

In memoriam

Some were white; some black. Some were officers; some enlisted personnel. Most were young, but there were careermen among them. They were American marines. After another hot dusty day the men prepared to sleep. Their sleep was fitful because Beirut is warm in October; Beirut is an uneasy city; Beirut hasn't been, for a long time, a place anyone would choose to visit. Awake or asleep, American marines probably dream of home.

During tedious hours of night patrol, a marine from North Carolina might look up at the dark green cedar-clad hills that ring Beirut and imagine these are the hills and valleys near Asheville where you can hardly tell where the Blue Ridge begins and the Great Smoky Mountains leave off. Then, as the moon comes from behind shredding clouds, he sees, hears, and smells Beirut.

A marine with twenty-nine years of service, with four tours of duty in Vietnam to his record, with one more year to go before retirement, had watched the sun setting into the Mediterranean. His family lives in Cataumet. Through half-closed eyes, he imagined a sunset on Buzzards Bay. Not at all the same and yet, if a man stretched his imagination, he might almost think the two bodies of salt water had something in common.

Off duty, the Carolinian pauses in the doorway of a smoke-filled room to watch seven of his buddies play poker. It's something to do. The dealer, a marine from Hollywood, Florida, calls the game. "Five card stud. Nothing wild." He's serious about his poker. A letter from his wife came today; she says she's lonesome. She writes of heat, humidity, and all the rain. She says the oranges are dropping off the trees before they ripen, there's been so much rain. The Floridian holds aces, back-to-back. He bets. Four stay; two fold.

The Carolinian kibitzes a few minutes, yawns, looks at his watch. "Guess I'll catch some shut-eye."

"Sweet dreams..."

Ka-boom.

Only survivors can describe the minutes, hours, and days

that follow. More than two-hundred-and-twenty American marines die.

Are we surprised? Sorrowful, yes. Of course. But surprised? We should not be surprised. Nor should we be surprised when, once the three hundred replacement troops already arrived in Beirut rebuild the command post, terrorist attacks are renewed. The Middle East seethes with continuous unrest. Our presence there, and our actions, do little to quell the currents of hatred and distrust that flow among the dozen or more warring factions, all bent upon emerging victorious over their fellowmen, and all fired with religious zeal.

Hardly one week before the booby-trapped truck smashed into the command post and blew building, its contents, and its occupants sky high, guns of an American warship lying off Beirut silenced shelling that had pounded the city from its encircling hills. The naval commander was quoted as having said the "necessary was accomplished." Did anyone imagine there would be no reprisal?

We count the mounting figures that toll the dead. We grieve with the bereaved families; we rejoice with those whose sons and brothers and husbands survived. We tremble for the men who remain. Remain they must. Now more than ever before, for to withdraw would signal every terrorist that terrorism succeeds. We are trapped, now, in even greater commitment, one from which withdrawal grows more impossible daily.

Yes, we mourn for the fallen. And we will do well to prepare ourselves for more mourning in months and years ahead. Our stance is not a peaceful one despite the banner of peacekeeping under which we send forth our marines. Let us be warned; let us be wary; let us be ready for we have walked, open-eyed, into a nest of hornets' nests, and we're going to get stung.

Semper fidelis . . . always faithful . . . the Marine Corps motto . . . *Sic transit gloria mundi*: so passes away the glory of the world. . . .