

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
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Tales of American Diplomacy

LETITIA "TISH" BUTLER

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NARRATOR: The bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, Lebanon, on April 18th, 1983, killed 63 people, including 17 Americans. Newly-arrived USAID (U.S. Agency for International Development) employee Letitia "Tish" Butler survived the bombing. This is her story.

BUTLER: My name is Letitia Kelly Butler. I go by "Tish" Butler. I joined the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) in 1977. I was not long out of undergraduate school, and I met my husband, Malcolm Butler, at the agency. As a tandem couple in the early wave of tandem couples for AID and State, we served together in Bolivia, Peru, Lebanon, the Philippines, and Guatemala. It has been nothing but a wild ride the whole time. Wonderful, wonderful experience. It's full of language and cultural learning. It's full of doing what's necessary for people who don't have the resources to achieve what they need in life to move in that direction. AID is an organization that is about building capabilities, building resources, building nations, really.

What comes with that work--in many places, and actually everywhere we went--is some form of danger. And in Bolivia, Peru, and the Philippines, we were dealing with extremist groups that were attacking the government--and by association, attacking Americans. But the place that we really felt that most poignantly was in Beirut. We were sent there because a major plus-up of aid to Lebanon was voted in by the Congress because of the Sabra and Shatila massacre (of Palestinians and Lebanese Shiites in 1982) and the placement of U.S. Marines in protecting the airport around Beirut. So, we were yanked out of Peru and sent quickly to Beirut. We were working slavishly to get a program going because it was only about \$12 or \$15 million [at that time] and there were \$250 million [in additional funds] that we were supposed to program.

So, we were there in October, and by April Malcolm was called back to Washington to do some consultations on about April 14th or 15th. And on Monday, April 18th, I got up and went to work at the embassy. Because Malcolm was gone, his deputy, who was acting mission director, held an earlier conference. I went to the cafeteria in the building a little bit earlier than I usually did. I walked down to the cafeteria, which was in the foreground, the front of that now very historic embassy building, which was U-shaped -- focused outward on the Corniche [a seaside promenade in Beirut], the main road going around the edge of the Ras Beirut area, and looking out on the water. So I went down there to get lunch, I sat, and was eating when I saw my two

very good friends walk in. One of them was Anne Dammerell, who had been working in the USAID mission for three years through all of the tough time and through all of the Sabra and Shatila work. She was a heroine, really. She was about to leave.

So, I got up when I finished to go sit with them--she and Bob; but they were at a tiny table for two and they were up against the wall that went towards the ocean. So, I decided I'd go upstairs and study French or Arabic -- I was studying both, I don't know which one I was doing at the time. I went up to my office, which is at the back of the building. It had a single room, and it had floor-to-ceiling glass doors to let the light in. A week before this day -- for no reason that I can explain -- I decided to move my desk, which was placed directly in front of the floor-to-ceiling glass doors, into a corner. So it was catty-corner in the room. I went, sat at that desk, closed the door to study, and not long after that I felt a change in air pressure. I can't explain it, except that it was a sudden change in air pressure followed by a low, ominous "boom" sound.

And by the end of the boom, the whole building shook. The glass door behind me blasted in shards right past me -- it missed me by a foot, and knocked my desk over. So, I knew that something bad had happened. I assumed it was some kind of a bomb. I grabbed my purse, ran to the door, and had to yank it because it was jarred. And I went into the open, central atrium area of the building. I was on the fourth floor, and it was filled with swirling dust and cement. I saw that I couldn't go down, so I decided to go on the same floor to the USAID Mission Director's area to see who was there, who was hurt. I knew that the Acting Mission Director, Bill MacIntyre was in the cafeteria when I left. He was having lunch with a female reporter who actually was the character on which John le Carré based the book "The Little Drummer Girl."

She was interviewing him about USAID's assistance. His wife (Marylee) was up in his office visiting, and she had been in the bathroom on the front of the building, and the glass had blown straight into her face. She had pale skin, white blonde hair, and she just looked like something out of a monster movie because she was bleeding. Nobody else up on that area was killed. So, we kind of collected people and guided Marylee (MacIntyre) out of that area and down the stairs to the second floor. There was a window there that we could open, and a shed had been built up against it. So, we were able to climb out on the shed, and some people already behind the building--I think some drivers--had put up a ladder. We got down and I got Marylee onto a ramp and into sort of a really rundown old ambulance. Some poor fellow from the State Department who had just arrived that morning--he was 24 and wide eyed--was in the back. We were flying and careening through the streets of Beirut, as crowded as they were, to get to the hospital. And we got there, and Marylee was taken swiftly into surgery. I found my friends--Anne and Bob. They had been the only two survivors of all the people in that cafeteria. After I saw that Anne Dammerell and Bob Pearson were being cared for, I called the USAID Washington headquarters to report what was going on. They wanted to know names and numbers of the USAID deceased.

Jill Mandel, the wife of one of the officers at USAID there at the hospital, and I went to the basement of the hospital and walked these long, dark corridors. At the end of that, the doors open, and it was a morgue. And they ushered us into a small room--a little anteroom and a larger room. And the anteroom had the bodies. There was the reporter--who was the character from "The Little Drummer Girl"—who was on the floor in the arms of a Marine who had been killed.

And entering into the other room, I was looking for USAID folks. And I saw the Lebanese young man who was this very joyful mail delivery guy for both the embassy and USAID--and his father had been killed in a bombing about 15 or 20 years before that. He was on a table, missing limbs, but he had a tee-shirt on that said the word "target" in French. And I was looking for our people, and I got to the point where people were stacked around. And we had to dig down into the bodies to find the people I was looking for. I knew that our two USAID members were there. I came back out and made a call back to Washington. The total number killed was 63, including 17 Americans.

So, Anne and Bob were the two survivors from the place there where I would have been. They were both injured, and Anne was injured significantly. It took her a year and a half of medical work to get repaired, basically. Bob just had a little bit of damage. So, at the end of that, after about four hours at the hospital, I got a ride back to my place and knocked back a couple of Manhattans (laughter). I was stunned; I wasn't crying. I was totally shocked. A gentleman from upstairs came down and knocked on the door to make sure we were okay. And then Tom Friedman--the journalist who lived right across the street from us--and his wife knocked on the door to see if I was okay. And so, I got to sleep. It was difficult. I had a lot of nightmare activity that night. I got up because the Deputy Chief of Mission called everybody to a meeting the next morning at the embassy and to corral everybody to count heads and to explain that we had to get to work because the Secretary of State was going to come on a visit.

There were people suffering; there were people mourning. But everybody immediately went to work. We had to move our offices from the destroyed building to another location two buildings down. And we started having to get ready for lots of newspaper coverage, writing speeches for the Secretary of State, and basically doing our normal work in the midst of what was like "Alice in Wonderland" almost. It was so surreal. But we did that, and we got through it. I think what I want to wrap up with is to say is that this was a once in a lifetime experience. But danger is part of the experience of international affairs, whether it's diplomatic or international development affairs. You learn to recognize it; you learn to live with it; you learn to set it aside. And the compensation for that is extraordinary experiences of other countries, other cultures, other languages in the sense that you're actually making a difference in a place.

NARRATOR: Thanks for listening to "Tales of American Diplomacy," a Tex Harris Initiative for the Association for Diplomatic Studies & Training, a "Personal Life Story" produced by Poss Productions. Donate to support our work at adst.org. Because diplomacy matters now more than ever.