

## **Operation Cast Lead: Child killed and friend maimed while fleeing bombing – their ambulance shelled and fired on repeatedly**

*“As [the paramedics] were reaching for the medical equipment at the back of the ambulance where I was, a shell hit the ambulance.”*



**On 4 January 2009 Thaer (18) was fleeing Beit Lahiya, which was being invaded and bombed, with his friends Omar (17) and Ali al-Qatnani (15), to the brothers’ grandfather’s house in Jabalia Camp. Ali’s father had taken the rest of the family there earlier that morning and now the boys were following as the attacks had escalated. On their journey they were joined by several families also fleeing the area. Around 10:15am as they cut through a dirt road to avoid the tanks stationed nearby, a shell injured a fighter in the area. When the ambulance came to collect him Omar went along in the ambulance, Ali and Thaer continued their journey. Seconds later Thaer was shelled, throwing him into the air and blowing off the lower part of his right leg. When Ali came to help, he was shot in the face. The ambulances which arrived came under heavy fire; a paramedic was killed and Thaer was shot in his right thigh as he lay in the ambulance. A second ambulance arrived and managed to evacuate the victims. Thaer was maimed and Ali died in this incident.**

Thaer (18) had spent the first night of the Israel ground offensive stage of Operation Cast Lead, 3 January 2009, sheltering in his friends’ house in al-Qura'a al-Khamseh neighbourhood, Beit Lahiya. He had gone to visit his friends – brothers Omar (15) and Ali al-Qatnani (15) – the day before, and was sitting outside their house after *Isha* prayer. Due to the heavy bombing 500 metres away, he had decided not to go home that night.

Although Ali and Omar’s father had moved them to a safer room on the ground floor, the three boys had spent the night listening to the relentless bombardment surrounding them. When daylight broke at 6:00am, Ali and Omar’s announced he was taking his family to their grandfather’s house in Jabalia, for safety. Omar decided to stay behind with Thaer and for the next few hours, the two boys helped neighbours with their children as they prepared to flee the area.

Thaer was very surprised to see his friend Ali returning for some items from the family home; meeting him 100 metres from the house, he warned him: *“I stopped him from going into the house because snipers were shooting. I was told by the neighbours that the Israelis had invaded Beit Lahiya and had positioned themselves inside houses.”* Given the increasing violence of the bombing, they decided to go to Ali’s grandfather’s house after all.

They joined the mass exodus of people evacuating the area: *“We started walking and I saw men, women and youngsters holding children and running east to Jabalia camp.”* To avoid the tanks stationed on main roads they cut across dirt roads: *“We went via a dirt road leading to Abu Obaida Ben al-Jarrah School opposite the west circle street. We didn't go to the West Circle Street because there was a tank stationed near al-'Atatra and as-Salatin schools.”*

Unfortunately, the presence of fighters in the area prompted an attack: *“Suddenly, the tank fired a shell at the dirt road from the east, about 300 metres away from us, injuring a fighter in the legs with shrapnel.”* Omar and some other young men put the injured fighter in an ambulance which had arrived. The attack increased the panic among the people fleeing,

displaced from their homes by the fighting. Thaer notes that it was around 10:15am at this stage. He and Ali cut down a side path to continue their journey; they hadn't travelled far when another shell was fired. *"Then a shell landed about three metres away from me"* Thaer was thrown into the air and landed forcefully: *"I felt myself flying and slamming into the ground. I looked at my right leg and found I the bottom half had been blown off, from under the knee. I wasn't feeling any pain"*.

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As his friend, Ali came to help, Thaer heard a round of shooting and saw Ali falling to the ground, clasp his face, which was bleeding profusely. Another child ran to their rescue: *"Just then, I saw Adel (17) running towards us. He grabbed my hand and dragged me to the roadside, about three metres away. He came back for Ali."* When ambulances arrived, Thaer was put inside, as Ali was being put into the ambulance, it was shelled. *"An ambulance arrived and the paramedics carried me and put me inside the ambulance. They returned for Ali and brought him to the ambulance. As they were reaching for the medical equipment at the back of the ambulance where I was, a shell hit the ambulance. The shell hit the door of the ambulance, injuring one paramedic and killing another. I was told later that the paramedic who was killed was Arafah Abed al-Dayem. Two other youngsters were also killed; Mohammad H. (21) and Mohammad A.J. (20). I knew them because they were from Beit Lahiya."*

This was followed by repeated fire on the ambulances, a bullet entering and hitting Thaer in the thigh of his injured leg. He tried to escape but the firing on the ambulances continued; *"I tried to get out of the ambulance but it was still being shot at by soldiers positioned in the schools and houses of al-'Atatra area."*

Fortunately another ambulance arrived and took Thaer away with the dead paramedic. Omar came to tell him of Ali's death on the third day. Thaer was operated on in al-'Awda hospital and stayed there until he was transferred to az-Zeitoun Hospital in Egypt 16 days later. After 14 days he came home to assess his losses.

*"I lost my right leg from under the knee. In addition to that, I lost Ali, my best friend."*

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