

# The Lebanese Diaries

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## The Beginning

### Friday, 1 September 2006

I flew into Oslo from a job in the Arctic a few days ago so exhausted that I could have slept a week. I managed to sleep for two days straight, which was perfect. A friend kept asking if I would come down to Norwegian Peoples Aid to see some friends attending a project managers meeting.

I hopped on my bike down to NPA to find a reunion of friends: the head of NPA's demining unit Per Negaard, Luke and Jan Erik who I worked with in Sri Lanka, Damir from Croatia, Reshad from Bosnia, Steven from Kosovo, Valerie from Ethiopia, Mario from Angola ... In all there were 22 mates that I've worked with for more than ten years in war zones together. To hell with the meeting: let's find a pub!

Per gently curbed my enthusiasm, at least for a couple more hours. As they wrap up their meeting talk turned toward Lebanon, particularly the south that has literally been bombed to the Stone Age. The scope of the problem is still unknown, but from the morsels of information that are coming out a picture of a massive unexploded bomb problem is emerging. The attacks by the Israeli military showed very little restraint, in particular their use of cluster bombs.

Cluster bombs are a nasty little weapon that is becoming the weapon of choice by many in conflicts. Basically it's a larger bomb, rocket or artillery shell that has many smaller bomblets inside it. One bomb may contain as many as 200 to 600 bomblets. The munition is fired, opens in the air and rains down a torrent of smaller explosive devices. All very nasty if you are an opposing army, but the problem lies in the fact that many fail to explode. They lie around, still very dangerous till someone tries to do something with them, like move them. They then often explode killing the person and many others around them. Unlike a landmine that is designed to maim, a cluster bomblet blows you to bits. I still have images in my head from Laos, Kosovo and Afghanistan of people who had interacted with these bomblets. Handless and headless, gutted, disembowelled corpses are what are left. No kids on crutches here, just bits up trees. Quite a reality check.

The snippets of information coming out of Lebanon tell the story of a massive cluster munition contamination over very wide areas. They were even fired into urban areas. This act alone by its very definition constitutes a war crime. What is happening, are people are trying to move them and are being killed doing it.

While normally the life of the party and one of the funniest guys I've known, today Per is preoccupied as we grab a beer in the pub. He's surrounded by the cream of the world's deminers and bomb disposal experts, all about to take off to their various corners of the world to resume their work of clearing dangerous objects away from communities.

“We need to get to Lebanon,’ he says. “We need to get there now. Jan Erik, you and me will go there Tuesday and begin a survey. The rest of you earmark some of your best from your programs to be sent there to work. John, I need documentation of the problem, Will you come?”

We have so much to sort out between now and then: permissions, visas, equipment, contacts and that's just what needs to be done in the first hour. By Monday morning we have airline tickets, boxes of flak jackets and bomb disposal gear and fist full of cash to make it all run. The flight is at 0700. It's short notice for wives and girlfriends, but they're used to what we are and what we do. You couldn't find better partners.

We all head to the airport hotel for the night so as to have an early start in the morning with our masses of gear and the wonderful world of excess baggage. Next stop, Damascus then to Lebanon by road.

### **Monday, 4 September 2006**

After four hours sleep we check in our mountain of gear at in Oslo Airport. Not too bad: four guys and 29 kilos over weight. Cases full of flak jackets and helmets are a must for a job like this one. As we check in we get one of those petty despots who just revel in the thought of charging us excess baggage. No amount of argument will sway him. Even the people in line behind us join in on our behalf.

“Come on, what's a few extra kilos! Let them through. How can you charge people going to Lebanon to defuse bombs?” Jobsworth holds his ground and we are charged an extra \$1,000. That doesn't put a smile on our faces. Not just because of the figure, which is excessive, but because we're operating on the smell of an oily rag and every dollar out of the project is another dollar not spent on the ground getting rid of cluster bombs. What does \$1,000 mean really? \$1,000 less ability to stay and work. Think about that all of you petty bureaucrats out there next time you want to work someone over because you can.

On the plane to Vienna then change for Damascus. We descend over Lebanon and touch down at Damascus airport. It's chaos, but the kind of chaos I have a strange liking for. Get in a queue, change money, get in another queue, almost make it to the front, get pulled out, give up our passports, sit on a bench, wait, wonder, sit, then a frenzy of waving and grabbing and pushing and guiding. “Mr John? Mr John? Money, give me.” Money for visa paid, stamps into passport shake hands with the smiling immigration guy then to the baggage area.

Per is already through and has started collecting our cases and bags. We collect everything eventually and then wait and wait and wait. Jan Erik and the TV journalist from NRK are missing. Our first casualties. Everyone from our plane has gone through customs except us. We wait then wait some more. We stand alone in an empty customs hall looking at the customs guys who stare at us and our mountain of gear. So much for slipping through with the crowd. Per goes in search of our two lost members and finds that our journalist friend has been bailed up by immigration. He begins to negotiate their release and finally they all march around the corner.

To customs! Nothing to declare, forget it. Here we go with the men in uniform. Pointing at first box, “open!” Helmets, flak jackets etc are all there as we try to explain that we

are doing humanitarian work in Lebanon and not starting a new front. Finally they are convinced and more handshakes pass around. We are free to go. A large official smiles and waves us through the customs hall. "Welcome to Syria, get out." We translate that as this way to the exit.

A driver from Lebanon is waiting outside for us and we negotiate the carpark with our trolleys. Four of us plus driver makes five in a Chevy sedan, with a mountain of gear, to drive to Lebanon, no way. This just isn't going to fit. We all stand and stare. Square peg - round hole. Per takes an executive decision: "Empty the boxes." We loose pack the trunk with all our gear and still it's overflowing. Stamping and stuffing and a few bungy straps and we are on our way. On the road to Lebanon, at last.

In less than an hour we reach the Syrian border with Lebanon. The paper trail and stamp collection begins again. One window, another stamp, to the next and the next and down the line we go. At each window we ask our driver Mohammad if this is the last one and he nods, says yes and drives to the next bureaucrat. Finally we have left Syria. "Finished?" we ask. "Yes" says Mohammad. Next corner reveals the Lebanese customs authorities. Here we go again.

We now need a Lebanese visa! We enter the immigration office and try to work out what to do next. A voice in excellent English asks, "Do you need a visa? Then over here." The Lebanese immigration official couldn't have been more efficient or helpful. We were stamped, issued and on our way in no time. We sincerely thank him and he says, "Welcome to Lebanon, we know what you are going to do and we love you!" Wow, never been 'Loved' on a border before. Been beaten up but never loved! I like this place already.

As we drive on we encountered our first signs of the recent fighting, a massive crater in the middle of the road that was over ten metres across. All traffic was diverting around the edge of it and as we did, *psst*, we got a puncture. Over to the side of the road to change it. Not an easy task when you have a project's worth of equipment in the trunk. We empty it piece by piece assisted by a helpful spectator. The tyre is changed and soon we're on our way again winding up into the mountains before descending into Beirut as the sun sets. There is a heavy military presence on the road and all seem very nervous with an anticipation of what might come flying out of the sun.

As we ascend the hills we find more evidence of the bombing: destroyed bridges, bomb craters... Finally we enter Beirut city and I'm struck by a kind of *déjà vu*. I don't know what, but this place is lit up and vibrant with billboards and cafes all open for business and a cosmopolitan mix of people. There are the beautiful, young fashionable set and those in traditional wear. A comfortable collision of the old and the new. I have a feeling about this place, but what is it? We check in at the Mayflower Hotel and meet Anissa and Wafa, Lebanese colleagues who kept NPA's programs going throughout the fighting. After a meal and a briefing from we're ready to get into it tomorrow, heading south into the heart of the cluster strikes and the worst of the destruction.

As my head hits the pillow I figure it out. Buenos Aires. This place feels like Buenos Aires!

## Tuesday, 5 September 2006

At 0600 we hit the ground running out the door and heading south to the area of the worst fighting. The roads are empty now, but who knows how long that will last. As we leave Beirut the words I read in the press start to ring in my head. The Israelis threatened to put Lebanon back 20 years. It is starting to look like they did. The highway south has been mashed by heavy bombing: almost all the bridges are down and massive craters lie in the middle of the roads. This is war and these are the expected consequences of war. First doctrine, disrupt communications, roads and airwaves. It certainly looks like they achieved their aims. This will cost millions and take years to fix.

The drive south along the coast is beautiful, but ruined. As we progress south I evaluate the military necessity of the air strikes and a pattern emerges of massive and total retaliation. Southern Lebanon wasn't bombed, it was obliterated. Surely there is a very sound argument that the level of force outweighed the need for this size of action? The traffic increases as the morning wears on. After a quick meeting with some friends from other NGOs and we set off to track down the real victims of this war, the civilians.

Ask any serving officer in any army their job and they'll most likely say "To fight and win the war then move onto a quick and functional peace. Rarely do soldiers like wars as they're the ones who must fight. Politicians are seduced by the shock and awe of it all. Ask a soldier if wars have limits and civilians are fair game. Any professional officer will answer "no." It's stupid, cowardly, against the Geneva Convention and simply wrong. The further south we go the more we realise that things have gone horribly wrong here. Everything is destroyed: houses, apartments, offices, the lot all reduced to piles of rubble.

Our main task here is to locate places that still have the present danger of explosive remnants of war. Find them, survey them, plan a response with deminers and bomb disposal experts, then deploy them as quickly as possible. The faster they are on the ground the quicker the place is cleaned up and the less lives that will be lost.

Our local sources are already coming to us with tales of people who have been injured or killed by munitions only hours or days after the ceasefire. We are directed to a town called Habboush where we meet a woman named Wafea who is still in shock from the loss of her eldest son. The family survived the 33 day war by hiding in their house as all hell broke loose around them outside. On the morning of the ceasefire they emerged onto the street to survey the destruction. Her eleven year old son Hadi stepped on a tiny little nothing the size of a roll of film and was reduced to a screaming bloody mess on the pavement. He'd stepped on a 'sub-munition' fired into their suburb in the final hours of the war. His right leg was mangled and he had major abdominal injuries. Around him lay three uncles and one cousin; all injured by the same blast.

The family bundled all five up as best they could and tried to get to a hospital. Hadi died on the way and his mother is inconsolable. Her cherished son is gone, the victim of a random act of aggression on a civilian target. The family's pain was not to stop there as an uncle dies of his wounds two days later. The rest are still in hospital. Wafea is staggering around in a dazed half-life not knowing if it's better to live or die.

Next we met a young boy at a local hospital who was one of the lucky ones. He survived. Twelve year old Oussama survived the war and the first two weeks of peace

then he saw 'a little something' on the side of the road in his neighbourhood. He was about to leave and report the device when he slipped and fell. In the resulting explosion his hand was mangled, but he might keep most of his fingers. Only time will tell. His mother sits by his bedside, watching, fretting and wondering how she will get all of her kids to the other end of this nightmare in one piece.

Over the hill in the next village we meet a man named who had lost his son Ali. The scenario is the same as the others in that he survived the war, but couldn't survive the peace. After the bombing ended he went to check on damage to his brother's house from the cluster strikes. The house had taken a direct hit and many unexploded munitions were scattered around. Holes were punched through the thick concrete roof and rooms were destroyed. The family realised these were dangerous and stepped carefully. They moved outside, again taking care where they stepped. Ali reached up to pick some grapes from the vine on a trellis at the front of the house. As he reached up a cluster munition tumbled down from the vine landing on his head. It doesn't take a lot of imagination to see what 200 grams of high explosive in a shrapnel casing does to a head. Twenty years old in his youthful prime, decapitated.

While talking to his father, Ali's uncle came running to tell us he'd found more clusters in the field behind the house. He was right; M-42 sub munitions littered the field. I looked around at the olive groves, neighbouring houses and fields, all would be heavily saturated with unexploded munitions. How many more lives are to be lost before this mess is cleared up?

I was then shown another piece to a very strange puzzle. Two outer cluster bomb canister skins. These are about two metres long and two of them make one whole bomb. They are dropped from aircraft and open in flight spreading small cluster bombs over their target. Each cluster bomb canister of this type holds 660 of these small bomblets. The strange thing about this casing was its age. I found the manufacturers name plate with serial numbers on it and the date of manufacture was 1981. This shit is 21 years old? No wonder it is creating a dangerous legacy that is going to cost lives. The age of the munitions is not the only problem as cluster munitions by their very nature create massive dangerous legacies. The old stuff just makes a bad situation worse.

The cluster strikes really only took place in the final 72 hours of the conflict as ceasefire discussions advanced. Until then the war was comprised of air strikes using high explosive bombs. Why the hell let loose with cluster bombs at the final point in the conflict? What on earth were they thinking? The outcome would have been well known and understood, a massive problem for the civilians once the ceasefire takes hold.

There is an argument between the governments and militaries of the world about the use of cluster bombs. Most think that they are a good and viable weapon and that they should be retained and used. The claim from manufacturers is that they have a one percent failure rate thus creating no out of the ordinary danger to civilians after a conflict. That claim should start with the words, "Once upon a time, in a land far, far away..." The reality on the ground indicates failure rates of between 25 and 40 percent. What this means in real terms is that thousands of them fail to explode? A single aircraft delivered cluster bomb with 660 inside it? That's somewhere between 170 and 300 unexploded

munitions. Multiply that by every round and every air strike and you start to build a picture of quite biblical proportions.

Our heads are starting to spin at the scope of the problem here. Massively effected areas with a cocktail of munitions used that have major failure rates. What a clean up job this is.

We wind down the day with a visit to the Mine Action Centre in Tyre. The Program Manager Chris stayed through the war and briefs us on the situation. He's not only the top expert in his field in country, but also ex military and provides some interesting insights into what happened and why. He clarifies many questions for us and gives us straight answers: "Yes, no, definitions, interpretation, don't know". Per, Jan Erik, Chris and I have worked in some wild places for many years including many where cluster bombs have been used. The only thing we have seen that links them is the post conflict nightmare created by clusters. The impact is massive and outweighs the utility.

### **Wednesday, 6 September 2006**

After another manic drive from Tyre to Beirut last night we got a few hours sleep then were straight back on the road in the morning back south. The job today is to find evidence of more failed cluster bomb strikes and in particular, find out what we can about a tricky little thing called an M-85. The M-85 fits into the mould of what militaries around the world consider 'good' or 'smart' cluster bombs. Their so called smartness comes in that they will self destruct if they fail to explode on impact. With clever technology like that then obviously we will not find any, will we?

The M-85 also has a special place in our hearts as it's an exact copy of a cluster bomb held by the Norwegian Army. If we can prove that these things do not work then there is a good chance that Norway will remove them from their arsenal and become a major sponsor nation in banning cluster bombs internationally. So if we find them then it proves the self destruct does not work, if we don't find them, it does work. A lot politically will hang on this.

The villages around Tyre in South Lebanon took the brunt of the bombing. They've been swept off the face of the earth. Through a contact with the Lebanese Army we hear of a house surrounded by clusters. When we arrive we find an Army engineer section surveying the site and true enough, there's a backyard of unexploded M-42 clusters. The mother is scared, but luckily for her and her 6 children something will be done about these in the next few days.

The M-42 is your standard 'dumb' cluster bomb. They hit the ground, fail to explode and lie around ready to go off. Very dangerous. Politically it would be argued that these should not be used as the 'smart' type is available. The reality is that they exist and there is definite evidence here that they create a dangerous legacy. The weapon is unstable. There is a piece of fabric tape that assists in arming the devise and stabilise it in flight. When you find them like this it is possible for them to detonate due to wind flapping the tape. The other problem is the tape can easily be caught up in trees and the munition suspended there. Wind in the trees can cause these to explode.

I look around me. Trees are far enough away. No idea what could be caught in them. I need to photograph these and show the relationship with the house. The only thing I have

to worry about is what is on the ground immediately around me. Look, no tell tale bit of tape around my feet. There is one to my left and another to my right. OK, do not disturb them. Down in the dirt on my face with a wide angle lens, cluster bomb shape charge pointing in my face a foot away, house in the background. Press the shutter, let's go. Piece by tedious piece we are building evidence that demonstrates that cluster bombs are a nightmare in the post conflict world. They didn't achieve their military goals as they failed to explode. They have achieved this horror though by lying about making the place dangerous. Maybe this is the true intent of the attacks in the last 72 hours was to punish civilians. It's starting to look like that.

We meet up with two Lebanese Americans working for the Mine Action Centre in Tyre. They are part of the community liaison team. Their job is to visit any sites that report dangerous objects and confirm if a disposal team is needed or not. I rudely nearly crack up laughing when introduced. One is named Mustafa, nothing funny about that. The other is called Jihad. He served in the US Army for a few years and is now home. He must have had a hard time in the American Army with that name. They're great guys and really care about the work they are doing.

"Hey man, heard ya lookin' for some M-85s," says Jihad. "Well ya should have been here yesterday. Had over 70 on a football field, but my man, I have you some more in an orchard and around a house." Love your work Jihad!

Off we go in search of the M-85s, of course, these can't really exist as they would have self destructed, right? Let's see.

We stop in the driveway of a deserted house that would have been quite beautiful before it was blown up: a perfect site on a hill overlooking groves of oranges and olives. The clusters should be about 40 metres away in the trees.

We look down the narrow path between bushes with its bower of grape vines.

"Get your flak jackets and helmets on," says Per.

There is a gentle breeze blowing which makes us even more cautious.

"Spread out a bit, don't step on any grass or leaves and don't brush your body on any bushes," says Per.

We gear up and Per leads us down into the grove. Every step is deliberate and cautious. We are sweating profusely under the Kevlar vests and helmets. Per spots the munitions ahead, but on a lower level of the orchard. We retrace our steps and cross a fence and weave our way down the hill. We get to the right level and are blocked by eight bee hives. I hate bees. I had a bad reaction to a sting as a kid and am not sure if I am allergic to them or not. It's hard to tell what's scarier – the unexploded munitions or threat of a bee sting.

"So here is the trap," says Per. "You disturb the bees, they fly out, we panic and run and go straight over a cluster bomb. Be deliberate, slow and cautious."

Gingerly we pass between the hives and in front is our Holy Grail, many M-85s scattered on the ground in front of us. It seems that the self destruct mechanism has failed to function, how surprising. Per inspects them closely and explains how and why they have failed. The bottom line, clusters are a bad idea, even these so called smart ones.

I'm on my face again in a river of sweat getting the proof we need to demonstrate these devices have failed. Don't disturb them and everything will be OK. Leave if the wind picks up. It's a funny thing to crawl up to a small tiny bomblet and stare into its shape charge. So little, but so much damage.

These bomblets function in 2 ways when they detonate. They have a fragmentation casing and this shape charge thing. A shape charge makes it armour piercing. Dual function. This is why they do so much damage to houses as well as people.

We now have the definitive evidence we need to wage a good argument with governments at the United Nations. Not a bad day's work. A cold beer will slip down so nicely tonight.

Jihad and Mustafa are very happy to have been able to help. We head our separate ways and plan the next few days. Per is due to fly back to Oslo tomorrow together with the TV journalist, while Jan Erik and I stay on. No more Per jokes about his hair and his beauty treatments (from a guy who is 6 foot 3 with a shaved head).

### **The Weekend: 9-10 September 2006**

We spend the weekend consolidating and preparing for arrival of the demining teams: renting apartments, purchasing vehicles. Staff arrive next week and we have to have everything organised for them. Luke is coming as the Program Manager and Pelle, the human coconut, will be Technical Adviser. Ex-British military Luke is the consummate professional, while Pelle, a Swede, divides his love of blowing stuff up with interior designing and cooking!

### **Monday, 11 September 2006**

With the new week comes a mass of work. Jan Erik will take care of logistics in Beirut while I head south to look victims of cluster bombs. Up at dawn and on the road with Rashid and Anissa heading south. It's a hard, slow drive south navigating massive bomb craters and downed bridges: left side of road, right side of road, down a detour, along a track, back on the freeway off the side again.

We come across a group of French military engineers putting the final touches on a temporary Bailey Bridge, a pre-fabricated steel bridge that can be erected in a day or two. Viva la France!! Now this is the kind of aid and assistance that is desperately needed.

We get a call about a man injured by a cluster who has been brought into Tyre hospital. With no more information we head to the hospital to find out more. A sad fact in a post conflict area is that most intelligence about new areas that are dangerous comes from people who have been injured by munitions. From this you can find where there are new areas and get teams to go and clear them.

The victim in intensive care is unconscious and a mess. We meet his wife, brothers and friends and the story begins to unravel. A fisherman, he was bringing in his catch last night when he pulled up a cluster bomb in the net. He reached down to free it and the device exploded. His right hand is gone and he has massive injuries to his head, torso and lungs. His survival is not guaranteed. The next few days will tell. His wife is beside herself with grief. It's not just the grief a wife feels for her husband but the grief one feels when your whole life is unravelling in front of your eyes. The crippling of the one you

love, the loss of the bread winner for the family, the destruction of a father and lover. All this comes to one family who happens across a cluster bomb.

We head into the hills in search of a man who was recently killed and another injured. We find another grief stricken wife and four kids who've lost their dad. Ironically the victim was a deminer who also worked as a farmer and builder. He and his friend were in an orchard near their house when he stepped on a hidden cluster that killed him instantly. His friend who was many meters away received many shrapnel wounds to the legs.

This is not war but a slow and insidious toll that is wearing away at average people every day. Innocent acts, lethal consequences.

The phone rings to tell us about an ambulance on its way to Tyre hospital with two more cluster victims. We head back to the hospital. The ambulance has just arrived ahead and we enter a scene of shocked and horrified people. A pair of shepherds have been injured. One man lies on a stretcher without a foot and massive shrapnel to his legs and body. His friend is much luckier with some pieces that hit him in the face and arms. The guy on the stretcher is in a bad way: I look into his eyes and find he's not there. The eyes are glazed and unfocused, a look I've seen too many times in my life. The end result is normally not good.

The doctors frantically cut away his clothes, get him x-rayed, then into surgery. I sit down with the ambulance drivers and realize these two young guys are pumped with adrenaline and deeply shocked. We need to talk it out, vent, let the air out. We walk to the back by the ambulance and they begin to take stock of the situation. One medic's singlet is stained with blood and gore. He begins to clean out the back of his ambulance: blood, grass, half a shoe all. The stretcher is recovered and will need some heavy cleaning as it looks like a butchers slab. I can the medics are starting to wind down a bit. Even a little black humour is creeping in. They open our eyes even wider to life in Tyre and a few alarm bells start ringing.

These guys are committed to saving lives. That is all they care about. They get a call; they get in, get the victim and get them to hospital as fast as possible. End of story.

Sorry, can't end there for me. Questions: "You get a call and turn up in the field where the guys are."

"Right"

"Who knows you are there?"

"The guy who called us."

"Did you call the Mine Action Centre to get a team out there to clear you a path into the field?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Don't know, just don't."

“What would happen if you stepped on a cluster as well? You’d all be injured and lying in the field, possibly dead.”

They look embarrassed.

“It’s not about you. You guys are great and do an amazing job but it is about your families. Do you have a wife and kids? Then you have to get back to them each day alive and in one piece. It’s for them, not you.”

That is the hardest thing to do, stay calm when all around you goes to hell. I’ve witnessed people die while we were trying to get to them. It is devastating but if you can’t do that then you shouldn’t be in this work. It is the most heart-wrenching thing to go through but you must always come home, always.

## **Tuesday, 12 September 2006**

Ok, so the sparrow farts and I get to work. The sun is just beginning to climb and we are on our way south again from Beirut. The roads are fairly quiet and I’m enjoying another dawn over the Mediterranean. As we head down the deserted highway I see the French are constructing another Baily Bridge. There’s now a French Frigate and a supply ship off shore and they’re landing load after load of pre-fabricated bridges. Anissa says she likes to watch the French soldiers build bridges. I suggest we drop her off as a good will gesture. She turns very red and becomes very quiet.

It’s early in the morning, but still we’re running late for a meeting I’ve arranged with a Community Liaison Officer from the Mine Action Centre. These guys like to get moving at the crack of dawn. We still have 85 km of bombed out highways to negotiate before we get there.

The Mine Action Centre is the coordination hub for everything that happens with bomb disposal in Lebanon. There are some good contacts here and a few of us know each other from other conflicts. I know the boss from Kosovo and others from various corners of the globe. A bit of a weird mob, but I like them. They make a difference in their work. How many can honestly boast that?

Kel, the Operations manager, has Hassan lined up for me and we quickly hatch a plan for the morning. Places of the worst strikes etc and in no time we are on our way. Hassan and I hit it off immediately. He’s spent his life working in many corners of the world, particularly west and central Africa. The stories, both strange and true, begin to flow between. Soon Anissa in the back is cracking up as we find that common thread of naughty boys causing trouble around the globe. At least we are quite good at it now so why stop when you are on a roll!

We hit the back roads. Hassan certainly knows his stuff. His network is excellent and in no time we are in worst hit places recording data and filming the sites. We use a video camera as it’s the quickest way to give the other teams a good feel to a site. We are right on the front line and we stop before a pile of stones on the road. This little marker indicates that there are clusters ahead on the road. We leave the car behind and proceed on foot. Sure enough, we are right in the middle of it and the area is covered with M-42 cluster munitions. We get a GPS reading of the site and film all that is obvious. Hassan is

a little pre occupied and I press him for the reason. The Israelis are still patrolling here so let us be quick. Quick we are and we are on our way to the next place.

We stop by a house on the side of the road, where clusters have been reported. We carefully step through the gate. Another moment of touch nothing, step on no grass. Just in front of the front door are our first cluster bomb, then another to the left and another straight ahead. All are armed and on the concrete floor. This is the prime strike for a cluster bomb, onto concrete. This is supposedly the conditions that they are tested under and come up with a 1 percent failure rate. Once we finish counting the munitions we are looking at a 12 percent failure rate at least. Such a pack of political lies surround the use of this weapon. I would like just one of those governmental morons to come and spend just one day with me. If they got out of it alive then they might even change their minds.

We continue on and find is the same story time and time again. Many clusters, great danger, community desperate to get their lives back together. Here lies the problem. I can only describe it as Money=Time=Lives. The more money that is available to clean this mess up the quicker it is done and the less people who are killed. It's that simple.

In the mean time there will be a race between the bomb disposal people and the locals who will become tired of waiting and take matters into their own hands. This will only lead to fatal consequences. This is not speculative. It's already happening.

We get to another site and its houses that have them in and around them. We block the road with the car as we work our way in and find them on the road, to the side and inside houses. One house has three clusters inside and a family living in there as well. They are in separate rooms but what uncomfortable house quests.

We hear a bit of a commotion on the road and go investigate. A farmer wants to take his tractor down the road to dump some garbage. We tell him of the danger, but he doesn't give a damn and thinks we are a nuisance. We point out some clusters to him and he throws a piece of metal at one. To hell with it, you want to die then go right ahead. We get in the car and back out. No extra amount of reason will work with him and there is nothing more we can do. Common sense isn't something we can force on people and we have no legal ability to physically detain him. Good luck to him and goodbye. I hope he makes it.

We part with Hassan and head into the hills by the Israeli border to villages that have been absolutely obliterated. The level of destruction here is stunning. Every single house, business, structure has been bombed to rubble. I've seen some bad destruction over the years but nothing like this. This is absolute and all done by airpower and artillery. Every single house has taken a direct hit from high explosive bombs then in the last 72 hours came the barrages of cluster munitions. This is the first time that I really feel I am looking at a war crime. Massive retaliation of this level on a civilian target can only be described as that.

It takes a lot to shock me but this has done it so total is what I am seeing. Amongst all of this are the survivors, the people that have either survived or ran and have now returned. We are invited into a house and they begin to tell me what happened and then of course, there are victims of clusters here too.

I meet with six kids who all were injured in two separate accidents but the stories are the same. Playing in the wreckage and found something. They threw it, it exploded and they luckily all survived but with terrible shrapnel injuries.

Where is the mentality behind rendering a village rubble, then spraying clusters over it when a ceasefire is being negotiated? This is above belief but here is the evidence. Here you learn to believe the impossible is so.

### **Wednesday, 13 September 2006**

One day becomes another. I'm tired and was planning to work from Beirut today but a call from Oslo required us to look at some specific problems in the south. My driver Rashid has been fantastic and working my average 16 to 18 hour days with me. We're both very tired with the prospect of another day on the road not an appealing one.

Some very specific information is needed for a United Nations meeting in November. I have to be able to prove without any shadow of a doubt that cluster bombs affect urban areas. Got to love a challenge. As we head south I get on the phone to my contacts for help. The usual suspects step up to the mark and Hassan has just the place for me: a village on top of a hill that has cluster bombs sprayed right through the middle of it.

We meet in the middle of the main street of the village and do not have to go far to get started: the clusters are across the road and in the backyard of the house we're standing in front of. Across the road three clusters lie at the bottom of an empty water storage container. More frightening are the pock marks showing where other clusters have exploded. There are the entry holes in the mud where others hit, but did not explode. This will be a difficult clearance task. It requires wading into the bog and god knows how they will find or excavate them from there. Another mess in an already messed up world.

I take GPS coordinates and photograph the scene. Hassan is grinning like mad and saying, "Who's the man? I'm the man."

We head around the corner and find everything that nightmares are made of. Clusters lie on the side of a major road with lots of traffic is passing by. One vehicle moving to the side of the road could detonate them shattering the truck and us in the process. I feel distinctly uncomfortable here. Too much is going on around me that I have no control over. People, trucks, cars, chaos... it's a lethal cocktail. I know my job and how to work in this environment, but I'm bristling at the scene and have a great desire to get the hell out of here. I have a bad feeling that it's all going to go horribly wrong very fast.

OK, get it done and get out of here. We get our flak jackets and helmets on and enter the courtyard of a house in a similar set up to the other day. I crawl through a hole in the front gate and find the first cluster a meter in front of me. I stop, look survey the scene. There's a second one two more metres in and a third to the left and another on the porch. Lots of dry leaves are scattered around making it hard to them and a gentle breeze is blowing. I crawl back out and have another look around. There's a field across the road between houses and clusters lying by the roadside. Why do I feel so twitchy today? I walk down the road carefully looking at the ground and trees. There's another cluster by a door of a house and another in a garden. They're everywhere. People are watching me do my thing and my thing feels a bit like flapping like a budgie. An old man, some boys and a few others stand nearby looking interested.

OK, I get the GPS reading, mark the site, count the numbers, get inside the house and film the place. I don't fancy crawling back through the hole in the gate and look for another entry. There is a gate that is tied shut. It's always better to stand and step than crawl about on all fours. Never open a gate or door if you don't know what's behind it. There could easily be a cluster right there by the gate that I knock and blow myself to kingdom come.

I pull myself up onto the wall and look over the top. Nothing there. I look down to the back of the gate and the entry is clear. So far so good. I untie the gate and it opens with a bit of gentle persuasion from my number nines. This would be a really nice garden: shady and cool with a trellis of grapes growing overhead and lots of scrubs and flowers. I stand still just inside the gate in the prickly heat and scour the ground. I'm looking for little black or green devices lying among the leaves. Where are you? Each step is carefully planned. From here to here, onto the wall, over the fence, then up to the house. As I walk the leaves rustle in the breeze. It's hot and a river of sweat is now steadily running down my back. One, two, three, four clusters. The porch is clearer of leaves and that makes me feel better. The door to the house is smashed open so I have a brief look around finding broken glass and the treasures of someone's life are scattered about. I look at family photos hanging on the wall and feel like a real intruder.

I begin to film the scene, the gate the clusters, the garden and the house. The GPS marks my position and I feel that I am almost finished. The last thing I want to see is the roof. I walk along the clearly visible patches of ground and climb the stairs at the side of the house. At the top I look around for any clusters on the roof. Nothing. It's a really nice house with a great view across the valley. I take a deep breath. Nothing to fear here, but fear itself. Funny how some things just wind you up some days.

When I am back on the street I talk to the locals about what has happened. They give me a greater understanding of what went on and now what it is like to live in amongst all of this mess. An older man tells me that he has clusters in and around his house. He has a wife and 8 children and he is terrified for their safety and desperately wants the bomb disposal teams to come here and clear this mess up. I couldn't agree more.

He takes me onto his roof which is pock marked with explosion marks and holes. An unexploded cluster lies over against the wall. "Can we get someone to come and take this one away for him?" He knows the teams are very busy and over-worked, but could they just get rid of the one on the roof before something happens to one of his children? He is happy to wait for the others to be taken away at another time so as not to be a burden. I promise to get something done. Looking down into his back garden we see another four clusters and the graves of his horse and cow. The cow walked on one and was badly injured along with his horse. He had to kill them both, a major economic blow.

I ask a banal question, "How does he feel?" "I am scared." A neighbour pipes in, "No, you are very, very, very scarred." This breaks the tension and we all laugh. I think I can get all the clusters removed from here.

So here is the reality of a community after a war: houses smashed and lives shattered. Jobs? There are none. The land is too dangerous to work and the legacy that is the gift that keeps on giving is the cluster bomb. This is not an accidental consequence of war,

it's the intention. This outcome was known by the people who planned the strikes. They have achieved their goal. Well done.

As I leave I ask the man how he feels about the people who did this and his answer surprises me. There is no venom in his voice as he takes my hand and simply says, "May God forgive them."

We part and I head back to Tyre feeling a little drained. I'm finished, but want to swing by the hospital one last time to see how the fisherman is doing. We now know the hospital intimately and I head for intensive care. The doctor explains that the fisherman has been taken to Beirut as his condition is very grave. Sadder still his ward has received three more cluster bomb casualties in the last 24 hours.

The doctor introduces me to the man I saw brought in the other day with his foot blown off. He is scared, in shock and hasn't spoken since being brought in. Tears swell up in his eyes as we look at each other. He has lost his foot and fingers and has many other injuries. His sister explains what happened to him and I explain to her why I am in Lebanon. I thank her for seeing me and turn to him and in my worst Arabic wish him a good and speedy recovery. In perfect English he replies, "Thank you for coming to see me." We touch hands as I hold back tears and we part. Bloody clusters, pure bullshit. Oh what I would give to have one politician here with me today who thinks these are a good idea.

My time in Lebanon is nearly to an end. We know the scope of the problem and can contribute greatly to the clean up of the mess here. Norwegian People's Aid teams are now assembling in the country and staff will start arriving tomorrow. The apartments are rented, vehicles in the pipe line and by next week our teams will join other NGOs to get on the ground and turn this sad chapter of Lebanon's journey into a dusty piece of history. Stick it where it deserves to be: in the past where one day some kid will read about it at school and wonder what the generals and politicians were thinking when they decided to use cluster bombs.

As I drive north I get a call from Chris at the Mine Action Centre. He tells me they have identified over 460 cluster strike sites that amounts to hundreds of thousands of cluster munitions, maybe millions. In the four weeks since the cease fire there have been 94 people either killed or injured and that number seems to be growing by about three a day. The problem here is big and the country will remain dangerous until all these munitions are removed. Then they might be able to move onto some kind of functional peace.

I am on a plane in the morning back to Oslo then to the United Nations in Geneva by Saturday for a meeting about landmines, but I'll keep the concept of "legacy" clearly stuck under their noses. What legacy do you want to leave future generations? Pain or peace? Pick one.

As we drive along the coast the words of the old man repeat in my ears. "May God forgive them." I hope he can, because I can't.

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## **The Lebanese Diaries: Part 2**

### **Back in the World, 14-17 September**

It's a very surreal experience to jump on a plane in a war zone and a few hours later step off in Paris: from the sublime to the ridiculous. I landed at one end of Charles De Gaulle Airport and my connection was leaving from the other end of a different terminal in 20 minutes. It might be possible to make it. If I were 20 years younger a certainty. Into a crowded airport and run like hell, weaving in and out of the crowd with a fairly heavy pack on my back.

"How do I get to terminal 2D?" I ask. Fingers point, signs go up, down, left and right. I still have to get into Europe properly through immigration. No idea how far it is to the terminal but I keep the pace up. Finally into immigration and it is empty, except for a long chicane of crowd control barriers, between me and the man with the rubber stamp. I start weaving in and out and it is a ridiculous amount of obstacle to have to negotiate; I keep weaving and see the immigration guys in the booths are getting quite a chuckle out of my navigations.

Time for plan B: I round a corner and hit the floor and slide under the remaining barriers on my butt. That shiny floor was good for something: the immigration guys laugh and stamp me into Europe. Keep running! I am still not in terminal 2D but feel I am getting closer. I am sweating like mad now as I have the feeling that I am crossing Paris, not the airport. Finally I am entering terminal 2D! Hooray!! Gate 65, where is that? The clock is ticking and I have to get through more airport security. Keep running. I empty my pockets into my jacket as I approach the security check. "Sorry folks," as I ram to the front of the queue tossing my bag and coat into the X-ray machine. Grab it all and keep running, leaving the sounds of protest behind me.

Gate 1, this is getting crazy. Keep running. My watch says 1228 hrs. My flight is 1230 hrs. Gate 16, 36, 44, 51, 58, 63 and finally 65.

"Sorry sir, the flight is closed." I look out the window and see the plane sitting there at the gate. The air bridge is just backing away. I am drenched in sweat and find a seat to collapse into. After regaining my breath I go in search on the transfer desk. The next flight to Oslo is in 8 hours.

Totally dejected, I sit down for a mind numbing wait in the terminal. Tic Toc ticks a clock as I wind my brain back to Beirut and the work of the last week. All of that death and destruction is hard to compare with the fashionable west. Opposite is a fashion shop and next door music and i-pods. I turn into my mind-numbed stupor and zone out till its time for my flight.

Finally the time has come and I am on, into Oslo and on the train to my girlfriend's flat; nice to be home.

### **Geneva, 18-22 September 2006**

The home euphoria is short-lived as I must fly to the United Nations in Geneva to be a member of the Australian government delegation at the 7th Meeting of States Parties to the Landmine Ban Treaty. These annual meetings are a work in progress for the

landmines treaty. I have had a very close involvement with the International Campaign to Ban Landmines for longer than I care to remember and it's a strange turn of events for me to be on a government delegation. Credit to the government, they are mixing civil society representatives with diplomats at these meetings to try and create a better balance in their representation and deliberations. The only real headache is finding a suit.

I heard a joke once: "What do you call a photographer in a suit? The defendant!" Well, at least not this time.

The UN is not my favourite place. It is far too much of an Ivory Tower to me and removed from the troubles of the world that it is supposed to be deliberating. An intolerable stream of cocktail parties and diplomatic speak will fill this week.

The opening ceremony is grand; they always are. The great and the good are aligned behind their countries' signs and there is always some kind of "event" to kick off proceedings. This year it's two graffiti artists working on a mural on stage. Then comes the double amputee cyclist who will leave here and cycle around Switzerland while the meeting is on. At least he will get some fresh air. I'm envious. All I'll get is stale cigarette smoke and flatulence. There is a real pecking order at the UN. Ambassadors sit in front of the delegation with First Secretaries and other assorted minions stacked up behind. They all look very impressive. There is not enough room behind the Australian sign for all of us so, I head off to sit with my NGO friends in the back. This whole treaty process only exists because of us. It was this little motley crew who forced governments into looking at the problem of landmines and created this treaty ten years ago. There are some real life heroes in this room and none of them are sitting behind a government's tag.

A meeting like this looks impressive but basically not too much happens right here. The real work takes place in side meetings. That is how you change the world; sit them down for a little one-on-one with no extra ears around. For me as a member of the delegation there is not much to do as Australia is one of the good guys in the landmine world; no one to fight or lobby here. There are plenty of other targets for me though, and I single out various diplomats whom I want to talk to over the week: Finland, Poland, Indonesia, Guinea Bissau and Lebanon to name a few; this is where the work needs to be done. Lobby, coerce, persuade.

Although this meeting is all about landmines, there is plenty of discussion centring around Lebanon. There is almost a diplomatic disbelief as to the scale of what has happened there. There are a few side events planned and I have been asked to attend them. Chris who is the UN Program Manager in Tyre Lebanon has flown in to present what is happening there to the delegates. He is tired and absolutely hammers them with the facts on the ground. The scope of what has happened there is now starting to emerge. Somewhere between 1.2 and 2 million sub munitions have been fired into Southern Lebanon. With failure rates that are being experienced so far, we must be looking at a minimum dud number of 300,000 to 500,000.

As he delivers his presentation to Ambassadors and delegates I can see a distinct uneasiness in the room. These people are honestly shocked and uncomfortable with the concept of what they have to come to terms with. Israel is being accused of war crimes. This is ground that is taboo for most, but the facts on the ground are the facts. They waged an unrelenting war against Lebanon and then in the last 72 hours pounded the

place to oblivion with cluster munitions. Where on earth was the military logic and where were the military objectives - targeting civilians? It's against the Geneva Convention as far as I can see. As a nation state, Israel is bound by international standards. They have stepped way outside of these.

This by no means is to exonerate Hezbollah from their actions. They kept throwing rocks from a glass house and the neighbour has come and smashed it all to pieces. It must be remembered that Hezbollah fired rocket volleys from Southern Lebanon into Israel. They paid no attention to where the rockets went or who they killed. They just fired them south looking for soft targets, then they kidnapped two Israeli soldiers. For these reasons they must bare considerable responsibility for creating this current war, but where it all goes wrong is in the scale of the response from the Israelis. Even with this provocation do you demolish a country and punish the civilians? If the answer is 'yes', then this kind of conflict will continue day after day, year after year, decade after decade. That at least is proven so far. The only constant is the never-ending cycle of violence.

The week wound to and end and the real side work for me was on what needed to be done in Lebanon. Many different NGO's are represented here and a great spirit of cooperation is present. They all want to bring something to Lebanon and all need more information. A 'collaboration' is put together and I am asked if I will return and continue gathering information on the problem on the ground. Of course I will. More tickets are purchased and I traverse a revolving door from Geneva to London to Oslo and then south again to Beirut - so much for my tickets to Australia. I'll get there one day I hope.

## **Beirut**

It's not far from Oslo to Lebanon but it takes forever to get there. What is about 5 hours flying takes over 12 hours via everywhere. Yes, international jet-setting at its best. Transfer desks and waiting at gates. How romantic.

I finally arrive into Beirut but this time fly straight in. I get the same welcome as last time and I am through and into the terminal at 0230 hrs. Rashid is waiting with a big grin. It is good to be back. A legacy of our last period here is that we have better logistics now. Rashid whisks me away to the NPA apartment to grab a few hours sleep before we drive south, back to Tyre.

At 0800 we are on the road again and I can see the improvement already. There are more Baily Bridges in and lots of road and bridge work is under way. Our drive south is better but not perfect. Another traffic jam - no idea why. Plan B, pick a back road. Back road gets us bogged again, more traffic. Rashid is not one to be outdone so comes up with plan C. He can get across a nearby Palestinian refugee camp as he has the pass but I don't. The plan: drop me on the side of the road and I go cross-country down a back path where the bridge is out, get across the river and meet him back on the highway past the destruction. Off for another run and past a few bemused Lebanese military, into the river and up the other side. Not really sure where I am going but south seems good. Half an hour later I emerge onto a road under a bridge under the highway. On the side of the road behind all of the traffic is Rashid. Good plan; on our way again and at full speed.

On the way into Tyre I drop in to the Mine Action Centre (MAC) to see Chris and the team and sort out some logistics for tomorrow. I am assigned Hassan and first thing tomorrow we will be on the road.

The two apartments Norwegian Peoples Aid have rented as home and office overlook an old Roman Hippodrome. A spectacular view of the whole place is had from the balcony. You can just imagine the chariot races and gladiatorial combat that would have taken place here. Just goes to show that they have been fighting around these parts for quite awhile. The grave of Medusa is even said to lie within its grounds.

## Tyre

The morning dawns: Hassan and I are on the road to find sites with cluster bombs that affect the most people and get them in the database for clearance. Check up on a few sites that should have been cleared by now and as for me, I am looking for more M-85s. These are the so called self-destruct cluster bombs. This is the political hot potato that most politicians are scared of. I like scaring politicians so let's get busy.

We weave into the hills behind Tyre and I can see more signs of a mass clear-up underway. The Lebanese are incredibly industrious people and are not looking around for someone to solve their problems; they are full speed into clearing away the destroyed houses and bridges and starting again. This is fantastic but of course also dangerous. They are operating in areas that are still heavily affected by cluster bombs. This is costing lives.

Only yesterday I was told of an accident which killed one boy and injured three others. A man was working a bulldozer clearing away the rubble of a bombed house. Little boys love big toys and there will always be a crowd around trucks and bulldozers. It doesn't matter what country you are in, this scene is repeated. As the bulldozer shovelled the rubble into the truck it bumped a tree. The tree had a bomblet hooked in the branches and it dropped out of the tree and detonated killing one boy, critically injuring one other and giving minor wounds to two other boys and the truck driver.

We don't get far out of Tyre before Hassan points to a field on our right side. Closer inspection reveals that the Lebanese Army had been through here and cleared out many M-85s. Excellent, that is one piece of land back to the farmer here in Tibnin. Our eyes are caught by a small pile of stones across the field. Closer inspection reveals another M-85. This one has been missed by the clearance team. That is a common problem on any site when teams are trying to clear so quickly. Luckily in this case the farmer saw it and has marked it with the small pile of stones. We will get a team to come back at some time and deal with this but we both doubt it will happen quickly. There are just too many tasks for the number of teams on the ground that have a higher civilian impact than this field. The farmer who knows Hassan said anytime he was here please pick a cucumber to eat, so we take two and move up to the village of Aytaroun.

Aytaroun has been hammered. Block after block has been reduced to rubble. We slowly cruise through the streets looking for areas with the worst impact and legacy and in no time we find one. There is another M-85 in the weeds on the side of the road. The only problem with this road is that it leads to a school. The school is not open at the moment but it will resume in two weeks. A local man came up distressed with the presence of the

cluster bomb. “Children will be here soon and you and I know that some kid will pick this up and die,” he says.

We couldn't agree more and make a call for an emergency response team. These teams only exist to be used in an emergency and not to have their time wasted by standard tasks. We consider this an emergency and we are assured that the team will be there by the afternoon. We all part smiling but will check up later in the day that it's been done.

Down the road is a family working on their destroyed home. Again we find that a team has been through and destroyed some bombs but more have been found. Unlike the school road, this one will not qualify for an emergency response. One house site is fully cleared and the other will have to be left and the occupants wait. It will get cleared eventually, but not today.

It seems that no matter which way you look there is another place with cluster bombs in amongst the rubble. Ayharoun has been systematically demolished. House after house has taken a unitary bomb or two and then the clusters. We leave this pile of rubble with the old man sitting under the shade of his olive trees with nothing but disaster behind him. How does an old man in the ending of his days deal with the total loss and destruction of his whole life? Where can he get the money from, and even if he had it, what stress getting contractors and trades' people to do the work. He looks bewildered as we walk away. I feel a little guilty but there is nothing I can do. He's in the system and that's that.

I am still after the M-85 cluster bombs and Hassan thinks he has something for me. We take a short drive to a nearby village called Bint Jubeil. Into a back street and there are really nice houses with minimal damage to them. We pull into the drive of one and are greeted by the owner. Yes, her house was damaged and her car destroyed but they were getting it all back together OK. The Lebanese Army had been through but of course missed many cluster bombs. The biggest problem she had was one little cluster bomb, outside of her bedroom door. The whole place was largely cleaned up except this little pile of rubble outside of her room which contained a cluster bomb. Low and behold, it's the one I am after, another M-85. Of course this is an apparition, as they self destruct, right?

Across the street we spot another M-85, then up the street for more. These are the older M-42 type so it proves that a few different shells were pumped in here. The neighbour come out and shows us more. They were up the street in the grass and in amongst his orange trees.

“Can we get rid of them now?” he asks. “No we can't,” we reply.

He tells us that he can stay out of the trees for one more month then he must harvest the fruit. He will harvest the fruit. It's a race against time as usual. If he clears them up himself there is a good chance he will die or become horribly maimed. This scene is repeating itself time and time again all over Lebanon.

We are doing all right gathering the information but the clock, money and available teams stop any fast progress. It is incredibly frustrating.

Enough for one day, now just see what tomorrow brings.

## Saturday, 1 October 2006

Saturday and I am pushing these guys to work, sorry. I am here for too limited a time and need to get too much information. Hassan and I head out following Haji who believes he has a cluster strike area with more M-85s in it. What I am here to explore. This would squash the argument that a failure is only an occasional thing. There are first a few stops to make with some of my Norwegian colleagues before we can find the strike area. The crew from Norwegian Peoples Aid is beginning to assemble in Lebanon and these two are Norwegian Navy divers on secondment for a few months to NPA.

We head to the village of Shayiiyen and to an orange orchard that has many cluster bombs in it. Wissan Chouyhari lives here with his extended family. Seventeen people in all live here and together they work the orchard. The orchard looks in excellent condition and the fruit is ripening and getting close to the time it will need picking. Wissan walks us through his 35000 square meter area and explains what has happened.

“It wasn’t till the last few days till we got barrage after barrage of cluster bombs being sprayed into our area. There didn’t seem any use in this, there were no fighters around. Every orchard around here is affected. The Israelis just systematically shot these weapons into each of our farms.”

As we walk down the shady grove under the cover of grape vines my eyes are always scanning the canopy for clusters hooked up in it. A beautiful place but I feel very uneasy here. At the bottom of a big wall were over 120 clusters that they had found in the orchard and brought out. Seeing this makes my blood run cold. Moving them could have got them killed and now there is a pile of 120. If one goes off there would be a chain reaction. Being in a pile here also makes demolition harder. There is no way the teams will move them and they will have to blow them up where they lie. A blast of this size will probably bring down the retaining wall but that can not be helped. Our teams can’t put themselves at risk because someone has done some DIY clearance.

He asks us when they will be taken care of and we tell him soon, but don’t know. As we leave I wonder if he will take things into his hands further and try and get rid of them himself. Some people have lit fires on them. This is hoped to burn them but what it does is detonate one and the rest are scattered all over the place in a more sensitive state again; one nightmare leads to the next.

We decide to check a few more orchards in the area. The next is owned by Abdallah Najem from Kanoun Ras Ien. Another beautiful hill of oranges and more clusters spread through it. His attitude to the danger is far more serious. He explains that he is scared to enter his orchard. He has only gone into the edges a bit and found clusters so left them and got out. He was able to show us a few clusters that he had found and what he shows us are M-77s. These come from a rocket system called the MLRS or Multiple Launched Rocket System. A barrage or rockets are fired and these carry far more clusters than an artillery shell; they rain down over a larger area affecting more area and people.

What a brilliant waste of an education. Someone goes to school and probably studies sciences then gets work in the arms industry thinking up more devious ways to kill people. The very concept of that makes me feel a little ill. I have never met anyone who works in the arms industry before but I think I would like to. See how they do without

their rockets systems for a little one on one. It wouldn't be bad to put my thuggish past up against their scientific reason.

Abdallah shows us one last thing, a new pipe sticking out of the wall. This isn't a pipe but the end of a Katyousha rocket. This one is a Hezbollah rocket and was out going fire. We check it and try to work out if anything is inside of it still. Not convinced it is empty, it will probably have to be blown in place. This will destroy another retaining wall and bring down many orange trees, a very sad consequence of this war and another innocent victim and livelihood destroyed by the legacy that it leaves. Abdallah seems prepared to wait for help but this will hurt his family badly financially.

One more orchard at Kanoun Rass Ain and we meet Salah Jaafar. Salah has an orchard full of clusters and there have already been many taken out and destroyed. 1600 M-77s have been taken out to date by the Lebanese Army and he has found many more since their first sweep. Most frighteningly here is the density of the orange trees. We crawl on all fours under their branches, careful not to touch anything. Salah shows us one, then another M-77 then takes us to another 'mystery pipe'. It is the tail of a MLRS rocket imbedded in the ground. This one is Israeli. That is the proof we need to confirm a mass saturation of cluster bombs.

The local people have a pleading innocent look to them. They want this war, other peoples' war, to be put behind them and just move onto a real peace, a peace where they can farm their land and be left alone. Not too much to ask for from anyone on either side of the border. Bring it back to simple human basics: food, shelter, family, potential prosperity. It's not rocket science, just basic human rights.

We head further into the hills in search of my M-85 strike area. Haji is in the lead as we weave through smashed village after smashed village. People are working hard, bulldozing rubble away and new houses are already under construction. There is a feeling here of bent but not broken. Through a few more towns till we get to Yatar then turn along a ridge line. We snake across the high ground always scouring the ground around us for the little tell-tale pock marks where clusters have exploded. They start to appear and we stop to investigate. Standing on a rock we can see a scattering of marks and some smallish craters. This is definitely worth an investigation.

Into the field we go, carefully placing every step. Looking, evaluating, stepping, scanning, smelling. It's the smell that gets me first: rotten meat. I know that smell all too well. It's a smell that permeates a battle field long after the guns are silent, bits of meat that are still putrefying in the sun. They could be human or animal, who knows. I can't work out where the smell is coming from. There are some bones about but not enough meat to make the smell. I check the wind direction but it's so light I can't get a direction. In Kosovo I found mass graves by smelling them out. Get the whiff, then head into the wind and there you are. Not here though due to the lack of breeze.

It's probably impregnated into the soil and the earth is sweating death. This I was once told by a World War 1 veteran about the smell of the battle field and I think I have been there a few times now in my life. All I know is that it stinks and I have some clusters to find. Get focused, keep looking.

Haji calls out that he has an entry hole from a rocket. Interesting, and it looks like bits of M-77s are around the entrance. I take a photo but it's not what I am after. We continue to fan out and here we are, an M-85. There is the distinctive perforated casing but is it the self destruct kind? The ways to identify this are very subtle. Onto my hands a knees and crawl up for a closer look.

A cluster bomb is a tiny little thing, not much bigger than a D cell battery. It has a little metal bell casing which contains the explosive and when detonated becomes fragmentation. It is filled with explosive to work as a shaped charge which focuses the explosion down to make it more dangerous to armour and buildings. It has a fabric tape loop of maybe six inches long that works to arm it. When it comes out of the canister the wind speed drags on the loop to make it hit the ground in the right direction and also pulls back the arming pin. On impact the whole thing slams forward and detonates. Sounds easy enough, so why are there so many lying about unexploded?

Two things we find is that it fails to draw back the firing pin thus not yet being cocked, or we find the pin back and ready to blast, but it hasn't. This last scenario is the one that scares us. That is the most sensitive and dangerous. It doesn't make the other un-cocked ones any safer as the simple act of picking it up by the loop can arm it; put it down again and it detonates. Kids have been seen spinning these things by the loops. It's now armed, then...?

This little killer in front of me is an M-85, and yes, it is the self destruct type. There is the distinctive slide and other subtle markings around the cap. Perfect. I get a bunch of photographs and we take a GPS reading of the site. We are sure that more will be found here but that can be the job of the BAC teams. We have done enough and I feel we are pushing our luck a little in this location: time to go and leave this stench of death behind us.

Down from the mountains to Tyre and it is a hot and sultry summer's day. I have to let Haji and Hassan go for the weekend. Not fair I work them anymore till Monday. They need to have a life with their families.

I get dropped off at the apartment and begin to climb the stairs. OK, today's danger colour is white. I have touched the wall and I am covered in wet paint. Up the stairs and as I sit and think I stare out over the old Roman Hippodrome. This place is drenched in history and today is just another chapter in a long and bloody past.

## **Monday, 2 October 2006**

Another early start. Doesn't matter, they are all early starts. A change of crew from the MAC and I am out with Haji. He works a different area to Hassan so good to get a little different perspective and a different region. We head back towards Yatar which is where we found the M-85s on Saturday.

Today's job is survey. Now survey if part detective and part intuitive. A call is made that an area is thought to contain something dangerous. A Community Liaison Officer goes out and has a bit of a sniff around. If any evidence that this is true is found then a Technical Survey team comes out and surveys the whole area. Their job is to isolate the strike and have a task area defined so that a BAC Team (Battle Area Clearance Team) can come in and get straight to work and not waste time looking for the area. Lots of

time, money and company paper can be wasted trying to isolate an area from a larger survey.

We head into Yatar and look for the Muktar or village head. He tells us what he knows and finds someone to come out with us and help locate the area. Four of us head out along the same road where we found the M-85s on the weekend. We stop, talk and work out a bit of a game plan. The area to our right is the suspect area. It's on the edge of a small valley and on the other side is where our last strike was. We know this area is used for grazing goats so any shepherds or goats that come in contact with a cluster will undoubtedly end up dead.

We find a small track and decide to use this as our starting point, a base line that we can come back too and also a track that is clear enough to see where we are putting our feet. It only took about four paces and we find separators. These are small plastic wedges that are packed between clusters when a shell or rocket is packed. Clue number one: there are clusters in the area, but in which direction? This would indicate kind of a rim but we need to work out in which direction the strike has gone. Then we will mark it to instantly make it safer for the shepherd then get the teams in as soon as possible.

The ground here is very rocky and although quite barren supporting masses of waist high thorn bushes. We gently push into these, careful of what might be caught up in one before we touch it. Every time I come to a part where I must part two bushes I carefully gaze into them for a cluster. Nothing, slip on through. The thought of slipping through a thorn bush is a little unreal. As I do it the razor sharp thorns pierce my legs through my trousers. What ever you do, once going forward then never go back. That would be twice as painful.

Once we have made it in about 50 metres we begin to find the tell tale blast holes. These ones are particularly distinctive as the earth is chewed up in about a 40cm area with a deep pierced hole in the centre. There the shape charge detonated. All four of us have spread out and we all call out our findings to Haji. Anything live will be marked, a GPS reading taken, and spray painted red. Then some red and white tape will be hung from a tree next to it. This will all make it easier for the BAC Team who will follow us.

First there is one M-42, then another and another. Haji is kept busy dashing from one of us to the next, setting up his marks and taking his reading. Each time we find one we then change direction as we are only trying to find the perimeter and not walk through the centre of it.

In no time we are spread over a 100 metre area and feel that we have it fairly well marked. Over 20 were found in this tiny circle leading us to the conclusion that we are in another site with a massive failure rate: 20 to 40%, is my guess.

That is enough for here as we have much more to do. We have a strike area reported on the other side of our little valley. We now have to get out and over there, more leg pricking as we make our way to the vehicle.

We drive around the rim of the valley and Haji points out an ancient village on the top of the hill. It's a ruin now but it has been around since the 1200s. When we drive up to the edge of it we realise that history is not immune from war either. Massive damage from 500lb bombs have shattered many of the walls. To stand for so long against so many

odds, just to be reduced to rubble now. On one of the lower levels we spot something different. It's big and smooth, an unexploded 500lb bomb. Now that might sound bad but it strangely is not. A bomb like this is really quite stable and it would take a lot to set it off. Cluster bombs are a nightmare compared with these. Get the GPS, mark it, photograph the markings on it etc, back to our suspected cluster strike area.

A little further along the road we get to our suspect place. Our last sight can be seen across the valley. We get out and begin fishing about in the scrub. Again, quickly we find separators.

Same as before, find the edges of the strike, mark it then move on. We spread out and drop over the crest of the hill looking for the real signs of cluster bombs but find none. Are we heading in the right direction? Maybe we have misread the area. We make our search wider and penetrate deeper down into the valley.

This is really tough terrain with dense masses of waist high thorn bushes. It hurts too. Look around a bush, look in it, push through, lots of spikes prick into my legs, nothing here. Find some rocky ground to walk along, still nothing, down one more level through the thorns, try this level. Another separator but no strike holes or clusters, very strange. Spread out wider and push deeper into the thorns. If this does turn out to be a strike area then it will be a nightmare to clear. Steep, rocky with hostile thorn bushes covering the whole place.

I find a loop of tape from the top of a cluster then Haji finds some components. This is telling us something but not exactly where the strike is. When a team is mobilised to do a clearance they do not need to have their time wasted trying to reduce the task size. We push down deeper.

Finally Haji finds an M-42, the old type; then I find another and another but also many separators so guess that there have been a few strikes dumped in here. We head in opposite directions to get to the edge then skirt to the bottom of the valley where there is an olive grove. Getting out of here through the olive grove will be much easier than getting back up this mountain.

My legs are itchy and drenched in sweat and as I reach down to scratch them, realise there is a minor torrent of blood running down my trousers from all of the prickings from the thorn bushes; a minor casualty of the job.

We finally make it to the bottom and find many more clusters in the olive grove. This seems more dangerous than the slopes as the ground here has been ploughed and is soft. This means that there could be ones that have penetrated under the ground. None of this makes us feel too good. It is time to get out as best we can. We move towards a track on the side of the grove and breath a deep sign of relief once there. We are still in the strike zone but at least on ground we can see and walk on. Another GPS reading is taken and we begin to climb our way back up to the road.

One M-42 is in the middle of our path and Haji spots it. "Look here," he says. "A muddy foot print across the tape. Someone has almost blown themselves up already walking down to this crop."

We all know it's only a matter of time till his prophesy comes true.

I start to feel a large weight of pressure lift from me as we work our way up back to the road. There is a huge amount of satisfaction within us though as we have another area identified and marked and a team will get here some time soon we hope.

This will do for one more day so it's back to Tyre to take stock and work out what the next plans of action are for the next few days. I am tired but most of all ravenously hungry. It's Ramadan and I don't want to put the guys I am working with through watching me eat, so the first meal for all is the evening meal. Ah, doesn't a beer taste good then.

## **Tuesday, 3 October 2006**

It is now Tuesday and another day of survey work ahead. Today I head out with Bilal. He has a list of suspected strike areas so it's sure to be a busy day. Kels the Ops Officer tells us that the Israelis withdrew from Marwahine last night and for us to get down there and see what we find. Someone has reported (over 40 shiny things) around their house.

As we head south from Tyre, we are blocked on the mountain road by a burning car; just another casualty to manic driving. No shortage of that going on around here. We turn and pick another route to avoid all of the chaos. The further south we go the deeper into the heart of darkness that is Southern Lebanon. From light damage around Tyre we get into total destruction down here. People look at us with that empty pleading look that comes from people who can not be hurt any more. Their resilience is amazing. It's all just being shovelled away to begin again.

One thing I am seeing that is amazing is the recycling of reinforcing steel. If a building is totally mashed then they will break up the concrete and salvage the steel for the next construction. If the building is shattered but not mashed they then try to break the concrete off the reinforcing and leave it as much in tact as possible. I saw a second story skeletal construction of re-shaped meshed steel. They had re-bent and propped it back into place and were about to re-pour a whole second story over the old reinforcing. Now that is clever and saves a lot of time, money and effort. No wonder the place is coming back together so fast.

We arrive at Marwahine and only a few hundred metres away is the border with Israel. We look at them, they look at us. I hope they have a nice view. We are looking for Hassan Yussef who called the MAC about the suspected items. He turns up and we head in behind some houses looking for the problem area. A track leads up the hill behind some houses and it's up there where things were seen. From here on in we consider this place a danger zone.

Slowly and methodically we begin our climb up the hill looking for the tell tale signs of a dangerous area. Cluster separators, casings, blast marks are what we are looking for. As we go a short distance that smell is back; that unmistakable smell of death. I can't see anything so keep on going. Higher we climb and we find lots of Israeli garbage under trees and strewn around. They must have either camped here or had an observation point here at some time.

As we continue our climb I find the source of the smell, a mass of dead goats that were blown up by clusters and lay rotting in the sun. There is our first piece of proof that this is a strike area. Still further up we climb and the map unfolds with at first separators then

blast holes and broken trees. We feel that there must be something around here so spread out and start hunting.

It's a tense thing looking for cluster bombs. They are small, indelible and easily lost in amongst all the other garbage and turned sods that surround us. Plan your steps. Be very accurate. Step to rock, to other rock, look at earth. Is it undisturbed? Put your foot down, look around, any tell tale signs, bits of tape, pieces of metal, no, repeat. We are finding plenty of evidence but no clusters. Maybe this is a rare one where it has detonated.

That thought doesn't last long as Bilal calls out that he has found one, then another then more by me. In half an hour we have marked over fifteen. We spray rocks around them with red spray paint and tie red and white tape to rocks nearby so as to warn anyone coming this way that here lies death.

Again we are not here to clear, only mark so we withdraw fairly confident that we have hit to perimeters of this site. An old man in a nearby house wants us to come and look around his place for him. He wants to rebuild and is scared. We agree and fan out again. Saleh Diab Mohamad is in his sixties and devastated at the loss of his retirement home. He is a nice old bloke and we all feel the need to give him a little support. In searching we do find some M-42s but are confident that they are over-spray from the site we were working on before. They will be picked up by a subsequent BAC Team clearance.

His real concern is in his house. Could there be anything inside? We look at the situation. The damage to his house has been caused by unitary bombs, not clusters. A good indicator but not 100%. There are no blast marks around the house; another good sign. The garbage and rubble inside seem to be linked with the destruction from outside. We feel confident that all's OK inside. The last thing to check is the pile of garbage in the back room. This doesn't take too long and the house is declared clear. He is ecstatic and wants to give us food even with it being Ramadan. Thanks but no thanks. I'd hate to think he bends his beliefs for us.

As we have no more tasks for today we decide to take a drive through an area that I haven't been to yet. As we drive over the pass between Rshaf and Debil, we notice some tell tale blast marks and decide to stop to investigate a little more. It only took five metres and there was my holy grail, an M-85 cluster bomb and yes, it is the self destruct kind and it is armed. This is exactly what I have been looking for. I get down to photograph it and Bilal tells me he sees another and then another. In all we locate over 20. All M-85s and all with the self destruct mechanism. Some are armed and some are not. This is the proof I have been looking for on a grand scale that self destruct cluster bombs are one hell of a dumb idea. Out comes the GPS. We mark and photograph and count and spray rocks red and put up tape. I am just itching to get this into a UN forum as soon as possible. I might actually get to enjoy being at one of these meetings now.

Although we have identified over 20 we are always pushing our luck in these places so it's time to take what we have and leave it to a future clearance team to deal with. I am feeling the kind of tired you get after a good dose of high stress then 'ahhh'.

Tyre beacons and tomorrow is another day. I feel guilty a bit as I have lately been doing all this work on strike sites and spent no time with the victims. I am wondering if the old man 2 weeks ago had got to me a little and I was maybe avoiding the real face of this

conflict, the people who are injured by this legacy of war. There is something to ponder for tonight as I plan up the work of the next few days. I might be getting soft in my old age, heaven forbid.

### **Wednesday, 4 October 2006**

The morning comes and I have lined up Anissa and Rashid to come down from Beirut to work with me today. It will not be a day for survey or clearance but one of victims. I am not sure if I have been avoiding them but whatever, time to get their stories out and put faces to the carnage.

The main people I really want to see are the survivors from the blast that killed one and injured three last week. On the road we go towards Sawaneh. Calls are made and a meeting with the family is lined up.

This accident happened on September 27, a week ago. We find the family of the worst injured boy, Hussien Ahmad Sultan. He is ten years old and just yesterday was released from the hospital. A group of four boys ranging in age from 10 to 14 years were watching a bulldozer clear away the rubble of a house. It shovelled it up and dumped it in the truck and the truck would haul it off to become landfill somewhere. They stood under a tree in the shade watching the work take place. As the truck backed out of the house it bumped the tree they were standing under and out fell a cluster bomb. It fell right into the middle of their group and detonated.

Hussein, his cousins and brother remember the sight like it happened in slow motion. The small bell shaped object passing by them then all hell broke loose. Everyone was injured and screaming. That is, everyone was screaming except his cousin Mohamad Hassan Sultan. He was dead. Shrapnel had pierced his face and neck but fatally pierced his heart.

Abbas, Hilal and Hassan were all lucky, if you can call being blown up by a cluster bomb lucky, and escaped with fairly minor shrapnel wounds to legs and arms. With Mohamad, dead it was Hussein who was left to fight for his life. Shrapnel had sprayed his legs but dangerously pierced his chest giving him life threatening internal bleeding. The last week has been 'touch and go' with his survival. He turned the corner a few days ago and is now allowed to come home to the care of his family.

On showing the boys my pictures of the various cluster bombs found in Lebanon they all pointed to the same one, the M-77. This opens an even more distressing scenario as they are delivered by rockets, the MLRS system, and not via artillery. The difference is simply payload. A few hundred clusters are in a rocket where an artillery shell carries 60 to 80. This combined with them being fired into the rubble in the last 72 hours of the war is beyond belief. What were they thinking and what did they really expect to gain?

In the words of an Israeli commander, "What we did was monstrous. We fired everything we had into villages without clear targets. This was all about punishment, not war."

This certainly confirms that. It then makes me wonder if there was no military utility in firing into the villages then the only other objective must have been to deny a safe return after the conflict. An area denial weapon used to gain the same effect as a landmine.

As the years from these days roll on there will be more and more international rationalisation as to what has happened here. Those that ordered the firing and carried it

out will piece by piece gain an understanding of their actions and whom they have really affected, and the ramifications. As they grow older and maybe wiser these days will return to haunt them. It always does.

I head out to the site of the explosion to have a fish about and see what I can work out for myself. The area has been royally squashed. Houses are piles of dust and here is the tree the boys stood under. All around are pock marked concrete where the clusters have detonated. I still don't trust this area and move very slowly and deliberately around the site. There is a little wall I can stand on to get an overview of the place. What strikes me is the intensity of the pock marks. It seems that there is one every metre or so. That certainly fits with a multiple MLRS strike.

Under the tree, my local contact points to the place where the cluster bomb hit the ground. Against the small wall is a little boy's shredded shoe. It is his shoe I am told. It was blown off him in the blast. I pick it up and it's caked in blood, dirt and well... The last thing left of Mohamad Hassan Sultan, a shoe.

I pick it up and take it with me. It's going to the United Nations. The only thing left to decide is whose head I'll throw it at. No one's with effect.

As we drive away I think about how much healing this whole country is going to have to go through before it can really move on.

Time can be a great healer, but some wounds can end up just too deep.

The day has just begun and there are more than just these kids who have been affected.

We didn't have to go far to find our next victim. Ahmad Taufic Sherzeh is 41 and a father of 3. He was walking with a friend a month ago in Majdel Salem, surveying the damage when they noticed some entry holes. It appeared that a few rockets or artillery rounds had failed to detonate and that they had crashed into the ground. Ahmad and his friend walked over to investigate and the friend walked on something in the ground. It turned out to be a buried cluster bomb and it detonated. This set off a chain reaction from many other munitions and the end result was one dead and Ahmad injured with shrapnel in his hand and eye. The subsequent surgery went well but has left him with some eye problems.

The investigation after the accident showed that an artillery round had smashed in full of M-42s. The accidental walking on a cluster bomb had set off a chain reaction explosion.

We turned towards Tyre and had another meeting lined up with Hisham Makkeh. He is 27 and was working in the printing industry in Beirut. He came to Tyre after the fighting was over to visit his family and walked into an orchard. The orchard was cleared by the Lebanese Army 20 days before and was supposed to be clear.

On September 16 at 1400 hrs as he walked in the orchard he walked on the end of a branch when a cluster bomb detonated 2 metres away at the other end. This explosion gave him multiple injuries to his legs, shoulder and right hand. The shoulder and legs have healed well but as most of his fingers on his right hand were severed he will never recover properly. He has lost his job in printing too and worries that his fiancé might leave him too. One blast and a whole life unravels.

The munition was another M-77, proving again that rockets had been fired into this area as with the others. All of this just adds to the already mass saturation that this land has absorbed with dangerous objects. What a clearance task lies ahead.

It was almost time to call it a day when we were told of a double fatality in the south on the Israeli border. Whatever had happened, it certainly didn't sound like a cluster bomb. A vehicle blown to pieces killing two men? That is a far bigger blast than a cluster can yield. We would now like to go to Naqoura, but it is almost on the Israeli border and behind a serious security cordon. No one is allowed down there except UN and those vetted by Lebanese Intelligence Services. When I was on the border the other day I got through all check point because I was in a UN vehicle. A Norwegian Peoples Aid car just doesn't quite cut it when you want to get into these areas. We either need another car or another way in.

It's often not what you know but who you know and we know some well connected people. A call to a friend, Mousa, and we are on our way. There is a big security check point south of Tyre but that is not the only road south. You just need someone who knows other ways. After a little weaving we are in the south and looking for the family we want to contact.

We track them down and meet with the family of Ali Hassan Miliji. Ali was killed on September 19, over a month since the ceasefire. He was with a friend, Ahmad Hadi Mendi, and they drove out to the banana plantation to fix the irrigation pumps there. The banana trees were in desperate need of water if there was to be a crop off them. As they pulled over to the side of the road all hell broke loose and their vehicle was ripped, frame from wheel. This was no cluster munition; they had hit an anti vehicle mine. We had no knowledge of these being used here but this might turn that around.

Both men were killed instantly and Ali's body was found over 150 metres away. At least, what was left of his body was that far away. Ahmad was minced in the wreckage. Unlike an anti personnel mine or a cluster bomb which has a relatively small amount of explosive, an anti vehicle mine has 5 to 7 kilos. They are designed to blow tanks up. If an ordinary car hits one the result is quite catastrophic.

The result in this case was catastrophic and Ali's 20 year old life was over and Ahmad has left behind a wife and 3 children under 10. Now what goes on during war is kind of fair game within limits, but a legacy that lasts well into peace is the issue of abhorrence. Landmines whether anti personnel or anti vehicle are the gift that keeps on giving. Days, years, decades after conflicts have finished they still are active, waiting to blow up the first person who comes into contact with them. This is the same legacy that a cluster bomb create and the reason why so many people around the world are beginning to come together to fight for a ban on their use.

Look into the eyes of someone who has lost all that they love and see if you find words to comfort them. Nothing that can be said is anything but a hollow oratory.

"I'm sorry."

Are you?

"I hope things get better for you."

They won't, you know.

"It will be OK in the end."

Are you mad or just plain dumb?

You reef a person's world apart and see what is left: horror, emptiness and suffering. That is all there is; nothing good, nothing positive. We make our leave and head back north in a very quiet car.

On the way north we stop on a cliff top that over looks the coast all the way to Tyre. It's a beautiful view up this eastern end of the Mediterranean. Farms and a gentle sea meet along a rocky coast. A few rock fishermen can be seen dotted along the coast then the reality creeps back in. The UN base full of troops from Guiana, building after building destroyed and bridges out. Check points and armed convoys. Now there is the reality of Southern Lebanon.

Two hours later I am back in the apartment writing this. My mind has been disgorging the day into the keyboard and I am exhausted. A deeper consciousness begins to creep back into me as I become aware again of my wretched state.

I am filthy, dusty, stink and am in desperate need of a shave and a haircut. As I look down at my fingers typing these words I become aware of the state of my hands. Filthy and gnarled, with muck from the shoe of Mohamad Hassan Sultan built up under my fingernails. That is all that there is left to show for the life of a young boy cut short.

It's time to shower and become a human myself again. My little piece of guilt lies in the washing of my hands and the final removal of any trace of another life that falls from humanity to become just another statistic. When will this ever end.

### **Thursday, 5 October 2006**

A dead loss and out of leads. Time to get the nose on the street again and dig up new ones. Dave at the MAC comes through for me when I ask him about any new injuries.

"Yep, two yesterday and I think you might find a few more with a bit of scratching."

On the phone and indeed I do find a few more. I am aiming to leave back to Oslo on Saturday, so tomorrow will be the last day of work. Better go big then get out.

Luke and Rick fly in and head straight to Tyre. Luke runs the operation in Jordan and will also be over seeing this one till things are smoothly running and any bugs are ironed out. Rick will then take over and become the ultimate country head.

The whole day is one of logistics; logistics for me and logistics for them. I plan to go to Nabathea tomorrow as there are people in the hospital there. The aim will be to get more information on strike areas and victim statements. From their stories we can hopefully work out any patterns of risky behaviour and try and feed the right information into the right areas and change dangerous activities.

I get two people in Nabathea lined up to help me. One is a young guy who is recovering from an injury he got to his arm while being bombed and the other is a Lebanese/Canadian who will translate for me. Ali is lined up to drive and I am good to

go. Not a bad thing to have a day to consolidate as the previous week has been at a break neck pace.

By the end of the day I am on the balcony writing and gazing out over the magnificent Hippodrome that is across the road from the apartment. It is truly spectacular. A massive race track that pre dates Alexander the Great. Here was the entertainment capital of Phoenicia.

“Come on down and bring the kids to the afternoon matinee show! Chariot races, Bull jumping, all the sports you’ve grown to love with a little Gladiatorial contest thrown in for good measure. See Sillius Sodus slice the ears off a Persian or two. Bring the kids, bring the whole family, roll up, roll up!” Ah yes, whatever happened to the good old days.

I took a walk over to the Hippodrome and what a place it is. To my left as I entered the gate are masses of ancient graves. I investigate these and find almost all have been broken into through the ages. The ancient grave robbers would have been after wealth buried with these people but to my surprise, many of the tombs although having their massive stone lids slightly opened have no wealth in them but are full of human bones. That is actually a nice thing to see for although thieves stole the gold, they left the bodies basically undisturbed. Not a bad lesson for a few modern day archaeologists to take on board.

I continue and find mosaic floors and more tombs then to the huge entrance arch and the road that runs down through it. This place must have been incredible in its day. Looking back up the Hippodrome there are still sections of stadium seating to my left that is still in tact complete with columns on top. The arena is probably 500 metres long from here to the far end and in the centre is a cenotaph and what looks like the remains of a Drum Tower. I head across the arena and climb to the top of the stadium and sit with my back against an ancient column. I bet a few people have done this in the past. The sun is now slicing between our apartment block and the bombed one next door creating long dancing shadows and bathing the place in a rich warm light.

For me this place really comes to life and I can feel the excitement of the crowd as they came for their gala spectacles. The roar of the crowd, betting in the back row, the thumbs pointed up or down. Humans, we are a weird beast.

As I cross the arena and head for home I look inside the Drum Tower and the walls are adorned with ancient graffiti; lots of little Christian crosses, and some Crusader coats of arms. There are tallies scratched in here and a few old Roman sounding names. Who had before stood in this same space and maybe carved their names into the wall before doing mortal combat? How many Christians from the Roman period met their end outside of this door when they were fed to Lions?

My imagination for the ancients is now replaced by the present and I head back home to get sorted for tomorrow.

“What are you doing next week?” says Luke.

“Back to Mette in Oslo then hopefully to Australia in a few weeks,” I say.

“How would you like to come to Jordan with me on Saturday for a week or so and do a bit of what you have been doing here for me?” says Luke.

I would rather see Mette but old mafia is old mafia and it makes sense for me to do it while I am in the neighbourhood so the answer is yes.

I do have the most understanding woman on earth and a phone call later to her and all is confirmed. Jordan it is. Still, Lebanon is not yet finished so best stay focused on the job at hand. Lots to do tomorrow.

## **Friday, 6 October 2006**

An early start and Ali and I are on the road to Nabathea. We meet Ahid at the community centre and also Saja who will translate. The first stops will be to go through the hospitals. It took only minutes to find the first new cluster bomb victim.

Mohamed Abdullah Mehdi is an 18 year old motor mechanic from Zawtar. He got out of the area during the bombing and returned as soon as he could. What he found was his life had been destroyed. His mechanics shop had been bombed and his livelihood was scattered into the street. He began clearing the rubble away and trying to find what was salvageable so as to start again. He had worked his way through most of the rubble and clusters had been found. These were dealt with by some of the military and he thought that his shop was cleared. Two days ago he went to move an engine and a cluster bomb exploded. Half of his left hand was severed along with massive damage to his legs. His right leg now has 3 metal rods in it. He indicated from the ID chart that it was an M-77. Zawtar was a major focus for the Israeli bombardment and they fired masses of clusters into it. The MLRS system was used there which means that great saturation of the town by clusters would exist.

In a house in Nabathea I was taken to Jamal Abel El Nassar Ayash from Sidiqine. Five days after the fighting on the 18th of August this 35 year old mechanic was walking in the rubble of his village thinking about what would come next. Without warning there was a massive explosion and he was in the middle of it. His screaming brought neighbours running and they found him as a bloody mess with most of his right foot blown away. Both legs were shattered and he also had shrapnel wounds in his chest and stomach. His recovery is uncertain as not only is his left leg badly broken but most of the calf muscle has been blown away too. The area where he was injured is still not cleared and he worries that more people will end up like him.

We head to another hospital in Nabathea and find Ridwan Ghandour in a bad way. The 34 year old is in a very bad way with his left hand gone and major eye damage. His left eye is now blind and he only sees shadows from his right. He will receive another operation on his eyes in five days. Twenty days after the conflict ended he was salvaging scrap metal from the rubble when the piece he was holding hit a cluster bomb. This was on the outside of Nabathea and I am amazed that the Israeli military have used clusters into such a big city. This really is the biggest case of lack of restraint I have seen. Scrap metal salvage is a major occupation here as the reinforcing metal is essential for the Lebanese to be able to rebuild. All over the south can be seen people pulling wreckage apart and smashing the concrete of the steel rods. The steel is then recycled into new

buildings. None of this now helps Ridwan as he lays in hospital handless and blind. His doctor tells me that he is also suffering deep mental trauma. What a mess.

This is the part of my work that is the hardest to do. Tracking down victims of the war and putting a human face on the slaughter. These are real people, not statistics, or in the spin doctors' verbal pornography, Collateral Damage. What the hell in Collateral Damage anyway? Sounds like your shares went down in Telstra, not that you killed a bunch of civilians.

I have one more call to make today and it is to 60 year old Salima Hammoud in a small community, Bint Jubeil east of here. The repetition of the story is here again. She escaped the bombing and returned to a village saturated with cluster bombs. She only made it a few steps inside her house when a cluster exploded on her front stairs. She was injured in her head, hand and stomach. Neighbours rushed her to hospital where she received medical care. Since then she has suffered headaches and she must have another operation in a few weeks to fit a metal plate into her skull.

When she was taken to hospital her two dependant children were left behind in the house to fend for themselves. Both are disabled. Her 25 year old son is seriously mentally handicapped and her 40 year old daughter both blind and mentally handicapped. The son hides in a corner traumatised and just rocks back and forth. Salima is the mother of 16 children and will require them to help her get through this nightmare.

"I can't think, there is pain in my head always. When I went to hospital my, two children were left behind. Finally after a week someone came here and found them in a terrible state. They can not look after each other. It is just lucky that they were too scarred to go outside so they too were not injured by more cluster bombs. My house is full of them. The back yard has a rocket that crashed into it. You can see it. Many small bombs are all around still," said Salima.

Five rockets from an MLRS strike are on her land. It seems that some of these crashed in with their pay loads in tact while others had dispersed their M-77 cargos all over the place. The yard is too dangerous to enter but a team from MAG is nearby and will hopefully clear this place soon.

Economically she is ruined. She has a small crop of tobacco and olives and this is rotting behind her house. Not only is it too dangerous to harvest these now but her physical state barely allows her to take care of her children.

Soon she will have to have the second operation on her head and her biggest worry at present is who will look after these two while she is in hospital.

It's hard to leave Salima as she is confused, angry, emotional and completely ill equipped for what her life is now. I wish I could just remove the bombs from her land and arrange for some care for the kids while she is in hospital but that will not happen as the problem she is faced with is repeated house by house, village by village all across southern Lebanon.

As we walk to the car I pick up a printed flyer that is blowing through the wreckage. Ahid explains to me that these were dropped all over southern Lebanon in the early days of the war.

In Arabic they said:

“To the inhabitants of the villages south of the Litani River, Because of the terrorist actions which were carried out against the Israeli state from within your villages and your houses the Israeli defence is forced to (has to) respond in an immediate way against these actions even/also inside your villages. You are asked to evacuate/leave your villages immediately in the direction of what is north of the Litani River. The State of Israel”.

People were told to go north of the Litani River as the south was to be destroyed. Many tried to do this and many got there. Many others were systematically shot to pieces by aircraft that circled overhead. Everything was a target but the Israelis specifically said any tractor, bus or truck would be destroyed and they were. How can you order a mass evacuation and then destroy the very means for ordinary people to escape, I ask myself. The roads are littered with burned out vehicles of all sorts of shapes and sizes. All of these could never have been “Military Targets”. They were also not collateral damage either, as with each can be seen a very obvious entry hole from a rocket or bomb. It was systematic and brutal and the south is a shell of its former self.

Israel promised to put Lebanon back 20 years. They have achieved their goal and left their neighbour as a smashed and smouldering wreck where the memory of this latest conflict will simmer for a few more generations to come. How to eventually break this cycle of violence between these two is anyone’s guess but the one thing for sure is that it will take moderate voices.

My time in Lebanon is at an end and I fly out tomorrow afternoon to Jordan. It’s been an amazing time here and one that leaves me full of all sorts of emotions and images. The fisherman who caught a cluster, the mother who lost a son, houses full of danger, an old man sitting amongst the wreckage, me crawling on my face through an orange grove scared of the wind, the echo of a distant explosion where something has gone horribly wrong. All of this will need to be fixed and the memories fade till the people can move on. Time can be a great healer sometimes but that is not a guarantee.

The drive back to Beirut is along the coast through Sidon and the old Crusader Castle by the sea. The cafes along the coast are quiet as it is Ramadan still but they will come to life after the sun sets. I have a date for dinner with Luke, Rick, Anissa and Hiba.

We meet at the Mayflower Hotel at 8 and head to downtown Beirut. This was the centre of the civil war a few years ago and has been totally rebuilt. It is such a contrast to what I have been living in down south. Here is the beautiful young set enjoying the warmth of a summers evening in Beirut. The streets are crowded and we find an outside table in the old city square and order dinner. It seems quite surreal to be here only 100 or so km from the south but it’s also refreshing and gives a real feeling of hope for the future. Maybe I was feeling too negative about this place’s future. Here is a comfortable mix of old and new, traditional and modern all living side by side in what is one of the Mediterranean’s most cosmopolitan cities. This place really does have a bright future if it is allowed to blossom.

The girls insist on us going to a few bars after dinner and I find us in amongst ‘the beautiful people’ set to party into the night. So this is fundamentalist Lebanon? Young, sexy and vivacious. Somehow I think that a few miles down the road in Tel Aviv you

would find many bars full of Israeli kids set to party the night away too. With the politics of Friday night I feel that the gulf between Lebanese and Israeli, Muslim, Jew and Christian, East and West is maybe not too different. You just need to get to the arena where the differences are stripped away and we can become something very special, ourselves.

After a fine and savoured cognac and a first rate piece of people watching I make my excuses and head for home. A big night in the bars is not really my scene. As I walk onto the street I am bathed in the warmth of the night and off somewhere in the distance a Mullah calls the faithful to prayer. This part of the city has definitely been rebuilt and is on its own course to a future. Maybe the rest of the country will get there soon too.

## **The End**

Please cite back to: John Rodsted, "The Lebanon Diaries – 2006,"  
[www.stopclusterbombs.org.nz](http://www.stopclusterbombs.org.nz)

In September and October 2006, the first part of the Lebanon Diaries aired in Australia by ABC's *Life Matters* show. <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/lifematters/index/date2006.htm>