

**OFFICE OF
THE COMMANDANT OF THE MARINE CORPS**

REMARKS BY

**GENERAL JAMES T. CONWAY,
COMMANDANT OF THE MARINE CORPS**

**25TH ANNUAL BEIRUT MEMORIAL OBSERVANCE
THURSDAY, OCTOBER 23, 2008**

GENERAL JAMES T. CONWAY:

Please take your seats. Thank you very much. General Gray, Mayor Phillips, other distinguished guests, particularly the families of the Marines and sailors and soldiers of Beirut, Colonel Geraghty, Lieutenant Colonel Gerlach, all of you, really, thank you folks for being here with us this morning for this memorial service.

On 22 October of 1983, the Marines of Headquarters and Service Company, BLT 1/8 of the 24th Marine Amphibious Unit, were doing what Marines traditionally do on deployment. It was a Saturday night. There was a USO show at the airfield. Many Marines attended that. There was also a memorial service for a Marine captain named Mike Ohler, who had been killed out on the perimeter some days before.

Some of the Marines were playing cards, writing their families, listening to their music, or in some cases, just catching some sack time. Little did they know that, in many instances, it would be their last night on Earth. The following morning at about 6:22, the sentries noted a yellow Mercedes delivery truck come into the parking lot adjacent where the Marines slept, gather speed and crash through the obstacles and the barriers – the near barriers that had been put up outside the building. It went into the lobby of a building and, in just a moment, exploded, in the process killing 220 Marines, 18 sailors and three soldiers. We now know that it was the largest non-nuclear explosion since World War II; that more Marines were killed that day than on any day since Iwo Jima; and we now know that those brave souls were the first American forces to give their lives on what we now call this Global War on Terrorism.

Our country has been hit many times since by terrorists. We lost 18 from the U.S. Army in Somalia. We lost 19 from the U.S. Air Force at a place called Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia. We lost 17 from the U.S. Navy inside of the *Cole* in an explosion. Our country, powerful as it is, is frustrated when that happens. It takes weeks, sometimes months, to do the forensics to find out who did it and even then, we're faced with the tough question: Do we react — do we respond against the country with a few minor citizens responsible for the act? It's a question that we've had to ask ourselves over and over again. Also as a nation, I think sometimes that we tend to remember these events simply by the numbers. We as Marines want to remember the names

and the city of Jacksonville has done a wonderful thing for us here by putting those names on this very appropriate memorial.

Now, every one of those names joined our Corps or joined the Navy or joined the Army with the thought that they might have to go to war and fight for this magnificent country. Every one of them was prepared to give their lives, I think, under those conditions. But I don't think any of them thought that they would die on a mission to preserve the peace. It was very personal for me, as General Hejlik indicated. I was a young major at the time, the operations officer of the 31st Marine Amphibious Unit. We were off Kenya. We were watching closely what was happening in Beirut and, finally, we got orders to go and assist our fellow Marines. We arrived in September. We immediately started an effort ashore to conduct orientation visits and to get to know, in some cases, old friends and in some cases, make new ones.

Colonel Geraghty's S-2 and S-3 met me and we went to the top of the building because it was the best place at the airport to get an orientation of the surrounding ground. I remember thinking this thing is well-built. It's serving its purpose against the known threat. There were mortar rounds that had hit the top of the building. They only disturbed the concrete and exposed a little rebar. We continued with the orientation program all the way down through corporal level and within a month or maybe 40 days, we got orders to sail away to another contingency. We weren't pleased with those orders. The Marines ashore were still taking fire. We thought that there was still work there to do but you follow your orders and so we sailed away to the Persian Gulf. There are things that have happened in all of our experiences that cause you to know exactly where you were when you heard something. Those that were alive at the time of the assassination of John F. Kennedy know exactly what I'm talking about.

I was at breakfast on board USS *Tarawa* on the morning of the 23rd of October of 1983 when our intelligence officer came to me and said, "Major, there's been a large explosion in Beirut. We think there may be as many as a dozen Marines killed." He came back 30 minutes later and said that number is growing. "It's now as high as 35 to 40." I saw him an hour later and he said there may be as many as a hundred Marines killed. And I said, "listen, why don't you get the final report and take that to the MEU commander." He paused for a moment and said, "sir, you don't fully understand. The building has been destroyed." And we were silent for the better part of a minute as I think we both contemplated the enormity of what he had just said. In fact, that evening we asked and the chaplain on board *Toro* conducted a candlelight service to honor and to pray for those Marines, sailors and soldiers and their families and I can recall it was very well-attended.

Our nation was attacked again on 9/11 and our country did respond. We put Marines and sailors and soldiers and airmen over them in a place called Afghanistan and we destroyed al Qaeda and scattered the remnants in a very rapid fashion. A couple years later, we went into Iraq for a different reason. What you may not know, ladies and gentlemen, is that within several weeks, the terrorists also chose to turn that [Iraq] into a battleground and we've been fighting it ever since.

I will tell you that — the Marines will tell you that it feels good to go after terrorists where they live and work. There's a level of satisfaction in not wanting or letting them to come to you.

They will tell you that they believe that our country has not been attacked over the last seven years because those same people that might be otherwise be trying to come into New York or Los Angeles are coming to Afghanistan and Iraq instead and we take them on there. And that, again, is a good thing. I would tell you that these young Marines that you have given us today are an incredible generation. To see them at work, to see their raw courage, their sense of team play, their sense of responsibility to this country literally brings tears to your eyes and I would also offer that I think if the Marines of BLT 1/8 had had a chance to get to know them, they would like what they see. I think they would be proud to call them little brother.

The 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit is headed home as we attend this ceremony today. There is both irony and I think a message in that. The irony I would hope is obvious. The message to terrorists over the world is that you can bloody our units, you can make our hearts heavy with sorrow and fill our guts with rage, but you can't stop us. We will replenish those units with well-trained and eager young Americans and we will come after you with a terrible resolve. And, folks, that's what you see happening today.

But we're not here to talk about the future. We're here to honor the past and we're here to recall these brave souls that did the job as they see it necessary to be done in 1983. I think the contrast is worthy, though. Today's Marines go forward to destroy; they go forward to eliminate terrorists. They go forward to do what has to be done. We should all remember that these Marines and sailors and soldiers went forward to preserve the peace. They came in peace. God bless you all and thank you for coming.