

Keep calm and carry on

A Diplomat's Day

Geoffrey F. Hancock

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I asked for this after receiving an e-mail from the publisher which announced: 'This is the personal account of the start of the Lebanese civil war in 1976 as seen through the eyes of the British *Chargé d'Affaires* and MI6 Head of Station in Beirut, Geoffrey Hancock.' Oh, thought I, how many other memoirs by an MI6 Head of Station do we have? None that I can think of. The book, unfortunately, does not live up to the advertising. There is nothing about MI6's role (if it had one). Hancock was acting ambassador during this period after most of the embassy staff were evacuated and it is that role which the book describes. There is a great deal about the day-to-day difficulties involved in maintaining the British presence in Beirut during a sporadic civil war when food, energy and transport became unreliable.

The major incident in this period from Hancock's perspective was the killing of the American ambassador; and we get the old, familiar message of British diplomats and MI6, the Greeks and Romans story. In this version the British state, a declining power, represented by Hancock, tiptoed round, trying to maintain contact with all sides in the civil war in which they could play no part; while the much more powerful Americans blundered about. It was this which got the US ambassador killed. Hancock notes that he 'died as the result of mistakes made on the ground and Washington's poor assessment of the degree of risk to which they were exposed'. Hancock adds that the context was the world-wide ban on US diplomats meeting PLO officials imposed by Henry Kissinger. (p. 36) If we haven't got the point, in an afterword John Wood, chair of the Trilateral Group, restates it:

'The actions of self-consciously bright and overly self-assured statesmen, when combined with gross ignorance, can have fatal effects not just for single

individuals but for whole societies and nations.’ (p. 103)

This account and the extracts from Hancock’s diary do convey considerable *sang-froid* on the author’s part; and at the rear of the book there are reproductions of some of the declassified telegrams which the author sent to London during this period. These may be of interest to students of diplomacy or to those who are studying this period in the Middle East. But mostly it’s just details of life under siege – he had to tune his own piano! – and how to Keep Calm and Carry On.

Hancock died in 2011 and his obituary was carried in the *Telegraph* at <www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/politics-obituaries/8684846/Geoffrey-Hancock.html>.

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