

CHAPTER 35

*We just got on top of that rubble and listened
for people. We would see an arm sticking out or a leg sticking
out and we started digging and pulling them out.*

—MARK SINGLETON

December 21, 2022

Commodore France ordered a medical team ashore from the *Iwo Jima* and activated two additional ones from the battleship *New Jersey* and the guided-missile cruiser *Virginia*. Sailors from the tank landing ship *Harlan County* and the dock landing ship *Portland* would likewise help dig out survivors. France recalled the *Austin* from a port visit to Alexandria, Egypt, and requested medical evacuations to hospitals in Cyprus and Germany. “Extent of casualties,” he concluded in a message to Washington, “unknown.”

First Lieutenant Anthony Pais, who flew with the Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 162, was asleep on the *Iwo Jima* that Sunday when the sound of chains being dragged across the flight deck roused him. The Baltimore native and graduate of the Virginia Military Institute, whose father served as a guard in the Nuremberg Trials, was still in his rack when the squadron duty officer burst into his stateroom. “Get up!” he said. “The BLT’s been hit!”

“So what’s new?” Pais quipped, noting that the building always drew fire.

“No, this time they’ve really been hit!”

The twenty-six-year-old jumped out of his bunk, pulled on his flight suit, and rushed to the ready room, where the flight duty officer briefed Pais and copilot Captain Michael Hagemeyer on that day’s frequencies and call signs. Pais then signed for the aircraft before heading topside toward his CH-46 Sea Knight, a tandem-rotor helicopter designed to transport Marines into combat. Medics armed with everything from intravenous fluids and catheters to bandages, dressings, and peroxide climbed aboard as Pais circled the helicopter on inspection before jumping into the cockpit’s right seat and firing up both engines.

He then dropped the rotor brake and pushed the condition levers forward.

“You are clear for takeoff,” the air boss crackled over the radio.

Hagemeyer gave the signal for the aircraft handlers to pull the chocks seconds before Pais lifted off the *Iwo Jima*'s deck at 6:45 a.m., aiming east toward Beirut as he ascended to an altitude of three hundred feet. The trip, which Pais had done countless times, normally took about fifteen minutes. Visibility that morning was about four miles. Land-based units were oddly silent. “There was nobody to talk to,” Pais recalled, “nobody on the radio.” Five miles from shore, the pilot began to step down his altitude. He crossed the Lebanese coastline and headed toward the Marine compound. “All I saw,” Pais said, “was a pillar of smoke.”

On the ground, Marines set up a perimeter, rolling out heavy vehicles along with fifty-five-gallon drums filled with sand to control access, allowing guards to screen any potential threats amid the rush of Lebanese fire trucks and ambulances. Others attacked the rubble before the cloud of dust even settled, using their bare hands and Marine-issued Ka-Bar knives until shovels, axes, and sledgehammers arrived. Fueled by adrenaline, the Marines clawed at the rock pile, shredding their fingers and knuckles. The explosion had not only pulverized the structure but obliterated human bodies, littering the wreckage with arms and legs as well as torsos and heads. Flesh likewise dangled from the limbs of nearby trees, many denuded of foliage. Scattered amid the debris, rescuers discovered dead birds, killed in flight. The abundance of human remains, blood, and entrails overwhelmed the senses. “You could smell guts,” recalled David Madaras. “Bodies were lying all over,” added Gunnery Sergeant Herman Lange, another of the initial rescuers. “People were trapped under the concrete. I could hear them screaming.”

“Get us out,” Marines hollered. “Don’t leave us.”

Rescuers followed those voices down into the rubble. Each person who dug on the pile emerged with a horror story. Michael Petit stumbled over a squishy object at his feet. “I glanced down,” he recalled. “A severed hand, palm up, lay next to my boot. It wore a wedding ring. I swallowed hard, forcing down the bile that had risen to the back of my throat.”

Glenn Dolphin, who left the Combat Operations Center to assist, spotted an overturned jeep. “There was a leg,” he noticed, “complete with boot and sock, sticking out from under the vehicle.” Hoping the Marine might be alive, Dolphin reached down, grabbed the boot, and yanked. To his horror, he discovered, the leg was severed from the rest of the dead

Marine's body. Like Petit, he fought the urge to be sick. "I immediately dropped the leg," Dolphin remembered. "It was as if I was having a nightmare. This couldn't be really happening. I prayed that I'd wake up any minute and it would all be over."

An equally emotional battle played out underground for those survivors who woke up disoriented and in pain, buried under tons of rubble. Navy corpsman Don Howell struggled just to breathe, choking on the thick dust in the basement of the destroyed building. The darkness robbed the twenty-one-year-old of a view of his surroundings, but he could hear the muffled voices of others trapped in the wreckage around him, letting him know he was not alone. "What the hell happened?" one Marine hollered. "Where the fuck am I?"

"You're in the basement," Howell replied.

"What?" came a stunned answer.

"Where were you?" Howell shouted.

"On the fourth fucking deck."

That Marine had fallen the equivalent of five stories yet miraculously survived.

Howell's eye hurt from his injury, prompting him to strip off his T-shirt and press it against his battered face. The last words the corpsman spoke before he drifted off to sleep the night before were the Lord's Prayer. Howell closed his eyes again in grace.

"God," he whispered, "please get me out of here."

Howell blinked to find a beam of light penetrating his underground prison. The single ray not only illuminated the dust in the air around him but revealed a path toward his salvation. "It was so radiant," he recalled, "and so obvious that it wasn't there before."

Elsewhere in the darkened wreckage, Emanuel Simmons fought the urge to panic. The twenty-three-year-old New Yorker, who had been on the second floor almost directly above where the truck crashed through the guard shack, used his right arm to push against his surroundings. "All I felt," he said, "was rock." At that moment, Simmons realized he had no sensation in his left arm. Had the explosion severed it? Pinned down on his stomach, Simmons moved his right hand around the front of his body, searching the rubble. Amid the rocks and concrete, he found a hand, one with a distinct piece of jewelry on the fourth finger: a gold ring engraved with the emblem

of a cobra. A girlfriend in New York had given him that ring long before he joined the Marines. “I knew then,” he said, “it was my hand.”

Simmons seized the wrist, hoping that if he could only hang on to it, doctors might be able to reattach it. He focused then on calming himself. There were several other Marines in the room with him when he went to sleep. Where were they?

Why was he now alone?

Simmons felt his breathing deteriorate. Fear seized him. Like his friend Howell, he turned to the Lord. “God,” Simmons prayed. “Please don’t let me die here.”

He then relaxed and his breathing improved. At the same time, Simmons began to hear muffled voices above him. “Get me out of here,” he hollered. “Get me out of here.”

“Quiet, quiet,” he heard someone above shout.

“Get me out of here,” Simmons continued to yell.

“We hear you,” someone assured him. “We hear you, bud.”

Simmons held on as the workers removed a concrete slab. He felt rocks and gravel slide down on his neck. “That’s when I realized,” he said, “I’m going to be okay.”

Danny Wheeler was not so fortunate.

The chaplain had been asleep in his quarters on the fourth floor of the building’s north side. The blessing wall next to his bunk had collapsed against another, forming an A-frame that helped protect him. Alone in the dark, the chaplain realized he likely would not survive, that he would die buried in the rubble. “I was angry,” Wheeler recalled. “I was very angry.”

“God,” he said, “so this is what you plan to do? Kill me?”

That opening salvo, uttered in a moment of frustration, helplessness, and anger, began a conversation that Sunday between Wheeler and God. Amid the horror—the blood, the dust, and the debris—he confided his fears in the Lord. If he died, what would happen to his wife and three young children back home in Jacksonville, ages two, five, and seven?

Who would take care of them?

“It’s going to be all right,” God assured him. “I’ll take care of them.”

“We got closer and closer,” Wheeler said of his relationship with God. “I wasn’t angry anymore.” Everything, the chaplain realized, one way or another, would be all right. He could feel the comforting presence not

only of God, but of those previously departed souls. “It was a moment in which I was between death and this life,” he said. “I was at peace.”

Up above, the chaplain’s faith colleagues rushed to pull survivors from the wreckage. Thirty-seven-year-old Rabbi Arnold Resnicoff was normally stationed aboard the USS *Puget Sound*, part of the Navy’s Sixth Fleet that covered the Mediterranean. The rabbi had arrived in Beirut on Friday to conduct a memorial service for slain Marine Allen Soifert. Religious custom forbade unnecessary travel on Saturday—the Jewish sabbath—so Resnicoff had stayed an extra night, crashing with Father George Pucciarelli. The duo were two of the first rescuers on the scene after the explosion. Pucciarelli had paused only long enough to slip on his flak jacket and helmet before he grabbed his stole—a cloth religious vestment similar to a scarf—and vial of oils and rushed out the door. “Follow me,” he had instructed Resnicoff.

The two religious leaders had reached the ruins within minutes of the collapse, struggling to process the scene as the dust enveloped them like a sandstorm. Neither wasted a minute to jump in and help. “I started giving last rites,” Pucciarelli said, “to those that I found were dead and those who were seriously wounded.” Resnicoff wiped the blood from the faces of the injured and covered their mouths to prevent them from inhaling the acrid dust. The rabbi peeled off his undershirt and began ripping it into pieces that he could use as wipes and bandages. “There were bodies all over,” Resnicoff recalled. “It was like being in a horror movie.”

“Over here,” Pucciarelli hollered. “There’s a man hurt over here. Get a stretcher.”

The priest moved on to the next Marine.

Then another.

Pucciarelli would tell a Marine Corps historian several weeks later that he tended to more than 150 dead and wounded that Sunday, including three he pulled from the rubble. The Catholic priest was no stranger to such violence, having once worked as a chaplain for a police department and later in an emergency room. But none of those experiences compared to the scope of the carnage here. This was personal. Before him that morning flashed the faces of young men he knew, Marines who over the many months in a war-torn land had confided in him their fears and struggles as he helped provide spiritual counsel and guidance. A terrorist’s explosion had now left these young men dead, disfigured, and broken. “I have never seen so many cuts and gashes,” Pucciarelli said, “huge cuts that were just torn open.”

Resnicoff used up every last fiber of his undershirt. He then removed his yarmulke, the traditional headgear worn by rabbis, and wiped the brow of an injured Marine. The words of the Old Testament prophet Malachi, who wrote of the cruelty and suffering he witnessed more than two and a half millennia earlier, echoed in Resnicoff's mind.

"Have we not all one Father?" the prophet had asked. "Has not one God created us all?"

The morning's attack revealed that the answer to that question still escaped so many, but not Pucciarelli and Resnicoff. At one point the priest noticed that his friend's yarmulke was missing. He tore the camouflage fabric from his helmet and fashioned a new one.

"Well," Resnicoff said, "we have a Christian and a Jew taking care of our men—a priest and a rabbi working side by side."

Pucciarelli agreed. "In the midst of desolation and death," the priest recalled, "I was reminded of the brotherhood of man."

The dust slowly dissipated and the morning sun climbed into the sky. Gasoline from overturned jeeps and destroyed diesel generators seeped down into the wreckage. Heat from the fires ignited small-arms ammunition stored in the basement, which cooked off only to be muffled by the tons of debris. British, Italian, and Lebanese rescuers arrived to help, including army commander General Ibrahim Tannous, who met with Geraghty. "Whatever you need, you've got," the general assured him. "We'll bring every emergency crew in Lebanon to bear on this, and I'll get you heavy construction equipment in here immediately to lift some of these layers off these people."

Cranes soon appeared courtesy of Oger Liban, Lebanon's largest construction company, which had provided equipment after the terrorist bombing of the American Embassy six months earlier. Geraghty moved his command post to his jeep. Armed with a PRC-77 radio and aided by his driver, Corporal Michael Cavallaro, the colonel set out for the bomb site, which reminded him of newsreel footage of wrecked European cities at the end of World War II. "I felt strongly that it was important that I be visible to my men and the rescue teams to offer encouragement and support while they carried out the heart-wrenching, gruesome task," he said. "It was surreal. Mangled, dismembered bodies were strewn throughout the area in a grotesque fashion. One Marine's body, still within his sleeping bag, was impaled on a tree limb."

The arrival of construction equipment allowed crews to lasso large slabs of concrete and hoist them off the pile. Workers used blowtorches to burn

through rebar and sledgehammers to break up rock. Survivors at times emerged from beneath concrete slabs, moaning and covered in dust. Other times Marines tunneled down in search of them.

“There’s someone alive in there!” a rescuer shouted at one point.

Others on the pile perked up.

“I can hear him calling for help,” the Marine continued.

Petit watched as the leathernecks clawed at the rocks with their hands to widen the entrance. A Marine then wriggled down into the rubble. He popped out moments later followed by another Marine, blanketed in filth and blinking at the bright sun.

“Oh, God,” the rescued man wailed. “I’m alive!”

Petit sized him up as he slid down the pile toward the others. “He didn’t have a scratch on him,” he marveled. “Barefooted, he wore the lime-green surgeon’s top and trousers in which he had slept. He rubbed the back of his head. Dust peppered his dark skin and hair.”

“I’m alive!” he continued to cry. “I’m alive.”

Another Marine embraced him as others encircled them.

“It’s okay,” the rescuers assured him.

Randy Gaddo had a similar experience when he heard a muffled cry for help from under the rubble. “I hear you, but I can’t find you,” he hollered. “Keep yelling.” To his surprise, the leatherneck responded with a familiar tune. “From the Halls of Montezuma, to the shores of Tripoli,” he sang. “We fight our country’s battles, in the air, on land and sea.”

“Keep it up,” Gaddo shouted. “Keep it up!”

As the trapped man belted out the Marines’ Hymn, Gaddo and several rescuers managed to dig him out unharmed from a crevice beneath a collapsed wall.

But not all stories ended as well.

Rescuers at times could hear wounded men trapped below, separated by a few feet or even inches. But the immovable weight of tons of concrete and rebar made it impossible to save them; their blood bubbled out beneath the rocks and shock shut down their organs.

“It was literally a race against time,” Geraghty acknowledged, “and we were losing.”

When possible, hospital corpsmen passed morphine to them to ease their suffering. Other times troops reached down to hold their hands. “There was a dying Marine just feet below us,” Dolphin recalled. “We

could see, touch and talk to him, but we couldn't save him. All we could do for him was to make sure he knew that he wasn't dying alone."

A similar nightmare confronted Corporal Brad Ulick, who along with several other rescuers was unable to lift concrete slabs off a trapped comrade. "By the time we got to him, he was dead," Ulick recalled. "But the worst part was his fingers were raw down to the bone where he tried to dig himself out through the concrete."

Others endured similar tragedies, including Gaddo, who managed to free one Marine with the help of three others. "All of a sudden," he recalled, "his stomach opened up and his innards started coming out. I grabbed them and tried to push them back inside."

In another instance, Gaddo and Pucciarelli spotted a Marine, still alive in his sleeping bag, sandwiched between two collapsed floors with only his feet protruding. "We tried to pull and pull, but he was in there. We couldn't do anything. We couldn't move tons of concrete," Gaddo said. "We stood there and watched him shake, shake, shake, and then he was still."

Such events added to Geraghty's increasing anger. "Many bodies and portions of bodies were totally burned," he said. "I had a tough time keeping my psychological balance." He was particularly disturbed when he came upon medics attending to Lieutenant Colonel Gerlach, commander of the Battalion Landing Team. Gerlach, who had earned a Purple Heart in Vietnam, had been in his office on the second floor. The blast had thrown him clear of the building. "To put it bluntly," Geraghty said, "he looked a mess." In addition to a crushed face, he suffered a broken neck, left arm, and right leg. "My first impression was that he was dead," the colonel said. "As I knelt down for a closer look, I came very close to getting sick. I was surprised that he was still living but frankly didn't give him much of a chance for survival."

"Here lie the fucking unintended consequences," Geraghty thought, "of getting sucked into an eight-sided civil war while trying to carry out a peacekeeping mission."

Buried under the rubble on the building's north side, Chaplain Wheeler continued to fight to stay calm. "I was trying to keep myself oriented without going crazy," he said.

"You can't lose it," he told himself. "You have to keep it together."

Wheeler's eyes adjusted, and even though he had lost his glasses, he could make out shapes in the dark. "I'm Danny G. Wheeler," he hollered to alert rescuers, "and I'm alive!"

But no one came.

One hour passed.

Then two.

Wheeler's voice went hoarse. Alone in his concrete crypt, he tried to distract himself. His wife, Brenda, had mailed him a collection of Louis L'Amour paperbacks, classic Western adventure stories. In each book, characters confronted impossible challenges, from battles with outlaws and kidnapers to cave-ins, yet managed to survive. Wheeler replayed those novels in his head. "I was imagining myself," he said, "as one of his characters."

Major Doug Redlich, who commanded the Marines' Service Support Group, divided rescuers into teams. Given the language barriers, volunteers from each nation were assigned a corner of the destroyed building on which to dig. Communication was primitive, consisting of hand and arm signals and sketch pads. Rescuers then fanned out with an ear to the ground, listening for any sounds of survivors. "The groans were everywhere," recalled First Lieutenant Mark Singleton, who helped Redlich with the rescue efforts and led the quick reaction force that provided overall security. "You could hear them and so you just went to where you heard the noise and started digging." At times, one voice in the rubble might reveal two or even three buried survivors. With so many dead and wounded, rescuers ran out of stretchers, forcing them to improvise with cots, ponchos, and plywood fished from the rubble. "Every five minutes you looked, there was somebody coming out," Singleton added. "He was half naked on a stretcher. He was black and blue, or his head was gone, and his arms were gone."

Elsewhere in the wreckage, Marines turned over debris in search of telltale bloodstains. "Once a blood trail was located, the digging effort followed that trail until a body, or more often a body part, could be recovered," Dolphin said. "This was not the funeral-home type of death with which all of us eventually have to deal. It was an indescribably gruesome, raw and visceral crime scene. This was murder, plain and simple." To Dolphin fell the grim task of helping remove the Marine who was impaled in a tree. "I grasped an end of the bloody sleeping bag. Blood ran down and stained the inside of my fingers. As gently as we could, we pulled the bag through the tree's branches and down to the ground," the lieutenant said. "I purposely did not look at the captain. I felt that in the interest of my own sanity, I needed to start filtering out as many horrific images from being planted into my memory as I could."

In such cases, Marines often sought the help of the chaplains. “As the dead were dug out, Marines would come up to me to ask that the bodies of their buddies be blessed,” Pucciarelli remembered. “A small group of Marines would gather around and watch solemnly as I anointed the forehead of the lifeless form before me. They had found a way to show respect for their dead comrades, and I was touched by how mindful the Marines were to provide services for their fallen brothers and by the strength they drew from prayer.”

As the hours ticked past, the rows of the dead grew longer, men covered by ponchos and poncho liners. “We ran out of body bags quickly and requested an emergency resupply,” Geraghty said. “The bloody bodies, along with the rising temperatures, caused a repugnant odor of death and drew flies, which added to the mayhem.” Staff Sergeant Calvin Openshaw, whose father was a coroner, stood watch until rescuers hauled them to the morgue. Even for Openshaw, who had worked as a medical lab technician, the scene was gruesome. “I saw one man blown in half,” he said. “I did not know such things could be done to human bodies.”

Dolphin endured a similar experience when he fetched a poncho liner from one of the bodies that was needed to cover a wounded man suffering from shock. As he did so, Dolphin glimpsed the dead youth, dressed only in red Marine athletic shorts. “He was just a kid,” he said. “There was blood seeping from his nose and mouth. A crushing blow to the chest had killed him. His entire body seemed to be swollen around this huge dent in the center of his chest.” Such scenes replayed over and over again exhausted the rescuers. “There were a lot of guys standing around,” Openshaw said, “not really hurt bad, just in shock, just wiped out.”

Resnicoff and Pucciarelli lost faith that their colleague Chaplain Wheeler would be found. “Pooch and I were so sure that he was dead,” Resnicoff said, “that we had promised each other that, when the day came to return to the States, we would visit his wife together.”

Wheeler’s Advent stole fluttered in the wind like a pennant, marking the spot where he was buried. “What is that purple cloth?” a Marine asked.

Pucciarelli overheard the question. In a Marine compound, where camouflage fatigues were the daily wardrobe, the color purple was rare. The priest immediately recognized the bright cloth as the same one his friend wore around his neck during service.

“That’s Danny’s stole,” he exclaimed. Pucciarelli snatched the cloth and peered down into the rubble. “Who’s there?” the priest hollered. “Who’s down there?”

Wheeler, who had lost his voice from his hours of earlier shouting, now struggled to respond. “This is Chaplain Wheeler,” he cried. “Come get me!”

“We’ll be right there,” Pucciarelli replied. “Hang on!”

Marines started digging down. Wheeler banged his ration box and his watch to make noise. “The next thing I knew, I felt a hand on my hand,” Wheeler said. “I held it.”

“Hang on, buddy,” someone above shouted. “We’re coming for you.”

Sand fell down the back of Wheeler’s shirt. The tunneling forced the walls to shift, increasing pressure on him, particularly on his wedged head. Pain shot through his skull. “*How much pressure,*” he thought, “*can a human being take before the head bursts?*”

“Hurry up,” he cried. “Hurry up!”

The walls likewise pushed on his chest and diaphragm. Struggling to breathe, he thought of Jesus crucified on the cross, desperate for air as his diaphragm collapsed.

“*I can’t die this way,*” Wheeler thought.

Suddenly the pressure miraculously vanished. Crews hoisted the wall that seconds earlier had threatened to crush him. Charlie Company commanding officer Captain Chris Cowdrey climbed down next to Wheeler. “Chaplain,” he said. “What can we do for you?”

“I’m thirsty. Can I get some water?”

Wheeler watched a canteen passed hand to hand down a line of Marines. The dusty and dehydrated chaplain lifted the canteen and pressed it to his lips, gulping the chemically purified water. “It tasted,” Wheeler recalled, “like nectar.” Marines cleared the rubble that pinned one of his legs and then yanked. “My foot,” he said, “came out like a cork in a bottle.”

Rescuers hoisted Wheeler atop a stretcher. He felt the warmth of the sunlight and felt the cool air that he imagined blew down from the ancient and cedar-lined mountains of Lebanon. “It was heaven,” he said. “It felt so good.” Rabbi Resnicoff hovered over his friend like a parent, counting all ten fingers and toes. “I didn’t realize that I was so obvious,” Resnicoff later said, “but the truth was that we could not believe that he was in one piece.”

Alone in the dark in the wreckage of the destroyed building, surrounded by hundreds of dead and the dying, Wheeler had, like the biblical figures of

Jacob and Job, argued, questioned, and wrestled with God, before in the end he made peace with his Lord. More than five hours after a terrorist's bomb imprisoned him in the bowels of the building, Wheeler was finally free. The chaplain would prove the last soul God delivered alive from the wreckage.

Rescuers gently carried Wheeler down off the rubble pile and toward the aid station. "Racked with pain, still unsure of his own condition," Resnicoff said, "he asked how his clerk was. Like so many of the men we would save that day, he asked first about others." Wheeler's spirit soared as he watched the parade of faces and smiles float past him, men who had gathered for a glimpse of their chaplain. "My Marines," Wheeler said. "These were my people."

Bigelow made his way back to the Battalion Aid Station to check on Ware as the wounded cycled through en route to the *Iwo Jima*.

"How many patients do you have over there?" Ware asked his friend.

"We don't have any more patients," Bigelow replied. "Everybody's here."

"Oh, okay," Ware said. "Where's John?"

Bigelow had no choice but to level with his friend. The irreverent doctor the men loved, the trombone-playing father of an eight-month-old son back home in Georgia, had vanished. "We haven't found John," Bigelow said. "He must have been in the building."

Ware had spent the morning focused on his own lifesaving work, convinced Hudson was leading medical efforts at the bomb site. Not only did the full scope of the tragedy still evade Ware, but until that moment it never occurred to him that Hudson might not be a rescuer, but a victim. The gravity of that realization now settled upon him.

"Well," Ware finally stammered, "how many people were hurt?"

"Everybody," Bigelow replied.