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DSS Physical Security Specialist recalls the 1983 bombing of the U.S. Marine Corps barracks in Beirut

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BY ERIC WEINER, DSS PUBLIC AFFAIRS

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This is the scene in the aftermath of the bombing of the U.S. Marines barracks in Beirut, Lebanon, Oct. 23, 1983. (AP Photo/Jim Bourdier)

The Diplomatic Security Service (DSS) Physical Security Division is fortunate to have Richard Truman on its staff. The physical security specialist works to ensure that the strictest possible security standards are incorporated into U.S. embassies and overseas buildings. His advocacy for safety is driven by his harrowing experience with the 1983 suicide bombing of the U.S. Marine Barracks in Beirut, Lebanon.

Truman deployed to Beirut in May 1983 with Marine Helicopter Squadron 162 as part of a multinational peacekeeping force. The squadron was part of the air combat element for the 24th Marine Amphibious Unit (MAU) that had infantry and ground units positioned at outposts guarding the Beirut airport and outlying buildings. As crew chief of the CH46 Sea Knight, Truman flew logistics and supplies between the marine camp located at the north end of the airport known as Rock Base and the USS Iwo Jima, a landing platform helicopter ship anchored five minutes off the coast.

Lebanon was in the middle of a long civil war. In June 1983, factions in Beirut were fighting regularly and Truman and his unit watched the nightly firefights in the mountains across from their camp. The fighting started high up in the mountains and, day after day, moved steadily downhill towards the airport. By mid-July fighting had broken out in the town across from the airport and factions began shooting and shelling Rock Base and the adjacent Lebanese Army boot camp. That same month the USS Iwo Jima departed Beirut on liberty leave, but was promptly recalled because daily fighting had intensified. As shelling and fatalities increased, helicopter operations were moved from Rock Base to the Iwo Jima.

At 6:22 am on October 23, 1983, a truck drove through the airport barriers and marine guard post and detonated 12,000 pounds of TNT underneath the four-story building housing the barracks of the 1st Battalion, 8th Marine Regimental Battalion Landing Team. 220 marines, 18 sailors and 3 soldiers were killed in the explosion. Truman and his unit were waking up onboard the Iwo Jima when they received word that the barracks had been bombed. They thought it was another mortar attack, but soon learned that the barracks had been leveled. They were ordered to stand by for mass casualties.



Truman was asked to stay on board USS Iwo Jima. As a trained EMT he was needed to help treat the wounded. Every available helicopter deployed to the airport to retrieve wounded, and fly them back to the ship where large aircraft elevators lowered the wounded to the hangar deck triage area. Injured marines were stabilized and the more serious cases were flown back to the Beirut airport and transported to three U.S. military hospitals in West Germany on large passenger planes.

Just the night before, Truman had been eating at the barracks chow hall with the marines who were now on the operating table in front of him. Truman vividly remembers assisting a chief surgeon by inserting a chest tube into a badly wounded Marine who was going in and out of consciousness while holding onto his hand. The marine kept telling him he didn't want to die. Truman went into what he called "EMT mode" for the next 12 hours. When he finally stopped treating the wounded, he went up to the flight deck and noticed that it was dark outside; the entire day had passed in a surreal blur.

The next day Truman flew to the airport to help with recovery. “Unloading bodies from ambulances and putting them into body bags was one of the most difficult things I have ever done.”

Truman and his unit deployed to Beirut thinking nothing was going to happen to them because they were part of a peacekeeping force. A suicide bomb changed all that.

A decade after the attack, Truman ran into the marine whose hand he had held on the operating table; he too, had lived to tell his story.

Read the first-hand account of the 1983 suicide bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut [here](#).

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