



H-080-2: Beirut Crisis, 1983—Personal Recollection

In October 1983, I was assigned as the strike intelligence briefer for a series of retaliatory strikes that were planned, but not executed, in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist bombing of the U.S. Marine Corps barracks in Beirut. At the time, I was the squadron intelligence officer for Carrier Airborne Early Warning Squadron 121 (VAW-121), embarked on *Dwight D. Eisenhower* (CVN-69), which was subsequently joined by *John F. Kennedy* (CV-67) and *Independence* (CV-62). As this was very much a formative experience in my career, I wrote this recollection a number of years after the fact. There are probably a few factual errors and sea story exaggerations, and certainly a fair amount of junior officer “snark” regarding “higher authority,” but I kept it true to what I believed and understood at the time. As an intelligence officer, one gets to see some things that most junior officers don’t, and there are certainly things in here that won’t be found in any other account.

Prologue

Early November 1983, Dwight D. Eisenhower (CVN-69), “Bagel Station,” Eastern Mediterranean, off Lebanon

I suppressed my severe trepidation and began the strike intelligence brief. Listening raptly were Rear Admiral Jerry O. Tuttle, commander of Task Force

60 and the *Dwight D. Eisenhower* Carrier Battle Group; Rear Admiral Roger Box, commander of the *John F. Kennedy* Carrier Battle Group; Commander Joe Prueher, our air wing commander (CVW-7); Commander Fox Fallon, the strike leader and executive officer of VA-65; and Commander Frank Notz, our battle group intelligence officer (N2), already a legend in the naval intelligence community. But what I remember most was the looks in the eyes of the aviators in the rows behind them. Because this strike brief was for real. I was providing the intelligence update that might make the difference between mission success and mission failure, between aircrew coming home alive or getting shot down.

We had emergency-sorted from Naples a week earlier when the U.S. Marine Corps barracks in Beirut were destroyed by a truck bomb, with 220 marines, 18 naval medical personnel, and an intelligence specialist killed. We were tasked to bomb the Hezbollah terrorist training facility in Baalbek, Lebanon, that night.

As I briefed the target, I knew people in the photo at the end of my pointer were going to die a violent death as 12 A-6 attack jets from two air wings hit them with 144,000 pounds of bombs. After years of schools and training, which was pretty much all I’d done with my life to that point, it struck me that this was for real. No kidding life and death. I’d never before experienced pressure remotely like I felt that night. No exercise can possibly simulate it, because I

interpreted the looks in those aviators' eyes to mean "you better not get me killed." Even if all the aircrew came back safely, people at the target were going to get killed, and even if most of them deserved it, at least a few of them would be innocent.

Given the gravity of the moment—this would mark the first U.S. airstrike since the *Mayaguez* incident and the Vietnam War—I half expected the air wing intelligence officer or the battle group N2 to want to give the strike brief themselves. I was just a first-tour E-2C squadron intelligence officer, not an attack squadron intelligence officer, but I had been assigned the duty of becoming the air wing expert on Lebanon and Syria. When crunch time came, somebody high in the chain selected me to provide the intelligence for the strike planning and to give the brief. I was both flattered and frightened to be given this level of trust, for although I believed we had enough good intelligence to successfully accomplish the strike, I knew better than anyone on that ship how much we didn't know.

As the aircrew prepared their aircraft to await the imminent final go order, for the first time in my career I wondered if I really wanted this much responsibility. Perhaps there was someplace else I would rather be? And I flashed back to that sign that hangs in high school locker rooms across the country: "If not you, who? If not now, when?" I'd thought it was kind of corny when I was a teenager, but now it made perfect sense, and I realized that, no, there was no place else I would rather be.

The final go order for the strike never came. Our deployment was extended, and three more times in the next month we went through a similar evolution, with the same result, before finally heading home, frustrated that our nation had sent a message of indecision and lack of resolve to the terrorists that would come back to haunt us.

The Beirut Crisis—1982-1983

First Sea Tour: 1981-1984

Carrier Airborne Early Warning Squadron 121 (VAW-121)—the "Bluetails"

First Deployment, Dwight D. Eisenhower, January-July 1982

Early June 1982, off Monaco and Southern France

War broke out yet again in the Middle East under the moniker of Operation Peace for Galilee, which brought death and destruction to many Syrian pilots and air defense gunners, Palestinian and Shia Muslim guerrilla fighters and terrorists, and innocent Lebanese civilians, plus a few United Nations (UN) observers.

Blowing right through the UN monitors, Israeli tanks raced northward into Lebanon, quickly passing their deepest advance during their 1978 incursion. I hurried to put together a brief to my squadron before we pulled into Monaco. At the rate the Israelis were advancing, they'd be in Beirut before we would be done with the planned port visit, which I half expected would get cancelled in favor of orders to steam to the Eastern Mediterranean due to the outbreak of hostilities. But this was the first visit by a nuclear-powered carrier to Monaco, and someone in higher authority determined the port visit was more important. So as the Israeli Air Force blasted Syrian surface-to-air missile (SAM) sites in the Bekaa Valley, and shot over 80 Syrian MiGs out of the sky in the most lopsided aerial dogfight in history, I basked in the sun on the beaches of Nice by day and scoured the intelligence reports by night.

Late June 1982, Bagel Station, Eastern Mediterranean, off Lebanon

To paraphrase the 1960s antiwar slogan, I thought to myself, "What if you gave an evacuation and nobody came?" Talk about another bust.

As our leisurely and very enjoyable Monaco port visit concluded, it must have dawned on someone in higher authority that with all the bombing, shelling, and shooting going on as the Israelis closed in on Beirut perhaps some American citizens might be in danger of getting caught in the cross fire, and we were sent racing across the Mediterranean to provide air cover for a potential evacuation of U.S. citizens from Lebanon. As the designated air wing expert on Lebanon and Syria, I was tasked with providing intelligence support to the air wing piece of the planning effort.

The plan was relatively straightforward enough. Our air wing would provide air cover against any potential Syrian interference, as landing craft from the U.S. Amphibious Task Force (CTF 61/62) went into the Lebanese port city of Juniyah to pick up the approximately 2,000 or more people the U.S. embassy estimated would want to be evacuated. Since the Israeli Air Force had pretty much swept the Syrian Arab Air Force from the sky, we really didn't expect much threat from them.

We were less certain of the Israelis as they blasted civilian areas in Beirut with artillery and airstrikes. Within a couple days of arriving on station off Lebanon (immediately dubbed "Bagel Station," a nickname that was just as quickly banned, which only made everyone use the term all the more), we detected that Israeli jets flying over the Mediterranean before striking targets in Lebanon had started to squawk the same identification friend or foe (IFF) codes as our air wing, thus making it very difficult for Syrian radar operators to sort out which fighters were U.S. and which were Israeli. As the historian, I also noted that it was the Israelis who had attacked the U.S. intelligence collection ship *Liberty* (AGTR-5) during the 1967 war, killing more U.S. sailors than any single attack since World War II.

Once again, it became readily apparent to me how much we didn't really know about what was going on. The U.S. Navy Ocean Surveillance Information System (OSIS) was optimized for tracking Soviet activity but was proving nearly useless for reporting in a timely

manner on the high-intensity Israeli and Syrian activity taking place only a few minutes' flight time from our location. I was frustrated, but I gave it my best shot. One thing about being the expert is that everyone else knew less.

In the end, by the time the go-ahead to conduct the evacuation came, a lull had taken effect as the Israeli army held up on the outskirts of Beirut, apparently having second thoughts about incurring the casualties likely in Beirut's urban environment, shattered though it was. With the halt of the Israeli advance, American citizens apparently also had second thoughts about leaving. Perhaps a couple dozen people initially showed up for the evacuation, although it eventually grew to about 500.

But my first deployment was over, and IKE headed for home, turning over to the *Independence*.

Second Deployment, Dwight D. Eisenhower, April-December 1983

Early June 1983, Eastern Mediterranean, off Lebanon

I could see Beirut from the flight deck of the IKE. Rear Admiral Tuttle was certainly making a statement. We were definitely "showing the flag."

As we steamed right down the three-mile territorial waters limit, all I could make out in the haze were the high-rise buildings along the shore. We were not close enough to see the anarchy and physical damage from years of civil war and the recent Israeli invasion. Nevertheless, it was the first time I'd seen the .50-caliber machine guns mounted and crewed at various positions along the flight deck.

It had been just over a month since the U.S. embassy in Beirut had been severely damaged by a car bomb, killing about 20 American diplomats (I didn't know at the time, but this took out the most important CIA station in the Middle East). The new president of Lebanon, Bashir Gemayel, and much of the senior

leadership of his Phalange Party, had also been blown up by a planted bomb the previous September. U.S. Marines were ashore in the middle of it, for what purpose none of us really understood.

But, as it turned out, Admiral Tuttle's aggressive gunboat diplomacy significantly exceeded the intent of higher authority. Word filtered around the ship later that the admiral had gotten "spanked" for his overzealous interpretation of his orders. Regardless, although we spent most of our deployment off Lebanon, we were not allowed within 25 miles of the coast.

Early June 1983, Eastern Mediterranean

"Admiral's on deck!" shouted the seaman on the desk watch to the carrier intelligence center (CVIC).

"Holy crap!" I thought, "It's two o'clock in the morning!" As the night intelligence duty officer, I scrambled to make a presentable appearance on what had been up until then a very dull and boring night. Rear Admiral Tuttle was well known for prowling the ship in the middle of the night, and he reportedly only slept about three hours a night. He came into the mission planning center, asked how things were going, and chatted with me and the night-shift enlisted intelligence specialists. It was actually quite pleasant, and we gave him a walkthrough of the different intelligence spaces.

In the meantime, the desk watch had apparently called the senior ship, air wing intelligence, and operations officers to alert them that the admiral was in CVIC. Three senior officers simultaneously converged on CVIC, bleary eyed, still tucking in their shirts, clearly worried about what the admiral wanted. Admiral Tuttle responded with a withering barrage, the gist of which was to get out. They quickly slunk off, and the admiral peacefully continued his tour of CVIC, talking to more of the junior intelligence specialists, no doubt finding out what was really going on.

Tuttle had a ferocious reputation and rode his staff very hard, with little toleration for foolishness or slacking off. Most tried to stay out of his line of fire. Nevertheless, there was a near universal view in the air wing that if you ever really had to go to war, Admiral Tuttle was who you wanted to follow.

20 July 1983, Livorno, Italy

For some unexplained reason, I had a sense of foreboding as I watched the lights of Livorno recede into the distance from the patrol boat returning to the IKE from our last night of liberty before getting underway. Lebanon had been uncharacteristically calm since the U.S. embassy attack in April, but I just had a feeling it might be the last port we saw for a while. I didn't know it, but we were about to set a Mediterranean record for the most consecutive days underway—93.

Except for our brief sabre rattling off Beirut, my second deployment had been a throwback to more traditional and recent Med deployment patterns. Short of money for fuel for steaming and flight hours, we were spending more time in port than underway, rarely at sea for more than a week at a time. This was not an altogether bad thing, and I was not above taking advantage of it. In fact, I was seeing more of my wife than I had back in the states when she was working and living in Washington, DC, while I was living as a geographic bachelor in Norfolk.

My wife had flown over, along with numerous other squadron spouses, and met the ship in early June in Pireaus, Greece. We'd taken sightseeing trips to Athens, Mycenae, and Cape Sounion, and had even experienced some actual squadron camaraderie in the resort area of Glyfada, including at Bobby's Bar Number Two (later blown up in a terrorist attack). When the ship left Greece, the spouses traveled via Corfu and the ferry to Brindisi, meeting the ship a few days later when we pulled into Naples. More sightseeing to Pompeii and Rome followed, although the busload of drunken sailors on the return from

Rome made that part of the trip uniquely and unpleasantly memorable.

My real coup, however, was to convince my squadron skipper to let me go on leave during a short period when the IKE left Naples for Livorno. This allowed me to take a week's leave, and my wife and I hopped the trains for a whirlwind tour to Paris, Amsterdam, Munich, and Monaco, before meeting the ship in Livorno, with enough time left for a side trip to Pisa. Although my wife opted to return to the States from Livorno, many other spouses stayed behind since we had more great ports scheduled in France and Spain. It was a mistake. The good times were over.

The next morning, a Soviet *Krivak*-class guided-missile frigate met us as soon as we reached international waters and stuck with us like glue as the duty "tattletale" all the way to the Eastern Mediterranean. Perhaps the Soviets knew Lebanon was about to go to hell again.

Late July 1983 Bagel Station, Eastern Mediterranean, off Lebanon

It would have made a good "Who's on First?" routine, except it involved national policy and matters of life and death. I was in the combat information center (CIC) of the IKE, preparing for the next flight operations brief, when I heard the conversation on the speaker. I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

Robert McFarlane, of later Iran-Contra fame, then the President's special representative to the Middle East, had flown out from Beirut to the *Iwo Jima* (LPH-2) to make a secure conference call to Secretary of State George Shultz in Washington and the President's national security advisor, Judge Clark, at the Western White House. Although the communications system they were using was encrypted and secure from outside interception, I doubt the three gentlemen understood that every CIC on every U.S. ship in the Sixth Fleet was monitoring that circuit.

The confusion among the three on what was happening among the many factions in Lebanon was astonishing. None of them seemed to know who was who, who was on which side, or even who the good guys and the bad guys were, although a strong case could be made that there were no good guys involved. To be fair, much of the confusion stemmed from their difficulty in grasping the push-to-talk procedures required for that communications system, and the circuit regularly dropped synch, garbling the transmissions. It wasn't called the bubble phone for nothing.

There was no doubt the situation was quite complex, with the Syrians, Israelis, Lebanese government (what there was of it), Christian Phalange militia, Shia Amal militia, Druze militia, Hezbollah (although it wasn't called that yet), and a host of smaller factions all fighting with each other. But even the President's special representative couldn't keep the different factions straight, and he'd just met with them trying to iron out some solution to the mess.

U.S. Marines had gone ashore in Beirut almost a year earlier, initially as part of a deal to ensure the withdrawal of Yasser Arafat and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from Lebanon as the rapidly advancing Israeli army closed in on Beirut in June 1982. As soon as the PLO fighters had been evacuated and the marines returned to ship, the

Christian Phalange militia had crossed through Israeli lines and massacred hundreds of Palestinian women and children in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila. The marines had then been reinserted to try to prevent more such atrocities, but now they were being inexorably sucked into the eight-way Lebanese civil war, ongoing since 1975. And our leaders were clueless.

It was clear from the conversation that there was no policy. There was no plan. They were just making it up as they went along. It wouldn't be long before U.S. Marines started to die because of it.

The conversation came to an abrupt end when the Commander, Task Force 69 (CTF-69) duty officer, some poor lieutenant commander who was oblivious to the significance of the parties on the net, broke in to pass some routine traffic. In communications lingo, she “stepped on” the transmission of the Secretary of State and then the circuit dropped synch for good. Somehow it seemed fitting.

Early August 1983 Eastern Mediterranean, North of Tobruk, Libya

I awoke with a start from a short but deep sleep as I heard the general quarters alarm sounding. I knew it could be real, since we should have been nearing Libyan waters by that time. As it turned out, it actually was a drill, but the quartermaster picked a particularly inopportune time to forget to say “this is a drill, this is a drill,” after pulling the alarm.

By early morning, our fighters were tangling with Libyan MiG-23 Flogger fighters north of Tobruk, both sides daring the other to shoot first. It had only been a couple years since F-14s from the *Nimitz* (CVN-68) shot down the two Libyan SU-22 Fitters fighters over the Gulf of Sidra, and tensions were still very high.

The on-again, off-again Libyan invasion of Chad had flared up enough to cause consternation in Washington. Late on the previous afternoon, the IKE received orders to depart station off Lebanon and transit at maximum speed toward Libya, with instructions to follow. As the designated air wing expert on Libya (in addition to Syria, Lebanon, Cuba, and Nicaragua—I’d pretty much cornered the market for bad guys), I laid out the charts on the table and prepared to give a situation brief as the air wing leadership gathered to find out what was going on.

Before I started, the air wing commander (CAG), Joe Prueher, looked at the charts, held up a hand, and said with a frown, “Give me those dividers.” He set them on 100 miles and then walked them across the chart from the Mediterranean, across Libya, and down to Chad, counting, “One, two, three...” When he got to

eight, he said, “So what are we supposed to do about it?” He was referring to the Libyan invasion. A distance of 800 miles was well outside our aircraft range (well, usually, however Rear Admiral Tuttle was well known for directing extremely long-range intercepts of Soviet Bear aircraft as well as “striking” other carriers in exercises).

It quickly became apparent that we’d put more thought into it than Washington, since no one there knew what to do about it either, and apparently hadn’t expected that we would get to the Libyan coast as fast as we did. As soon as reports went out that we were mixing it up with the Libyan Air Force, we received urgent orders to the effect of “back off!” We proved that naval forces could react far faster than national command authority could decide what to do.

We spent the next week steaming in circles in the northern Ionian Sea, well away from Libya and Lebanon, awaiting further direction. Since we happened to be there, we were ordered to participate in a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) exercise. Even from there, we managed to intercept several Libyan fighters operating unusually far out beyond the “safety” of Qaddafi’s “line of death.”

We wouldn’t go into a port for many more weeks because of the criticality of the situation in Lebanon, but it was okay with higher authority that we participate in the exercise and burn precious flight hours. Although we were involved in intense crisis response activity, our air wing had already used almost all our fuel and flight hour allotment. We were flying only combat air patrol (CAP) and the E-2C while our strike skills atrophied due to lack of flight proficiency time for the rest of the air wing.

Late August 1983, Eastern Mediterranean, off Egypt

The other three junior grade lieutenants and I were all a bit perturbed and griping to each other in the back of the ready room as the interminable brief went on. The all-Navy (ALNAV) lieutenant selection list message

had been out for almost a week, and all the other junior grade lieutenants in the other squadrons and the ship had been frocked to lieutenant already. My second skipper in VAW-121, Commander Terry Wendt, was even better and more impressive than the first one, whom I held in extremely high regard, but for some unfathomable reason he had not frocked any of us. At that time, it was normal for an officer on a selection list to be immediately frocked to the higher rank as soon as the list became public; being frocked entitled the officer to wear the higher rank insignia, although the pay raise would not become effective for another month to a year when official promotion authorizations came out. It was highly unusual not to be frocked immediately.

The meeting we were enduring in the ready room was out of the ordinary. The Secretary of the Navy, John Lehman, and the commander of the U.S. Sixth Fleet, Vice Admiral (three-star) Edward H. Martin had flown aboard the IKE for a visit. Secretary Lehman was also a U.S. Navy commander in the reserves, and he would be fulfilling his annual reserve commitment by flying with our A-6 medium attack squadron during the major U.S.-Egyptian exercise Bright Star. Because we had the largest ready room, our squadron had been selected to host the Bright Star overview brief for Secretary Lehman and Vice Admiral Martin.

As the brief ended, but before the senior party could make an escape, Skipper Wendt sprang his trap, asking, "Mr. Secretary, would you please do the honor of frocking my new lieutenants?"

The Secretary graciously agreed, although it would have been a bit awkward for him not to. My lieutenant's bars were pinned on by the Secretary of the Navy on one side and by the commander of the Sixth Fleet on the other. It was quite a memorable moment for a junior officer, and well worth the wait and angst. Skipper Wendt had executed his plan to perfection.

Late August 1983, Eastern Mediterranean, off Egypt

It was a classic Tuttle trademark operation: an audacious long-range intercept and deception plan. It worked to perfection. The U.S. Air Force was clueless.

As part of exercise Bright Star, two U.S. Air Force B-52s flew all the way from the United States to conduct a simulated attack on the IKE, operating north of Alexandria, Egypt. Normally, carrier-based fighters would intercept incoming aircraft around 200 nautical miles from the ship. Never one to do the expected, or to conform to the exercise plan, Rear Admiral Tuttle directed our air wing to intercept the B-52s at 1,000 miles, as they came through the Strait of Gibraltar. During the workups in the Caribbean for my first deployment, we had intercepted a pair of Soviet TU-95 Bear D aircraft flying from Angola to Cuba at 700 miles from the IKE, also at Admiral Tuttle's direction. We dusted off that plan, which required relays of carrier-based KA-6 tanker aircraft, S-3 antisubmarine warfare (ASW) aircraft serving as tankers, and extremely long-duration flights by the F-14 fighters and the E-2C, as well as accurate calculation of when the B-52s would pass Gibraltar. The window for success was very small, but it worked. However, as best our pilots could figure, the B-52s were flying on autopilot. There was no evidence that the Air Force pilots even realized our aircraft were there.

As the B-52s approached, we executed our emissions control plan as well as deceptive formations and maneuvers. The B-52s never achieved a targeting solution on us; it was a heck of a long way to fly to find nothing but ocean.

Late August 1983, Eastern Mediterranean, off Egypt

We didn't get to go to Egypt, but Egypt sure came to us, and the pharaoh got his revenge. It was really gross, but in typical Navy fashion, we found a way to make it much worse.

Like one planned port call after another, the port visit to Alexandria was cancelled due to the mounting tensions in Lebanon. However, higher authority deemed it okay for us to come off Bagel Station to participate in Exercise Bright Star, but not for us to go into Alexandria for a few days. Few people were especially heartbroken, but we certainly could have used the break.

The advanced party did go ashore into Alexandria to do the usual advance work (hence, the name) for the port visit, before it was cancelled. They brought something back with them. Within two days, almost the entire ship had come down with some kind of dysentery-like ailment, resulting in a serious run on the heads. Although I didn't come down sick, I was definitely affected by the sudden and critical shortage of toilet paper throughout the ship. Sailors being a resourceful lot, they found other things to wipe with, which proved only a short-term solution, since such things as newspaper quickly clogged most of the toilets.

Despite the fact that two-thirds of the ship had the trots, the ship held its usual damage control exercises. And in keeping with routine, the water normally used for flushing toilets, those few that were still working anyway, was rerouted to the fire mains for firefighting drill purposes. Normally during damage control drills everyone just had to hold it, because without running water, the heads were useless. This was not an option for much of the crew under the circumstances, and the result was an incredibly putrid mess throughout much of the ship. In some spots, it took weeks for the smell to dissipate.

At least Bright Star resulted in some really cool pictures of our air wing aircraft flying in a big formation with a variety of Egyptian MiG fighters over the pyramids, but aside from that it was mostly just a big distraction from the rapidly deteriorating situation in Lebanon. Although many of our sailors may have felt like dying from the unfortunate situation on board, within a few days marines at Beirut airport started dying from shelling.

Late August 1983, Bagel Station, Eastern Mediterranean, off Lebanon

Contrary to conventional wisdom, there are sharks in the Mediterranean. And they are very big and very curious.

The IKE was dead in the water south of Cyprus holding a swim call. No one on board could ever remember if any carrier had ever had a swim call for its crew since World War II, but someone convinced the ship's captain that it could be done, and the planning and organization had been meticulous.

We'd been steaming in circles west of Lebanon for over 40 consecutive days as the situation for the U.S. Marines in Beirut steadily deteriorated and the purpose of their mission became increasingly confused. One port visit after another had been cancelled because higher authority didn't want us to stray very far from Lebanon. We didn't even get a beer day at 45 days like carriers in the Indian Ocean got. No carrier in the Mediterranean had gone that long without a port call so far as anyone could remember, so there was no provision in the Sixth Fleet regulations for a beer day in the Mediterranean. To keep the crew's spirits up, someone came up with the swim call idea.

The first group of 20 sailors went into and out of the water without a hitch. When the second group jumped in, two sharks showed up. Swim call came to an abrupt end.

To further spoil the party, two Soviet Il-38 May antisubmarine and reconnaissance aircraft picked that time to launch out of their base in Tiyas, Syria. Given how close we were to Lebanon and Syria, there were only a few minutes to react.

Although the sailors were out of the water in a hurry, we still had to recover the boats that had been put in the water to rescue any swimmer that got in trouble and to carry the shark watch, which had in fact done its job quite well despite being an extra precaution that no one was really expecting to need.

The Soviets caught us with our pants down, literally. Although Mays didn't carry antiship missiles, they were capable of providing over-the-horizon targeting to other Soviet ships and submarines in the area.

It was Navy policy to intercept any Soviet aircraft as far away as possible. Unable to get the ship moving soon enough, we were unable to launch fighter aircraft to intercept the Mays, since the F-14s required considerable wind over the deck in order to get airborne. The only aircraft that could be launched with the ship at a standstill were the E-2C Hawkeye radar plane and S-3 Viking antisubmarine aircraft. So we launched them, and two S-3s successfully intercepted and escorted the Mays, which may also have been a first.

To my knowledge, however, this may have been the last swim call from an aircraft carrier.

Early September 1983, Bagel Station, Eastern Mediterranean, off Lebanon

"Never underestimate your enemy," I thought. Druze gunners in the Shouf Mountains overlooking the U.S. Marine positions at the Beirut airport had quickly figured out how to defeat the high-technology counterbattery radar, which had the capability to track the trajectory of incoming enemy projectiles and pinpoint the source. But it only worked for projectiles on a ballistic trajectory. The Druze gunners situated their guns so they could fire down the gullies in a direct line at the airport, making the counterbattery radar useless.

The situation in Beirut deteriorated dramatically the last weeks of August while we were off messing with the Bright Star exercise. It culminated in early September with the sudden Israeli pullout from the Beirut suburbs and the Shouf Mountains, setting off a mad scramble among different factions to fill the vacuum. Bitter fighting raged between the Lebanese Armed Forces and the Druze around Suq al Gharb in the Shouf while fighting resumed between different Christian, Shia, and Sunni factions in Beirut.

The Druze, the Shia Amal militia, and the newer Hezbollah Shia militia, which was trained and backed by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, all became increasingly convinced that the Multinational Force (MNF), which included French and Italian troops in addition to the U.S. Marines, was no longer a neutral peacekeeping force but was rather serving the interests of the Maronite Christian-dominated Lebanese government. They reached this conclusion based on statements made by our own government representatives in the region. As a result, incidents of sniping by Shia elements in the slums around the airport, and shelling by Druze in the hills, started sporadically in late July and then picked up greatly in intensity. The first two U.S. Marines were killed by shelling in late August. Two more were killed the first week of September, and a number were wounded in numerous incidents in between.

The marines were trapped in a no-win situation, which was clearly evident to us at the time, not just in hindsight. The mission was political. Having the marines confined to the low ground at the airport, while increasingly hostile factions occupied the high ground around it, was military lunacy. As soon as the marines were allowed to return fire, the different factions only became more convinced the United States was an enemy and not a neutral. Firing incidents only increased while the marines began digging deeper to protect themselves and gave up any pretense of neutral peacekeeping. Unfortunately, our political leadership still clung to the illusion that we were doing something useful in Lebanon other than serving as target practice for Druze artillery.

After one particularly egregious barrage, the U.S. frigate *Bowen* (FF-1079) was given orders to fire on the ridgeline overlooking the airport. But due to delays and lack of obvious targets (the Druze were good at shoot-and-scoot), the Druze interpreted the act not so much as retaliation for their fire but rather as direct fire support by the United States for Lebanese government troops then battling with the Druze for control of key positions vacated by the Israelis in the Shouf Mountains. The situation became increasingly chaotic. The cycle of escalatory violence

continued, and the marines were no longer just in the crossfire, they were in the bullseye.

Early September 1983, Bagel Station, Eastern Mediterranean, off Lebanon

“Damn! Lebanon’s a lot smaller than it seems on the chart,” said the radar intercept officer (RIO) of the first F-14 to fly a photoreconnaissance mission over Lebanon.

How right he’d turn out to be. His jet had also been shot at by multiple shoulder-fired SAMs from Syrian-held territory in Lebanon, but all had missed. It was the first use of the F-14 tactical aerial reconnaissance pod system (TARPS) in combat conditions.

After the debrief, a fairly large crowd of aviators and intelligence officers gathered, eager to get a look at the film as soon as it came up from processing. Finally the photo interpreters had the reel of film, put it on the light table, and started cranking for the initial quick look.

The film showed that the plane crossed the Lebanese coast at exactly to right point, then up over the Druze gun positions in the Shouf Mountains that had been shelling our marines ashore, then down into the Syrian and Hezbollah positions in the Bekaa Valley.

The film reel continued unwinding. Someone whispered “oh, oh” as the film coverage continued up and over the mountains on the east side of the Bekaa Valley until it became unmistakably clear that the plane had missed the turn point. The plane continued well inside Syrian air space, filming coverage of highly lethal Syrian SA-6 radar-guided SAMs, before reversing course. We didn’t get any reports of air raid sirens going off in Damascus, so presumably the Syrians had been as surprised by the border violation as we were.

Our F-14 TARPS squadron flew over three dozen more reconnaissance missions over Lebanon and were fired upon each time, often by the portable SAMs. We were directed by higher authority to plot the

origin point of each missile launch and track it with a target designation so that it could be shelled by U.S. surface ships off Beirut, in the event that even higher authority decided that having our planes shot at was sufficient provocation for retaliatory fire. This, however, was an exercise in futility, since the missiles being fired were man-portable. As soon as the missile was fired, the person who fired it would just run away. There would be absolutely nothing at the launch site, except for perhaps the used gripstock tossed in the bushes, when the retaliatory fire arrived. But we dutifully plotted the positions as they reached into the hundreds.

We never were ordered to retaliate for our jets being fired upon.

Mid-September 1983, Bagel Station, Eastern Mediterranean, off Lebanon

“Jeez, it’s a regular three-ring flying circus out there,” commented one of my squadron mates after another particularly intense early warning mission by our E-2s. And, like the Red Baron’s Flying Circus of World War I fame, it was becoming increasingly lethal.

In the confined waterspace between Cyprus and Lebanon, warning time was also minimal, and my squadron had its work cut out for it and was in the process of breaking the all-time E-2C flight-hour record for a single deployment. It seemed like every country in the region that had aircraft was trying to make some sense out of the chaos in Lebanon.

The Soviet Il-38 Mays operating from Tiyas airfield in Syria continued to fly on us regularly, providing targeting information on our whereabouts to the sizeable force of Soviet missile-armed warships and submarines that had been deployed to the Eastern Mediterranean in response to the rising tensions.

Israeli jets flew numerous reconnaissance missions over Lebanon, using the same techniques as during our previous deployment, flying out over the Mediterranean among our aircraft, then streaking

into Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley from the sea and drawing considerable fire from Syrian and Hezbollah positions. It was quite likely that the Syrian gunners just assumed that our F-14 missions were Israelis, which is why they fired so profligately. One thing the Syrian gunners could be pretty certain of, after the debacle to the Syrian air force the previous year, was that any aircraft flying over their positions wasn't one of their own. Nevertheless, Syrian MiG-25 Foxbats flew several reconnaissance missions over Beirut so high and so fast that the Israelis couldn't intercept them, nor hit them with ground fire. Others weren't so lucky.

A French F-8 Crusader fighter (a somewhat ironic name, although that was the U.S. designation) was hit by anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) while escorting a Super Étendard photoreconnaissance mission following an earlier small French airstrike in the Shouf Mountains. The French, too, were getting tired of having their forces in Lebanon shot at. The damaged Crusader managed to limp back to the French aircraft carrier *Foch* and crash-land into a successful barricade arrestment.

A British light observation aircraft got shot down over Lebanon. We weren't quite sure what it was doing there, although it was presumably related to the Royal Air Force Buccaneer fighter-bomber strike rehearsal missions the British were flying out of their base in Akrotiri, Cyprus, which was also hosting a squadron of Italian F-104 fighter-bombers supporting the Italian troop contingent in Lebanon. Although the MNF existed, no one was actually in charge of it, and each of the countries involved pretty much did their own thing in a loosely coordinated manner.

The biggest flying circus act, however, was the first strike mission by the newly reconstituted Lebanese Air Force, which had been moribund since the early days of the Lebanese Civil War. The Lebanese managed to get all three of their operational 1950s Hawker Hunter jet fighter-bombers airborne for a strike in the Shouf Mountains; one was shot down (and the pilot picked up at sea by an HS-5 helo off IKE), a second was damaged and made an emergency landing on a

highway, and the third pilot flew his damaged jet to Cyprus and requested political asylum.

In other aviation follies, one of our F-14s returning to the ship reported a mystery aircraft orbiting over the IKE. When the F-14's RIO came into the intelligence center to debrief, he acted like he'd seen a UFO, finally stating, "I swear it looked like a DC-3 [a 1940s airliner] in camouflage." I told him he wasn't hallucinating. The Israelis had a C-47 (military version of the DC-3) that was configured as an intelligence collection aircraft, although we didn't know until then that it was still operational. When the photos came up from processing, sure enough, there was the Star of David. I found it ironic, albeit disconcerting, that even with the most sophisticated radars and airborne early warning capability in the world, a World War II-era aircraft could orbit undetected for several hours directly over the IKE, copying all our communications.

We also began to develop a close relationship with the French naval air force since we were working in the same airspace and waterspace as the carrier *Foch* and later *Clemenceau* (they alternated). An aviator exchange program was set up. Every day, a U.S. pilot would get helo'd over to the French carrier. Although we considered ourselves much superior in technology and training to the French, every U.S. aviator came back marveling about two things: how the French managed to keep their hangar bay deck looking like the floor of a Mercedes showroom, and how the officer's mess served wine, and plenty of it (U.S. ships were, of course, alcohol free, at least officially). Every day, the helo returned from the *Clemenceau* or *Foch* and out rolled a soused U.S. aviator.

Mid-September 1983, Bagel Station, Eastern Mediterranean, off Lebanon

The IKE was racing around at top speed south of Cyprus, alone, when the Soviet task group came over the horizon, head on, just after sunset. It was probably a toss-up as to who was more startled.

Although embarrassment at the swim call incident may have been a factor, Rear Admiral Tuttle was well known for trying out innovative, or at least unusual, tactics. Steaming the aircraft carrier at very high speed, so fast that none of the escorts could keep up, was already one of his signature trademarks. It made Soviet targeting very difficult, since the carrier was not at the center of a bullseye of escorting cruisers and destroyers, and it certainly had the advantage of being unexpected.

The Soviets certainly didn't expect to see an aircraft carrier, all by itself, bearing straight down on them at 35 knots, since they were still right in the middle of a refueling at sea. For the Soviet Navy, refueling was a very difficult and slow bow-to-stern evolution, unlike the U.S. Navy's alongside underway replenishment technique. The four-ship Soviet task group consisted of the oiler *Desna*, an old *Riga*-class frigate, a newer Mod *Kashin* guided-missile destroyer, and the *Slava*, the first of a new class of guided-missile cruiser, on its first deployment to the Mediterranean.

Since we weren't conducting flight operations, because we were going too fast, and because our air wing was out of money for flight hours, the captain announced that anyone who wanted to come up on the flight deck to see the Russians was welcome. It seemed like about half the crew took him up on it. For most of the crew, it had been getting pretty boring on Bagel Station.

As the ships steamed right at each other, neither side gave way in the game of chicken, although the Soviets were forced to break off their refueling. The IKE split the Soviet formation in two, with the *Slava* and Mod *Kashin* destroyer passing down the port side while the oiler and the *Riga* frigate passed down the starboard side.

I focused on the *Slava* since this was the first time we'd seen it up close. Its 16 huge SS-N-12 antiship missile tubes, 4 pairs per side, designed to destroy our ship, hurtling by about 200 yards away were most impressive, although I noted that we were well inside their minimum effective range. Of course, even

without the missile threat, the *Slava* outgunned us by a very wide margin. (Renamed *Moskva*, this was the Russian cruiser sunk by the Ukrainians in 2022.)

I've wondered what the Russians must have been thinking as the solitary U.S. carrier plowed right through the center of their refueling formation with about 2,000 U.S. sailors on the flight deck, almost all with cameras taking pictures, flashbulbs popping in the deepening dusk, many of the sailors waving.

Of course, the whole thing may have just been intended by Admiral Tuttle as a diversion for the Russians. Several of our escort cruisers and destroyers, including the *Virginia* (CGN-38), which had never left IKE's side, had joined the gunline off Beirut and received orders to open fire on artillery positions in the Shouf that had been located by our F-14 reconnaissance flights. Our ships blazed away, the first significant U.S. naval fire support action since the Vietnam War, in retaliation for the continued, and increasingly heavy, shelling of the marines at Beirut airport (*Bowen* had fired a few days earlier). Our ships were shooting and our aircraft were being shot at. There was no doubt in our minds in the IKE Battle Group that we were in a war. It wouldn't be the last time in my career that forward-deployed naval forces knew we were at war long before the political and military leadership in Washington, DC, did.

Early October 1983, Bagel Station, Eastern Mediterranean, off Lebanon

It was an awesome sight as the battleship *New Jersey* (BB-62) came alongside the IKE for an underway replenishment and a photo op; the oldest warship on active duty in the Navy was steaming just a few feet away, side by side with the newest aircraft carrier in the Navy (well, technically *Carl Vinson* [CVN-70] was). As big as the *New Jersey* was, it still looked surprisingly small next to the IKE, which towered far above the battleship's sleek, low silhouette. The modern updates the *New Jersey* had received when it was brought out of mothballs during the Reagan buildup, such as the armored Tomahawk cruise-missile launchers, had

not appreciably disrupted its classic World War II fast battleship lines. The sight of a battleship underway, regardless of its age, will stir the heart of all Navy sailors worth their salt.

Although an anachronism, the *New Jersey's* nine 16-inch guns were well suited (with appropriate fire spotting) to deliver massive amounts of ordnance onto targets in support of the beleaguered marines ashore. The *New Jersey's* guns had the range to hit practically anywhere in Lebanon and could do so without sending aviators into the dense AAA and portable SAM environment that was proving increasingly dangerous. It was for this reason that the *New Jersey* had been diverted from what was supposed to be a short deployment off the west coast of Central America (no doubt to send a gunboat diplomacy-type message to the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua) and sent to the Eastern Mediterranean, over the objections of the commander of the U.S. European Command (EUCOM), General Bernard W. Rogers, for what turned out to be a year-long first deployment.

Although it was probably coincidence, a cease-fire went into effect the day before the *New Jersey* and its big guns arrived off Lebanon during the last week of September, and it held. It beat the heck out of us what EUCOM's objection was, although we assumed that they hadn't caught on yet either that we were involved in a war.

Late October 1983, Bagel Station, Eastern Mediterranean, off Lebanon

I waited in vain for the helicopter to pick me up from the guided-missile destroyer *Mahan* (DDG-42) and return me to the IKE. It had apparently broken down somewhere, and I would have to stay overnight on a destroyer for the first time since my midshipman cruise on the *Basilone* (DD-824) in 1977. I wouldn't make it to any other surface ships in the battle group. The experiment in providing better intelligence support to our surface combatant escorts was off to a rocky start.

Somewhat to our amazement, the cease-fire in Lebanon had been holding reasonably well for over three weeks. The French carrier *Foch* had returned home while we continued steaming in furious circles south of Cyprus, now underway for over 85 consecutive days, shattering the Mediterranean record for carrier deployments. Frankly, although not going into port affected morale, after about 40 days it just didn't matter anymore. You just became numb to it, and in a macho and masochistic way you began to hope it would continue, just for the bragging rights. Nevertheless, those few who were still on board from IKE's 1981 Indian Ocean cruise (which set the all-time carrier underway record of 158 days during a deployment of eight and a half months that included only one port call of five days) let it be known to the rest of us who the real men were.

During this relative lull, some senior intelligence officer came up with the idea that we should provide our escort ships with some updated intelligence briefs. The commanders of some of the escorts indicated they were feeling starved for updated intelligence. In those days, the only way to get intelligence to the cruisers and destroyers was through a 75-baud broadcast, so once the battle group left Norfolk, intelligence typically only came in short, formatted messages giving the latest positions of Soviet ships. Someone hit on a novel solution: take an air intelligence (AI) officer (me) with a slide projector, put him aboard a helicopter, lower him in the horse collar to the ships below, pick him up the same way, and go to one ship after another. The first ship went great, and the *Mahan's* officers seemed quite appreciative of the effort we made.

Because I got stuck on the *Mahan* overnight, I didn't make it back to the IKE in time for the flight I was supposed to take into Beirut the next morning to conduct an intelligence exchange and liaison mission at the headquarters in the Marine Corps barracks at the Beirut International Airport.

23 October 1983, Naples, Italy

“Explosion at the Marine Barracks at Beirut Airport. Two Dead,” said the initial flash precedence message, standard when U.S. forces are attacked. My initial thought was “at least it wasn’t worse.” I also thought that someday we’d catch on to being attacked on Sunday mornings. It was distressing, but four U.S. Marines had already been killed in Beirut in August and September in several shelling and sniping incidents.

The assistant ship’s intelligence officer and I had planned to catch the early boat ashore to Naples and then hop a train to Rome. But he’d slept through his alarm, and we’d missed the boat. I was waiting in the intelligence center for him to show when the first report came in. Hopes of making the Rome trip began to fade and then shrank to complete inconsequence as more reports came in.

The death toll crept up in small increments: 6, 10, 12, 18. By the time it reached the 20s a pall of gloom had fallen over the ship. We considered these losses staggering. And still they climbed, into the 50s and the 100s. I became angry. Why didn’t somebody just send a message that said “the place is leveled, everybody is dead”? But no, the toll just kept climbing by 10s until it reached 241 (220 U.S. Marines and 18 Navy medical and intelligence personnel, plus three U.S. Army personnel). (Actually, there were OPREP-3 [operational report] messages with more detail—why they didn’t get to the carrier intelligence center until later beats me).

I and everyone else became even more outraged at whoever had done this. We’d just spent three months off Beirut providing cover to the marines, and on our first port call since mid-July, someone had blasted the barracks to smithereens. Did they time the truck bombing for when the carrier was gone, or was it just coincidence? We didn’t know. We were getting very little intelligence from inside Lebanon. We were still suffering from the car bomb at the U.S. embassy in April 1983, which had destroyed the largest and most important CIA station in the Middle East.

We expected orders to get underway immediately to go bomb the hell out of somebody. No orders came. Another day went by, and then a second, with no orders. On the third day, liberty resumed and many of the crew struck out for Rome, but I opted to stay closer. Little did I know that indecision would characterize the rest of our time on that deployment.

Late October 1983, Sorrento, Italy

“I’ll be damned,” I thought as I saw the SH-3 helicopter flying around the Bay of Naples with its dipping sonar in a lowered position. When we’d been briefed that this was the signal to emergency sortie, I’d thought, “Yeah right, like that will really work.”

I’d been to Naples enough that I knew how to work the Italian mass transit system. I’d visited the Roman ruins at Herculaneum that morning, and now I was sitting alone on a nice relaxing bench on the waterfront at Sorrento sunning myself. We’d just spent over 90 consecutive days underway, and I was enjoying being many miles from the ship. But there was no mistaking, or ignoring, the helo with the dipping sonar.

I caught the next train back to Naples and rushed to fleet landing. As I approached, other sailors had doubled back, saying the ship wasn’t going to get underway until late evening. I turned around and went back into town with the intent of blowing the large wad of Italian lira in my wallet. I was successful, buying jewelry and a last meal, for I had no idea how long we’d be out, or if we would return to Naples at all. I was unsuccessful in retrieving my service dress blue uniform that I’d taken the day before the Beirut bombing to the NATO exchange to be striped for lieutenant following my recent promotion. When I returned to fleet landing, the shore patrol checkpoint had been moved farther out to snare sailors and keep them from doing the about-face maneuver I had just pulled off.

The emergency sortie sort of worked, but we still left a couple hundred sailors on the beach that couldn't get back in time from Rome and elsewhere. Indecision.

Late October 1983, Bagel Station, Eastern Mediterranean, off Lebanon

I thought they just did this in the movies. The courier was a full commander, in service dress blue, and he arrived with a briefcase literally chained to his wrist. He was also upset that he was on the IKE, since his orders were to deliver the top secret plan only to Rear Admiral Tuttle on the *John F. Kennedy*, which had just arrived in the Eastern Mediterranean following a "glamour cruise" to Rio de Janeiro. Apparently, Washington assumed that Admiral Tuttle would shift his flag to the JFK since the IKE was nearing the end of our scheduled deployment, but Admiral Tuttle chose not to change horses in the middle of the stream. The implication for us was clear: we wouldn't be home for Thanksgiving as planned.

Technically, our relief was supposed to be the *Independence*, but it had been delayed by participation in the Grenada operation two days after the Beirut bombing and would be at least a week late. In fact, it was considered an AI's duty to regularly brief the location of the relieving carrier. I had been roundly booed by my squadron when it turned out the position reports we were being given, and that I was briefing, were deliberately false, and the *Independence* was bombing Grenada instead of approaching the Strait of Gibraltar.

It took some convincing, but the courier finally realized he was on the right ship and unlocked the briefcase.

Late October 1983, Bagel Station, Eastern Mediterranean, off Lebanon

The target was the Sheikh Abdullah Barracks in Baalbek, Lebanon. My first reaction looking at the target photo was, "Gee, I'd like to go there someday,"

as my eye was drawn to the spectacular Roman temple ruins atop an acropolis overlooking the city, which I also noted could serve as a great radar-offset aim point to improve the accuracy of our bombs.

Only a small handful of people in the air wing were initially read into the plan, and I was the only squadron intelligence officer, and the most junior. Although I was not an attack squadron AI, the air wing commander selected me to be the primary intelligence planner for the strike based on the recommendation of the air wing intelligence officer, Lieutenant Commander Larry Askins, and the battle group N2, Commander Frank Notz. Other planners included the commander of the JFK's air wing, as well as Commander Fox Fallon, the executive officer of Attack Squadron 65 (VA-65), who was the designated strike lead.

We conducted the initial planning in the IKE commanding officer's in-port cabin until we outgrew it and took over the mission planning center in the CVIC, locking everyone else out. Mission planning was the normal center of activity for all the squadron intelligence officers and was where all the routine air wing flight operations briefings and debriefings were conducted. There were some real hangdog looks among the other squadron AIs. Not knowing what's going on is the definition of hell for an intelligence officer. I felt badly for them, but it wasn't my call, and it wouldn't be long before all of them were in the thick of it.

The Sheikh Abdullah Barracks was a Lebanese army facility in the Syrian-controlled area of the Bekaa Valley, but it was occupied by Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps personnel who were assessed to be providing training to the Islamic Jihad, the terrorist apparatus within the Lebanese Shia militia group Hezbollah. We were actually provided very little information on what exactly went on at the barracks, but we assumed since we had been given the target by Washington, DC, that it was likely that the suicide bomber that hit the marine barracks had been trained there. The planners also presumed that, because of the delay in being ordered to get underway and

respond, any guilty parties were long since gone from the facility. Nevertheless, from a physical aspect, it was a great target. A large (but not too large) building situated on the outskirts of Baalbek, surrounded by a fairly wide sand strip with only some minor civilian encroachment at one corner, and damage to that could be mitigated by using a proper bombing run-in heading. The target even looked like a big bullseye, and with the distinctive radar-significant terrain (the acropolis) it would not be hard to find in the dark.

My job was to assess the threat to the various different strike options the planners came up with, and it looked to me to be quite doable. There would be heavy small-caliber ground fire in the immediate target area, but it was possible to take advantage of terrain masking to keep the strike ingress and egress routes either outside or below known SAM and larger-caliber AAA coverage, or in a couple spots, present such a brief crossing-target aspect that SAMs or radar-guided AAA would be ineffective. (My squadron had previously sent me to tactical action officer [TAO] school—I may have been the first intelligence officer to go through it—and what I learned was paying off.)

I worked at a feverish pace to round up all the best available intelligence to support the strike, experiencing considerable frustration at how much was lacking due to the near-total preoccupation of the rest of the U.S. intelligence community with the Soviets. There were significant collection gaps, as well as much outdated and erroneous information in the poorly maintained databases. I was convinced we had enough good intelligence to successfully conduct the strike, but I knew more than anyone how much we didn't know.

The strike plan itself struck me as elegant in its adherence to the military principle of “keep it simple, stupid.” Even so, no other military in the world, including the Israeli military, could have executed it. Twelve A-6 medium attack bombers from the IKE and JFK air wings would fly a combined nighttime, low-altitude strike mission, obliterating the target with 144,000 pounds of bombs. The night and low-altitude aspects of the strike played directly to the strengths of

the A-6, and were what A-6 crews were exceptionally well trained to do. These strengths would mitigate the effects of ground fire by surprise. The A-6s would be on and off the target so fast that gunners would have precious little time to react, if they could even see the aircraft in the dark. This strike would have worked.

Early November 1983, Bagel Station, Eastern Mediterranean, off Lebanon

In the early predawn hours, A-6s on the *Dwight D. Eisenhower* and *John F. Kennedy* were armed with live bombs, their pilots in the cockpits, their jet engines turning, awaiting the final go order for the first strike by the U.S. Navy since the Vietnam War-era. The order never came. I slept through the whole thing. (Pilots in the cockpits and engines turning may be a bit of an exaggeration, since I slept through it, but that's what I was told the next morning. Certainly, when I hit the rack, everyone expected that this mission was a go.)

The strike brief to Rear Admiral Tuttle, commander of the IKE Battle Group; Rear Admiral Box, commander of the JFK Battle Group; other senior officers; and the strike aircrews had gone very well. Uncharacteristically, Admiral Tuttle had asked very few questions. He hadn't needed to. The planning, led by the designated strike leader, Commander Fox Fallon, had been extraordinarily professional. The atmosphere in the brief had been one of utter seriousness, and of cool, calm, matter-of-fact professionalism. I'd done my best to measure up, and although I had been frustrated by things that we didn't know, the intelligence was apparently considered at least adequate. By the end of the brief, everyone had appeared to believe that this strike could be successfully executed, that all threats had been mitigated, and that the assigned mission would be accomplished.

There were no inspirational speeches or other pontification, just final direction from Admiral Tuttle to be ready to execute at the specified time. The other AIs were all geared up with outstanding charts and

pictures to debrief the strike when it returned, so with nothing more for me to do after the brief, I went to sleep and wound up getting a better night's sleep than I had in weeks.

In the run-up to the strike, I had given little thought to anything but gathering and presenting the intelligence necessary for a successful strike. I was consumed by the desire not to miss something or make a mistake that could lead to aircrew being killed or jets being shot down. Since I would not be one of those going in harm's way, I did not allow myself the luxury of either wishing for the strike to be a go or not. The decision was not mine to make. My duty was to do my utmost to ensure it was a success, with no loss of aircrew lives and minimal loss of life by civilians. I did my duty as best I could, putting every bit of my training and experience to use.

It wasn't until after the strike was cancelled that I seriously pondered broader issues. On the one hand, I didn't want to bomb and kill people, or to put the lives of other Americans at great risk. But on the other hand, there was an underlying desire to know, after all the work that had gone into it, whether it would have really worked. I felt a bit guilty for thinking that, but I can't deny that I did.

I certainly thought the strike would be a technical success in the sense that we could get the bombs on target and get most, if not all, of our aircraft back safely. But I had substantial doubt that the strike would have had any more than symbolic value. Too much time had gone by; the real culprits in the Beirut U.S. Marine Corps barracks bombing had no doubt long since scattered or gone to ground. I wasn't convinced that retaliatory bombing led to anything besides making more terrorists bent on revenge, especially if the bombing hit the wrong targets and killed innocent people. Nevertheless, the attack on the marines had been so devastating, and so egregious, that it seemed to me that if there ever would be legitimate grounds for retaliation, this was it. There was little doubt that the people at the Baalbek barracks were up to no good, whether or not they were directly responsible for the U.S. Marine

Corps barracks attack, so I didn't feel significant moral qualms about bombing them.

In the end, I reached the conclusion that a symbolic gesture was important. Failure to respond, especially in the face of such extreme provocation, would be viewed throughout the region as weakness and would only encourage further terrorist attacks in the future. Unfortunately, I was right. As it turned out, it is hard to imagine that the strike could possibly have made the end result in Lebanon any worse.

Early November 1983, Bagel Station, Eastern Mediterranean, off Lebanon

The new target was near a small Lebanese village called An Nabi Shit. Proving that all men are still sixth-grade boys at heart, even those who fly multimillion dollar combat jet aircraft, this immediately provoked an extended round of coming up with alternative permutations of the village name.

We were given even less information about the significance of the buildings near An Nabi Shit, but we assumed that this was where those responsible for the Beirut U.S. Marine Corps barracks bombing had taken refuge after clearing out of Baalbek. An Nabi Shit was actually a much tougher target; it was smaller, harder to find, tucked into rough, mountainous terrain right up against the Syrian border, and uncomfortably close to multiple Syrian mobile SA-6 radar-guided SAM batteries immediately across the border. The target itself was covered by only small-caliber antiaircraft fire, but if the strike missed the target by anything at all, the pilots could easily blunder into highly lethal SA-6 threat envelopes, which were now much more alert than when we had flown our first F-14 TARPS photoreconnaissance missions in early September.

This strike brief was tougher than the first. Admiral Tuttle asked numerous probing questions. I briefed the most sensitive information we had. No one wanted a repeat of Vietnam, where intelligence officers were accused of withholding the most

sensitive intelligence from pilots in order to protect sources, which reportedly resulted in U.S. aircraft shot down by missiles that intelligence officers knew were there but that the pilots had not.

Normally, all the exercise strike briefs were conducted at the secret level. This one was at a higher level because of intelligence we'd been given access to once the national level became convinced that we would really be ordered to conduct an actual strike. This brief was given in the admiral's war room rather than the usual mission planning center. It was small, packed, and hot, similar conditions to my first aborted brief to Admiral Tuttle, and I thought I would melt away like the poor tactical electronic warfare squadron (VAQ) briefer from the previous deployment.

The sensitive material provoked intense interest by Admiral Tuttle, and he bored in on the details of Syrian Arab Air Defense Force command and control. It was clear he was looking for any advantage to ensure that the SA-6s would not become a threat to the strike. There were questions I was not able to answer, but fortunately the admiral appeared convinced that it wasn't that I didn't know, but that U.S. intelligence didn't know.

The admiral also asked questions about how the Israelis had defeated and destroyed multiple Syrian SA-6 batteries in the Bekaa Valley a year earlier. I did know the answers to those, but unfortunately the Israelis had made extensive use of Israeli-made and U.S.-made decoy drones, which the U.S. Navy didn't have. Nevertheless, Tuttle appeared relatively satisfied when I informed him, based on pretty extensive observation, that although SA-6 launchers were highly mobile as designed and used by the Soviets, the Syrians tended to operate them as fixed SAM sites (like SA-2s or SA-3s) and only rarely moved them. If the strike stayed on the planned course, U.S. pilots would be safe, at least from the SA-6s.

Once again, final approval for the strike never came. When the launch time passed and no orders came, the jets were shut down, and the aircrew went back

to sleep. Later the next day, we received an electronic intelligence report from an RC-135 (an Air Force intelligence collection aircraft) that was actually a couple of days old. I was shocked and appalled when I read the report and cursed that it was so late and that we hadn't had it during the strike brief. According to the report, a Syrian SA-6 battery was located near An Nabi Shit. When I plotted it on the chart, I saw that it was located on the high ground right on the border above the target, exactly opposite our ingress route. The battery was in the most ideal position possible to defend An Nabi Shit against our strike. The Syrians had picked the perfect spot. I wondered if they knew, or if it was coincidence. I breathed a sigh of relief; that strike would have flown right into a SAM ambush. (Electronic intelligence positions have a circular error probable [CEP] that can vary in size, so it is possible the Syrian SA-6 was still in its usual position, but the center point of the ellipse did plot where I describe above.)

Mid-November 1983, Bagel Station, Eastern Mediterranean, off Lebanon

I thought the admiral was going to have a cow when he looked at the strike chart. I don't remember if the admiral was the deputy commander of the European Command or the deputy commander of Naval Forces Europe, the latter I think. They were all pretty much the same to me, just some bigshot. We'd been told that he would be coming down to the *Ike's* intelligence center to review our contingency strike plans that we had been furiously working on for months by that point.

As the mission planning supervisor, I was directed to put the plans up on easels so the admiral could easily see them. I had arranged them in a particular order on purpose. As the admiral entered mission planning, I tried to steer him to the first easel, but apparently he was left handed or something, and he made a beeline for what was intended to be the last easel.

Expecting to see our plans for Lebanon, he actually saw plans for a long-range strike by our aircraft

over Turkey and the Black Sea to the Soviet Backfire bomber bases in the Crimea. His eyes widened, and he rocked back on his heels, but he retained his composure. “Uh, Lieutenant,” he said with slow, carefully chosen words, “that’s quite an ambitious plan, wouldn’t you say?”

That was certainly an understatement, but I hastened to agree, explaining quickly that this had been one of Rear Admiral Tuttle’s special projects he’d tasked us to work on. “The Lebanon and Syria plans are over here,” I added.

This time the admiral followed my lead.

Mid-November 1983, Bagel Station, Eastern Mediterranean, off Lebanon

“This is getting out of control,” I thought to myself. The strike plan was growing more complex by the day by direction of higher authority, presumably the U.S. European Command, or higher. I was becoming more concerned that this one might not work.

With the arrival of the carrier *Independence* and the French carrier *Clemenceau*, the strike had grown to a multitarget strike package that began to require strike aircraft to fly all over Lebanon in daylight, often breaking into small sections or even single aircraft to strike various isolated targets with an increasingly wide variety of weapons, such as Walleye television-guided bombs. The targets were hard to find, some in areas of very dense Syrian AAA coverage, and we were given very little information on the significance of some of the targets, nor could we figure out the significance. We were being directed to plan something that began to significantly violate the KISS (keep it simple, stupid) principle.

The airspace over Lebanon was getting increasingly lethal. The Syrians and Hezbollah were getting plenty of target practice. The Syrians actually managed to shoot down an Israeli Kfir jet fighter on a photoreconnaissance mission over the Bekaa Valley, which the Syrians no doubt viewed as a triumphant,

albeit rare, victory. A French Super Étendard jet fighter on a photoreconnaissance mission was also hit in the tailpipe by a shoulder-fired SAM but managed to barely make it back to the carrier.

The French became extensively involved in the strike planning. They even gave our air wing a planning tool that we didn’t already have, a three-dimensional relief map of Lebanon. The so-called bumpy chart was wildly popular among our strike planners, and it gave us a crude capability to estimate radar shadow zones, where our strike aircraft could be hidden from enemy radar by the terrain. These zones were even harder to estimate with the typical flat charts.

Despite all the jokes made over the decades at French expense, the French were very professional, and deadly serious. Fifty-eight French troops had been killed in a separate suicide car bomb in Beirut the same day as the bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks, and the French were out for blood.

Mid-November 1983, Bagel Station, Eastern Mediterranean, off Lebanon

Strike aircraft on the *Dwight D. Eisenhower*, *John F. Kennedy*, *Independence*, and the French carrier *Clemenceau* were armed, crewed, and waiting for the launch order. The original Baalbek strike plan had mutated to a four-carrier multinational, multitarget extravaganza. All that was needed was the final launch order from higher authority. The jets waited, and waited, and waited.

Eventually the French started calling on the radio, asking something like, “You are going? No?” Finally it got to the point where we either had to launch or cancel the strike, and still no orders either way had been received. The French radioed their apologies and launched their strike without us, hitting the same Baalbek barracks that had been our original target. The damage inflicted by the much-smaller French Super Étendard fighter-bombers was far less than we would have done with A-6s. But they hit the target.

Immediately after the strike, the *Clemenceau* headed for home.

There were many in our air wing who reluctantly reached the conclusion that the French had provided a demonstration of the proper way to utilize naval air power. The *Clemenceau* had left its home port, steamed over to Lebanon, blown something up, and immediately gone back to port. Meanwhile, the IKE had spent four months steaming in furious circles off Lebanon, planning one strike after another, only to ultimately do nothing.

Late November 1983, Bagel Station, Eastern Mediterranean, off Lebanon

“What a bunch of arrogance,” I thought, as we attempted to conduct a turnover with the *Independence’s* air wing intelligence officer and one of their strike intelligence officers. They’d done the Grenada operation, and they acted like they were some big war heroes or something. They’d bombed things. We hadn’t. They seemed like they couldn’t care less about any lessons we were trying to impart based on our four months of strike planning, having our aircraft shot at, and shelling targets ashore with naval gunfire from our ships.

“Just put it in the box. We’ll take a look at it later,” they said. Eventually, I got fed up and wandered off. “Suit yourself,” I muttered. At least we were going home.

Late November 1983, Thanksgiving, near Gibraltar

The two C-1 carrier onboard delivery (COD) aircraft arrived from Rota, Spain, remained on board the IKE briefly, and then launched en route the *Kennedy* and vanished without a trace.

No wreckage was ever found. It was presumed that the two CODs, carrying mostly parts and mail, but some passengers, somehow managed to collide with

each other in midair somewhere north of the Algerian coast.

I remembered seeing one of the COD pilots on board the IKE because she was a classmate of mine from the U.S. Naval Academy (USNA), Lieutenant Suzanne Grubbs. I didn’t know her at the academy, and I didn’t get a chance to speak to her during her brief time on IKE. But the incident gave me a sense of how fleeting our time on earth is, how someone with a great future one minute could be gone the next, forever. So far as I know, she was the first female Naval Academy graduate to die in the line of duty.

Early December 1983, Ship’s Store, North Atlantic

The seas were getting pretty rough. We were heading into a strong nor’easter (basically a winter hurricane) a couple of days from Norfolk. An aircraft carrier doesn’t move around nearly as much as a destroyer or a frigate, but if the seas are high enough, it moves around far more than you would think. If the seas were right, the ship’s large size actually could make things pretty miserable; with a 1,000-foot moment arm, it could seem like you were riding an elevator up and down 10–15 stories every 60 seconds, and that got pretty old after a couple hours. This was one of those days.

On a westbound (homebound) transatlantic crossing, it also always seemed like the days were 25 hours long, principally because most of them were. On the eastbound transit, the clocks were always turned ahead during the night, so most of the crew lost an hour of sleep each time we crossed into a new time zone. Westbound, the clocks were always turned back an hour during daylight, so most of the crew would get an extra hour of work. I always wondered what sadistic genius thought that one up.

Despite the seas, I decided to go down to the ship’s store to see if I could get some souvenir ship’s ball caps, T-shirts, or sweatshirts. It had been a pretty memorable deployment, I thought. Sadly, the place

was picked clean. Several forlorn cardboard boxes were strewn about, along with some things no one would want at this point, such as laundry bags or shoe polish. I have no clue what possessed me to look inside one of the unmarked boxes, perhaps because I'd climbed down so many ladders to get there that I was compelled to find something, or it was just out of bored curiosity. Inside the box, all wadded up and crumpled, with no tags of any kind, was my service dress blue uniform that I'd left behind in Naples when we emergency sortied. No one in the store had any idea how it got there, or when. It even had my brand new lieutenant's stripes sewn on.

Early December 1983, Washington, DC

Finally home with my wife, I opened the front door, saw the newspaper headline, and was overcome with dumbfounded disbelief. Two U.S. Navy jets shot down during strike on Lebanon, one pilot killed, one captured by the Syrians. Eight U.S. Marines killed at Beirut airport by retaliatory shelling following the strike. It looked like a total fiasco. I devoured the articles trying to figure out what the targets were. They didn't sound like anything we had planned. As it turned out, they weren't.

It wasn't until I returned from post-deployment leave that I learned more of the details. I was dismayed; the strike was even more of a fiasco than I had thought. The strike had been hastily ordered by Washington, DC, supposedly because an F-14 TARPS reconnaissance mission from the *Kennedy* had been fired on by a shoulder-launched missile over Lebanon. This rationale struck me as contrived since our aircraft had been fired on by portable SAMs many times in September and October.

A revised strike order, with an earlier launch time, had come at the last minute, basically catching both the JFK and *Independence* air wings unable to react in time—throwing previously careful plans out of whack. In the mad scramble to get airborne, most jets had launched with the wrong kinds of bombs for the assigned targets, and some launched with inoperative

defensive gear. There was no chance to execute a deception plan, so the Soviet tattletale ships watching our carriers had provided warning to the Syrian air defense network. The targets were mostly antiaircraft gun positions, which are very difficult to locate and hit under ideal conditions.

The strike timing had been dictated by Washington (or EUCOM, no one knows) and was the worst possible time to try to bomb Lebanon. At that time of the morning, the sun would have been right in the aircrews' eyes and at the Syrian gunners' backs. The west slopes of the Lebanese hills were in shadow and shrouded in mist. The only way for the aircrews to find the difficult targets was to fly at medium altitude, then drop low through the AAA and shoulder-fired SAM envelopes to try to hit the gun positions. The Syrians couldn't have asked for a better situation to defend against the strike, and the result was predictable: the first combat losses for the U.S. Navy since Vietnam.

One A-6 from the JFK was shot down. Both aircrew ejected, but the pilot, Mark Lange (USNA '79), severed his leg and bled to death while the Syrians watched. The bombardier and navigator, Bobby Goodman (USNA '78), was captured but was eventually released after Jesse Jackson went to Syria to negotiate. The air wing commander from the *Independence* flew an A-7 jet with a broken flare ejection system, and not surprisingly, was hit by an infrared-guided SAM. Although he bailed out over water and was rescued, in keeping with the whole nature of the operation, the unpowered A-7 turned around and crashed ashore, killing eight women and children. Murphy ruled.

I also considered it a shame that Admiral Tuttle, the best warfighter in the U.S. Navy in my view, was given an impossible, and pointless, mission. But that just seemed fitting for the whole Lebanon operation.

As a postscript, our air wing commander, Joe Prueher (who went on to be a four-star commander of the U.S. Pacific Command and later ambassador to China) was ordered by Secretary Lehman to stand up the naval strike warfare school ("Mud Gun") to do for strike

aviation what the Top Gun school had been doing for years for the fighter community, and to provide the training to ensure that another botched strike like the one in Lebanon never occurred again.