

General James F. Amos, USMC
Commandant of the Marine Corps

Remarks (as prepared) at the Beirut Memorial Observance

October 23, 2013

Camp Lejeune, NC

Ladies and Gentlemen... Thank you for the honor of speaking here today as we remember our heroes of 1983. General Gray, Mayor Phillips, other distinguished guests, and particularly the families of the Marines, Sailors and soldiers of Beirut...I have no expectations that this morning's remembrance and honors ceremony is any easier for you in 2013 than it was in 1983...your fellow Marines and family members grieve with you...despite the painful memories...thank you for being amongst us this morning!

Ladies and Gentlemen...each of you know full well why we are here this morning. For those of us that still wear this cloth and for those of you that wore it in the past, you understand that this is a heavy-hearted day for the nation and especially for our Corps.

As we think back...many of us here today remember the time well. The early '80's was a tumultuous time of conflicting powers...it indeed became the harbinger of worse times yet to come.

Tensions were high across the world as the cold war raged on and radicalism surfaced as a new threat to stability in the Middle East.

When conflict ripped at peaceful coexistence in Lebanon, the United States, France, Italy, and Britain answered the call to assist. Marines set out to establish an environment which would permit the Lebanese Armed Forces the ability to maintain security and stability in the Beirut area.

The U.S. involvement in peacekeeping operations in Beirut for the next year and a half would redefine the world we lived in.

The Marines that served in Beirut as part of the Multinational Peacekeeping Force made a difference. They stood overwatch and patrolled chaotic streets to provide a blanket of safety and comfort for the citizens of Lebanon. They stood for freedom... but they also knew that their mission was not without risk.

And then on October 23rd 1983 – on a morning much like today, terror struck. At 6:22am, extremists drove an explosive-laden truck into the Marine barracks... the likes of which had never been witnessed before. The massive explosion shook the ground of the Beirut International Airport... along with the souls of Marines around the world. 220 Marines, 18 Sailors and three Soldiers were lost in the attack. 241 Americans that volunteered to make a difference... that volunteered to serve their country...

241 that put the lives and the freedoms of others before their own... 241 of the nation's finest. We honor each of them today.

It's important to understand the significance of October 23rd and to put it now in historical context. The attacks on the Marine barracks and the US Embassy in Beirut a few months earlier, really defined the beginning of the War on Terror.

The world we live in and what we knew of the future security environment was forever changed.

At the time, Bonnie and I were in Meridian, Mississippi. I was a flight instructor in advanced jet training...but like each of us, I remember the day well. My training and the training of new aviators at the time was built around an eventual showdown with the Former Soviet Union. This was a carryover from old thought...from history as we believed it would be written and our understanding of traditional warfare.

That all changed in Beirut in October of 1983. The nation wasn't expecting this... it was a new kind of warfare... the threat of radical extremists being able to target military and civilian personnel with weapons of mass destruction for political, religious and personal gains was real. It was a new way to attack the west...it was a cowardly attack on freedom.

If you look back at the last 30 years... beginning in Beirut... extremists have attempted to destroy what makes this nation great by attacking America at home and abroad.

On June 25th 1996... terrorists detonated a truck bomb adjacent to an eight-story structure housing US Air Force personnel killing 19 and wounding 498... they attacked our embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 which killed over 220 people and wounded over 4000... the attack against the USS Cole in October of 2000 while harbored in Yemen resulted in 17 Sailors killed and 39 injured... on 9/11 terrorists attacked America in New York, Pennsylvania and the Pentagon killing nearly 3,000. We remember each of these well...and we will never forgive...nor forget!

Just last year... gunmen attacked our embassy in Benghazi, killing five including U.S. Ambassador Stevens. Not only are these world changing events, they are personal to all of us.

We have responded in places like Yemen, Somalia, Mali, Libya, Afghanistan, and Iraq... across the globe where extremists have attempted to plot against freedom and democracy. Terrorists have tested our resolve as a nation. Those men who died 30 years ago today would be proud to know... we have never relented... never backed down...we never will!

I want to talk briefly about one of the Marines who is honored by this memorial today... Sergeant Manuel Cox. We are honored to have some of his family here with us today... His wife, Evi (E-vee) and son, Anthony are here.

Sergeant Cox was born in Havana, Cuba in 1963 and came to the United States with his mother when he was one year old. His mother passed away due to cancer when Manuel was only 14, and he fended for himself as an orphan until 17 when he joined the Marine Corps.

Manuel found solace and camaraderie in the Corps... and he excelled. He was rewarded for his strength of character and work ethic with meritorious promotions to Lance Corporal, Corporal, and Sergeant. He was an admired Marine by his peers and juniors...a reliable NCO by his commanders... and a dedicated man to his family.

In 1983, Sergeant Cox was a squad leader with Golf Company... 2nd Battalion, 8th Marines. For those that remember, 2/8 was the designated Battalion Landing Team for the 22nd Marine Amphibious Unit that relieved the 24th MAU in Lebanon after the bombing at the barracks.

Sergeant Cox along with seven other members of his squad manned Observation Post 76 on the West side of the Beirut International Airport on December 4th, 1983 just over a month after the terrorists struck the barracks. Two days prior, Evi (E-Vee) had given birth to their son... Anthony. In a conversation with his company commander, Sergeant Cox was given the option to return home to take care of his family. He handed the Marine Captain a cigar and said, "My wife and baby are fine... My men are here – my duty is here."

While standing guard on December 4th... Observation Post 76 came under intense enemy fire in an attempt to further exploit Coalition losses in Beirut and test the capabilities of the new U.S. forces on the ground.

The engagement lasted for around 3 hours... Sergeant Cox and his squad were outgunned... by all accounts, the fighting was ferocious. He called for and adjusted artillery fire and mortars, and gave fire commands to his gunners. As some put it... "Sergeant Cox and his Marines fought like hell that night."

Regretfully, Observation Post 76 was hit by indirect fire taking the lives of Sergeant Manuel Cox and seven more of our nation's finest.

Sergeant Cox was an inspiration to those that served with him... as were the other Marines, Sailors and Soldiers that we remember today. Though it seems they were taken suddenly and it remains difficult to understand the purpose for which they left... I am confident they would be proud of the legacy that continues because of their sacrifice.

Sean Stokes was only 10 months old in Fremont, California when Sergeant Cox was in the fight of his life in Beirut. Sean wouldn't even know the horrific tragedy of the barracks bombing until many years later. But like Sergeant Cox... Sean felt a calling to serve. Sean Stokes entered the Marine Corps on October 15th 2001... a month after the attacks of 9/11. An excellent athlete... and an avid outdoorsman... and a moral compass to his fellow Marines. Sean was an upstanding young man who was always about doing the right thing.

During the battle of Fallujah in November of 2004, Corporal Stokes was assigned to Lima Company, 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines... he was the point man for his squad. As fighting raged for days in house-to-house combat... Corporal Stokes never backed down and refused to leave his Marine brothers even after being wounded multiple times. He continuously advanced against heavily armed enemy positions, engaged in close quarters combat, and selflessly protected his fellow Marines rather than himself when members of his squad came under intense enemy fire.

Stokes walked point each day of the battle. He was the first Marine down every street, in every house and every room – hundreds of rooms. He was the first Marine to be attacked by the enemy and the first to report the situation to his squad leader. Bullets, grenades, rockets and roadside bombs were around every corner. His bravery and composure in the harshest of conditions were an inspiration to all that served with him... he was a legend.

Even though Sean didn't want recognition, he was awarded the Silver Star for his actions in Fallujah in 2004.

Sean was killed in Al Anbar Province 45 days into his third tour in Iraq. Investigating an area of possible roadside bombs... Sean again 'took point'... he died due to an improvised explosive device... and once again saved the lives of countless Marines.

Ladies and Gentlemen as you can see... One thing that is consistent since that fateful day in Beirut 30 years ago... the character and courage of the US Marine has not waivered...it never will.

As we sit here today, our Marines remain forward deployed ...three Marine Expeditionary Units are staged around the globe (26th, 13th, & 31st) ... Marines continue to train security forces and deny terrorist safe havens in Afghanistan... Marines are deployed with Special Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Forces to respond to crises in Africa and the Levant... our Marines are as strong as ever... ready to respond... ready to answer the nations clarion call...

Bonnie and I are honored to be a part of this remembrance... thank you to all of you who have joined the Marine Corps and the city of Jacksonville today to remember not the tragedy, but each individual who sacrificed everything to serve our nation and save the lives of countless Marines, Sailors and Soldiers who have served after them. God bless and Semper Fidelis.