

The Attack in Riyadh: 1995

As told to Tom Cuba by Maureen Wiltse

The bright red cross that had been embroidered on my shirt fell directly over my left breast: right over my heart. I smiled. It was a fitting place for it. My life had been dedicated to charitably serving others. The cross, and the Christ it stood for, might as well have been my heart itself. The cross itself had faded slightly through the years of wear and repeated washing, but its meaning, and my dedication, remained brightly burning.

My duties today were menial, but necessary. Our staging area in Riyadh supported relief efforts in Ethiopia, Sudan, and Somalia. Children should have food and clothing, and all that I needed to do was to sort items into shipping boxes in preparation for shipping.

Of course we had no idea which children would receive which box, so we sorted the donated clothing into sizes and further separated them into categories, such as shorts, long pants, shirts, underwear and so forth. That way the workers at the distribution centers would have an easier time handing things out to the parents. When they had parents, that is. Into each box, we would put a small toy, if we had one. A ball or a toy truck could bring a smile to the hungriest child.

The volunteers who worked in those countries had a much rougher time of it than me. As the thought of my friends working in what many would consider a war zone wandered through my mind, I couldn't help but remember my training. We had been told that under some particularly dangerous circumstances, our revered red cross had occasionally been used as a target, an aim-point for snipers. We were told that there would be times when it would be wise to keep it hidden. I smiled again with the knowledge that I would easily display my compassion no matter what the risk might be.

That was when I heard the explosion. The building shook a little, but not much. It was more like a shiver. The same shiver that ran through each of us. Everyone stopped what they were doing, looking around with an expression of surprise, mixed with shock: A look which was shortly replaced with one of fear and concern. *What had happened? Were there people who needed our help?*

That was how our minds worked. It was how we thought. It was in our nature. We quickly ascertained that we had not been harmed by the blast itself, and we

immediately thought of others. The woman next to me, one of my best friends, looked at me for advice.

“What happened? What should we do?” Janet asked in a voice much too calm for the situation.

“I don’t know,” I replied just as calmly. “I don’t know what happened either,” I added, acknowledging and thanking God for the inner peace that can be had when faith guides you.

Kalmesh, our driver, burst through the door to the warehouse where we worked.

“Janet!” he cried. “Amber! There has been an explosion at the military base!”

“Our children!” Janet cried.

“We must go,” I said, my composure quickly losing ground to the fear that the news had brought.

“Yes, let us go now,” Kalmesh said and hurried us to the door.

At the last moment, Janet and I grabbed our black robes, pulling them on as we rushed to the car. I wasn’t quite frantic yet, but was very unsettled. My two girls and Janet’s little boy attended the day care center at the United States Riyadh Military Base. We had the utmost confidence in our military and, at some level, knew that our children would be safe. Working in some of the places we had worked fostered a faith in our Marines that complemented our faith in Christ. This time, however, the instinct of motherhood had undermined our trust and rattled us to the core.

Kalmesh was an excellent driver, and he navigated the streets of Riyadh quickly, despite the unusually high volume of traffic as people fled the area. That was, until traffic came to a complete halt halfway to the base. We were stuck. We were going nowhere.

“Oh, crap!” Janet muttered. “What are we going to do?”

Kalmesh looked at me in the rear-view mirror and shrugged.

Motherhood took over.

“We run,” I said flatly. “We get out and run.”

I opened the door, Janet only a half second behind me.

“Try to get to the base, Kalmesh. If we make it, we’ll need a ride home.”

Janet and I looked at each other briefly, made the sign of the cross, and ran. We ran and ran and ran, ignoring the people running the other way: away from the blast at the base. It wasn’t until we had gone about a quarter mile that I began to notice the hateful stares of the men whom we ran past. *What are they looking at?* I thought. *Is it because*

*we're running towards the base, and they are all running away? And why the hate? Do they hate us for loving our children?*

Then it hit me. We had forgotten our hajibs. Janet and I are both blue-eyed, blonde, women in our thirties. Our long blonde hair was streaming in the wind. We had picked up the hem of our abayas so that we could run more easily, and our legs were exposed. We had jeans on, but that was never enough in this part of the world. Worse, though, we were not attended to by an adult male. Such actions were a serious crime in Saudi Arabia. Neither Janet nor I cared, though. We were going to save our children, and no one was going to stop us. Fortunately, no one tried. All that got in our way was the hateful stares.

Off in the distance, above the buildings, I could see black smoke rising into the air. There was a billowing, bulging, shape to the column indicating that the fire below was quite intense. Unbelievably, we ran even faster.

Rounding a corner, entering the road that led to the main gate of the base, the smell of the explosion struck us. This was no simple explosion. It smelled of gunpowder and sulphur. Something had gone terribly wrong at the base. As we ran towards the gate, getting closer to the disaster, black dust began to fall around us. Inhaling it was unavoidable. At first it stung a little, but the adrenaline pushed the discomfort away and we kept running.

At the gate, the Airman guard stopped us. When he recognized us as two of the parents, though, he allowed us to enter. I was horrified to see that the day care center had no more windows, and yet relieved to see that it was still standing and did not show any evidence of having been on fire.

"Our children!" I cried. "Where are our children?"

Janet only nodded and wiped the mixture of sweat and dust from her face. She was completely unable to speak, and I was nearly so.

An officer noticed us and motioned to the airman that he should return to his post. Without introducing himself, the Major calmly escorted us to a steel door set in heavy concrete.

"The little ones are safe and in here. In our bunker."

I never knew if he really was that calm or was practiced in not letting his concern show. Whichever it was, the effect it had was to lower our anxiety and we were grateful. Once inside, one of the day care workers led us down a gentle incline to the big room of the below-ground shelter. In front of us, in the dim light, were about forty

children and three women caregivers. Janet found her boy rather quickly, but I only saw Annie, my eldest, and the fear came creeping back.

“Where’s Ellen?” I asked trying to emulate the demeanor of the Major.

Annie only cried, but she pointed to the other end of the bunker where a woman sat on what looked like a small stage, cuddling a small child who was wrapped in a blanket. I ran to them. It was Ellen. Both of my children were safe and uninjured, and I cried, hugging the woman, hugging Ellen, and thanking the woman for comforting my baby. I had no expectations of what would happen next, and no understanding of what had happened above. And I didn’t expect Kalmesh to be allowed onto the base.

When I saw him being escorted into the bunker, I picked up Ellen and cried some more as I went back to get Annie.

Janet had also seen Kalmesh enter and soon we were considering what to do next.

“What happened?” Janet asked.

“Car bomb,” Kalmesh replied. “Or something. The blast was from inside the base and I can’t imagine how it might have been smuggled in. The radio report said car bomb.”

“Should we stay here?” I asked. “If it wasn’t a car bomb, could it have been a rocket?”

Kalmesh shook his head. “I don’t know. But I do know that the base was the target. I think the compound will be safer. I will take you back to the American Compound.”

The Compound where we worked and lived had a contingent of Marine guards and, as long as it wasn’t also a target, I agreed.

“Come on, girls,” I said. “Our ride is here.”

“Alright. Let’s go,” Janet said.

Outside, Janet and I were once again faced with the reality of not having our hajibs and of being attractive, blue-eyed, blonde, Americans in a very Islamic world. If it was a terrorist attack from the outside, we ran the risk of running into them on the way back. To be safe, we folded down the back seat of the car, placed the children inside, then covered them with our bodies while Kalmesh covered us all with the black robes. With any luck, no one would know we were in there at all.