

There is one thing they never tell you about Lebanon;

the living, and the working, are, most of the time, so very easy. Not only does the news tend to come to your door—if not actually through it—but help nearly always outweighs hindrance. Admittedly, on occasion, in unusual form.

It was November 1985, the beginning of the 'Flag War' between the Druze Progressive Socialist Party and the Shi'ite movement Amal in West Beirut. Up the hill to my right, Terry Waite was sitting under a table in the Associated Press office regaling his interlocutors with tales of the other occasions on which he had been under fire; up the hill to my left, in the Clemenceau neighbourhood that is still home to Valentino and Cartier, a small group of Druze militiamen were fighting off scores of attacking Shi'ites (the Druzes came out unscathed; the Shi'ites did not). Our own area, Ain Mreisse, had not yet seen a shot fired in anger; young Druzes and young Shi'ites who had known each other since birth, and who still played in the same football team, were uncomfortable in each others' company but were keeping their fingers off the triggers for the moment.

The fighting was the worst inter-militia sparring that West Beirut had seen at that time, spectacular raw sound for radio, and merited a closer look. But the Druzes, friends and neighbours, barred the way: "You'll get killed. No further, please."

This perfectly reasonable request brought forth a torrent of abuse from the Shi'ites, who had provided safe passage into and out of many front lines. "We know her and she can go wherever she likes," they screamed, emptying their AK-47s at the Druzes' feet. "This is our area too. What right do you have to prevent her going where she wants to go? She's a journalist and this is her job..."

In many ways, there is nowhere easier to work than Lebanon, no people more helpful, no politicians more accessible. Every faction has at least one radio station—and often a television station too—and the difficulty lies not in getting information but in sifting it and making sense of it. Red tape, like government, barely exists. Every taxi driver you meet will know the address of every notable in the city (so small is Beirut, and so familiar, that addresses are given by building and not by street). Friendship moves mountains.

In this most street-wise of cities, where street life bounces back to life the minute the guns fall silent, 7 February, 1984, was a day apart. Not a civilian soul was out and about as day dawned. The Moslem militias had routed the Christian-dominated army in most areas of West Beirut the day before and the status quo, street by street, was hopelessly confused—not least because army and militia were wearing the same fatigues. If I ventured out from the Commodore hotel, where most journalists had been trapped overnight, to cries of "you're mad" from my colleagues, it was only to get home to feed the cat.

I was halfway there when two Druze militiamen known to me only by sight drove past and asked if I needed a lift. On hearing I was a journalist, they proposed I accompany them about their business, sharing the back seat with two kalashnikovs and an opened box of hand grenades.

First stop was the American Embassy, where they met

the deputy chief of security, to inform him, almost apologetically, that "the army have handed over all their weapons." "Folded up just like we thought they would, huh, Saleh?", responded the American. Saleh, embarrassed, looked at his feet: despite their divisions, the Lebanese have an overwhelming sense of Lebanon.

From this day on the Druzes were friends and seemed to consider it their duty to ensure that I didn't miss a beat.

A few months after the takeover of West Beirut, there was a knock at my door well after midnight. "We're leaving in a few hours to attack the *Mourabitoun*," a Sunni militia. "Do you want to come too?" (Thanks, but no thanks.) On another occasion, a senior Druze official came out of a meeting with Amal to phone in the news that had just come over his walkie-talkie: four Americans had been kidnapped from Beirut University College by gunmen dressed as policemen. He was back on the line less than an hour later, ignoring cries of "CIA" from the Shi'ites: they were not only dressed as policemen, they were policemen—a detail the Prime Minister, Selim el-Hoss, confirmed several weeks later.

With very few exceptions, the same eagerness to help is to be found among all the Lebanese. When hijackers seized TWA flight 847 in 1985, Amal arranged interviews at the hijacked plane and with some of the American hostages it had managed to extract from the control of the pro-Iranian Hezbollah party. There was much talk of mega-bribes, but the truth was simpler: Amal knew the reporters who had stayed in Lebanon, and who had shown a real interest in Lebanon, and fell over itself to help. Not a penny changed hands.

Politicians were equally helpful, equally accessible. In West Beirut, even the Prime Minister, Selim el-Hoss, was too courteous to turn away visitors who arrived without appointments; he may have been reluctant to talk shop, but he would receive you. In East Beirut, Gen. Michel Aoun was always willing to send an armoured personnel carrier for a pick-up when shelling had made it impossible to drive to the presidential palace. News departments, where they existed, could usually be circumvented—unless the target was the

Lebanese Forces leader, Samir Geagea, or the Amal leader, Nabih Berri.

And then there is the national airline, Middle East Airlines, which breaks all records for helpfulness and efficiency against the odds. A few years back, when police riots were sending political shockwaves through Egypt, ABC News was late in making up its mind about sending a crew in from Beirut. When the decision to go was finally taken, Cairo was under curfew, Cairo airport was closed, and Beirut airport had cancelled all flights to Egypt including our chartered 707. It still took only a quick telephone call to the friendly chairman of MEA to find ourselves airborne with champagne thrown in for luck.

Over Cairo our luck ran out and ground control refused landing permission. But our pilot solved the problem with only a little prompting. "We have little fuel and we need to land..." The Egyptians really had little choice.

All this helpfulness can of course misfire, especially when fingers are on the triggers. As one fighter told an American colleague who wanted a guided tour of the mid-city Green Line on a day of very heavy shelling. "Welcome to come with me. Maybe you die; maybe you don't." In the event, nobody died that day although the shortest of the fighters with us was shot through his helmet-liner—at the level where most of us had our necks.

Despite their openness to the media, in part a reflection of the favour foreigners have traditionally enjoyed in Lebanese society, our relationship with the militias was an equivocal one. They were both friend and foe, source and censor, protector and oppressor. And when their blood was running high, they were a positive, and unpredictable, danger.

The same Druze friend who informed me of the quadruple kidnapping on another occasion put his pistol in my stomach and threatened to pull the trigger if I asked one more question. A Shi'ite fighter who had helped me through several battles turned murderous one *Ashura*, misunderstanding a chance remark, and destroyed all my equipment by smashing it with his submachine gun. (One of his friends later sought

out my house and returned my tape, miraculously intact despite the destruction of the recorder]. A friend in Hezbollah who was both thoughtful and helpful turned on me in a rage when I absent-mindedly touched his arm one day, and refused ever to deal with me again.

Excluding their occasional determination to kill you, the worst thing about the militias from a journalist's point of view was their obsession with bureaucracy. As they hit the headlines—whether by fighting on the streets or in the ill-named National Unity Government—they produced their own press passes emblazoned with their own flags and consigned the Lebanese press card to history.

Three days before the militia take-over of West Beirut, I was in the Shi'ite southern suburbs, observing the vicious attack on them by the army of Amin Gemayel, when a well-dressed young man flagged down my car. It is a cliché but not an exaggeration to say that shells were exploding all around. The young man demanded my Amal pass. I did not have one. He insisted I leave the suburbs. I refused. He lectured me, on the street, in the heavy shelling, for more than 10 minutes. We finally agreed, hating each other, that I could continue recording the tribulations of his community if I brought an Amal pass with me the following day.

"Who," I asked with loathing, "do I get this pass from?" He grinned evilly: "Me." Today we are friends: he is more cooperative than most government officials and less censorious. After accompanying me into a Palestinian camp that Amal was rendering uninhabitable, with enormous loss of life, he read my entirely uncomplimentary report and nodded sagely: "That's fair."

In the early stages of militia life the press pass, once obtained, had to be renewed weekly. The Lebanese had of course learnt this from the Palestinians, who taught them all they knew and much they should forget.

At the beginning of the Israeli invasion of 1982, when the Fakhani district that housed most of the offices of the PLO was being bombed by air, land and sea, PLO spokesman Mahmoud Labadi insisted that the hundreds of foreign

journalists who were then in Beirut renew their PLO passes every five days—risking their lives every time they did so.

A British photographer who had illustrated a book on the Palestinians protested that this was sheer lunacy, as indeed it was. Labadi insisted. The photographer then misspoke: he was, he said, a 'friend' of the Palestinians. And he mentioned the book, implying that his was no ordinary case. Labadi extended his hand for the pass. The photographer handed it over, looking satisfied. Labadi crossed out '5' - and wrote in '2'.

The problem posed by the militias acquired a totally new dimension in 1982 with the kidnapping of David Dodge, then acting president of the American University of Beirut. In a private letter to his wife soon after he was seized, Dodge made clear that his release was dependent on the release of three Iranians kidnapped in East Beirut.

Although it was not apparent at the time, Dodge's kidnapping was the first blow in a new war that was to hit journalists and academics especially hard. A dozen Western journalists have been kidnapped in West Beirut to date and two are still held: Terry Anderson of the Associated Press, now in his sixth cruel year, and John McCarthy of Worldwide Television News. Almost every journalist still in Beirut has a story to tell of the day he thought he was about to become a statistic.

My own first brush with kidnapping—or so it seemed at the time—came in February 1984 when a car load of gunmen picked me up for questioning during the army's attack on the southern suburbs. By this time I was the proud possessor of an Amal pass and, finding myself in the southern suburbs, attempted to inaugurate it. It failed to impress. I then tried a bit of name-dropping, mentioning a friendship with Nabih Berri. This, too, failed to impress. "He's not the boss around here."

It was my first intimation that Amal was not the only real force on the ground in the Shi'ite community.

But it was still early days and the encounter ended amicably. After two or three hours, the gunmen put away their pistols, unlocked the door and proposed a cup of coffee.

I bumbled my thanks and fled; there is nothing so unsettling as a locked door reinforced by handguns.

A brief encounter of this kind would have been almost unimaginable a few years later. Perhaps not for a woman... but even that is far from certain. Lebanese women are no strangers to kidnapping and two British women have been held for a brief period—admittedly not for political motives, but nevertheless by Shi'ite militants. More pertinently, new thresholds are being crossed almost every day; it is not so long ago that we fondly imagined journalists were foolproof.

For several years in the late '80s, the threat of kidnapping made it difficult and at times impossible to work. In the worst periods, foreigners who had refused to be evacuated sat behind locked doors; at other times they thought twice before venturing near the southern suburbs or driving down to south Lebanon.

For almost two years Hezbollah has been kept out of the south by the rival Amal movement. But the pro-Iranians controlled large pockets of the south until 1988 and could, had they been so inclined, have taken dozens of journalists hostage there despite the presence of the United Nations peacekeeping force UNIFIL.

In 1984, David Hirst of the *Guardian* and I were stopped at a flying checkpoint well out of sight of the nearest UNIFIL checkpoint by two young men in black who were armed to the teeth. They detained us at length and asked unusually detailed questions before letting us pass. At the bottom of the hill, UNIFIL told us they were Amal men. But they were not; they were most definitely Hezbollah. David, like myself, was shaken: "They could have had us down one of those wadis and away before anyone knew we were missing." A few years later they did just that with William Wiggins, the American marine colonel last seen in a videotape of his hanging.

It is one of the things that most angers me about the Lebanon of recent years: that Beirut-based journalists who did so much to record the deeds—more specifically the misdeeds—of the Israeli army in south Lebanon should have been hamstrung by a minority of the very community that is most

suffering from the Israeli boot.

Much has been said and written about the 'intimidation' of journalists in Beirut, and much of it by Israeli officials with a Palestinian axe to grind. In almost 10 years, I have never felt threatened by any group within the Palestine Liberation Organisation. There was a nervous moment late in the Israeli invasion when a fighter at a checkpoint manned by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine asked: "You American? No? Good. If you American, I kill you now." But the moment passed quickly—Americans were running about Beirut in their thousands in those days without coming to any harm—and the anger was, it seemed to me, perfectly comprehensible: American weapons were being used to kill and maim on a vast scale with very little being done to stop it. Despite all the publicity and the promises—especially on the subject of cluster bombs, 'bomblets' as some papers would have it—Washington never stopped supplying them.

PLO officials could put you to sleep with their complaints about your stories and they could be mind-blowingly petty and officious. But I never felt the need to exercise self-censorship.

It is a different story outside the framework of the PLO. Despite cordial relations with some members of Abu Nidal's Fatah-Revolutionary Council—his Beirut spokesman Walid Khaled has sat on my terrace, spitting olive pips, proclaiming friendship and watching his 'protection' endeavour to look inconspicuous behind the palm trees below—it would be unwise to take a poke at Abu Nidal from Beirut. Some journalists even decline to link Abu Nidal's henchmen to kidnappings they are well known to have organised. And everyone was quick to comply when Walid Khaled demanded that the group be referred to as 'Fatah-Revolutionary Council', and not 'Abu Nidal'.

Israel's other allegation—that journalists in Beirut are intimidated by the Syrians—has, or had, more substance to it, even if it was only part of the truth.

Until a few years ago, journalists thought twice about filing any sensitive Syrian-related story from Lebanon. The list

of journalists killed or wounded by the Syrians in Beirut is well known. As a result, some stories were attributed to "travellers from Damascus" while others were run under far-flung datelines—Nicosia, London or New York. Some were simply forgotten.

This is no longer the case. The Syrian regime has done much to improve its relations with, and behaviour towards, the foreign press. Were there to be a replay of Hama today, the Beirut press would almost certainly jump all over it. But there is still a subconscious, or perhaps residual, self-censorship. Why, for example, is so much written about Israel's mistreatment of Lebanese prisoners and so little about Syria's? Is Khiam so much worse than Mezze? The answer perhaps, these days, is that there could be a problem for visas the next time a hostage is released in Damascus.

In West Beirut, Syrian behaviour to the man on the street has improved beyond measure since the Syrian army returned to West Beirut in 1987—largely thanks to the good example of the head of military intelligence in Lebanon, Gen. Ghazi Kanaan, who has won a reputation for personal honesty that his predecessor did not enjoy. Syrian solidiers are still despised by the Lebanese for their rough peasant ways and their thick Syrian accents, but they inspire more compassion than anger with their requests for 'drinking water, newspapers, cigarettes—luxuries they cannot even dream of on a salary of 2,000 Lebanese pounds (approximately two pounds sterling) a month.

However much scorn is poured on them, and however much they sometimes merit it, West Beirut's Syrian peacekeepers are an army and can be dealt with as an army. One example will serve.

One night some while ago, my maid's husband, a Togolese, was walking me home when a Syrian soldier stopped us at a checkpoint. On seeing a black man, he began to harass him, shining his light into his eyes from a distance of only a few inches and ordering him to step inside the building to receive a "message from one of your friends." I was instructed to shut up and continue on my way. He was rude, crude and

probably had robbery in mind. But I won the argument, being ruder and angrier than he, and complained to his superiors at the next checkpoint. Without the slightest hesitation, the officer in charge accompanied me back down the street and started hitting the offending soldier so hard that his head slapped against the wall like an unstuck sole. "We are guests in this country," he shouted. Slap, slap. "We are donkeys compared to the Lebanese." Slap. "We must behave with politeness." Slap, slap, slap.

"Next time you go to jail..."

The Syrian intelligence, *mukhabarat*, in West Beirut are a different story, as unpleasant and as violent as ever they were. No strings can be pulled where they are concerned and there is no court of appeal. There are only two rules: don't show anger and keep your mouth shut. My driver on one occasion failed to observe these rules and angrily protested that he had not, as alleged, parked next to a Syrian office that was almost 100 yards distant. He should have eaten his words, for he was hauled out of the car and thoroughly beaten. I protested later to an army officer, who merely shrugged his shoulders.

Having criticised the Syrians, it is necessary to examine the Israelis who were, at least during my time in Lebanon, a greater threat and generally far less pleasant. I have some good memories of Syrian soldiers; none of Israelis. The images that spring to mind are all negative—the tall, lanky soldier with the slouch hat telling crowds of exhausted, frightened Lebanese in 1982 that the pass they needed to cross their own mountains was issued not by a Phalangist major but by "an Israeli, of course"; the crew-cut graduate lolling in the garden swing of an appropriated villa in East Beirut and ranting on about how the invading army had brought its own supply of Marlboros and Coca-Colas. "We're not like the Lebanese. We don't steal"; the boy from Tel Aviv who shot a Lebanese child dead in front of my eyes and who, having shot him, flung down his rifle and jumped with joy.

Throughout the last decade in Lebanon, the Israeli army, far beyond its own borders, has been a constant threat to journalists—both accidentally and, I believe, deliberately.

Forget the journalists who died in 1982 in the course of Operation Peace for Galilee. Forget the three-month siege of Beirut that cut off even the water supply. Forget the phosphorous bombs in the middle of the city and the routine bombardment of hospitals, orphanages and schools. But remember the day when Beirut Radio took time to thank the journalists who had stayed in West Beirut—and then named the foreign bureaus that were still operating out of the An-Nahar building on Hamra Street. Minutes later, a 155 mm phosphorous shell hit the building, dropped through the ceiling of the Newsweek office, transited through the Los Angeles Times and exited through United Press International, destroying everything but taking no lives because everyone was already in the basement. Chance? Perhaps.

Three years later, an Israeli tank shelled and killed an American television crew attempting to film an 'Iron Fist' operation against the south Lebanese town of Zrariye, where 30 Lebanese villagers died. Tel Aviv argued later that the tank crew had mistaken a zoom lens for a rocket-propelled grenade. Possible, in these high-tech days? Doubtful.

Israel's proxies in south Lebanon, the South Lebanon Army militia, are among the worst thugs in the country, combining the trigger-happiness of the Lebanese with the arrogance and rudeness of the Israelis. They are also the only militia that has never, ever offered me a cup of coffee.

One of the major difficulties facing journalists in Lebanon is obviously the physical difficulty of the place—whether it be caused by the Israeli invasion, the militias' mad-dog battles or, most recently, the War of Liberation launches against the Syrian army by Gen. Michel Aoun.

But until the War of Liberation there was a vibrancy about Beirut—especially during the Israeli invasion when the very dreadfulness of every day, and the idea of an Israeli army occupying an Arab capital, created a sense of uplifting fraternity. The militia battles were madness, death to Lebanon, but they were energising: there is an attraction to running around front lines; knowing that that shell, once again, did not have your name on it; racing, bent double, from wall to

barricade as a skinny kid with a wicked smile shouts: "Keep your head down".

But the War of Liberation was never vibrant, never energising. It lasted twice as long as the Israeli invasion—six months of fighting with 155mm and 240mm artillery—and never offered any hope of a solution. Except perhaps the final humbling of the Maronite Christian community. Before it was over all the clichés had come true: Beirut was a ghost town; the calms were tense; the city was terrorised. There was not even a Commodore Hotel to act as fixer and keep the bar open all night long. Few drivers stayed in the city and fewer still were willing to drive around it. We thought back almost fondly to the good old days of intermilitia fighting when every block was a front line, when tank cannons were used like submachine guns and when it was still possible to move on the streets.

In the worst moments, the shelling was so frightening that knees stopped knocking and locked. Worst of all for the journalist was the crippling communications problem that emerged as Gen. Aoun fought on.

Even in 1982 there were always some lines of communication open to the outside world—if only because the Commodore begged, borrowed and stole to keep them open. At one point towards the end of the invasion, the hotel's endlessly inventive manager even persuaded a friend at the PTT to plug the hotel into the city's sole surviving telex line—that of Prime Minister Shafik Wazzan—so that journalists could get their copy out.

But the War of Liberation was the death of communications. Everything worked sometimes, but there were lengthy periods when nothing worked. More importantly, bribery was of no use: the system was simply on its last legs, lines broken beyond repair and generators overburdened and overheated. International telephone calls became virtually impossible, inducing one news agency to go to the previously unthinkable expense of installing a portable satellite line. Telexes went down for days on end and more than one bureau was reduced to using the heavily surcharged satellite line of

the Summerland hotel.

With the worst of the War of Liberation apparently over—and with state-sponsored kidnapping at least temporarily over—Beirut became once again a place in which it was possible, and enjoyable, to work.

Despite Aoun and despite the militias, opinion flourished. And it is relatively informed opinion: there is no newspaper comparable to Britain's tabloids and the least educated Lebanese will be found reading, or rather devouring, the local equivalent of the *Guardian* or the *Telegraph*. In West Beirut, always the more tolerant and cosmopolitan of the two Beiruts, diplomatic and journalistic life is reviving as a result of the terrible destruction inflicted on the East by the inter-Christian fighting. Hamra may be a sorry sight when compared to its pre-war glory and the Shi'ite refugees who run many of its boutiques may lack the taste of their predecessors. But the sequins and the feathers, the copy-cat fashions and the cheap stylish shoes, all testify to a burning, resilient desire to climb up into the middle classes.