

CHAPTER 12

Beirut



When Randolph eventually got back to Geneva for his debriefing, everyone had heard about his arrest and wanted to know what was happening on the island. He gave them the story and his understanding of the events that had led up to it. In parallel, he arranged with the accounts department to pay back the cash and ticket expenses to the Embassy of the Men in Black. Once the cheque had been signed and cleared, he handed in his UN Laissez-Passer, took back his UK passport and booked a flight to London.

Malaysia and the island already seemed so far away that it might as well have all been a dream. London was as busy and as familiar as before. No one had won the rat race.

At the roster organisation that had sent him he met up with good old Jack and gave him an account of his six months on the island. "Don't worry", said Jack with a friendly smile, clapping Randolph on the back, "It's not the end of the world. By the way, the other day I heard that the Red Cross is looking for someone like yourself to deploy to

Lebanon. Should I tell them you're interested?"

It was mid-June. Even London looked pretty. Of course he was interested in going to Lebanon but he had no idea about what was happening there. While he was in Malaysia, all the news and the talk had been about the Falkland Islands war. Having spent some time in the Air Training Corps as a kid Randolph had even received a letter stating that depending on the outcome of the 'hostilities' – the conflict was never declared as a war – he may need to be called up. The thought had terrorised him.

As Jack had mentioned that the Lebanon job could be imminent, Randolph took the train that same night back home to Scotland. It was summer there too, and for once not raining as he crossed the border in bright morning sunshine, enjoying the view of the rolling countryside as the train climbed steadily into Scotland's southern uplands and south Lanarkshire to Beattock Summit, the highest point of the West Coast Main Line railway. Randolph was feeling good. He was a free man, with the perspective of a new adventure on the horizon.

He had only been home for a few days when the phone rang. It was the Red Cross in London. Good old Jack had let them know about Randolph's availability. The call was short and sweet. If Randolph was interested, they would like to meet him the next day in London. "Tomorrow?" asked Randolph, "Is it so urgent?" It was.

In anticipation of the call, Randolph had not yet unpacked. He once more said a quick goodbye to his mother and brother, waved to the neighbours and took the bus to the railway station and the night sleeper to Kings Cross,

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turning up at the Red Cross office for morning coffee. As a precaution, having by then heard that the situation was not good in Lebanon, he told his mother he was heading to the Seychelles and would be back for Christmas.

A day later, Randolph was again in Geneva, this time for a briefing at the Red Cross. By then, his third visit to the city, he already knew his way around part of the Rive Droite, where the international agencies and organisations are located, and easily found the building of the Red Cross. He was proud of himself, feeling as enthusiastic and self-confident as a seasoned traveller.

The briefing, however, stopped him dead in his tracks. Lebanon wasn't going to be like Nepal or Malaysia. There was a civil war on. From north to south, warring factions were shelling each other from one mountain range to the other. Beirut was being pounded by fighter jets every day from morning till night. The number of casualties was high, and growing by the day. Randolph would be in the thick of it.

His first glimpse of Lebanon was on TV in a hotel room in Rome opposite the Colosseum. His onward flight from London with Alitalia, changing in Rome for Damascus, had been overbooked in Rome, where he found himself stranded between flights for two days. Randolph looked on numbed as he watched the bombing and the fighting. His gut had that uncomfortable feeling you get when you know you're trapped or have been found out. It was too late. There was no turning back. Besides, Randolph was consoling himself with the thought that the mission to Lebanon was worth four months' pay and another headline on his CV.

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After two lonely days walking the streets of Rome, too preoccupied by his destination to be interested in any of the sights, Randolph was finally rerouted on Syrian Arab Airlines via Aleppo to Damascus. The Red Cross were notified about his late arrival and had arranged for him to be picked up in Damascus and driven overland straight to Lebanon.

En route, as they changed planes in Aleppo, he observed that he was the only foreigner flying onwards to Damascus. In the free-for-all on the tarmac, when the other passengers ran towards the plane, jostling each other to get on first, he also realised that he was one of the few passengers not carrying a weapon. In this crowd of flowing robes, long moustaches, bushy beards, head bands, daggers and the odd machine gun strapped over the back, all heading as fast as they could to the plane, it could have been a set for a modern version of *Lawrence of Arabia*. All that was missing was a caravan of camels grazing beside the runway.

In the front of the plane's passenger compartment, Syrian Arab Airlines had sacrificed two rows of seats to stash guns and other weapons during the flight in a pallet-sized crate made of meshed steel. The passengers were allowed to keep their knives but had to deposit their guns. Randolph sat next to a window behind the starboard wing, looking all the time out of the window and trying not to be noticed, hoping nobody would ask him anything or want to spark up a conversation.

The plane had hardly begun to taxi when some of Lawrence's men stood up and walked up the aisle in their flowing elegance. The poor stewardess was brushed aside

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like dust, looking on concerned but not daring to speak out as the men entered the galley, pulled the food trays out from their storage racks and began to pass them down the plane, over the heads of the passengers. Randolph took his tray and nodded a timid “shukran”. Totally oblivious to danger and bent on doing only what they wanted, when they wanted, one of the men produced a kerosene pressure burner from a shoulder bag, placed it on the gangway floor, pumped up the pressure, lit the stove’s blackened ring with a match and started to boil water in a kettle someone else had found in the galley.

As the old 727 tore down the runway, Randolph’s blood ran cold. The unspoken hero deep inside him was screaming out to put this right. He imagined pulling out his shining sabre, forcing the men back to their seats at knife point and lecturing them on their ignorance, stupidity and total disregard for safety and for the poor stewardess who, by that time, had taken refuge in the cockpit. Instead, he just looked straight ahead into the safety brochure on the back of the seat in front of him and asked himself where the hell he was going.

During his first weeks in Lebanon, Randolph was based in the north, where war was raging between the factions to the east and the west of the Bekaa valley. His mission was to

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peeping the horn he would sometimes shoot into the sky, hurling angry abuse at anyone blocking his way.

On one particular day, Mustafa got so angry at the traffic that was going nowhere that he shot out the traffic lights. This scared Randolph, but he was afraid of confronting the brazen, trigger-happy, highly emotional Mustafa and didn't know what to do about it. Instead of confronting him and risking a conflict – and perhaps a bullet in the head – Randolph played safe and contented himself with complaining to his team about Mustafa behind his back, hoping that he would somehow get the message.

In that part of the world, however, you don't talk behind people's backs. If you want things done or to pass a message, you speak straight to the face of the other person or not at all. Word eventually got to Mustafa that Randolph had been talking about him behind his back.

At their delegation office in Baalbek, the chief insisted on having a daily debriefing meeting in the early evening when the teams had returned from the field, where everyone present would say a few words about their day. Randolph hated the meetings and felt they were a total waste of time. Instead of everyone making a succinct report to the chief who could then sum up the day and inform the team about the essentials, everyone had to sit around in a circle and listen to each other's news of the day. Invariably, the meeting dragged on for nearly two hours, leaving the participants frustrated, edgy and hungry.

On the day that Mustafa had learned about Randolph's cowardice and talking behind his back he turned up at the evening meeting with a buddy who was armed with

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a Kalashnikov and a full belt of cartridges strapped over his shoulder like a cowboy. As they strutted in, ordering everyone to shut up, his buddy menacing them with his machine gun, Randolph knew instantly that they had come for him. Turning to Randolph, Mustafa spoke clearly, with anger in his voice and total disrespect in his eyes. "So you don't like me, Mr Randolph? You talk shit about me? You tell people I am bad? Is it true?" Getting no reply from Randolph, who had only shrugged and looked sheepish, Mustafa stepped forward, commanded Randolph to get to his feet, and with his face almost squashed against Randolph's shrieked "Is it true?"

Mustafa's buddy then joined in the action. Pushing Mustafa aside, he stuck the barrel of the Kalashnikov in Randolph's mouth and screamed out "Answer, piece of shit!" Mustafa came in next with, "Say it, you bastard, say it! I am not good? I am bad driver? I am crazy? Say it, piece of shit, or we blow your head off". Mustafa's buddy pulled the barrel from out of his mouth, then with one hand holding the butt and trigger fired half a dozen rounds upwards into the ceiling. "Say it!" "Say it!" By then the two were livid. Someone in the team screamed.

Mustafa lunged forwards, pushing Randolph backwards with his fists on his chest, his eyes glaring into Randolph's with the rage of a rabid dog, the droplets of spittle smacking Randolph's cheeks. As if knowing he was going to die, Randolph spoke up: "I'm sorry Mustafa for speaking behind your back". "Say it, you fucking bastard!" retorted Mustafa even more enraged. "Say it!"

And so Randolph said it. "Yes, it's true. You know it's

true. I talk behind your back. I hate you. I hate everything about you.” The room fell deadly silent, like when someone pulls the pin out of a grenade in a film and you wait for the imminent blast. “You hate me?” “Yes,” blurted out Randolph, “I fucking hate you. It’s you that’s the piece of shit.” Randolph had no idea where the words were coming from, but they were coming and he couldn’t stop them. “Who the fuck do you think you are? You drive around like a cowboy with your gun. You think that makes you big? It just shows how fucking small you are!”

Randolph felt like he was on a stage. Any minute now there would be the sound of automatic fire. He didn’t care. He was going out with a bang. From injury to condemnation, Randolph spat his words out at him, insulting his parents, his country, his name, and even his God for having created him. The more he insulted Mustafa, the more the words flowed, and the more Mustafa’s eyes opened wide. For Randolph it was like a dam bursting. He spat the words out. Twenty years of pent-up rage and revolt were exploding from his mouth in swearing, cursing, hatred for Mustafa, the world, and everyone that had ever put him down. Later, the team said that Randolph even lunged at Mustafa, pointing at him, threatening him. Everyone was shitting themselves.

They say that when you’re shot at close range you don’t hear the gun going off. The ball was in Mustafa’s court. Nobody moved. Stalemate. The room was as silent as the inside of a coffin buried six feet underground. One of the girls in the team was whimpering.

Mustafa stepped back, grabbed the gun, held it in one hand, finger on the trigger, aimed it at Randolph, then

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turned it upwards and shot a dozen or more rounds at the ceiling, this time bringing down plaster, dust and cobwebs.

"So you think I'm an asshole?" he shouted. "Allah, this piece of shit thinks I'm an asshole. Maybe he's right. Maybe I am an asshole?" he had turned and was asking his buddy. "Kbeeri asshole. A fucking asshole. An asshole just like you?" His arms shot up in the air like he was about to give a speech and exclaimed: "Me, Mustafa, much bigger asshole than you can ever be! Me, big boss of assholes!"

Mustafa and his buddy burst out laughing. Randolph had no idea what was going to happen next. "Come" said the buddy, pointing at Randolph. "You come with us." Still convinced they were going to crucify him, Randolph tried to resist. "You come with us!" he shouted at Randolph, aiming his gun at him.

Then, out of the blue, Mustafa's buddy produced a bottle of whisky from a black plastic bag he was carrying in a sling over his shoulder. "Assholes drink with assholes," he said. They grabbed Randolph by the arm and led him out. Behind him, he could hear crying and dismay.

In the room next door, they sat Randolph down, stuffed the bottle of whisky in his hand and forced him to drink from it as it passed round the trio, from one mouth to another. The three of them drank themselves to oblivion, with the bottle emptied in a matter of minutes. In spite of the lingering fear, the uncertainty of what would happen next, his head and guts reeling from a third of a bottle of whisky on an empty stomach, and the odds strongly against him, for the first time in his life Randolph had beaten his fear and been able to speak out. It had saved his life.

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For the rest of the evening, Randolph felt like a hero, and for the remainder of his time in the north, Randolph got on well with Mustafa, who no longer carried a gun in the car, at least none that Randolph could see. Both had earned the respect of the other.

News from the south was troubling. In a sombre voice, the chief informed the team that Beirut was under daily bombardment from the sky and being pounded by artillery from every direction. Reports, he said, talked about dead bodies lying strewn like discarded garbage everywhere. The possibility of an epidemic and total public health breakdown was looming. Something had to be done.

Turning to Randolph, he said that the head of delegation in Beirut had sent a dispatch ordering him to get ready to travel to Beirut at the next ceasefire. He was to report to the Lebanese Army, who would organise his safe passage.

In peace time, driving to Beirut would have taken a little less than three hours. In June 1982, because of the numerous checkpoints and outbreaks of fighting along the way, it could take two days or more. Under the protection of the Lebanese army, transport was organised in two steps, with a stopover at Zahle, where Randolph could spend the night at the Red Cross sub office.

The next ceasefire came sooner than Randolph had hoped for. As soon as it was broadcast, he set off, passing from checkpoint to checkpoint, quaking in the back of the Jeep that was carrying him as it made its way to Zahle. When they arrived it was already early evening and the Scandinavian medical team working there had gathered to review the day in the office, which was within the walls of

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the local hospital where they worked. Randolph wondered if these evening pow-wow sessions were standard practice across the organisation.

Simultaneously, as if to welcome Randolph, heavy street fighting suddenly broke out nearby, with stray bullets pinging against the walls. The medics knew the drill off by heart and waved energetically at Randolph to follow them down to the morgue in the basement. The morgue, they explained, was the safest place in the hospital.

As the evening drew on and night fell there was no sign of a let up in the fighting. In the basement and behind closed doors, intense gunfire and muffled explosions could still be heard and the occasional trembling of the ground felt, with slivers of masonry and dust falling from the ceiling. The medics were mumbling among themselves, apparently trying to reach a decision about what to do.

Having reached a verdict, they explained to Randolph that their lodgings were a street away, but in the direction of the fire, and they thought it best to spend the night here. "In the morgue?" asked Randolph. "Yes, when it gets bad, we sometimes sleep here," replied a nurse. "It's not so bad, the mortuary cabinet freezers are off." She giggled.

"What do you mean?" asked Randolph horrified, "You sleep in the corpse drawers?"

"Yes," she replied again, "and tonight you'll sleep there too." The medics laughed.

Randolph jumped up with "Are you fucking kidding? Is there nowhere else?"

"Nowhere else, unless you want to sleep on the floor."

The experience sent the creepy-crawlies up Randolph's

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spine. To climb into his cabinet Randolph needed a short ladder, which was then taken away and used for the next one to climb in. While the cabinet was wide enough for his body with his arms laid by his side, it was not wide enough for him to lie in the foetus position he slept best in. To add some comfort, the medics had placed blankets on the bottom of the cabinets to provide a layer of cushioning from the metal base, which slid inwards as Randolph slithered in, creating an uneven surface beneath him.

Randolph spent the night wrestling with the blanket, turning and tossing as far as he could from left to right, and all the while staying alert to any noises in the morgue that would warn of approaching danger. As soon as he had grasped the morbid reality that he would be sleeping in one of the drawers, he had instantly developed a phobia about being locked in.

By the time the night was over and the team had crawled out of their holes in the wall, the fighting had stopped. The medical team's mission was to treat any injured civilians as well as fighters from both sides, regardless of who they were, and that morning there were many. Randolph had never been in a medical environment and was horrified by the injuries of the people brought to the hospital upstairs. Many had gunshot wounds and were peppered by shrapnel, while others had had their hands, arms, feet or legs blown off.

What was it all about, thought Randolph; why all this violence? In the wake of the scenes of barbarity he had witnessed in Malaysia and the aftermath of the violence he was now witnessing in Lebanon, he was struggling to

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remain an idealist. Inside him the battle raged between thoughts of anger at the stupidity of all this and thoughts of hope that there was some way these people could talk to each other and live in peace.

After breakfast, an army Jeep turned up to collect Randolph and take him to Hamra, in the heart of Beirut, where he was dropped off late in the afternoon at the Red Cross country delegation. The delegation was a dozen-man operation made up of a handful of delegates whose job it was to visit prisoners in an effort to reunite them with their families, a war-zone doctor in charge of all things medical, a radio operator, some admin staff, security personnel, a munitions specialist, two drivers, the head of delegation who had privileged contacts to the various armed factions, the authorities and the international community, and Randolph.

The delegation offices were on the fifth floor of an empty apartment building plastered on all sides with Red Cross posters written in English and in Arabic. A massive Red Cross flag was draped across the roof and permanently lit with spotlights. Previously, the offices had been on lower floors, closer to the basement where the staff could run to quickly during bombing raids, until a spate of car bombs going off in the surrounding streets chased them upstairs.

After the initial car-bomb blasts some weeks previously, the delegation staff had positioned their desks behind the building's concrete pillars and stair walls to at least save themselves and any vital equipment in the event of another blast. Shortly after Randolph's arrival, two car bombs had indeed gone off one day after another, shattering the

remainder of the glass in the building and sending doors, chairs, tables and paperwork flying.

Randolph remembered the feeling of the high-pressure blast of dust-filled air that picked up and threw his typewriter onto the floor, and the flying glass that cut his forearm and shoulder. During the next weeks, three more bombs went off. Everyone in the delegation had developed an acute, uncontrollable fear of parked cars. "Car" was the word used to warn the others that a parked car had been spotted near the building. The word sent everyone scurrying like blind mice escaping from prowling cats.

The delegation was the only inhabited apartment left in that part of the city, where the surrounding streets had been for the most part reduced to rubble. It was also the only building that was allowed to be lit at night when all around was pitch-black darkness. In the oppressive blackness, people could sometimes be heard scampering from one side of a street to the other. The only continual sound was the mechanical din of the oversized 40 kVA generator in the basement that supplied power to the building. Frequently, sustained bursts of automatic fire and exchanges of RPGs erupted like firework displays, muffling even the noise of the generator. In daytime, the ground shook every time fighter jets pulverised buildings in the vicinity.

Supplies could not easily reach the delegation, which was stranded like a desert island in the centre of a disputed quarter of the town, which frequently changed hands from one warring faction to another. It was, however, close to a shopping area, where stores had either been boarded up and survived, locked away behind thick metal struts,

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sheeting and heavy industrial padlocks, or lay open like looted tombs, their broken shelves, upturned tills and smashed displays piled up on the floor.

To get supplies to the delegation had become an urgent necessity, but a dangerous business. The solution adopted to keep supplies coming in was for delegation staff members to go out and loot whatever they could lay their hands on. The chances of being shot were high.

Experienced as they were in diplomatic stuff, the delegates had no idea about how to move around in relative safety under live fire. They needed to learn fast. "Let's ask the Lebanese Army for training," someone suggested. The Lebanese Army, who were friendly to the Red Cross cause, were duly contacted by the head of delegation and sent in an expert in urban warfare who, in training the delegates how to avoid being shot, probably saved their lives.

In a matter of days of gruelling training in mock scenarios in the protected courtyard to the rear of the building, the delegates' survival skills were upgraded from 'zero' to 'good to go'. The idea was for everyone to take their turn at pillaging whatever they could find, but on a volunteer basis. In spite of the training, not all the delegates wanted to take the risk and only a few volunteered.

When it was Randolph's turn to go out, he slid his white Red Cross vest over the bullet-proof waistcoat the army had provided, buckled his white Red Cross helmet under his chin, slipped on the shrapnel gloves the army had also lent them, went down to the front entrance, and froze. His heart was beating like a snare drum. He was shitting himself. He

could neither focus on nor remember what the trainer had painstakingly trained them to do.

Adrenaline was pumping through his head like a fire hose. He was sweating like he had just come out of a sauna. 'Fuck it,' he said to himself eventually, looking left, then right, inching his head out from behind the entrance pillars. *What was it he said?* thought Randolph, a last time, then aimed his body at the sheltered entrance across the street, put his head down as instructed, and leapt, zigzagging as they had been trained to do to the other side. In a bag strapped to his back he was carrying an axe, a crowbar and a heavy set of wire cutters, and in his waistcoat pocket his VHF radio.

The shops he was aiming for lined the street just around the corner. The colleagues who had volunteered some days before him talked about at least half a dozen that looked like shored-up mini markets. His luck was in. At that moment nobody was shooting. Randolph zigzagged up the street until he came to one shop whose shutters looked like they had been ripped away by one of the car bombs. The store was his for the taking.

Although it also looked like he was not the first looter to pass by, enough tins of conserves were still left behind scattered around on the floor to feed the delegation for a few days. He packed what he could carry into his shoulder bag and set off, zigzagging again back to the delegation. Randolph had never been more frightened in his life, and at the same time never as focused.

When the fighting eventually moved away from the part of the city where the delegation was based, Randolph could at last get to work. The doctor delegate in charge of medical

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things had set him up with a van and a team of young volunteers from one of the refugee camps. Their job would be to drive to the scene of the air raids and ground fighting and spray chemicals on dead bodies and human remains to stop the potential spread of disease.

Out on their first sortie, Randolph was appalled at the destruction they witnessed and the blood-soaked, lifeless corpses and body parts that so often covered the ground in the aftermath of bombings or battle. On several occasions, he retched up his guts in the middle of the street. His team did likewise.

Back at the delegation, word had gotten around about the horrendous conditions this gang of young men were exposed to, and the delegates – all of whom were twenty years older than young Randolph – began to show him respect and offer him the perks, like a glass of whisky and the occasional bar of chocolate, they had stowed away for their personal consumption. By and by, Randolph's team became the delegation's eyes on the ground, allowed by the warring factions to pass freely through checkpoints, and checked on every day by the regular army.

By the time their supplies of chemicals ran out, the soldiers of the international peace-keeping force had arrived and were anchored off the coast. They flew new supplies to them in a helicopter in which the same soldiers also packed a crate of chocolates and other goodies for the team. Randolph and his boys were doing a job that nobody else wanted to do and were being recognised for it. Whenever they passed a gang of armed militia they would exchange salutes. On the notorious Green Line during

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ceasefires, both sides stood down when they moved in to pick up remains.

One night at the delegation, after a particularly gruesome day in the field, Randolph remembered remarking to one of his colleagues that he had made the acquaintance of more people in Lebanon in two months than during the whole of the rest of his life, and that he felt safer in war-ravaged Beirut than back in his hometown in Scotland. Personal safety, he realised, was all about the people you knew and could rely on.

Even so, in the bomb-cratered streets and the crumbling, burning neighbourhoods through which Randolph's team passed, there lurked dangers that no training could ever prepare them for. Driving home one day in early September from a mission to disinfect the bodies of kids in the playground of a school that had been decimated on the other side of town, Randolph's team got caught up in a queue of cars waiting to cross a new checkpoint that had sprung up, apparently overnight. The masked gunmen who manned the checkpoint were only letting some cars through and turning others back. Randolph's colleagues didn't know why.

After a wait of half an hour or so, it was the turn of a VW Beetle that was in front of the team's van. The gunman stopped it, looked in through the open windows, ordered the four occupants to hang their hands out of the windows, then waved it through, signalling to the driver to drive slowly. Once the Beetle was about 20m clear of the checkpoint a gunman appeared from behind the sand-filled petrol drums with a rocket launcher and fired an RPG at the car, which

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erupted in a ball of flame. Randolph and his team were speechless, stunned by the sudden violence, numbed by the atrocity before their eyes.

That day Randolph was driving. He was now in pole position for crossing. It was his turn next. The gunman who had checked the Beetle now approached the van, again ordering the occupants to place their hands outside the windows. He then opened the back doors of the van and asked what the drums of chemicals were. One of the team explained. Without any further comment he waved Randolph through.

Randolph remembers how difficult it was for him to press the accelerator and lift the clutch pedal. His feet wouldn't obey. It was only when the gunman shot some rounds off in the air shouting "Yalla!" that Randolph found the courage to drive forward. He neither looked at the mangled Beetle burning by the side of the road nor in the mirror, not wanting to give any suspicious signs to the gunmen behind him. 10 m (32 ft), 20, 30, 40, 50... It looked like they were clear. Nobody spoke for the remainder of the ride back to the delegation.

A few days later, the team was called out to clean up the remains of an ambush that had happened at the entrance of one of the big refugee camps to the south of Beirut. The team usually didn't venture so far out of the city centre, and definitely not in the direction of the airport and the camps in the south. The green light for their mission, however, was given by the Lebanese Army, who said they were not expecting any trouble along the way.

Once parked at the entrance of the camp, Randolph

noticed that petrol drums had been stacked at the top of a stairwell leading underground. When he asked via one of his colleagues where the stairs led to, he couldn't believe the answer: "It's an underground hospital."

"They stockpile petrol drums at the top of stairs leading to an underground hospital? Are they out of their fucking minds?" Randolph was furious. Furious at life. Furious at the needless death and destruction he was witnessing every day. Furious at just how stupid people can be.

"Who's in charge here?" he cried out. By then some people had gathered, all wanting to know why Randolph had lost his rag. A massive militiaman, as wide as he was tall, with a thick black beard, broad cheeks, an oversized nose, beady black eyes, a belt of grenades slung round his waist and the usual Kalashnikov slung over his shoulder, stepped forward and announced that he was in charge and asked what the problem was. Despite the anger that had taken control of him, Randolph realised that he should be careful with what he said.

Trying the rational approach, Randolph asked Blackbeard if he knew what would happen if these drums caught fire. "You telling me how to do my job?" barked Blackbeard in surprisingly good English, shaking the barrel of his gun towards him. Randolph was triggered and barked back: "I'm telling you that if these drums catch fire and everyone in the basement is burnt to death it'll be your fault."

Oops, he shouldn't have said that. Too late. Blackbeard grabbed Randolph by the biceps and marched him off into the camp and almost threw him through the open door of a tent. Someone wearing the traditional keffiyeh of a tribal

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leader beckoned with his hand to Blackbeard to speak. "This foreign bastard thinks he knows better than us," spat out Blackbeard, who obviously didn't think much of Randolph's interference. He went on, apparently, to explain in Arabic what the fuss was all about.

The leader looked at Randolph, and with the reflex of a true diplomat thanked him for helping his people. Then with the theatrical gesture of a Roman centurion dismissing an argument, waved towards the door of the tent, in simple body language that Randolph correctly understood to mean the audience was over. When he got back to the team who were waiting by the van and told them what had happened, they grabbed him, thrust him into the back of the van, and sped off.

"Do you know who you were talking with?" they asked. Randolph didn't. They never told him.