

Valley man recalls horror of '83 Beirut bombing

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Photo by Robert K. Yosay

SOMBER REMINDER: Anthony Kolat of New Middletown holds up a picture of fellow Marines with whom he served. He was on one side of a compound in Beirut, Lebanon, on Oct. 23, 1983, when a suicidal truck bomber killed 241 U.S. service members, 220 of whom were Marines.

The former Marine received a Purple Heart for his efforts in the aftermath of the attack.

By Sean Barron

For many people, the war on terrorism officially got under way in the weeks and months after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

For Anthony Kolat, however, the war started decades before the collapse of the World Trade Center towers.

“The war on terror began when the hostages were taken in Iran [and held for 444 days in 1979 and 1980] by the Ayatollah Khomeini,” said Kolat, who served 10 years in the Marines. “Terrorism is when you take action to kill innocent people, military or civilian.”

Twenty-six years ago today, Kolat, 50, experienced terrorism up close. The New Middletown man was on one side of a compound in Beirut, Lebanon, during the early-morning hours of Oct. 23, 1983, when a suicidal truck bomber plowed into a four-

story set of barracks nearby with the equivalent of six tons of dynamite. The blast killed 241 U.S. service members, 220 of whom were Marines, and prompted President Ronald Reagan to pull U.S. peacekeeping forces out of the country several months later.

Kolat, who was a combat engineer with the 1st Battalion, 8th Marines, 24th Marine Amphibious Unit, recalled being on a bulldozer and hearing sirens shortly after seeing and hearing the explosion. A Condition Red, the highest-alert level, was issued, and “all hell broke loose,” he said.

“It was chaos. We couldn’t leave our bulldozers until we had the all-clear four hours later,” added Kolat, who arrived in Beirut in late September 1983 as part of a peacekeeping mission.

Kolat shared many recollections Wednesday at the Eat ‘n’ Park Diner, South Avenue, Boardman. He also brought a Good Conduct certificate he was awarded, several photographs taken in Beirut after the bombing and various military artifacts that survived a fire at his residence shortly after he left the Marines in 1988.

In the aftermath of the attack on the barracks, military personnel sought volunteers for the grim task of searching for survivors. Kolat recalled hearing some of the injured yelling for their parents and other people.

Kolat said he received a Purple Heart for trying to find as many people as possible after the blast and ensuring no one was left behind.

Nevertheless, Kolat continued, he was doing a job and doesn’t consider himself a hero. The true heroes are those who made the ultimate sacrifice serving their country — including the 44 passengers and crew of United Flight 93 who fought four hijackers Sept. 11, 2001, before crashing near Shanksville, Pa.

For a while after the attack on the barracks, Kolat said, he was able to deal with the memories. About seven years later, however, the past suddenly hit him, causing sleep problems, among other things, he said.

Kolat, a 1978 North High School graduate, said he copes with the memories of that day through his faith as well as being a member of New Life Church in Poland.

The week of Oct. 23, though, is still the most difficult time of year, Kolat noted, so annually on that date he visits the Hopewell Beirut Memorial in Struthers to pay his respects to his fallen brothers and attends a memorial site in Hermitage, Pa.

Another source of strength for Kolat has been his family, which consists of his wife, Linda; sons Tim and Chip, 17; daughters Renne and Sarah; and 1-year-old grandson, Alexander.

Being a longtime member of both the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 2799 in New Springfield and American Legion Post 290 in Columbiana also have proved highly beneficial, he added.

Kolat urged soldiers having difficulty adjusting upon returning from Iraq and Afghanistan to get connected with their local Veterans Affairs clinic. They shouldn’t hesitate to take advantage of its offerings, he added.

“I’m more than happy to talk to anyone coming back,” he said. “I don’t want them treated like those who came back from Vietnam.”

Before going to Beirut, Kolat was stationed at Parris Island, S.C., and attended boot camp in November 1978 at Camp Lejeune, N.C.

Today, Kolat serves as head chef at DeChellis Italian Caf in New Middletown and has been with the eatery nine years.