerlach was gravely wounded and disabled. "I have no clue why we are here; this will end quite badly," SgtMaj Douglass predicted. "The least I can do now is take care of my Marines."

Overall many lessons have been learned. The intelligence analysis capabilities of a Marine expeditionary unit (special operations capable) (MEU(SOC))⁵ vastly surpass the capabilities organic to the MAU in Beirut. This writer learned this first hand while deployed in 1989 with the 26th MEU. Chains of command have been realigned, heavy-duty cultural training is now common for deploying Marines, and ROE are more in line with the actual threat. These changes were confirmed by the former Commandant, Gen James L. Jones.

A Failure of Intelligence

On 18 April 1983, the U.S. Embassy in Beirut was destroyed by a massive car bomb that took the lives of 17 U.S. citizens and over 40 others. What has never been formally acknowledged, yet is widely known, is that at that time many senior station chiefs of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) were holding a meeting in the Embassy. Eight of the killed in action were employees of the CIA, including chief Middle East analyst Robert C. Ames and station chief Kenneth Haas. This meeting was also confirmed by Robert Oakley in 1987. He was a former U.S. State Department coordinator for counterterrorism during the 1980s. Oakley has also served as U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan, Zaire, and Somalia.

These intelligence officers were stationed all over the Middle East. Many were killed. With one stroke most of the human intelligence network in the Middle East was wiped out. Sure, agents and sources were still in place, but they had lost their handlers, and many intelligence networks withered away. This loss of human intelligence was also directly confirmed to this writer by Robert "Bud" McFarlane who served as national security adviser to President Ronald Reagan from 1983 to 1985.

The loss of effective human agent networks would be felt for years and, retired CIA officers now acknowledge, seriously degraded Washington's ability to collect solid information on the Middle East. Both Oakley and McFarlane confirmed this view.

It takes years to reestablish intelligence networks. At the same time, Washington had already decided to redirect intelligence gathering from agents in place to electronic and signals analysis. Note that after 11 September 2001, demands were made on the CIA to rapidly reestablish an effective global agent network-a task that takes years.⁶

The S-2 (intelligence) for the MAU was ill-equipped to analyze a steady stream of intelligence about militia groups. In 1989, aboard the USS Nassau (LHA 4), a Marine

intelligence officer who had served with the 24th MAU recalled, "We got no guidance from Washington or any of the higher headquarters. We had no training in analyzing this type of intelligence." He recalls that the intelligence section received a steady stream of reports warning of attacks. "The volume [of these reports] was very high, and we had no prior training on how to properly review this information." This assessment of MAU intelligence operations and the improvements under then-Commandant, Alfred M. Gray, were the subjects of lengthy discussions between this writer and then-LtCol Matthew E. Broderick who was the CO of the BLT assigned to 26th MEU in 1989.⁷

It was worse than that. Officers trained in battlefield intelligence suddenly had to learn how to understand the incomprehensible politics of Lebanon and try to sort out who the players were. The need for this understanding was urgent because Marines-after having initially been received with cheers-incrementally got dragged into more and more confrontations and firefights resulting in casualties.⁸

The intelligence officer aboard the Nassau recalls that the G-2 office had tracked 57 separate militias. These included assorted factions of the Druze, the Maronite, and various Islamic fundamentalists such as the Amal and Hezbollah. Another major factor was the Syrian Army, actively engaged in combat in the Shouf Mountains above Beirut and specifically in the once fancy resort area of Souk el Ghar.⁹ One group was named the "Pink Panthers." They had stolen a truckload of utilities that turned pinkish after a first wash. Who were they? Nobody knew.¹⁰

Without any tangible guidance from higher headquarters, the intelligence section was in no position to properly give the MAU commander guidance on what was a real threat and what was not.¹¹ Similarly, said Capitano de Fregata¹² Pier Luigi Sambo, "We never had a clue who was who." He was the commander of the San Marco Battalion, Italy's tiny Marine Corps, that occupied the sector just north of the Marine Corps sector around the Beirut International Airport. Yet even without intelligence support, the Italians managed to serve superb dinners accompanied by choice Italian wines.

The Long Commission grimly stated:

There was an awareness of the existing dangerous situation at every level, but no one had specific information on how, where and when the threat would be carried out. Throughout the period of the USMNF [United States Multinational Force] presence in Lebanon, intelligence sources were unable to provide proven, accurate, definitive information on terrorist tactics against our forces. This shortcoming held to be the case on 23 October 1983.

The Rules of Engagement

Until 23 October the MAU virtually operated on ROE that limited the right to shoot back unless the hostile force could be clearly identified.¹³ Even as the climate in Beirut changed, starting in April 1983, and Marines became the subject of ever more frequent attacks including heavy shelling by what was assumed to be Syrian artillery-122mm mortars, RPG-7s (rocket propelled grenades) from various militia, and snipers-it was up to the combined

amphibious task force commander to formally authorize return fire-hence the Can't Shoot Back Saloon.¹⁴

The actual language of the ROE was exceptionally complex. The reality in the field was, "don't shoot back unless you know at whom you are shooting." Some days this was truly bizarre. Near the Beirut University library a sniper operated from a minaret, taking occasional shots at the Marines of Weapons Company, 1/8 who used the roof of the library as an observation post. This went on for weeks.

No casualties were taken, and the Marines never shot back. Why? Under the ROE they were not allowed to shoot-the enemy was not clearly identified. Around 1600 each day the sniper would climb down, exit the minaret tower, give a casual salute to the Marines, and go home after a long day's work.

Until 23 October 1983, the ROE specifically stated that:

- * When on post or mobile or foot patrol, keep a loaded magazine in the weapon. Weapons will be on safe, with no rounds in the chamber.
- * Do not chamber a round unless instructed to do so by a commissioned officer unless you must act in immediate self-defense where deadly force is authorized.
- * Keep ammunition for crew-served weapons readily available but not loaded in the weapon. Weapons will be on safe at all times.

The perimeter guards at the BLT building on the morning of 23 October were in full compliance with these rules and were unable to shoot fast enough to disable or stop the bomber.

The Long Commission report concluded that these rules, in effect until 24 October, seriously degraded the Marines' mission and ability to defend themselves. Washington and the many higher headquarters in a complex chain of command did not accept that the peacekeeping mission that started in 1982 had evolved into a small war.¹⁵ The Marine Corps ignored the most basic rule first formulated in the 1980s in the Small Wars Manual, "Delay in the use of force . . . will always be interpreted as weakness." Perception of weakness leads to disaster. The troubled history of the Middle East has shown this perception over and over again.

Some retaliatory force was applied in the months, weeks, and days before the bombing. It included a combination of naval gunfire, close air support (CAS), and Marine 155mm artillery. But this force was applied with massive delays and often not with clear objectives. This writer recalls how Marine positions around the Beirut International Airport were the targets of-presumably Syrian-shelling, and it would be hours before any counterbattery fire was permitted. These delays were caused in part by a misperception of how the mission had evolved and a chain of command almost absurd in its complexity.

What also contributed to the tenuous position of the Marines was that much of the force applied was not in support of the Marines ashore but in direct support of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), engaged in pitched battles with Syrian units and their proxies. In the perception of the locals, the United States was not neutral but a player.¹⁶

The Chain of Command

On average it would take 4 hours or more for a request by the MAU commander for naval gunfire, CAS, or permission to use organic artillery.¹⁷ Why?

Until 23 October 1983, the chain of command was as follows:¹⁸ President to the Secretary of Defense, through the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Commander in Chief,* U.S. Forces Europe (USCinCEur). In the theater, operational command ran from USCinCEur to Commander in Chief, U.S. Naval Forces Europe (CinCUSNavEur), and from CinCUSNavEur to Commander, Sixth Fleet (ComSixthFleet). Operational command flowed from ComSixthFleet to Commander, Task Force 61 (CTF-61) who was designated Commander, U.S. Forces Lebanon. The MAU commander was Commander, U.S. Forces Ashore Lebanon.

Requests to return fire went through most of this chain of command causing extensive delays. Stated the Long Commission:

The Commission concludes, however, USCinCEur, CinCUSNavEur, ComSixthFleet and CTF-61 did not initiate actions to effectively ensure the security of the USMNF in light of the deteriorating political/military situation in Lebanon. In short, the Commission found a lack of effective command supervision of the USMNF prior to 23 October 1983. The Commission concludes that the failure of the USCinCEur operational chain of command to inspect and supervise the defensive

*Note: The term Commander in Chief now refers only to the President of the United States.

A Changed Mission

With the benefit of hindsight it is almost haunting to read and see how the mission of the Marines changed rapidly, but how the perception in Washington that it was purely a peacekeeping mission never changed.

Again, the Long Commission reported:

The Commission concludes that U.S. decisions as regard[ing] Lebanon taken over the past fifteen months have been, to a large degree, characterized by an emphasis on military options and the expansion of the U.S. military role, notwithstanding the fact that the conditions upon which the security of the USMNF were based continued to deteriorate as progress toward a diplomatic solution slowed. The Commission further concludes that these decisions may have been taken without clear recognition that these initial conditions had dramatically changed and that the expansion of our military involvement in Lebanon greatly increased the risk to, and adversely impacted upon the security of, the USMNF.

This writer recalls a red-haired colonel with the LAF who, in September 1983, said that, "Lebanon is like a bingo game that doesn't end. Once you are in it, you cannot pull out."

From the earliest days of the mission in Lebanon, the Marines, the French, the Italians, and a tiny contingent of British were slowly dragged into this bingo game. Their mission was to "keep the peace." Yet, what made them something other than peacekeepers was their overt support for the LAF as well as the formal Government of Lebanon.

The reality that both the LAF and the government were essentially just one of many factions fighting against each other did not impact on the mission. As the Long Commission concluded:

By the end of September 1983, the situation in Lebanon had changed to the extent that not one of the initial conditions upon which the mission statement was premised was still valid.

But it was even more complicated than that. The Marines had, by October 1983, come to be perceived as an active force in the raging civil war.¹⁹ The Marines, along with the balance of the multinational peacekeeping force had entered Lebanon with an impossible mission and loaded down with a heavy dose of guilt.

Keeping the peace and stabilizing the Lebanese Government was the formal mission statement. The reality of Lebanon was distinctly different—an effective government had been fiction for most of the civil war that started in 1975.

U.S. Marines first landed in the Port of Beirut on 25 August 1982 at the direct request of Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) chairman Yasser Arafat. He had been promised by U.S. negotiators that the Marines would cover the evacuation of about 18,000 PLO fighters. He was also assured that the various Palestinian refugee camps would remain "safe," even though specifics for that mission were never spelled out.

This initial deployment was to last 30 days, but the Marines pulled out on 10 September 1982. As soon as they left all hell broke loose in Lebanon. The popular President-elect, Bashir Gemayel, was assassinated, and Israeli troops invaded West Beirut. Christian Phalangists entered the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila and massacred hundreds of Palestinians. The Israelis stood by.

This meltdown in Lebanon forced the return of the peacekeeping force. On paper, the mission was to keep the peace. "But we were actually driven by collective guilt," said Capitano de Fregata Pier Luigi Sambo of the San Marco Battalion. "We had left early and the killings took place. We didn't have a real mission." The Italians were charged with patrolling the main Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila.

In the end Marines spent over 550 days in Beirut and essentially accomplished nothing—nor did the French, Italian, or the British.

A lesson learned? Some of the recent experience of the United States suggests that critical lessons have indeed been learned. This writer believes that the U.S. military needs to evolve

new doctrine for operations like those in Lebanon. This new doctrine should draw strict distinctions between peacekeeping and peacemaking. Peacekeeping essentially means an operation in a more or less permissive environment while peacemaking would apply to the application of force. Essentially, the current operations in Iraq and in Afghanistan should be considered peacemaking.

Notes

1. Numerous books have been published about the Beirut deployment. Most useful are *Peacekeepers at War: A Marine's Account of the Beirut Catastrophe* by Michael Petit, Faber & Faber, Boston, 1986 and *The Root* by Eric Hammel, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1985.
2. The other four members of this commission were Robert J. Murray, a former Under Secret of the Navy and former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (International Security Affairs); LTG Joseph T. Palastra, Jr., USA, then on active duty; LtGen Lawrence F. Snowden, USMC(Ret); and LtGen Eugene F. Tighe, USAF(Ret).
3. BLT 2/8 replaced 1/8 in Beirut right after the bombing.
4. Late in the mission that sign was changed to the "Can Shoot Back Saloon."
5. Gen Alfred M. Gray was the Commanding General, 2d Marine Division at the time of the Beirut bombing. He absorbed many of the lessons of that tragedy. When he, as Commandant, evolved the innovative concept of the highly capable MEU(SOC) units, he incorporated many of the lessons learned.
6. The effort required to establish an effective intelligence network was substantiated in a discussion 2 years ago with the former CIA Director, Richard Helms. This writer interviewed Mr. Helms in connection with an upcoming book on Office of Strategic Services operations in World War II.
7. Broderick retired as a brigadier general. He also commanded a MEU deployed to Somalia.
8. Based in part on verbal discussions in 1989 with LtCol Matt Broderick. Similar comments were made to this writer in late September 1983 by Maj Andrew Davis who was killed in the bombing.
9. These statements are substantiated by comments in the Long Commission report.
10. This theft was confirmed to this writer by WO Charles W. Rowe, Jr. who served with the MEU public affairs office (PAO) staff in 1983. It was also confirmed by then-SSgt Randy L. Gaddo who served with the 24th MAU.
11. See the Long Commission report.
12. This rank is equivalent to a commander, U.S. Navy.

13. See detailed discussion in the Long Commission report that includes copies of all ROE.
 14. This writer saw with his own eyes the frequent attacks on Marine forces ashore.
 15. Discussion with Bud McFarlane in 1988.
 16. These assertions are backed by the detailed analysis in the Long Commission report as well as a letter to this writer written in late 1983 by Capilano de Fregata Pier Luigi Sambo.
 17. This writer saw the lengthy fire support request process first hand on several occasions in September and early October 1983. The MAU PAO officer, Maj Bob Jordan, also confirmed the time it took to process fire support requests to the writer at the time.
 18. This chain of command is based on the details contained in the Long Commission report.
 19. There are several contemporary sources for these statements. The most exhaustive, that also analyzes the "guilt factor," was a very detailed article published in the Sunday magazine of The New York Times by Thomas L. Friedman on 8 April 1984. Another source is the Nouveau Magazine, published in Beirut on 24 September 1983. A third source is Monday Morning published in Beirut on 2 October 1983. Starting on page 6, that magazine carried a lengthy interview by Lydia Georgi with Col Timothy Geraghty.
- *Mr. von Hassell is an international trade consultant. He has published two books on the Marine Corps and most recently a book on West Point. He is a life member of the Marine Corps Combat Correspondents Association.

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