

'They Came in Peace'

Every year on Oct. 23, survivors and the families of uniformed Americans killed in an Islamic terrorist attack in Beirut, Lebanon, in 1983 gather at Camp Lejeune, N.C., to honor the fallen

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Operating under dubious rules-of-engagement that prevented them from carrying loaded weapons, the Marines of 1st Bn., 8th Marine Regiment, based at the Beirut, Lebanon, airport in October 1983, were an inviting target for Islamic terrorists. The Marines were the battalion landing team (BLT) of the 24th Marine Amphibious Unit (MAU). Although they were there in a peacekeeping role during the Lebanese Civil War, they knew they were vulnerable to attack.

That feeling became a reality at 6:22 a.m., on Oct. 23, when an Iranian Hezbollah suicide bomber drove a truck loaded with the equivalent of 12,000 pounds of TNT through the front gate of the Marine compound. The truck's driver passed Marine sentries, who had no time to load their weapons, into the lobby of the BLT headquarters and barracks and detonated his mobile bomb.

"As soon as I saw the truck," recalled Lance Cpl. Eddie DiFranco, who was manning a guard post, "I knew what was going to happen. [The driver] looked right at me and smiled."

Another Marine, Sgt. Stephen E. Russell, was guarding the lobby. He remembered "a bright orange-yellow flash at the grill of the truck" when the bomb exploded.

On top of the building, another guard, Marine Lance Cpl. Adam Webb, one of four guards on the roof of the compound, miraculously survived the blast.

"I never left the roof until it hit the ground," he said. "I wound up sitting upright in a jeep." The blast was so powerful that it lifted the entire building upward, sheared the base off its support columns and reduced the upper 50 feet of the structure to about 10 feet of rubble. A massive shock wave and flaming gas shot in all directions.

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Dead and wounded Marines were sandwiched between the collapsed floors and ceilings. The blast killed 241 uniformed Americans — 220 Marines, 18 sailors and three soldiers. It was the worst single-day death toll for the Marine Corps since the World War II Battle of Iwo Jima.

‘Dark Smoke on the Shoreline’

About 15 miles offshore, the 24th MAU’s air combat element, Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 162 (HMM-162) was onboard the amphibious assault ship USS Iwo Jima (LPH-2). Marine Capt. Anthony Pais, a CH-46 helicopter pilot, recalled hearing an auxiliary power unit fire up and steel tie downs being dragged across the ship’s deck.

“It was pretty early, not quite pre-dawn, but still pretty early for a Sunday morning routine,” he remembered.

Pais said the squadron’s duty officer rushed into his room shouting, “Get up! Get up! The BLT’s been hit!”

Pais threw on his flight suit and rushed to the ready room.

“I remember walking down the passageway after signing for the aircraft and seeing about 10 men who volunteered to go in with me,” he said.

One of those men was Marine Sgt. John Snyder.

“It was announced that there had been an attack on the Marine barracks. None of us had any idea of the extent of the damage, the lives that had been lost or the fact that the growing cloud of dark smoke on the shoreline was what was left of where we had, only weeks before, eaten chow every day,” Snyder said.

“As the extent of the disaster was realized, the squadron called for a working party to go ashore. I jumped at the opportunity. A handful of us, maybe 10 or so, flew by CH-46 helicopter back out to the airport to an area known as LS (Landing Site) Brown.”

Pais and his co-pilot, Capt. Michael J. Hagemeyer, flew their CH-46F medevac helicopter, accompanied by a second CH-46, east into the early morning haze at about 6:45 a.m. Pais recalled “a pillar of smoke” as they approached what was left of the BLT’s headquarters.

“It was just a smoking hole,” he said. “There was nobody to talk to, nobody on the radio.”

Pais landed his aircraft on the north end of the north-south runway.

“We had set up an LZ (landing zone) that was in defilade (a protected position) and was pretty much secure from small arms fire,” Pais said.

He shut down the aircraft and started walking toward the MAU headquarters.

“It was just silent,” Pais recalled. “There was activity but there was just shocked, stunned silence.”

Pais saw that the MAU headquarters was relatively undamaged — the blast had cracked the reinforced concrete foundation and caused relatively minor injuries — and continued walking. A jeep picked him up and drove him toward the “Pile,” as the destroyed BLT headquarters came to be known.

‘The Pile’

“There was a big sloping mound of non-reinforced concrete in a big pile,” Pais recalled. “They asked for volunteers to go in and dig through the rubble. We were in a lifesaving phase to pull Marines out. We found lots of [dead] Marines and body parts.”

The rescuers came under sporadic sniper fire.

“I remember we had our flak jackets and helmets and we were trying to stay out of the line of fire,” Pais said.

Sgt. Snyder recalled that he, Pais and other Marines worked out of and around the small, empty Lebanese hanger.

“Trucks would bring the bodies of the dead from the blast site, down the road and to the hanger,” Snyder said. “My job was to unload and stack the bodies as they were brought down the road from the blast site. We would then, with great care, stack the bodies — some in body bags, some not — into aluminum shipping containers, which we would eventually load on aircraft for their final flight home.”

‘No Feeling in My Left Arm’

When the blast detonated, Lance Cpl. Emanuel Simmons was sleeping on the second deck of the BLT headquarters.

“I woke up and found myself buried,” he said. “The ceiling had collapsed, and my thought was that we got shelled. I heard a lot of yelling and moaning.”

Simmons said he “tried to humor” himself while awaiting rescuers.

“I had no feeling in my left arm and believed it to have been severed,” he said. “On my left hand, I had been wearing a ring with a cobra snake on it. I felt the ring and grabbed hold of my arm thinking I was going to keep it and give it to a doctor to reattach to my body.”

Simmons heard heavy machinery and yelled for help. Somebody shouted back, “Hey, are

you OK, bud? We're coming to get you."

The lance corporal felt dirt roll down his neck and cool air hit his body. At that point, Simmons started to believe he "was going to get out" of his predicament. He was pulled from the rubble with a broken left scapula, collapsed lung, burst eardrums, second — and third — degree burns, severe lacerations to his face, embedded shards of metal in his body and temporary blindness and paralysis — but he was alive. Simmons was one of dozens of BLT survivors rescued from the rubble.

'Prepare for Mass Casualties'

Navy dentist Dr. Gilbert U. "Gil" Bigelow, a former Air Force commando, was at the compound when the suicide bomber struck. After the blast, Bigelow remembered telling his colleague, Navy Dr. James J. Ware, what had happened.

"Jim, the BLT has been hit," Bigelow recalled saying. "There is a lot of wounded people. Prepare for mass casualties."

The two doctors, the only medical officers present, ran to the Marine Service Support Group (MSSG) headquarters. While Ware set up an aid station, Bigelow said he "grabbed my emergency medical kit, counted off four corpsmen and charged back in the direction of the BLT to set up an on-site triage station."

Meanwhile, Pais joined dozens of BLT Marines, Navy corpsmen, Lebanese civilians and Red Cross and Italian soldiers at the Pile.

"I did a lot of stretcher bearing," Pais explained. "Most of the men on stretchers were unconscious, and they had to be stabilized with IVs to keep them alive. At first it was hard to separate the dead from the wounded. Their swollen limbs and faces just made them unrecognizable."

The Marine captain said they continued working until they had enough wounded to take to the Iwo Jima.

"[Sailors and Marines] unloaded the casualties on the flight deck and used the elevator to lower them to the hanger deck where a field hospital had been set up," Pais said.

Sgt. Snyder recalled a mass of activity. "Wave after wave of our squadron's helicopters flew ashore, each time returning with bodies that were quickly stacked up on the hanger deck below decks," he said. "Many of us were tasked with carrying the dead and wounded, and helping out as best we could; holding a hand here and there and trying to calm those who could not be calmed. It was a very sad, busy and chaotic time."

Pais said that within 15 minutes of the suicide bombing, aircraft began evacuating wounded

Marines. A total of 62 wounded were treated aboard the Iwo Jima.

“When the casualties were stabilized enough, they were flown from the Iwo Jima to the Beirut International Airport,” he recalled. “The first were evacuated by a Royal Air Force C-130 to the British facility at Akrotiri, Cyprus, followed by a U.S. Air Force C-9 to the Wiesbaden Air Force Hospital, Germany, a U.S. Navy C-9 to Naples, Italy, and a C-141 to the Landstuhl Army Hospital in Germany.”

Three years after the deadly blast, on Oct. 23, 1986, Marines at Camp Lejeune, N.C. — home to the 24th MAU — hosted a dedication ceremony for a memorial honoring those who lost their lives in the bombing. The memorial consists of two large walls, separated by the statue of a Marine.

Inscribed on the left wall are the names of the Americans killed in Beirut and the names of three Marine pilots killed on Grenada. An inscription on the right wall reads, “They Came in Peace.”

This article is featured in the October 2019 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by Richard Camp and Suzanne Pool-Camp. Richard “Dick” Camp and his wife, Suzanne, reside in Fredericksburg, Va. A retired colonel, Richard served in the Marine Corps during the Vietnam War and is the author of 16 books.