

# Marine paper tells Lebanon war story

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BEIRUT, Lebanon — The steadily escalating involvement of U. S. Marines here, from mere patrolmen to active combatants, is well known. But perhaps nowhere has the transformation been chronicled so simply as in the unit's weekly newspaper.

Early issues of Root Scoop (root is Marine slang for Beirut) tended to be dominated by stories about promotions, athletic contest winners and family additions. These topics have yielded to accounts of prolonged artillery duels, U. S. Navy volleys, lists of casualties and pleas for constant vigilance.

"It would be easy to lower our guard during this cease-fire," Col. Timothy J. Geraghty, the Marine commander, writes in the lead story of the current issue. "It would be easy to relax our discipline. Therein lies the danger. We must continue to maintain the same high state of alertness and discipline which saw us through the hostilities of the past two months."

Since it is, in a sense, an official U. S. government publication, Root Scoop offers no explanations on how a show-the-flag mission turned into some of the worst fire taken by American troops since Vietnam.

No attempt, for example, is made to link the Druze attacks on the Marines, who officially are here to support the Lebanese army, and the army's reportedly increasing cooperation with Christian Phalangist militiamen, arch enemies of the Druze.

Nor is any special significance attached to the first time that Marine artillery and U. S. naval guns fired on positions that weren't firing on them.

Indeed, the innocence of Root Scoop, whose front-page masthead proclaims, "U. S. Peacekeepers, Beirut," is at times stunning. But therein lies the force of its words.

The 1,400 Marines arrived in September 1982, largely in response to the massacre of Palestinian civilians by Phalangist militiamen at two Beirut refugee camps. Volume 1, No. 1, though, was not issued until April 15, two weeks after the then-local commander, Col. James Mead, ordered his troops to carry loaded weapons because of reports of possible terrorist attacks.

The lead story dealt with the pending nomination of the Marine Corps commandant. Also in the edition were a list of promotions and names of Marines whose wives had given birth.

The next issue, April 22, was more sobering. It reported that one Marine, not a member of the peacekeeping unit, had been killed in the U. S. Embassy explosion that took more than 60 lives.

Another story, headlined, "Marine Sentry Returns Fire," told how Pfc. Kenneth E. Simpson weathered an attack at Checkpoint 11. "A round passed through the Wellston, Ohio, Marine's uniform trousers, but he was not injured," Root Scoop said.

Reflecting the surface calm, if not the growing political dissatisfaction, the next few issues dealt with less explosive issues: the installation of a television transmitter at the Beirut International Airport home of the Marines and the importance of buying U. S. Savings Bonds.

The mood was broken in the May 13 issue which told how Mead's helicopter was hit by machine gun fire. No one was injured. The brief item did not mention he was flying over Lebanon's central mountains to determine who had fired on French army peacekeepers.

That was to be the last bad news for two months. Root Scoop was able to concentrate on the basics of base life. Among the prominent items: "Next Assistant Commandant Announced," "Hospital Corps Celebrates 85th," "Marines Celebrate July Four With Festivities." Profiles appeared of a base

doctor, of a mini-marathon winner, even of a company bugler.

At a time when the Marines still had some contact with civilians they were invited in one issue to "try your hand at speaking Arabic."

The July 15 edition fell on the 25th anniversary of the Marine intervention here in 1958 to protect the faltering regime of President Camille Chamoun. "No shots were fired and no incidents occurred," an article said, declining to draw any comparisons with their presence now.

In what writing teachers like to call foreshadowing, the July 22 issue highlighted the 155mm howitzers of the Marines, their biggest guns, the "sleeping giants of Charlie battery standing tall against the Mediterranean sky." The story detailed how each 15,740-pound gun could fire two 95-pound high-explosive projectiles a minute. They would be fired in early September.

On Aug. 15, a feature on Marine mobile patrols included this warning: "If they don't react properly in a real situation," says Maj. Andrew Davis, operations officer, "then they're liable to have a heck of a lot more casualties."

In other stories, the medical unit issued a warning about eating Lebanese-made food and the formation of an Alcoholics Anonymous group was announced.

By this time the Marine compound had come under mortar fire at least three times. But Root Scoop, following the official U. S. line, assured its readers it was nothing personal. "So far we haven't been targeted," Lt. Col. Larry Gerlach, the commanding officer of the battalion landing team, was quoted as saying on Aug. 19. "We know that we are not the targets. The targets were portions of the Lebanese population. They (those who fired the rockets) were very concerned that we had Americans who were wounded."

The sad truth about the nature of the Lebanese conflict and the American role began to emerge in the Sept. 2 issue. "Two Marines were killed and 14 injured when dozens of rockets, mortars and artillery rounds" struck the compound Aug. 29 in "the most intense fighting since Marines landed in Lebanon more than a year ago," the lead story said.

In a haunting memory of the days in Vietnam, Root Scoop also published its first casualty list, taking up most of an inside page.

That was just preliminary skirmishing. The civil war began in earnest on Sept. 4 when the Israeli army ended a 15-month occupation of the central mountains, which begin only a few hundred yards from the perimeter of the Marine compound.

The front page of the Sept. 8 issue contained two stories. One reported that two Marines were killed and 10 wounded in the latest fighting. The other contained Geraghty's acknowledgment that incoming artillery fire had been "adjusted" on Marine positions, a polite way of saying the guns were aiming at the Marines.

"Marines maintain defensive positions. . . Fighting continues," the Sept. 15 Root Scoop proclaimed, announcing the first use of U. S. Navy guns to stem the attack. Four more casualties were cited, but no deaths.

"Naval gunfire lashes out September 17, 18, 19; Lebanese hold Souk el Gharb," bannered the Sept. 22 edition. The story told how American commanders for the first time decided to bombard positions attacking the Lebanese army — but not Marines — at Souk el Gharb, on the grounds that the fall of the mountaintop city would threaten the American peacekeepers. The article did not call this an escalation.

Everyone learns from experience, and that includes Root Scoop. The lead headline in the Sept. 29 issue read: "Cease Fire Halts Fighting In Beirut. . . How Long Will It Last?"