Focus | BEIRUT BOMBING

Thirty years ago today, a suicide truck bomber brought down a building in Beirut, Lebanon, where U.S. Marines were quartered, killing 241 servicemen. President Ronald Reagan called it...

a ‘despicable act’

But the Marine barracks bombing was more than that. It was the unofficial dividing line between the Cold War — in which traditional foes like the Soviet Union and China were feared — and today’s ongoing war against the constantly changing threat of terrorism.

The commander of the Marines in Beirut, Col. Timothy J. Geoghegan, later testified he was unhappy with the conditions of the quarters his troops were placed in. The compound near the Beirut airport was surrounded by hills from which Muslim militia occasionally fired artillery. The area was under occasional sniper attack. Orders prohibited fortifications or even a prominent perimeter fence. Sentries were ordered to stand guard with unloaded rifles.

So when a yellow Mercedes truck loaded with explosives burst through a modest gatehouse at 6:22 a.m. Sunday, Oct. 23, 1983, there was little to keep the vehicle from smashing into the cinder block building (below).

The explosion could be seen from miles away (right). The building lifted off its foundation and then pancaked. Marines scrambled to pull survivors from the rubble. The last had been buried for nearly six hours.

The explosion killed 300 Marines and 220 other U.S. military personnel. In all, 241 people died. The resulting crater measured 30 feet deep and 40 feet wide.

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