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Former Marine Security Guard remembers the 1983 bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut

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A U.S. Marine sits on the bumper of a car that was destroyed when a huge bomb explosion wrecked the American Embassy in West Beirut, April 19, 1983, where he is on guard duty across the street from the Embassy. Rescue workers continued to search the rubble for those missing in Monday's explosion. (AP Photo/Bill Foley)

On the afternoon of April 18, 1983, Sgt. Charlie Light – then the Marine Security Guard (MSG) assistant detachment commander at the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, Lebanon – was sitting in his office spit-shining his boots in preparation for an upcoming inspection. He remembers being annoyed by the constant backfiring and revving noises made by a newly installed generator in the embassy basement when suddenly, at 1:05 P.M., everything went black.

Light woke up covered in brick and mortar in a room that was not his office, thinking the generator had exploded. What had actually happened was a suicide bomber drove a pickup truck under the awning of the building and detonated 2,000 pounds of TNT.

Light was choking on dust and debris when an uncharacteristic breeze cleared the air, and he found himself lying in the rubble of a section of the building that had been completely destroyed.

His surroundings were unrecognizable with only a few of the building's pillars remaining upright.

The explosion blew Light's shoes off and shattered the window in his office, driving shards of glass into his arms, back, and face. Despite drifting in and out of consciousness, he remembers the smell the CS gas — a type of tear gas — leaking out of the damaged storage vault, and the sounds sirens, and people moaning, screaming, and crying.



A U.S. Marine sits at the site of U.S. embassy bombing in Beirut, Lebanon, April 18, 1983. (AP/ Wide World Photos)

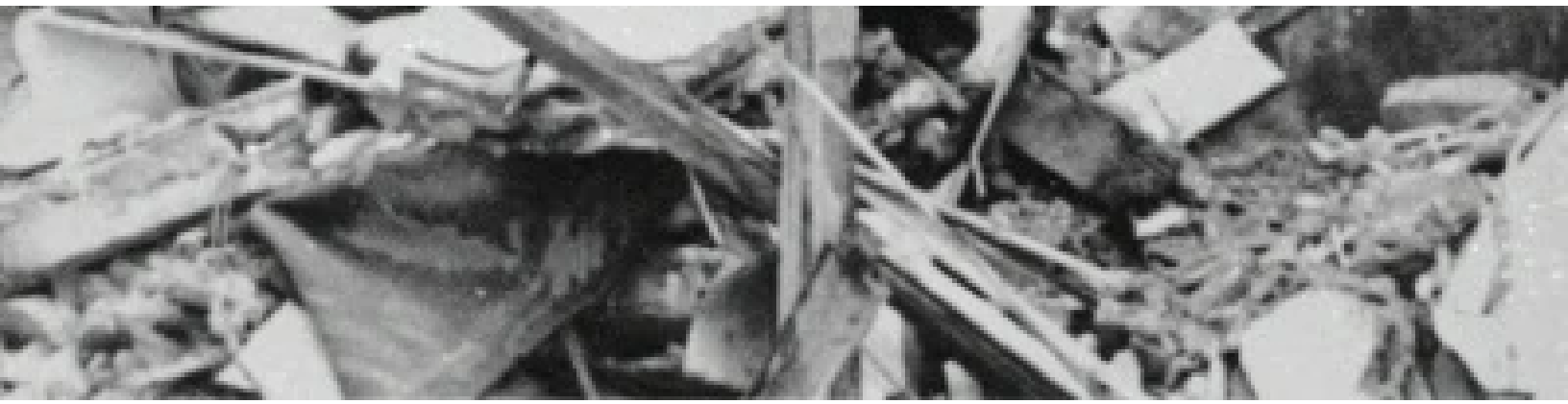
A woman came up to Light, crying in pain because the blast seriously damaged her face. He dragged her to where the embassy entrance once had been and saw that the front of the building had collapsed like a

deck of cards. He found one small, v-shaped opening large enough to squeeze through, but there was fire on the other side. Pipes in the upper level of the embassy had blown and water was cascading down. Light soaked a blanket he had found, wrapped it around the woman, soaked himself as best he could, and crawled with her through the opening and emerged where the bomb had detonated.

Light ran towards the stopped traffic in front of the embassy, and he found a taxi to take the injured woman to the hospital. The driver initially refused, but when Light pulled his weapon, the additional persuasion had the desired effect.

Upon returning to the U.S. embassy to help, Light saw saw dead and disfigured bodies everywhere he looked.





A U.S. Marine sits at the site of U.S. embassy bombing in Beirut, Lebanon, April 18, 1983. (AP/ Wide World Photos)

“As a Vietnam veteran I had experienced that kind of destruction before,” said Light. “But I think very few people inside the embassy had ever seen anything like that.”

Light directed the other Marines to help the injured people and secure classified information and currency. The 24th Marine Amphibious Unit (now known as the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit) arrived to help ferry the wounded to the hospital, and set up a staging area next to the leveled embassy to recover and identify the dead before sending them to the morgue.

Despite his injuries, Light worked around the clock for the next 18 days.

Light remained in Beirut for several more weeks before he turned over command to a new detachment commander. He then flew home for surgery on his neck and elbow.

When asked what kind of barricades or countermeasures protected U.S. Embassy Beirut at that time, Light said, “there was nothing.”

There was no physical deterrent preventing vehicles from driving up to the front of the embassy. The regional security officer (RSO) parked the ambassador’s chase and lead vehicles on the semi-circular drive that connected the street to the building. There were two small guard shacks on each side of the circle manned by Lebanese policemen who were vaporized when the bomb exploded.

The U.S. Embassy Beirut bombing was one of a few policy-changing attacks in 1983 that led to the development of countermeasures like anti-ram barriers that are now required for all U.S. office facilities and some residences overseas.

After retiring from the Marine Corps, Light joined the Diplomatic Security Service and deployed to Baghdad as an assistant RSO. After the Gulf War, the U.S. constructed a new embassy, and Light worked with Overseas Building Operations to strengthen physical security and install sub-surface anti-ram barriers on every road entering and exiting compound.

“My experience in Beirut formed all of my ideas about what security should and shouldn’t be,” said Light. “I’m proud of the part I played in securing the Baghdad embassy.”

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