

Faithful Servant Leaders: The Chaplains at Beirut

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There is a special relationship between Marines and Sailors, especially when it comes to corpsmen and chaplains. When a Marine bleeds or cries, a Sailor is by his side. Stories of courage and compassion amid the crucible of war abound throughout the Corps' storied past.

A powerful vignette occurred during the bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut, Lebanon, on Oct. 23, 1983. The FBI investigation afterward stated it was one of the largest non-nuclear explosions in history. It was the greatest loss of life in a single day for the Marine Corps since the Battle of Iwo Jima in 1945. The bombing resulted in the death of 220 Marines, 18 Sailors and three soldiers.

During this tragic chapter of Marine Corps history, three Navy chaplains representing the Catholic, Protestant and Jewish faiths showcased the power of love, service and brotherhood in the rubble together.

Battalion Landing Team, 1st Battalion, 8th Marines (BLT 1/8) was the ground combat element for the 24th Marine Amphibious Unit (MAU), a precursor to what Marines know today as the Marine Expeditionary Unit, or MEU. BLT 1/8 deployed to Lebanon as part of a multinational peacekeeping force made up of American, French, Italian and British troops.

They were known as the peacekeepers.

Several months earlier, on April 18, 1983, a suicide bomber had detonated an explosives-laden vehicle outside of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, killing 63 people, including 17 Americans. The region was a powder keg.

But what circumstances led to three Navy chaplains being present in Beirut, Lebanon, at the same time? One might call it a coincidence, but each of these three faith leaders are confident it was divine providence.

Lieutenant Junior Grade, Reverend Danny Wheeler, a Lutheran minister, was the chaplain for BLT 1/8. Before serving in the Navy, Wheeler was an enlisted



COURTESY OF ARNOLD RESNICOFF

LCDR Rabbi Arnold Resnicoff wearing the "camouflage kippah," made from LCDR Father George Pucciarelli's camouflage helmet cover. Rabbi Resnicoff's kippah had become dirty and bloody following the terrorist attack in Beirut, Lebanon, on Oct. 23, 1983.

Chaplain Resnicoff was shaving when the explosion went off. He initially thought they were receiving indirect fire. Several Marines rushed through the building. One of them grabbed him and stammered, "The BLT's been hit!"

soldier in the Army with a tour in Vietnam where he served as a postal clerk and guard. Later, he was the pastor for a small parish in the Midwest before returning to uniform.

Lieutenant Commander, Father George Pucciarelli, known as "Pooch," was the senior chaplain. He served on the staff of the 24th MAU. Pooch had graduated from Boston College before attending

St. John's Seminary to become a Roman Catholic priest, so that he could serve as a Navy chaplain with Marines.

Lieutenant Commander, Rabbi Arnold "Arnie" Resnicoff previously served as a Navy ensign in Vietnam before seminary. He was assigned to the staff of the 6th Fleet, whose flagship was stationed in Gaeta, Italy. In his duties, he traveled to Beirut every few weeks to support those of Jewish faith.

Chaplain Wheeler arrived in Beirut May 29, 1983, on his 35th birthday. According to an interview with the American Legion, he was the only battalion chaplain assigned to the infantry. "I don't know if God was playing a practical joke. I had done all I could to stay out of the infantry in Vietnam," Wheeler said in the 2018 interview for the American Legion article "Rescuing the Last Survivor" by Henry Howard.

The BLT was housed in a four-story building the Marines dubbed the "Beirut Hilton," with a sign reading "Military Discounts available." The fourth floor of the building included the "peacekeeping chapel." Rough pews and an altar were assembled from workbenches and pallets. Camouflage netting hung from the ceiling, and artwork painted on the bulkhead included a cross and tablets signifying the Ten Commandments. Chaplains from previous rotations had scrawled scriptures and blessings on the wall. Chaplain Wheeler and 21-year-old Corporal Johnny Olson slept in the chapel, with Chaplain Wheeler's cot right next to the "blessing wall." About 75 yards away from the building, a converted firehouse within the perimeter of the Beirut International Airport housed personnel from the MAU headquarters, including Chaplain Pucciarelli.

The BLT began taking casualties as enemy activity increased. One of those casualties was Staff Sergeant Allen Soifert, a Jewish Marine who was killed by a sniper during a cease-fire. Chaplain Resnicoff was on leave when his boss called. The Marines, wanting to honor Soifert, requested a rabbi for the memorial service. Resnicoff simply



ABOVE: This portion of the sign for the Peacekeeping Chapel in Beirut survived the terrorist attack 42 years ago. It is part of the historical collection at the U.S. Naval Chaplaincy School and Center in Newport, R.I.



Rabbi Resnicoff lights the Hanukkah menorah, made with wood and nailed shell casings that served as the candle holders, in Beirut.

could not say no. The Beirut International Airport was closed due to the conflict, so the rabbi took a circuitous route to arrive.

On Oct. 21, two days before the bombing, the three chaplains held a memorial service together. Holding hands, they read Psalm 23, a passage of scripture shared by all three faiths. It was a somber service.

The chaplains performed various services in Beirut, sometimes as a team, sometimes individually. Often the altar was no more than a pile of sandbags. In addition to services, they hosted marriage classes, Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and individual counseling sessions. They

didn't just stay in the command post but circulated to the security positions where the rifle companies were working.

First Sergeant David Battle had many conversations with Chaplain Wheeler during the deployment. Wheeler had always been fond of first sergeants, ever since one looked out for him in Vietnam. He noticed that 1stSgt Battle looked out for his Marines in the same manner. Both the chaplain and the first sergeant saw their job as looking out for "the boys." Additionally, they were roughly the same age and both Vietnam veterans.

They became friends, though Wheeler always addressed Battle as "First Ser-

geant" and Battle addressed him as "Chaplain." Battle introduced Wheeler to drinking Baileys Irish Cream in his coffee. They shared many cups together.

Battle's wife had urged him to be baptized over the years, and he always responded, "I'll know when the time is right." On Oct. 21, he asked Wheeler, "Chaplain, is there any reason why I can't be baptized?" Wheeler, with a beaming smile, replied, "Not at all, First Sergeant." They made plans for the next day.

On Oct. 22, Chaplain Wheeler baptized 1stSgt Battle, using the same small basin he used for shaving. Reading scripture, then pouring water over his head, he blessed him, saying, "David Lee Battle, I welcome you into the family of God, which has no end." A gunnery sergeant was there as a witness, and they coordinated with a cook to have a cake made in celebration. Recounting the event many years later, with a tear in his eye and a smile on his face, Chaplain Wheeler said "It was a good day."

It was the day before tragedy struck.

The Marines had arranged transport for Chaplain Resnicoff back to 6th Fleet the day after the memorial service, Oct. 22, but he refrained from traveling on the Jewish Sabbath. He would stay another day.

While in Beirut, Resnicoff was supposed to stay with Wheeler in the BLT building, but Pooch had something on his mind and needed to talk, so he racked out in the MAU building.

At 6:22 on Sunday morning, Oct. 23, 1983, most of the Marines were asleep when a 19-ton yellow Mercedes truck entered the parking lot of Beirut International Airport, circled once and then approached the BLT headquarters. A suicide bomber drove through the concertina wire and through the sentry's position, detonating a truck bomb into the four-story building housing 350 personnel, causing it to collapse. In addition to the 241 servicemembers killed, more than 100 were left injured by the attack.

Minutes later, a second suicide bomber rammed the French military compound nearby, killing 58 French paratroopers and injuring 15 others. About two dozen Lebanese civilians were also killed or injured in the two attacks.

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Moments later, the rabbi heard the words "Follow me!" from Father Pucciarelli. As the two men started to run, Rabbi Resnicoff noticed the priest



COURTESY OF ARNOLD RESNICOFF

Rabbi Resnicoff leads a memorial service for a fallen Marine, SSgt Allen Soifert, in Beirut on Oct. 21, 1983, with Reverend Danny Wheeler and Father George Pucciarelli joining him in a recitation of the 23rd Psalm.

placing a purple stole around his neck, knowing he would have to perform last rites. The two chaplains were among the first on the scene, doing what they could for the survivors.

One of those trapped in the rubble was Chaplain Danny Wheeler. He had been asleep in his cot when the explosion tore the building apart. The evening before, he wished goodnight to Cpl Olson, who was serving as a clerk and chaplain's assistant.

Wheeler awoke to find himself pinned in a small corner. Over the next five hours, he alternated between screaming and praying. At one point he prayed, "God take me now or let me live," calmly accepting what his fate might become. However, he felt as though God told him, "It's going to be alright." While he waited, he thought about his family, his Marines and his friends, including Cpl Olson and 1stSgt Battle.

He could hear voices beginning to fade as others succumbed to their injuries. He thought back to the many Louis L'Amour novels he'd been reading. The protagonist often found himself in a bind, sometimes in situations like a collapsed mine, but always persevered

over tremendous odds. Wheeler took strength and encouragement from those tales. He screamed until he lost his voice, "I'm Danny G. Wheeler, and I'm alive!"

In the wreckage above, Chaplain Resnicoff tore pieces of his clothing,

A small group of Marines would gather around and solemnly watch Father Pucciarelli anoint the forehead of a fallen comrade. The way they showed respect for the dead was deeply moving, and they drew strength from prayer.

including his skivvy shirt, to wipe the concrete dust from the blinded eyes of the survivors. The rabbi even used his kippah (headcovering). His uniform was blackened with dust. His face was sweaty and dirty, and he looked exhausted. Pooch tore some fabric from his own

camouflage helmet cover, bringing it for Resnicoff to wear as a kippah. He said, essentially, "I want them to all know in this land so divided by religion that Christian and Jew, priest and rabbi, are side by side serving our men."

They continued to minister in the rubble, the wreckage and the rescue efforts. As the dead were dug out, Marines would come up to the chaplains and ask that the bodies of their buddies be blessed. A small group of Marines would gather around and solemnly watch Father Pucciarelli anoint the forehead of a fallen comrade. The way they showed respect for the dead was deeply moving, and they drew strength from prayer.

Pooch was walking with Marines, looking for signs of life among the debris when, according to the American Legion interview, "they noticed something purple waving in the wind." Pooch recognized it as a chaplain's stole, no doubt belonging to Wheeler. Resnicoff quickly appeared, and together they began to dig.

That's how they found Danny Wheeler, the last survivor pulled from rubble. Resnicoff inspected Wheeler as if he were a newborn child, counting his



COURTESY OF LARRY GERLACH

LtCol Larry Gerlach right, BLT 1/8 Commanding Officer, Col Tim Geraghty center, 24th MAU Commanding Officer, and CDR George Pucciarelli, left, 24th MAU Chaplain, perform a ribbon cutting at the opening of a new chapel for U.S. servicemembers at Beirut International Airport in spring 1983.

fingers and toes. Pooch used the stole as a pillow for Wheeler's head as they placed him on a stretcher. A Marine called for a canteen, which was tossed up from below.

Each of the chaplains eventually retired from the Navy. Father "Pooch" Pucciarelli went on to serve as the Chaplain of the Marine Corps. Rabbi Arnie Resnicoff donated the field expedient, camouflage kippah to the chaplain school, where it is displayed in a museum. Every year on the

anniversary of the bombing, Reverend Danny Wheeler has a little Baileys in his coffee to remember his friend, 1stSgt David Battle. In an interview 40 years later with author and Navy Seal Jack Carr, Wheeler said with great emotion, "God, I miss him ... I will always miss him."

Forty-two years have passed since that tragic day in Marine Corps history, yet the example and lessons displayed

by these three faithful servant leaders remain with us today. Presence matters, relationships matter and sharing hardship matters. These three men showed love and devotion to the men they served even in the crucible of combat. Their love is still evident in the way they talk about their Marines. They continue to honor the memory of the peacekeepers lost that day by sharing their stories.

Executive Editor's note: This article was based on research done using "Targeted: Beirut," by Jack Carr, along with interviews conducted by Carr for "The Danger Close Podcast."

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