

A Holiday-Like Lebanon Exodus

By Joe Alex Morris Jr.
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Beirut

With smiling Palestinian guerrillas standing guard, the U.S. Navy successfully took 263 Americans and other foreigners from Lebanon yesterday aboard a small unarmed landing craft.

The group, including 116 Americans, was transported from the military beach here by the landing craft out to the Navy dock landing ship Spiegel Grove, three miles offshore, for a 44-hour voyage to Athens.

There were virtually no incidents and the whole operation went smoothly, thanks to coordination between the U.S. Government and the Palestinians who, with the Lebanese Arab Army, provided security. The teamwork had been coordinated through third parties.

The 263 who went amounted to less than ten per cent of the foreign community remaining in Lebanon after 14 months of bloody civil war, the terror of nightly artillery bombardments and the crunch on food supplies caused by the Syrian blockade of Beirut.

It reflected the impression that Washington views the situation here with considerably more alarm than do the people living through it.

Last Wednesday, U.S. Ambassador Francis E. Meloy Jr., economic counselor Robert O. Waring and Meloy's Lebanese driver were assassinated in Beirut.

But yesterday, the atmosphere was more like that of a holiday outing as the Americans moved down from the Riviera Hotel to the military beach where landing craft No. 1654 tied up in mid-morning.

There were some tears of indecision, caused particularly by the rule that no pets should go on the trip to Athens.

Many who had planned to leave by land in the stalled British-sponsored convoy decided not to go by sea because of their pets. One such as Carl Peterson, an engineer from Hamden, Conn., and the owner of two cats, said: "If I don't take them, my wife will divorce me."

"I've mixed feelings about this," said Vicki Ulrey of Greenwich, Conn., waiting at the U.S. rendezvous at a seashore hotel.

"There's an election going on in the United States, and it's certainly beneficial for President Ford to show firmness in a situation like this. At the same time, I'm not cynical. I know the road has been cut. I just hope our going out in such a spectacular way won't jeop-

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ardize the Americans who are left here."

John Cobb, an engineering consultant from Atlanta, also declined to go by sea since it meant abandoning his two collies.

The British convoy to Damascus was canceled for the second straight day, with deteriorating security conditions on the road the reason. Indeed, the road south out of Beirut was reported cut and closed to all traffic by noon yesterday.

The evacuation followed days of urgent appeals by the U.S. embassy over the Voice of America and the British Broadcasting Corp. warning all Americans to get out of Lebanon. The attitude of most Americans seemed to be that they had lived through 14 months of civil war and would get through the rest of it — somehow.

In fact, many of the people leaving yesterday were leaving for reasons other than safety. Abdullah Zakby of Monterey, Calif., a machinery salesman, had urgent business in Teheran. Some students were en route to summer school outside Lebanon.

This is the first time that the United States has evacuated by sea from the Lebanon. The last evacuation was during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, and that was by chartered airliner.

Beirut airport has been closed two weeks, making an airlift impossible at this time.

The last time the U.S. Navy has appeared off the Lebanese shores on anything but a courtesy visit was in 1958, when the Sixth Fleet brought in marines who landed at the urgent appeal of then-President Camille Chamoun. That decision is still wrapped in controversy.

The scene was only slightly different yesterday. Lebanese Arab Army soldiers flirted with pretty girls leaving on the boat, and carried their baggage aboard.

Geoffrey Hancock, the British charge d'affaires, helped carry his wife's luggage on board, in the process knocking down a soldier's automatic rifle.

"So sorry," said Hancock with true British aplomb, and moved on. The soldier smiled and picked up his rifle.

The only moment of excitement came when someone decided that this being a military installation—even though only a swimming club—no pictures should be taken. When photographers appeared reluctant to stop, a few shots were fired into the air to drive them back.

Sailors aboard the landing craft ducked for cover, but not those waiting to board: they've heard so much shooting in recent months that they scarcely blink an eye at the sound of gunfire, big or small.

There was a motley crew of guards at the pier.

One commander appeared to be a man in civilian clothes who carried a golf club instead of a swagger stick. One member of the military escort had his machine gun but was dressed only in bathing trunks.

The loading operation took about an hour, slowed down by a shortage of buses.

"We are sorry to see the Americans and the Europeans go," a Lebanese Arab Army soldier said. "The Americans here were nice people. But Beirut is no place for them now."

As if to emphasize his words, there was a distant rumble of artillery in the background.

The Navy eventually relaxed its ban on pets, and three were brought aboard.

The whole operation was over by noon, with the landing craft heading out into the haze where the mother ship lay. The bikini-clad girls next door at the sporting club went back to their newspapers and suntan oil; the press moved off to other haunts. For the moment, the evacuation story was over.

1400 AMERICANS REMAIN IN BEIRUT