

No COUNTRY BUT WAR

No COUNTRY BUT WAR:

A REPORTER'S SKETCHES OF LEBANON

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Rockville, Maryland
2008

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For Mike Dawahare

*And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray
Do not go gentle into that good night,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

—Dylan Thomas
Do not go gentle into that good night

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PREFACE

THE ongoing violence in the Middle East in general, and Lebanon in particular, prompted me to revisit the following essay almost twenty years after I first wrote it. If nothing else, I knew the manuscript was well traveled. First draft was written in Lexington, Kentucky in 1989. Following a divorce, the manuscript and I journeyed to Amsterdam, where I revised the text between visits to my favorite coffee houses of that damp, grey city. From there, we made our way to the palm trees and bars of Key West, where I completed the work. The book almost saw print in 1992 when a small publisher in upstate New York placed it on their fall list, only to bump it for Jack Kevorkian's first book on assisted suicides. Discouraged, I shelved the project and moved on.

Over the ensuing fifteen years, I tore through life at a frenzied pace. I married my wife, Anita, and we had two sons, Alex and Eric. Our blended family, which also includes Anita's two boys Jesus and Roque, left Key West and returned to Kentucky where I completed my doctorate in political science, continued to write and began to teach. I finally published my first book, *Civil Society and Lebanon*, in 2000. A scholarly study, it was not the literary work I had hoped to author when I first began to write and publish. Like so many journalists—especially foreign correspondents and combat reporters—I have read too much Hemingway and taken him far too seriously. When this book was writ-

ten, I still dreamed of publishing novels and winning Pulitzers. Such aspirations have faded over time and are now mere shadows that inhabit the deepest recesses of my remaining dreams.

In any event, as I began to reread this text, I was fascinated by the author's voice—my voice at the rather youthful age of 29. It was an odd experience for I (the reader) had become a completely repositioned subject; not entirely someone else, but certainly a very different person than I was when first I (the author) began this work. I immediately decided to leave the text unaltered, including the original Author's Note, save a good copy-edit.

That first reading also caused me to reflect on how reporting has changed over the past two decades. Today, combat reporters are no longer granted the freedom to move more or less freely from unit to unit the way we did in Lebanon. Instead, they are 'embedded,' their copy subjected to strict military censorship. Here at home, editors in New York and Atlanta (CNN was nascent in 1984-85), bury the war on the inside pages of newspapers and 'farther back in the book' in newscasts. Most of the public, meanwhile, act as if the nation isn't even at war. Gone are the Viet Nam-like days when the media and the public followed with varying degrees of hope and rage the plight of American troops placed in harm's way.

On a more innocent level, I hope readers are as amused as I when they encounter the antiquated technology of the eighties in the pages that follow. Instead of web-based wire services, digital recording devices and iPods, this text is populated with the chatter of old fashion wire machines, the turning spools of cassette recorders, alligator clips attached to the mouthpieces of analogue phones and Walkman cassette players.

As part of my research before writing this book so many years ago, I read the war memoirs of Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon, Phillip Caputo, Tim O'Brian and Michael Herr. I intended to add to the genre as these authors had. And while the following may be only a modest contribution, I decided to send these pages into the world because, if nothing else, they capture the end of an era. The end of war reporting, and combat itself, at close quarters.

There were no computer-guided Tomahawk or Cruise missiles in Lebanon. Nor did we move about the country well behind enemy lines while embedded with American military units. Lebanon's civil war may well be the last military conflict fought without the high tech weaponry

that has led to the dehumanized killing that war has become. Xboxes and Play Stations didn't exist in 1984. And wars, especially low intensity conflicts like the Lebanese Civil War, did not resemble such games.

Finally, despite the fact that Lebanon's war has receded into the world's historical memory, the events related in this narrative deserve to be shared. The war may be over. The Western Media may no longer be fascinated with the tiny Mediterranean nation now that the carnage has (more or less) come to an end. But the scars such a conflict leaves on the world, and the lessons learned (one hopes), remain.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

THIS book is not a political or military history of the conflict in Lebanon. Instead, these pages convey the experiences of one person who happened to survive a part of Lebanon's war. This is a personal narrative. This book is about covering the war as a reporter for a small Beirut English-language daily and an American radio network. It is about the little people—the Lebanese and Beirut's expatriate community—not the Big Picture.

The following pages concern roughly a six-month period in Lebanon's war, the fall and winter of 1984-85. The fact that some years have passed since these events took place does not matter. These episodes are as real today as they were then. They are intended to convey the sorrow and violence that Lebanon's war inflicted upon all whom it touched.

The events recounted here all happened. The chronology, I believe, is accurate (though some of my notes were not dated). Only the names of a handful of guerrilla fighters and four civilians have been changed; all others, including those of public officials and my friends, are true. Conversations between acquaintances, friends, and colleagues are reconstructed. Quotations of public officials and victims were taken from my notes and dispatches.

I have tried to write an impressionistic portrait of Lebanon's war and its killings, several years after having left the country. And like an

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impressionistic painting, I have found that the greater the distance—in this case, time—the sharper the focus, the clearer the image.

If the reader is strained by the episodic quality of this book, then I have succeeded. War, as the saying goes, is organized confusion. Life in a combat zone is disjunctive, surreal; events occur in spurts, recollections come in episodes. I have used both the present and past tenses as a narrative device in an effort to recreate this quality in the world of the text with the hope that it will invoke similar feelings in the mind of the reader.

MDD
Key West

We knew that the uses of most information were flexible, different pieces of ground told different stories to different people. We also knew that for years now there had been no country here but the war.

—Michael Herr
Dispatches

ENDINGS, BEGINNINGS

All men dream, but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake in the day to find that it was vanity, but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dream with open eyes, to make it possible.

—T.E. Lawrence
Seven Pillars of Wisdom

I walk along New Oxford Street in London's banking district with my bureau chief, Lou Miliano. A light winter mist falls on the city. I'm dressed in my best clothes—a full length grey herringbone tweed overcoat, an Italian wool suit, cotton shirt, and silk tie.

This is my first day at the bureau. I have just arrived from Beirut and I want to make a good impression. Lou and I are old friends, having met in Buenos Aires during the Falklands War when we were working for different radio networks. Now we both get our paychecks from RKO. He is my boss and we're chatting about my new beat.

We walk by a four-story tower of scaffolding. Planks span the rungs so that the workers have a surface on which to stand while they paint the eaves of the building.

We take another ten or fifteen steps. Something explodes behind us—the sound of an incoming 60mm mortar round. I jump to the gutter, then turn and look at Lou who is standing on the sidewalk, his hands stuffed in his overcoat pockets and a cigarette hanging out of his mouth.

He says without a smile, "Get out of the gutter, Dawahare. This ain't Beirut."

The "explosion" was a wooden plank that had fallen off the scaffolding. It was a brusque first impression.

When I arrived in London in 1985, after a six-month tour in Beirut, I weighed 167 pounds, down from my usual 185. For the next year, my right eye twitched when I became nervous. I could be talking with someone about the most innocent subject, and my eye would start up and I would turn away, ashamed. Loud noises—a car backfiring, a plank hitting concrete—would send me looking for cover.

But sleeping—or, rather, not sleeping—was the worst. Horrible dreams invaded my nights. Nightmares that were not fiction, but actual experiences relived in the mind of an insomniac.



The Smuggler's Inn, an elegant West Beirut restaurant frequented by the Muslim sector's artists and intellectuals, is destroyed by a satchel bomb. Rumor has it that George and Petro Zeini, the two Greek Cypriot brothers who own the establishment, refused to pay protection money demanded by the Shia Amal militia.

No bakshish, and your place gets bombed.

Fashionably dressed patrons are dining in the restaurant when the plastique detonates. Now, people lay moaning on the floor. They huddle in twos and threes; those who are not injured tend to the wounded.

An AP photographer and I cover the bomb site. We walk through the burning remains of the restaurant, propane gas canisters in the kitchen cooking off in dull thuds. Several of the wounded scream as the canisters pop, thinking other bombs have exploded.

George Zeini stands amid the smoldering rubble and shouts, "I have built this place with my life, all my life, and now it is destroyed, for what?" He sobs, holding his slightly wounded right arm.

Red Crescent volunteers (the Muslim version of the Red Cross) load the dead and wounded into ambulances for transport to American University Hospital. I hitch a ride in one of the converted vans and follow a stretcher to triage.

Bodies on gurneys line the walls. Puddles of blood cover the floor. I walk through the red pools and interview a doctor who is moving from patient to patient in triage.

We come upon two dead men, their faces burned black. The flesh is molten. The smell causes me to retch in a trash can.

As the ambulances shuttle more wounded into the hospital, Amal militiamen take control of the emergency room. One approaches me, his Soviet-made AK47 assault rifle trained on my gut. He becomes ani-

mated, screaming at me as he herds me toward the double glass doors that lead from the hospital to a parking lot. The doctor I had been interviewing intervenes before I'm taken outside to face who knows what at the hands of the enraged fighter.

After filing on the bombing, I go home. I sit on my bed and undress. My shoes and socks are soaked in blood. So are my feet. I go to the bathroom to wash off. I scrub my feet, but it does no good.

I scrub the soles of my feet for two days, trying to get the blood off, until the flesh turns raw.

I have had the same dream, off and on, for months. I'm afraid to go to sleep at night. Afraid I can't get the blood off my feet.

Now such dreams rarely visit my sleep. And my eye doesn't twitch as often.

But what about the Lebanese, the Palestinians, the Syrians, and the Israelis? What about the combatants and civilians who fought and lived in Lebanon through so many years of war?

The romance of war is a myth. Remembering one's experience in war might strike some as romantic. But there is nothing truly romantic in the actual fighting.

War fascinates young men with questions; questions about their strength, their courage—how they might behave in the face of death. Will I run when I confront the enemy? Can I shoot a man who is trying to shoot me? Questions whose answers rob them of their youth. Later, after they have found the answers to these questions, they are invariably drawn back to the country where their youth was lost. Not because they loved the war they fought or observed, but because that place is part of them now. And they have become part of that place.

The only noble acts I saw as a reporter in Lebanon were those of survivors. A man drags a woman from a bombed car. A doctor tends the wounded. The noble acts of the Lebanese who try to go on with life despite all the killing.

Journalists have long debated the morality of our behavior as observers in combat. Should you simply watch and record events? Or should you interfere when an atrocity is being committed and influence events? Do you take a picture of a child suffering in a fire fight, or do you save the child?

Some consider such questions valid. I don't.

If you can save the child, save him. If you can't, then—and only then—might the 'pure' role of observer be acceptable.

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Covering the war in Lebanon meant more than simply observing and recording a nation as it tore itself apart. You had to live there, too. You couldn't just leave the child weeping in a street while 9mm rounds pockmarked the ground around him.

Living in West Beirut meant living in another man's dream of power and war. Lebanon was, and long remained, the militias' collective fantasy of glory. For her civilians, Lebanon's war was a nightmare, a nightmare in which too many people, innocent and guilty alike, had to live.

ARRIVALS

*In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful,
here begins my tale...*

*Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was
a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow
that was coming down along the road met a nice little boy
named baby tuckoo...*

—James Joyce

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

INCOMING

From time to time God causes men to be born—and thou art one of them—who have the lust to go abroad at the risk of their lives and discover new...These souls are very few; and of these few, not more than ten are of the best.

—Rudyard Kipling
Kim

AN Israeli 50mm machine gun unleashes a furious burst at something to my right. A lone AK47 answers, tapping out three rounds. I drop to the pavement and lean against a low concrete retaining wall. Sweat trickles down my spine, slowly making its way along the crease of my back in a cold stream. The afternoon is hot, but I shiver. Fear.

I check my tape recorder. The cassette is rolling. I watch the spools turn. I'm getting some really good "bang-bang." What a stupid euphemism for live fire. Although we make our living writing, journalists can author the most sophomoric euphemisms.

What now? I can't move or I'll draw fire. I certainly can't sit here all day. I need to file. This is good stuff—top of the hour material for the radio network.

George's Barbecue Pit is across the street. The 50 sits atop a jeep parked next to the squat building. I need to make it twenty feet to George's in order to file and I can't. I'm trapped in a cross-fire.

A group of us worked out a deal with George, an Armenian Christian who once lived in the States, to use his direct-dial long distance phone—one of only two in Sidon—to file our dispatches. Jim Muir of the BBC, Daily Star reporter Richard Beeston, and some guy I've just met from the Philadelphia newspaper are already inside.

Twenty feet and I can't make it! I can't believe it.

I look out across the parking lot that I am facing. A wave of horror surges through my body and swells in my chest. An AP local hire (a Lebanese who works full-time for the wire, but for low wages) is strolling across the pavement, seemingly oblivious to the chattering machine guns.

“Get down!” I shout. “You’re gonna get wasted walking around like that!”

“No, it’s OK, just walk—don’t run—and they won’t shoot at you,” he answers. “Get up slowly. As long as you don’t run, they won’t shoot.”

Anything is better than being trapped between two machine gunners, so I rise slowly. My legs shake involuntarily. I struggle to control them.

I join the AP photographer and walk right by the Israeli gun and into George’s.

I remember thinking, “Man, this is one weird war.”

Then again, they’re all weird. Confusion is perhaps the single most common element in war. Novelists and scriptwriters tend to create images of orderly set-piece battles that move up and down an open field like a football game. Such images are literary conveniences, far from the actual truth of the matter when it comes to low-intensity conflicts and limited insurgencies. For that matter, fire-fights and traditional company and battalion-strength battles are fought by individual men—frightened, alone, confused—who struggle to stay alive and kill the other guy, rather than be killed themselves. Grunts and guerilla fighters do not care about tactics and strategy. Most have no idea what those lofty concepts mean in the middle of a fight. They do not envision entire units, companies and platoons, taking map grids and holding them. Troops on the ground see themselves and their friends. They smell fear and burnt cordite. They scream with their weapons and struggle to control their desire to run or just not fight.

And each war has its own rules. During the civil war in El Salvador, I saw fire-fight pause so that women could collect their drying laundry from clothes lines. In Beirut, no one would fight in bad weather. If it rained, it was quiet.

But I was not thinking about such things on the eve of my arrival in Lebanon. On the contrary, I was excited with my new beat. After three years in Central America as a correspondent in El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua covering the military conflicts that plagued that region

through most of the eighties, I thought I was well prepared to cover the war in Lebanon.

Nothing could have been further from the truth. I didn’t know it at the time, but I had many things to learn about Lebanon—the first among them, who was fighting whom. Something even the Lebanese didn’t seem to know. And still didn’t when I left.

Perhaps more importantly, I soon discovered that no one could agree on a single reason why Lebanon’s civil war started in the first place.

Some say the French caused the war when Lebanon was granted independence by imposing the 1943 Covenant which dictated that only a Christian could hold the office of president; only a Sunni Muslim the office of prime minister; only a Shia Muslim speaker of the house; and the Druse were allowed nothing higher than a ministerial post—restrictions that remain in Lebanon’s constitution until the Treaty of Tai’f. Thus, the French left their former colony a stratified society of first-, second-, third-, and fourth-class citizens.

Others claim the Palestinians caused the war when they were driven from Amman by Jordan’s King Hussein during Black October and took control of Beirut’s Muslim sector. Three years later, after the PLO had begun staging operations against Israel from South Lebanon, the Civil War began. Still other Lebanese argue that foreign intervention prevented Lebanon from resolving its civil war. One thing almost every Lebanese I ever spoke with about the subject agreed upon was that somebody else—the French, the Palestinians, the Israelis, the Syrians, the Americans—caused the war, not the Lebanese.

All of these explanations have some validity, though none fully explains the war, the senseless killing. By the time I left Beirut, my personal theory was, and remains, that the war was nothing more than a conflict between the region’s confessional sects, much like the tribal conflicts that have plagued the region for two thousand years, only this time the combatants possessed much more sophisticated weaponry. Instead of horses, camels, swords, and hunting rifles, they now had Armored Personnel Carriers (APC’s), artillery pieces and automatic assault rifles with which to fight one another. A second element of my theory is that Lebanon’s youth were trapped in an endless cycle of killing. Many came of age at some point during the fifteen-year conflict—born to war, nurtured in war, knowing nothing but war.