



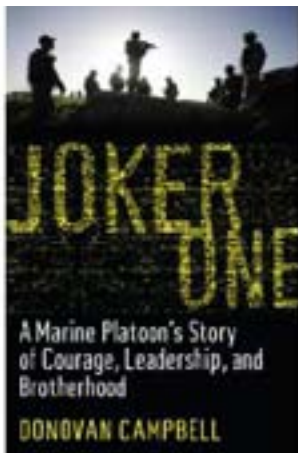
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## A Review of *Joker One* by Donovan Campbell

Reviewed by Philip Kapusta



### *Joker One*

By Donovan Campbell, Random House, 2009

In brief, *Joker One* is a compelling story superbly told. Written by then First Lieutenant Donovan Campbell, the book chronicles his platoon's experiences in the cauldron that was Ramadi, Iraq in 2004. Ironically, Donovan and his platoon were afraid that they had missed the war, and when they first arrived in Ramadi, they were concerned about whether they would even qualify for Combat Action Ribbons. That worry was soon eclipsed by their struggle to stay alive, as the thinly stretched Marines found themselves in daily firefights against shadowy and surprisingly well armed insurgents. Campbell's

platoon was a part of the single Marine Corps Company that prevented Ramadi from descending into the medieval chaos that enveloped the nearby city of Fallujah as the insurgency intensified throughout the country and in Al Anbar province in particular. Wisely, Campbell leaves the strategic and Washington-level analysis to others and concentrates on what he knows – the street-level reality that was Iraq as the insurgency blossomed.

As we now know, Campbell and his Marines had prepared for an entirely different deployment. Starting with a 10-man cadre, the platoon rapidly assimilated 30 new members and had just four short months together before shipping out to Iraq by way of Kuwait. *Joker One* spends just the right amount of time detailing the platoon's preparations, and although it is clearly not his intent, Campbell ends up damning his platoon's inadequate training and equipment with faint praise. From the laughably unrealistic pre-deployment training scenarios to the unarmored Humvees that the platoon relies upon, the reader can't help but feel a mixture of both pride and sorrow for every member of the platoon and all those who answered the call.

Amazingly, Campbell himself is somewhat of an Accidental Marine. As a junior at Princeton, he decided to attend Marine Corps Officer Candidate School, more to enhance his resume than the typical family tradition or God and country motivations. However, something about the Corps drew him in, and Campbell ended up eschewing the Ivy League-enabled corporate route in favor of becoming a Marine infantry officer. After a brief stint as an intelligence officer (also in Iraq) where he apparently found little self-actualization, Donovan finally made it to the infantry with

2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 4<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment (2/4). Whatever the winding path that got him there, it is a match that worked. Specifically, *Joker One* is truly about the entire platoon and its quintessentially American socio-economic makeup. Of course, in focusing the book on the individuals round him, Campbell ends up revealing more about himself than if he had written a “look-at-me” narrative of his exploits. His former OCS instructors can rest assured that he did, in fact, internalize their lessons about leadership, honor and sacrifice.

Small-unit leaders past, present and future will instantly appreciate Campbell’s masterful descriptions of war’s complex amalgam of pride, anxiety, excitement, boredom, love, hate, terror and honor. All others can rest assured that *Joker One* provides a definitive account of what it is like to lead brothers in arms through chaotic and challenging times for months at a time. Campbell pulls no punches in his self-critique, and he expertly details his thought processes as he makes the hundreds of literally life-and-death decisions that are required of a Marine platoon leader. Remarkably, even though one-third of the platoon members were wounded during their tour, his platoon suffered only a single KIA – an objective testament to the skill, intellect and courage of Campbell and his fellow Marines.

Truth is, indeed, more interesting than fiction. Whether it is the live fish that provides hours of entertainment when it is delivered by an Iraqi contractor in what is supposed to be the platoon’s purified drinking water, or narrowly escaping death when the rockets hidden in a car and fired into the platoon’s position were angled two or three degrees too low, *Joker One* delivers the action and character development of a blockbuster movie with the sad advantage that it is all true. In what is hopefully the first of many works, Donovan establishes himself as a leader among the Iraq generation of warrior poets. *Joker One* belongs in both well-stocked military libraries and in the living rooms of all who want an honest, ground-level view of Iraq and a poignant description of what it is like to live and fight in the modern U.S. military.

*Philip Kapusta is a Commander in the U.S. Navy. The views expressed in this review are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the U.S. Government.*

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