

Hotel`s Fall Mourned In World`s Press Clubs

March 01, 1987|By Jonathan Broder, Chicago Tribune.

JERUSALEM — In the old days, when a nervous reporter arrived at Beirut`s Commodore Hotel for the first time, the reception clerks had an unsettling way of asking his room preference.

``Artillery side or car-bomb side?`` they would inquire casually, referring to the rooms facing the pool or the street.

The veterans always took third-floor rooms overlooking the pool. The wisdom was that when artillery began to fall, one could escape if necessary by jumping out his window onto the overhang, drop down to the poolside patio and dash into the Commodore`s basement shelter until the shelling subsided.

Car-bomb-side rooms were considered dangerous.

Today, there is no more choice at the Commodore. The news from Beirut is that the legendary hotel, once the sacrosanct, safe haven of foreign correspondents in Beirut through 11 years of civil war, finally fell to Druse militiamen last week after a ferocious seven-hour battle against Shiite Moslem fighters that left the Commodore looted and heavily damaged.

After the fighting, owner Youssef Nazzal cabled his employees from London: ``I have decided to close down. Put a paper on the door saying we`ve closed.``

According to reports from Beirut, the Commodore`s entrance was blown away in the fighting. The spacious lobby, where in saner times gunmen were requested to leave their weapons behind the reception counter, was reported to be a scorched dead zone of shell holes, piles of rubble and shattered glass, smoldering, overturned sofas and pools of dried blood on the cracked marble floor.

The victorious Druse stripped the hotel of anything they could lay their hands on--liquor, food, linen, television sets, silverware, the reports said.

Few foreign correspondents were in Beirut to witness the Commodore`s rape. After Moslem extremists kidnaped Associated Press Beirut bureau chief Terry Anderson two years ago, most major Western news organizations pulled their reporters out of the city, declaring Beirut too risky an assignment even for the most battle-hardened war correspondents. When the Commodore fell, the foreign press corps had been reduced to two or three reporters.

For many veterans, the Commodore`s demise confirmed the end of an era in their own lives, a shuddering recognition of the inevitable toll from the years of living dangerously.

They remembered Coco, the deranged African parrot that sat in a cage by the bar and sent journalists diving to the floor with his realistic imitations of the sound he knew best--the incoming whistle of artillery.

They remembered fat Tommy, the overfed, curmudgeonly cat that slept between the two wire-service tickers in the lobby and studiously ignored everyone.

But most of all, they remembered how the Commodore and its extraordinary staff became a home and family in a city of deadly splendor.

In a sense the Commodore died as it was born, transformed in 1975 from a back-alley, seven-story hotel into the headquarters of the foreign press after fighting gutted Beirut's fashionable seafront hotels in the first year of the civil war.

The hotel installed AP and Reuters printers, secured reliable telephone and telex lines and paid hundreds of thousands of dollars in protection money to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which dominated West Beirut at the time, to ensure that the Commodore's journalists would be safe.

From then on, the political tides of the Middle East could be gauged by the number of foreign correspondents who gathered each night around the Commodore's horseshoe-shaped bar. Joining them at the bar was an assortment of diplomats, United Nations soldiers, spies, scholars, hitmen and whores.

The drinks were generous, the conversation intriguing, and when bartenders Mohammed and Younis went home at 2 a.m., they let the late drinkers pour their own.

The bar was the scene of some memorable fistfights between reporters, both male and female. Actor Robert Conrad, visiting U.S. marines in Beirut in December 1983, crossed ideological swords with one newsman and ended up out cold on the floor.

The strangest evenings began and ended at the Commodore bar. Steve Hagey, a former UPI Beirut bureau chief who is now in Jerusalem, remembers having a drink there before dinner, getting kidnaped by Shiite gunmen from a nearby restaurant and escaping the next morning in time for breakfast and a Bloody Mary--back at the Commodore.

Some correspondents left the bar and never came back. Sean Toolan, a former Tribune reporter, walked home from the Commodore on the night of July 14, 1981, and was found the next morning murdered in the street.

As the dangers of Beirut grew, the Commodore's Lebanese manager, Fuad Salah, always suave and unflappable in his custom-made suits, arranged for returning journalists to be picked up at Beirut airport by armed bodyguards driving one of the hotel's distinctive fleet of white London taxis.

And when it came time to pay up, he miraculously transformed bar bills into hotel laundry, restaurant and telephone charges for correspondents'

expense accounts, elevating him to near sainthood in the hearts of foreign press corps.

Beirut's bloodiness usually stopped short of the Commodore's turquoise tiled entrance, but when it invaded the lobby, it was dramatic.

Once, in March 1984, armed Druse drug dealers marched into the hotel, grabbed an employee suspected of poaching in on their turf and shot him in the knees. One of the bullets ricocheted off the lobby floor and nicked the earlobe of a stunned correspondent.

When the kidnappings in Beirut drove the journalists away in 1984, the Commodore began to fall on hard times. At the time of its fall, only two guests were staying at the hotel, members of an Arab-American group on a mission to secure the release of foreign hostages. They both fled to East Beirut and surfaced later in London.

The Syrian army entered West Beirut last week only a few days after the Commodore's fall, and reports from the Lebanese capital say hotel employees have been urging owner Nazzal to reopen, saying sufficient security has been restored in the city.

“Why should we close now when things will get better?” assistant manager Hashem Hatoum was quoted as saying.

Meanwhile, Coco the Parrot's owner, British journalist Chris Drake, now living in Cyprus, has offered a \$100 reward for the safe return of the Commodore mascot. After speaking to hotel employees by telephone, he said the last anyone saw of Coco was after the hotel battle, when a Druse gunman reached inside the cage and took the screaming bird away.

“Either he's dead or he's a hostage,” Drake said. “But he has a vicious beak, and it wouldn't be too difficult to recognize the gunman who stole him. He'll be the one with his trigger finger missing.”

Beirut Haven for Press to Close Its Doors : Commodore 'Won't Be a Hotel Anymore,' Owner Says of Money-Loser

February 21, 1987 | J. MICHAEL KENNEDY | Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

Youssef Nazzal, who defied the gunmen, the shelling, the car bombs and the odds, made his decision Friday: He is closing his West Beirut hotel, the Commodore.

For days, at his home in London, Nazzal had been listening to reports from the Lebanese capital about the fighting in and around the Commodore, which once served as an almost sacrosanct haven for the press.

The Commodore was a place where reporters could withdraw from the madness of Beirut. Nazzal had made this possible by paying off the various militia factions that roamed the streets and, when necessary, by posting guards around the hotel.

Nazzal took up the challenge of keeping the place running in the mid-1970s, when civil war erupted, and hung on through the years, even during the Israeli siege of 1982. Over the past four years he struggled to keep it open, although the reporters were no longer coming to Beirut.

Hotel Losing Money

He is wealthy, and he kept the Commodore open because it was an institution, even though it was losing money. But on Friday, Nazzal decided that the institution was dead, that Beirut had finally killed it.

"It won't be a hotel anymore," he told a reporter by telephone.

The stories Nazzal heard from Beirut were chilling--pools of blood in the hotel lobby, where Druze and Shia militiamen, once allies, fought with machine guns and grenades; hooded fighters crouched in the lobby with guns trained on the entrance.

One story dealt with the hotel's last two guests, American Muslim leaders seeking the release of hostages. They were trapped, then robbed. One robber said he was Druze, the other a Shia. The two Americans left the country.

'Shooting--Then Looting'

Then came word of gunmen carrying off everything from liquor to towels. Nazzal said it was the "Bedouin way--first the shooting, then the looting."

At last, the final insult: A truck pulled up and carted off the piano from what had been the dance floor.

"It's finished," Nazzal said. "That's it, the end of the line."

In its own way, the Commodore was as famous as Saigon's Caravelle had been to reporters who covered the Vietnam War, or Tehran's Inter-Continental to those who covered the Iranian revolution and the hostage crisis.

The Commodore was a seedy, third-class hotel of 200 rooms in a city that was once the playground of the Middle East. It was a subject of the "Doonesbury" comic strip, and it survived countless days of vicious combat. It was always the place where the telephones and the telex worked, even when communications were knocked out in the rest of the city.

On those grim evenings when the bullets were flying, when reporters who lived in apartments in the city were forced to move to the Commodore, Nazzal was there, sitting on the couch in a corner of the lobby that was reserved for him and his father, Abu Youssef.

Crush at the Bar

Those were the glory days, when a room was \$200 a night, when the two bartenders, Mohammed and Younis, struggled to keep up with the crush. And sometimes, late in the evening, after the crowd had thinned out, Nazzal would tell the story of the Commodore, of how he bought it from a pair of brothers who went broke playing cards and playing the horses; of how, in the old days, the Commodore was where people on cheap package tours were put up.

Then, he recounted, in 1976 the civil war broke out. Nazzal was flying back to Beirut from London, the plane was crowded with press people sent in to cover the fighting, and they wanted to know where it would be safe to stay. The Commodore, he said.

Nazzal installed new telephones and telex equipment, along with teleprinters that carried the Associated Press and Reuters reports. From then on, the Commodore was never the same.

Newcomers would be suddenly frozen by what sounded like the whistle of an incoming shell, only to learn that the sound came from Coco the Parrot, on his perch by the circular bar. It was Coco's best trick.

Champagne and Orange Juice

Fuad Saleh, the hotel manager and chief fixer, could accomplish almost anything. He could get your glasses repaired, get your residency permit renewed. Once, at a time of particularly heavy fighting, a group of press people wired ahead to say they would be coming in by boat because the airport was closed. Saleh met them with champagne and fresh-squeezed orange juice.

"No problem," he said.

Saleh, ever the dapper dresser, would roam the hotel until the wee hours of the morning, buying a drink here, stopping to chat there, and on occasion sending an employee down to the Green Line--the boundary between the city's Christian and Muslim sectors--to rig a telex line at the main post office.

In 1984, when Shia fundamentalists, enforcing Islam's stricture against alcohol, went through Beirut smashing bars, Saleh prudently moved bottles and glasses to an upstairs suite.

Guns Checked at Door

Hotel clerks kept machine guns behind the check-in counter. Gunmen were asked to check their weapons at the door. Guests chose rooms on one side of the hotel or the other, depending on where the sniping or car-bombing seemed to prevail at the time.

When the city was virtually without food, as it was so often, the Commodore had prime rib. When reporters needed cash for a quick foray into Tehran, the Commodore came up with \$120,000 in a matter of hours. When there was fighting, the hotel was the place to be.

There were cockroaches in the rooms, but the laundry was done every day.

In recent years, the press drifted away. Those who lived and worked in Beirut have for the most part been moved out to other cities. The March, 1985, abduction by terrorists of Terry A. Anderson, the AP's chief Middle East correspondent, made it clear that the press was no longer immune to the savagery of the city.

Nazzal said he had a premonition last week that something was going to happen to his hotel. He called Saleh, the manager, and told him to be on the first plane for London.

Today the Commodore is no longer a hotel. There are holes in its walls, its windows are shattered. It is one more casualty of the war that never seems to stop.

Nazzal said he will wait for a while before he decides what to do with the building.

"I can decide that when I see what's left of it," he said.

J. Michael Kennedy was The Times' correspondent in Beirut from 1981 to 1984. For nine months he lived at the Commodore.

War is heck at `hack' hotels

Survival: Foreign correspondents cope with snipers, bad food, too little or too much alcohol, price gouging and the scramble for a way to transmit their stories during assignments in brutal times.

October 21, 2001|By G. Jefferson Price III | G. Jefferson Price III, PERSPECTIVE EDITOR

Every war seems to have its "hack" hotel - hack being a word of British origin applied to journalists.

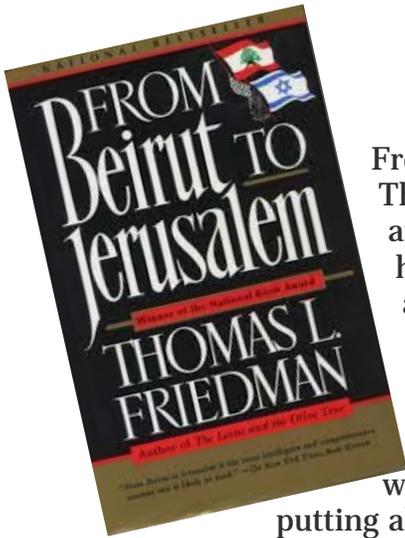
In Saigon it was the Caravelle where hacks sat on the veranda sipping cocktails while the war rumbled in the distance - and occasionally nearby. In Beirut it was the Commodore, where a parrot named Coco whistled a scary imitation of the sound of incoming artillery. The American Colony Hotel in Jerusalem, whose central part is an old pasha's palace, is the favorite lodging and drinking place for foreign correspondents. In Sarajevo it was the Holiday Inn, where the front rooms were not used because they faced the city's notorious "sniper alley." In Baghdad it's been the Al Rashid, overlooking the bombing of Iraq during the gulf war and later. In Belgrade it was the Hyatt, which managed to bring food to two dozen foreign correspondents jailed because they were on the roof of the hotel the night NATO started bombing.

War correspondents work very hard in very difficult, dangerous places. They have simple requirements. They need, above all, a place to transmit their stories. They need a place to sleep. They need food and after a long, dirty, scary, frustrating day, they need drink.

Catering to press

Beirut's Commodore Hotel may be the most famous hack hotel of modern times because the conflict in Lebanon lasted so long and because the hotel's management and arrangements were structured exclusively to serve the press. A Reuters and an Associated Press wire machine clattered around the clock in the lobby. The hotel had three working telex machines (this was before widely available satellite communications), a dependable international telephone hookup, a restaurant where the food was lousy but abundant, a bar that remained open until the last hack was sated. Each room had a mini-bar restocked every morning. The hotel had a kidney-shaped swimming pool, but it rarely was filled with water - a fact painfully discovered by the occasional drunken hack.

Empty pool or not, everything at the Commodore was outrageously expensive. Before the war, the hotel was nothing. But the war made its Palestinian owner, Yousef Nazzal, one of the wealthiest men in Beirut until it closed in 1987. By then, there were no more hacks in Lebanon, except for hostages such as the AP's Terry Anderson. Shiite militiamen ransacked the hotel. Coco the parrot was never seen again. It was the end of an era.



From [From Beirut to Jerusalem](#) by Thomas Friedman.

The home of all good Beirut fixers — not to mention all good Beirut reporters and crooked taxi drivers — was the Commodore Hotel. Every war has its hotel, and the Lebanese wars had the Commodore. The Commodore was an island of insanity in a sea of madness. It wasn't just the parrot in the bar, which did a perfect imitation of the whistle of an incoming shell, that made the place so weird; it wasn't just the front desk clerk, who would ask registering guests whether they wanted a room on the "shelling side" of the hotel, which faced East Beirut, or the peaceful side of the hotel, which faced the sea; it wasn't the way they "laundered" your hotel bills by putting all your bar charges down as "dry cleaning"; it wasn't even the sign in the lobby during the summer of 82 which read: "In case of shooting around the hotel, the management insists that neither television cameramen nor photographers attempt to take pictures. This endangers not only their lives but those of the guests and the staff. Those who are not prepared to cooperate may check out of this hotel." It was the whole insane atmosphere, an atmosphere that was neatly captured by the cartoonist Garry Trudeau in a series of *Doonesbury* strips he did about the Commodore during the summer of 82. My favorite shows his character, television newsman Roland Burton Hedley, Jr., calling down to the front desk from his Commodore room. "Any messages for me?" Hedley asks the desk clerk.

"Let's see ..." says the clerk. "Yes, a couple more death threats. Shall I put them in your box?"

"Yeah, look," says Hedley, "if they call again, tell them I only work for cable."

You did not stay in the Commodore for the quality of its room. The only thing that came with your room at the Commodore was a 16 percent service charge, and whatever you found in the blue-and-gold shag rugs. The lobby consisted of overstuffed couches, a bar, a would-be disco with a tin-sounding organ, and enough bimbos to stock a warehouse. There was also a Chinese restaurant and an old dining room, where the service was always bad and the food even worse. When the Shiites took over West Beirut in 1984 and imposed a more fundamental regime, the Commodore management was forced to close the bar in the lobby and to open up what became known as the Ramadan Room on the seventh floor. (Ramadan is the Muslim holy month of fasting.) Hotel guests would knock on the Ramadan Room door with all the caution of entering a speakeasy during Prohibition. Yunis, the bartender, would peek out to make sure it wasn't some mullah come to break his bottles, and then let you in. Inside, guests would be sitting in the dark, sipping drinks on the couch, while Fuad, the hotel manager, would be shuffling back and forth uttering his favorite expression: "No problem, no problem."

If you got tired of visiting the battlefield, all you had to do was sit in the Commodore lobby and wait for the front to visit you. One quiet Saturday night in 1984, a large number of journalists were gathered around the bar, getting loose after a day in the field. Yunis was keeping the booze flowing, when suddenly shots rang out from the lobby. The journalists all ducked behind the bar while a band of Druse gunmen poured into the hotel from the front door and kitchen, chasing after a certain gentleman who was apparently cutting in on their drug business. They found him in the lobby and tried to drag him

out, but he, knowing what was in store for him, wrapped his arms around the leg of a couch. In order to encourage him to let go, the Druse pistol-whipped him and then pumped some lead into his thigh. Just as this scene was unfolding, my friend David Zucchini happened to come out of the elevator.

“All you saw in the lobby was this poor guy holding on to the couch for dear life, while the gunmen were trying to drag him away; and over at the bar all these little eyes of journalists were peering out from behind the stools,” Zucchini recalled. “At the front desk, two gunmen were beating the clerk, who was trying to call Amal for help. But what I remember most was that CBS correspondent Larry Pintak’s Dalmatian, which he used to keep tied up to the AP machine in the lobby, got so excited by all the shooting that he broke his leash and started lapping up this guy’s blood on the lobby floor. It was disgusting! The gunment finally left and this guy let go of the couch, got up, and sat on a bar stool in shock. Fuad immediately showed up and pronounced, ‘No problem, no problem.’”

Why did any sane journalist stay at the Commodore? To begin with, most deluxe hotels in West Beirut had been destroyed during the early years of the Lebanese civil war. But more important, the Commodore’s owner, a Palestinian Christian by the name of Yousef Nazzal, who bought this fleabag in 1970 from a pair of Lebanese brothers who needed some fast cash to pay off their gambling debts before their arms were broken, was a genius of catering to journalists. He understood that there is only one thing journalists appreciate more than luxury and that is functioning communications equipment with which to file their stories or television spots. By paying enormous bribes, Yousef managed to maintain live international telex and telephone lines into his hotel, no matter how bad the combat became. In the summer of 82, he once paid someone to slip into the central post office, unplug Prime Minister Shafik al-Wazzan’s telex, and plug the Commodore’s in its place. Yousef never took politics or life too seriously. He loved to sit on the stiff blue couch in the lobby right around deadline time and listen to the hum of all the telexes going at once — at a rate of about \$25 a minute. He would sneak up behind me and say, “Tom, my boy, some people make a living, other people make a killing.”

The other important attribute of the Commodore was that it filled the void left by the defunct Lebanese Ministry of Information. For a “small consideration,” also known as baksheesh, also known as a bribe, the Commodore would get you a visa at the airport, a work permit, a residence permit, a press card, a quickie divorce, or a marriage certificate. Hell, they would get you a bar mitzvah, if you wanted it. As long as you had money, you could buy anything at the Commodore. No money, see you later.

Pro-Israeli press critics used to complain that the Commodore was a “PLO hotel”. There is no denying that many a Palestinian spokesman hung out there, but when the Israeli army invaded West Beirut, more than a few Israeli officers dined in the Commodore’s restaurant and sued it to contact reporters — the exact way the PLO had. The Commodore lived by the motto: The king is dead, long live the king. I would not be surprised if today a poster of Ayatollah Khomeini is hanging over the reception desk

Yousef would tell the some of the journalist who stayed at the Commodore Hotel that he had a place in St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands and were welcome to spend time there. On occasion, I would assist them with their stay on the property and It certainly added more stories to those crazy years in Beirut. One journalist arrived with the first Sony Walkman. I was amazed and had to have one. “You Can Get It If You Really Want” and I did.

I always kept numerous sets of diving gear for myself and guests and we would take many of the guests for their very first dive. It was fun time.