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Hungry guns, exploding cats
(Tripoli, Lebanon, November 1983)

THE PLO CIVIL WAR MOVED UP TO TRIPOLI that autumn, along Lebanon's northern coast, where the Syrians were shelling Arafat and his supporters in the refugee camps, pretending the dirty work was being done by Palestinian dissidents led by a cashiered Colonel who called himself Abu Musa ("Father of Moses"). The Syrians were on Mount Turbol, overlooking the camps, Nahr el Bared and Baddawi. Even though the Lebanese media pretended the Syrians didn't exist, their tanks were parked in plain sight in an olive grove above the city and the tank crews made no bones about the fact they were Syrian, not Palestinian. We drank tea with them one day, and they'd shoot at us the next when we went to report on Arafat and his men down below.

It was a crazy little war, even by Lebanese standards. A handful of us would drive up in the morning in a collective cab, roam around looking for news, then drive three hours back to Beirut before nightfall so we could file our dispatches to Paris, London, New York, and in my case, Atlanta. If we left Tripoli early enough, we'd stop for drinks on the way back in a mountain tavern overlooking the sea, just thirty minutes and a world away from the war.

One day I drove up with a Czech correspondent I had met at the UPI bureau where we filed our dispatches. Vaclav Bervida was not particularly adventurous when it came to covering the fighting (nobody much cared about it in Prague). But he was happy to get out of Beirut, away from his wife; and he turned out to be great company. On our first foray together we were joined by a French photo-journalist named Roger Auque. He turned out to be a total nutcase. Certifiably insane.

In a patch of dusty sunshine at the top of the Baddawi camp, Roger spied an old man sitting on a fruit crate, keffiyeh wrapped around his head, his huge gnarled hands swatting flies, and thought he would make a great picture. Vaclav spent the next fifteen minutes looking for a safe place to leave his car, so it wouldn't get hit by shrapnel. By the time we caught up to Roger, he and the old man had been joined by a pair of 12 year olds who had set up a 60 mm light mortar. Roger was egging them on, trying to get them to fire off a round toward the Syrian tanks. The old man was shooing them to get lost.

“Why don’t you send a birthday card to Hafez al Assad?” Roger cajoled the kids.

“You’ve got to be out of your mind,” I said.

“Come on, it’ll be a great picture,” Roger said. He looked like a cartoon caricature, safari jacket stuffed with film, chin length hair, twirly moustache, red scarf. He crouched and moved with his camera crab-like around them, pretending to find the best place to shoot.

“They’re actually going to do it,” Vaclav said. He started down the hill.

“Roger, you are truly messed up,” I said.

“Come on, come on, you’re going to be famous,” Roger egged on the kids.

And then the kid with the mortar bomb did it. He popped the mortar into the tube, and the two of them giggled and put their fingers in their ears and Roger started snapping pictures. I gave it thirty seconds before we had incoming.

“See you back at the car at 4,” I said. Then I jogged down the hill to where Vaclav had taken cover a couple of streets down. I had reached the count of forty when a tank round slammed into the upper floor of the building across the street from where Roger and the kids and the old man had been. Once the shrapnel and the dust had scattered, I stuck my head around the corner, but didn’t see anyone. They must have run for cover just in time.¹

Vaclav was short, stocky, and sported a gnarly dark beard. He had a constant twinkle in the eye that for some reason made me think of the Russian anarchist, Mikhail Bakunin. Even the Palestinian kids could tell he was a Slav, not American or French. As we worked our way lower down into the camp, a teenager in fatigues came up to Vaclav, holding out an assault rifle for him to examine.

“Mister, mister,” he said. “Nobody knows where this comes. Mister, you know?”

“I don’t have a clue,” Vaclav whispered to me. He took the rifle and pretended to examine it authoritatively, then he announced that it came from Hungary.

“Hungry?” the kid repeated.

“That’s right. It’s a hungry rifle. It needs to be fed.”

The fight for the camp erupted into extreme violence for ten or twenty minute spurts, a gushing wind like a sudden storm; then it fell quiet, the bullets stopped, with only an occasional mortar or tank round bursting nearby. The Syrians and the Fatah rebels occupied the high ground, allowing them to pour enfilade fire down the main street of the camp, where two thousand people still lived. Arafat’s men hunkered down and made occasional sorties, still succeeding those first days in keeping their enemy at bay. Vaclav and I stopped off at an

UNWRA school flying the blue UN flag near the bottom of the hill, where several dozen families had taken refuge. To while away the time, kids took cafeteria trays and slid down the corrugated tin roof of the bomb shelter entrance, even as bombs exploded nearby.

After several day trips back and forth, our PLO contact told us that Arafat would speak to us that evening at 10 PM. I had hooked up with a photographer from UPI, and decided to stick around to meet Arafat, then see if I could get a hotel or a late night ride back to Beirut.

That afternoon, the rebels made their final push. They came down from Mount Turbol and took up positions in an olive grove just beyond the crumbling apartment buildings at the top of the camp, where Arafat had his offices until a few days earlier. As they advanced, camp residents began rising up out of the shelters, as if carried by a flood, and flowed downhill seeking safer ground inside the city of Tripoli itself. Late in the afternoon, even the fighters began clearing out. The UPI photographer and I were the last reporters left in the camp. We had holed up on the ground floor of a house along the main street, and every ten minutes or so, groups of three or four exhausted fighters, many of them bleeding, would crash into our shelter to escape the automatic weapons fire tearing down the street. When they sensed a lull, or perhaps that the enemy had stopped for tea, they would crawl across the junk-strewn concrete and then roll into the drainage ditch beyond. It was the only way to actually leave the camp. To reach the shelter of the city from where we were, you had to cross the main street and the drainage ditch, and then it was a 200 meter sprint across open ground to the next group of buildings at the edge of the camp.

We were trapped. And the UPI photographer and I and the fighter who was serving as our guide knew it. But the longer we waited, the closer the rebels advanced toward our position and none of us had any confidence they would respect our protests that we were press.

Finally, it started to get dark and we decided to make a run for it, first the soldier, then me, and finally, the photographer. I was carrying a Sony professional cassette recorder in a leather case around my neck that I used for my radio work. It had full stereo capabilities that let you dub from one channel to the next, and weighed a good ten pounds. I decided to carry the microphone and my notebook in one hand, and hold the recorder against my chest with the other, and record whatever happened. I whispered a brief, out-of-breath commentary to set the scene in both French and English, then ran in a crouch across the street and dove into

the drainage ditch, rolling to keep the cassette deck from hitting the ground. It was still recording, so I waved to the photographer and he made his move, pointing his camera toward the shooters, taking pictures as he ran, and this time I could see the bullets as they kicked up sand and dirt all around him. But he made it, and together we ran across the broken field and collapsed into the shelter at the bottom, completely out of breath from the run, the fear, and the adrenalin.

“You were lucky,” he said when we could breathe again. He poked at my Sony.

I looked down and saw that it was still recording, but that the decibel meter on one channel had gone dead.

“Not there. There,” he said, pulling at a tear in the thick leather casing where the tape recorder had been covering my chest. Whether it was from a rock when I crashed into the drainage ditch or from a passing bullet, I never knew. But an angel got up and, unwrapping his wings, flew off into the night.

We made our way to Arafat’s new headquarters in Latfi, a residential district on the outskirts of town, where a crowd of reporters was waiting for the Old Man to appear. Our arrival, fresh from the battle they had been hearing about on the radio, was the most exciting thing that had happened to them all day. A French reporter named Jean-Paul Kaufmann took me by the arm and led me into a corner. At first, I was flattered: I had been reading his eye-witness dispatches from Beirut and Tripoli in *Le Matin de Paris* and admired his literary skill.

“So what was it like in Baddawi?” he asked. “What happened?”

“Ouf,” I said, using a French expression that could mean anything from “not much” to “whatever.”

“No, really. What was it like? We’ve been hearing all day that the camp was about to fall.”

“Why do you think there are so many loyalist troops in here?” I said.

He latched onto that. “You mean, they have fled?”

I gave in and started to talk. “One of the last guys we saw leaving was this idiot on the back of a pickup, hanging onto the grips of an anti-aircraft gun as they bounced in the potholes. He was wearing Palestinian flags like a sandwich board, back and front, shooting up the mountain like a maniac. And through all of it, you could smell the honeysuckle and roses people were growing just beyond the walls, mixed in with the cordite. It was surreal.”

Suddenly it occurred to me that I would be reading about sandwich man in his dispatch the next day, and I kicked myself.² “How about you, what did you see?” I asked.

He pulled out a notebook and flipped through the pages. “We went to the morgue. They had 14 dead and 45 wounded, both civilian and military.”

I knew the hospital and the morgue well. Everyone did. But I had a special reason to go back there as soon as I could, and it wasn't to number the dead. “Pretty quiet? No shelling?”
“Calm.”

Suddenly, three GRAD rockets slammed into the neighborhood in quick succession and made the lights go out. Like mortars, the GRADs could land at street level because of their ballistic trajectory, but they were several times more powerful than the mortars.

“Someone is making us a target,” I heard somebody say in English.

About ten minutes later, an officer came in and gave us the all clear and most of the reporters left. They'd had enough of waiting for Arafat that night. Besides, they knew he was going to dish out more lies.

History was full of them.

Arafat's number two, Abu Jihad, arrived first, pulling up in a dark blue Alpha Romeo. I thought it was an odd car for a guerilla commander to be driving around Lebanon; but then I thought, why not? If you had all the money he'd stolen and could choose any car you wanted, why not pick an Italian sports car with leather seats, and then equip it with bullet proof glass and armor-plated doors?

Arafat himself arrived, wheels squealing, in a white Jeep Wagoneer with two carloads of bodyguards, and almost ran over people lounging outside in the courtyard. A couple of local TV cameramen had stayed behind, and they turned on their lights. The Fatah chief was wearing pressed olive fatigues over a crisp green dress shirt, and a pistol with silver inlay in the handle. If you listened to his calm, good-humored presentation, you would think it was just an ordinary day in the life, not a day when his men had made their last stand, and lost. It was a great lesson in image over substance.

At 1:15 AM, there were no cars on the street, no taxis, no hotels, and nowhere to go. I was beginning to wonder why I had hung around to listen to Arafat, when I knew full well my editors wouldn't want anything from him in my dispatches, since they could get it off the wires. The deathly quiet was unnerving and made me feel exposed, as if a thousand eyes were

tracking me from behind curtains. Plus, it was getting cold and all I had on was a polo shirt and a thin leather jacket. Sleeping outside was not an option, nor was walking around. I had to find shelter.

All the windows on the street were dark, either from the power cut earlier or because everyone was in bed, so I went into the first open apartment building I found, walked up to the top floor, and started knocking on doors. After the third try, I thought I heard movement inside, and began to wonder if this was a very bad idea. What if someone came out firing an AK-47, thinking I was trying to burgle their home? I figured that by now, enough people must know that I was inside the building, so if someone wanted to offer me hospitality, they would. So I brushed the broken glass and debris off the cement faux-marble tiles in the stairwell and sat down, trying to find a comfortable position. I resolved to try to get some sleep.

For the longest time, I couldn't stop shivering. But in the end I must have drifted off because the next thing I knew it was 3 AM and I no longer felt the cold. I had been woken up by the deep thump of a departing artillery round from somewhere nearby. It's astonishing how quickly you can go from deep sleep to total alertness at the sound of danger. Less than two minutes later, the broken window across the street blossomed bright red as the first incoming round ripped the covers off the night.

For the next hour or so, the gunners on both sides traded fire. You could almost hear them thinking in between rounds: was that enough to shut him up? Can't we just get back to sleep? And then, one of them broke the lull and they traded another volley.

But at 4 AM either the annoyance factor had kicked up a notch or someone important had woken up, because suddenly both sides went at it without let-up. I could see the reflection of a not-so-distant fire in the windows across the street, and then a shell must have landed just below because half the windows shattered, driving slivers of flame through the air until they hit the pavement like rain. In one of the apartments just above me, a woman started to wail. Another round hit close by and the walls jumped. It went on like that for fifteen minutes or more, until the guns were no longer hungry.

The next time I opened my eyes it was light outside. It wasn't the light that woke me, but the sound of a door opening just above me. A middle aged woman in a long nightdress peered down at me from the landing, then called her husband to join her. The man saw me, shook

his head, and shut the door. In the distance, I could hear ambulances screaming. I was glad the night was over and I could get back to work.

The emergency room at the Islamic Hospital that morning was standing room only as family members sought out their loved ones. There were so many wounded that the ambulance medics had to leave some of them on stretchers on the floor. A 40-year old Lebanese man slipped in a pool of blood as he rushed in, sobbing, carrying his infant daughter. A medic caught his arm, and together they placed the shivering girl on a vinyl-topped counter, because the two operating tables were taken. A young nurse smoothed the wet hair from the girl's face and stared down at her with a tenderness I suddenly found heartbreaking. I swatted a fly off my forearm and saw that it had left red tracks.

Down one corridor they had stacked the dead, too busy to haul them off to the morgue. A volunteer medic arrived with a bunch of body bags and struggled to slip one over a pair of gnarled bare feet. I wondered if the young nurse would come help him. Maybe, like me, the medic had come to the hospital just to be in her presence. Windows rattled against their hinges up above us as another artillery round slammed into a nearby building.

I waited an hour or more, taking notes, trying to find someone of authority who could give me an actual body count, but really just waiting until things had calmed down enough so I could take the young nurse aside and interview her. She had a Brancusi face, with a broad forehead and an intentness that seemed to focus all the emotion of this place on whoever she looked at with those brilliant green eyes. She seemed fragile and yet strong all at once.

"You were wonderful," I said once the stretchers had cleared. "How can you deal with all those children and those horrible wounds?"

"I was born here," she said. "In Baddawi, the camp. Perhaps you have been to Baddawi?"

"I was there when it fell to Abu Musa yesterday afternoon."

"Don't talk to me about Abu Musa!" she said, with a sudden burst of anger. "You know who led the assault? It was Ahmed Jibril, the Syrian. He boasted about it on the radio this morning."

For an instant, I thought she might be angry with me. "I'd like to write about you," I said. "What's your name?"

"My mother named me Thara'a. It means 'wealth.'"

"Wow," I said. "How could she have known."

“Known what?” she smiled.

“How beautiful you would become.”

She blushed, and looked around quickly to make sure the medics were still busy with patients. Then she brushed her hand gently against mine, pointing to my notebook.

“My mother is Lebanese, but I am Palestinian. You can write that I need to see the wounded, to hear the bombs, to see the blood,” she said, without flinching as another artillery shell slammed into cinderblocks nearby. “These are my people. I want to die here in Tripoli!”

“Please don’t be in a hurry,” I said.

I ran into Vaclav at Arafat’s headquarters later on. It was now official that Baddawi had fallen to the rebels last night. My UPI colleague’s photographs were the last taken by any Western photographer from inside the camp. After we had escaped, it turned into a rout.

“Have you noticed anything about the shelling?” Vaclav said.

“Yes, it’s coming to a neighborhood near you. My guess is, the Syrians want to put pressure on the local muckety-mucks to kick Arafat out of Tripoli.”

Vaclav was nervous about his car. He was keenly aware of the immense privilege his Communist editors had granted him by shelling out for the old Peugeot, and wanted to make sure nothing happened to it.

“How about I give you the low-down from last night and we grab lunch up in the mountains?”

“It’s deal,” he said, with a fake Russian accent. Vaclav loved to make fun of the Russians. It’s one of the many reasons we hit it off.

My hunch about the shelling turned out to be right. Vaclav drove toward the port, thinking that was about as far away from Fatahland as you could be on this particular day. But the Syrian gunners seemed to follow us wherever we went. Vaclav was a nervous driver. He actually stopped at stop signs and red lights, unlike the Lebanese. He braked for cats – and there were lots of them. With every shell that landed they seemed to leap out of basements, their fur electric. It would have been hilarious if they didn’t look like they were just about to explode.

We reached the coast road and this gave us a clear view across the ruins of the artillery marching in our direction, digging up the dirt.

“I don’t think you need to worry about the police,” I said. “Go faster!”

Vaclav started sweating, and the last thing I saw as we cleared the edge of the city at 70 mph, with tank shells exploding just behind us, was a kid on a skateboard, calmly weaving back and forth to avoid the shellholes and the debris.

We feasted that afternoon at a restaurant in a small village up in the mountains, with a spectacular view of the sea way below. We shared two bottles of Ksara wine from the Bekaa and talked about our families. Among the many things we had in common was an aversion to returning to our home countries. In my case, it was the dread of working for a small town newspaper in America. For Vaclav, it was the dull stupidity of Communist rule in Prague. He never said it in so many words, but I suspected he was not a Party member and had gotten the Beirut post because no one else at *Rude Pravo* wanted it.

“Your countrymen are hard at work,” he said, pointing to the sky. “Why don’t you call them to join us and we’ll order another bottle of wine.”

We couldn’t yet hear the fighter jets, but this was the second group that had flown by. We were still on the road when the first group had roared overhead but we hadn’t been able to see them through the trees. Now in the distance I could see a faint outline of four aircraft approaching the Lebanese coast from the sea. As they came closer, it seemed to me that the sound of the engines was distinctly different from the Israeli F-16s from last summer.

“Those aren’t ours,” I said. “Look at the wings. Do you see how small they are? And how they kind of sweep back from the fuselage? They’re Super Etendards. It’s like the entire French naval aviation is on exercises.”

“Is bad joke,” Vaclav said. “So what are they up to?”

We left the table and followed the aircraft up the stairs from the terrace and out into the parking lot, until they disappeared without giving any sign of turning back.

“They’re headed for the Bekaa,” I said.

Twenty minutes later, the planes returned and disappeared out to sea. I figured it was time to settle the bill and head back to Beirut.

On the radio, maybe a half hour later, they announced that the French had just bombed the headquarters of Islamic Amal in Baalbek, the Iranian-backed group believed to have been responsible for the twin truck bomb attacks on the French and American Marines three weeks earlier. The radio said the initial death toll was more than 50, but within days the truth came out that a mole within the French foreign ministry had tipped off the Iranians so

they could evacuate their people. The only casualties were a local shepherd and a bunch of sheep.

But it took more than two decades for the full story of the Nov. 17, 1983 fiasco to come out. President Ronald Reagan had ordered U.S. Marine Corps fighter jets to lead the airstrike, but at the last minute Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger pulled the plug, leaving the French to go it alone. Weinberger argued that the U.S. would lose its allies in the Arab world if it took part in such a raid, a ridiculous statement given the fact that the Arabs were then mired in an epochal blood-letting with Iran that would leave more than one million dead on both sides. They hated the Iranians and would have applauded the raid.³

A few days later I was leaving the UPI office in Hamra when someone ran up behind me and grabbed my arm. I recognized the sparrow-thin fingers before I saw her, and a thrill shot through my veins.

“You’re not dead!” Thara’a said. “Look, I’m not dead, too!”

As the Syrian bombardments reached progressively into the heart of Tripoli proper, including the Islamic Hospital, Thara’a’s mother had ordered her to leave the city and visit relatives in Beirut.

“I am so sad to leave,” she said. But despite all her efforts to make a sad face, the joy leapt out of her heart and we embraced on the street.

Notes

1. Roger Auque was taken hostage by Hezbollah in January 1987 and held for nearly a year. Later in life, he went into politics and was appointed French ambassador to Eritrea by President Sarkozy before dying of brain cancer in 2014. In a tell-all memoir published after his death, *Au Service Secret de la République*, he revealed that during much of the time he spent overseas as a reporter he was engaged in secret missions on behalf of French intelligence and Israel’s Mossad.

2. *Le Matin de Paris* did indeed publish an eye-witness account of the fall of Baddawi the next morning under Kaufmann’s byline that described sandwich man. Like Roger Auque, Kaufmann was taken hostage by Hezbollah a few years later and released after intense French government negotiations with Iran.

3. In the second chapter of *Countdown to Crisis: the Coming Nuclear Showdown with Iran* (Crown Forum, 2005), I recount the federal court testimony of Rear Admiral James (Ace) Lyons in a lawsuit against Iran brought by families of the 241 U.S. Marines murdered in Beirut in which he described an intercept proving Iran’s responsibility for the October 1983 terrorist attack. See www.kentimmerman.com/countdown.htm

Author of 11 books of non-fiction, including several *New York Times* best-sellers, **Kenneth R. Timmerman** was based in Paris and covered the Middle East and many of its wars during the 1980s

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