

# JOKER ONE

## Chapter One

I found myself fascinated by the interesting geometric designs of the twisted iron rebar in front of me. For a time, my eyes traced each of the dark, thumb-thick strands where they spewed out of the cinder-block walls like the frozen tentacles of some monster from the myths of antiquity.

I have no idea how long I spent engrossed in contemplation, because time in and around firefights is somewhat fluid, but eventually I tore myself away from profound admiration of the destruction in front of my eyes. It was difficult, this return to a reality that sometimes seemed more like a myth—or maybe a nightmare—but it was necessary, because the problem immediately at hand was all too real. If I ignored it for too long, I might get everyone around me killed.

So I stepped back from the abandoned building's wall and surveyed the floor around me. Somewhere in the various piles of newly created rubble scattered about the floor were pieces of the rockets that had just ripped through two feet of cinder block to explode inside my observation post (OP). I needed to find at least one of these pieces, preferably the base of the warhead, because this was the first time that my unit had been hit by rockets capable of doing this much damage. If I could find a piece, then we could figure out what kind of rockets these were, estimate what it would take to launch them, and predict how they would be used in the future. We could then effectively plan to thwart them and potentially save several lives, which was important to me because my job description was twofold: 1) save lives and 2) take lives. Not necessarily in that order.

With these considerations in mind, I sifted diligently through the rubble until I found what I was looking for: a smooth black object, just a little larger than a hockey puck, with a half dozen or so holes drilled through it. Though the little puck looked fairly innocuous, I knew from hard-won experience

that it was actually a thing of great pain; it was the base of one of the rockets that had just struck us. Without stopping to think, I grabbed the thick circular object as firmly as I could, shrieked manfully, and then dropped it as quickly as I could. Even ten minutes after its firing, this part of the explosive warhead was still hot enough to sear my palm. Important safety lesson: When picking up a newly fired enemy rocket warhead base, allow proper time for cooling *or* handle it with gloves. I filed that one away with other lessons learned the hard way, right after “RPGs (rocket propelled grenades) that you need to worry about always make two booms” and “No one here is your friend.” We now lived in a bizarre world where explosions were so commonplace that we had ways of distinguishing the more from the less harmful and where little tips and tricks about proper expended rocket handling made perfect sense to collate, absorb, and pass on. The absurd had become our baseline.

Ten minutes ago, though, the world was very simple, for it consisted solely of something that seemed like one gigantic explosion. Actually, it was three separate large explosions within half seconds of one another, but it’s fairly difficult to make the distinction when you’re lying on your back with your ears ringing. However, it’s fairly easy to think rapidly and incoherently, which was exactly what I was doing as I lay on my back, wondering whether my hearing would return this time, and, incidentally, what in the hell had just happened to me and my men.

Time, I already knew, would answer the former question without any help from me, but as the lieutenant and the unit leader, it was my job to answer the latter one, and time in this case was working against me. If you’re a Marine lieutenant in a firefight, a situation that’s probably as good a proxy as any for hell, then it’s your job to figure out at least 50 to 70 percent of what is going on around you so that you can make intelligent decisions, which translate into good orders, which lead to focused, effective, and decisive action. This whole process needs to be rapid to be relevant, but if you’re

too hasty, then you can lead your men to their deaths, all the while believing that you're leading them to safety. It's not an easy tension to manage on an ongoing basis.

However, it can be done, and to do it well you must have absolutely no concern for your own safety. You can't think of home, you can't miss your wife, and you can't wonder how it would feel to take a round through the neck. You can only pretend that you're already dead and thus free yourself up to focus on three things: 1) finding and killing the enemy, 2) communicating the situation and resulting actions to adjacent units and higher headquarters, and 3) triaging and treating your wounded. If you love your men, you naturally think about number three first, but if you do you're wrong. The grim logic of combat dictates that numbers one and two take precedence.

After the explosions, I rose, ears still ringing, and grabbed for the radio handset. Once the black handset was pressed firmly against my ear, I pushed the button with my thumb and, as calmly as I could manage, informed headquarters that my eleven men and I had just been hit by several large rockets. There were probably multiple casualties, I said, and maybe some of us were dead, but I didn't know just yet. I'd call back. Headquarters squawked something in return, but, with my hearing still questionable and one of our machine guns firing full bore inside the all-concrete building, I couldn't understand a word, so I told HQ I'd be back in touch when I could hear again. Then I put the handset down and resolutely ignored it until I could sort out what was going on inside the old abandoned hotel that my eleven-man squad and I were using as an observation position.

After five minutes of running helter-skelter through the thick dust that the rockets had kicked up, I found Sergeant Leza, my squad leader, and we conferred. Slowly the pieces of the attack came together to form a coherent picture: The massive explosion, which we assumed to be the rockets, had kicked off the insurgent assault. Seconds after their impact, one enemy from our southwest had fired an RPG at us but had missed, probably because one

of my men had shot the insurgent as he took aim.

Simultaneously, several enemies off our southeast flank had sprayed the building with AK-47 fire, and the two Marines covering that sector had returned fire with their M-16s. They were unable to tell whether they had killed anyone. We had also taken some fire from our direct north and south, and the Marines in those positions, including my medium machine gunner, had reciprocated in spades. They, too, were unable to tell whether their return fire had had any effect. For the most part it was all pretty routine, with only two small deviations.

First off, directly across the street from our hotel, a car blazed furiously in an alleyway. I had seen burning cars before, but they were usually the result of either nearby bomb detonations or steady machine gun fire during particularly fierce combat. I had yet to see a burning car accompanied by a simultaneous rocket attack. I pushed the incongruity aside—the more important question was how the enemy had managed to attack us with such powerful rockets, which were almost certainly antitank weapons and definitely not man-portable. Ten minutes later, my first squad, patrolling in from the north, called in with an answer: The backseat of the burning car bore the clear remains of a homemade-rocket launcher, still smoldering inside. Our attackers had simply parked the vehicle in an inconspicuous place next to the gates of a house, hoping that we would lose track of the nondescript vehicle amid the hustle and bustle of the thriving marketplace area below us. When the rest of the assault was ready, a spotter within the crowd had launched the rockets with a cellphone call.

The second small plot twist, however, was that no United States Marines were wounded or killed in this story, a very unusual thing for a Ramadi day in August 2004. In spite of their clever plan and their disciplined execution, our enemies had failed—we hadn't stopped our mission for even a second. Indeed, we had probably winged at least one of our attackers, although it's sometimes difficult to tell because most people don't go down when you

shoot them with our little .223 bullets. So on that day, I believed that God had been watching over us. Up to that point, even with the horrors I had witnessed,

I retained my faith, if only barely. Every time events made me ready to throw in the towel, a small miracle happened—like antitank rockets missing our floor—or I saw something supernaturally beautiful in the actions of one of my Marines, and for one more day, it was enough to keep faith and hope alive.

Now, nearly three years after that August day, those Marines and I have long since parted ways. Our time together in Iraq seems like someone else's story, for there's nothing in America even remotely similar to what we experienced overseas, nothing that reminds us of what we suffered and achieved together. And none of us have really been able to tell that story, not fully, not even to our families, because each small telling takes a personal toll. No one wants to suffer the pain of trying to explain the unexplainable to those who rarely have either the time or the desire to comprehend. So, many of us have simply packed our war away and tried hard to fit into normalcy by ignoring that time in our lives.

But our story is an important one, and I believe that it's worth telling truthfully and completely no matter what the cost. For seven and a half months, from March to September 2004, my company of 120 Marines battled day in and day out against thousands of enemy fighters in a city that eventually earned the title of Iraq's most dangerous place, a city called Ramadi. Our story has been largely overshadowed by the two battles of Fallujah that bookended our deployment, battles in which the U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) brought the full weight of its combat power—jets, tanks, artillery, and so on—to bear on a city populated almost entirely by insurgent fighters. Fallujah I and II have probably been the closest thing to conventional fighting since Baghdad fell, and they're a gripping story: intense, house-to-house combat between clearly defined foes—the Marines on one

side, the jihadists on the other—with a negligible civilian population muddying the battlefield.

We, by contrast, fought a much blurrier battle, a classic urban counterinsurgency, a never-ending series of engagements throughout the heart of a teeming city where our faceless enemies blended seamlessly into a surrounding populace of nearly 350,000 civilians. These civilians severely limited the assets we could bring to the fight, negating entirely the artillery and air power that American forces invariably rely upon to win pitched battles. Thus my men and I usually fought on foot, street by street and house by house, using only what we could carry on our backs. Outnumbered and outgunned in nearly every battle, we walked the streets of Ramadi endlessly, waiting, tensely, for another enemy ambush to kick off. For us there was no end to the mission, no respite from the daily violence—for seven straight months we patrolled without ever having a single day off.

Indeed, we never experienced anything even remotely resembling a normal day, and as I searched my memory and my diary for one to bring the reader into our world, the brief August rocket attack was the best I could come up with—nothing too terrible, just a standard day with a few little twists that made it slightly memorable.

During our entire deployment, I prayed for something other than this standard day, for a respite from the unrelenting pace of combat, but a break never came. Instead, we fought and fought and fought until, on our return, one out of every two of us had been wounded—a casualty rate that, we were told, exceeded that of any other Marine or Army combat unit since Vietnam.

However, our perseverance and our sacrifices paid off. Despite the determined attacks of the insurgents, Ramadi never fell entirely into their hands as had its sister city Fallujah, and we retained control of the key thoroughfares and all the institutions of government until we were relieved by other Marines. Three weeks thereafter, Central Command doubled the U.S. forces in Ramadi, then tripled them. In early 2005, the Marine Corps

formally honored our efforts by giving the Leftwich award to my company commander (CO), Captain Chris Bronzi. With this award, the USMC officially stated that it considered Captain Bronzi its best combat company commander (and our company as its best combat company) for all of 2004, a year that included both Fallujah invasions.

Throughout all the fighting, I led a forty-man infantry platoon—onequarter of our company—under the CO's command. Day after unrelenting day bound our platoon tightly together, eventually creating a whole much greater than the sum of its parts, and we grew to love one another fiercely. I knew these men better than my best friends; better, in some ways, than my wife. For what they did and what they suffered, my men deserve to have their story told.

But it's so hard to tell the truth, because the telling means dragging up painful memories, opening doors that you thought you had closed, and revisiting a past you hoped you had put behind you. However, I think that someone needs to do it, and I was the leader, so the responsibility falls to me.

I was neither born into the military nor bred for it—aside from a two-year stint my grandfather did as an Air Force doctor, no one in my family had ever served in the armed forces. Indeed, the thought of joining the service never really occurred to me until my junior year at college, when I decided that the Marine Corps Officer Candidate School (OCS), the ten-week selection process that qualifies university students for an officer's commission, would look good on my résumé.

With this less-than-altruistic motivation to spur me on, I headed down to Quantico, Virginia, to take in the ten weeks of uninterrupted screaming that constitutes OCS. Unsurprisingly, I hated the experience, and on the day I completed the course, I swore internally never, ever to join the Marine Corps. I hadn't done ROTC, and I hadn't accepted a dime from any of the

services to help pay for college, so I didn't owe the military a thing. I intended for it to stay that way.

Over the course of my senior year, though, something shifted. Somehow, the Fortune 500 recruiters and the postgraduation salaries lost their luster, and, somewhat to my surprise, I soon found myself casting about for a pursuit that would force me to assume responsibility for something greater than myself, something that would force me to give back, to serve others. Try as I might to avoid them, I kept coming back to the United States Marines. I knew from OCS that if I could make it to the Marine infantry, then I could be a platoon commander and have forty men whose lives would be entirely my responsibility. I also knew that in the infantry I'd be in a place where I could no longer hide behind potential, a place where past academic achievements and family connections were irrelevant, a place where people demanded daily excellence in action because lives hung in the balance. As my final semester of school wound down, I thought of the words one of my sergeant instructors had screamed at me over the summer: "Candidate, the currency in which we trade is human lives. Do you think you can handle that responsibility?"

I didn't know if I could, but I did know that I wanted to try, and I knew that I wanted to learn to lead, which, I soon discovered, simply meant serving others to an increasingly great degree. Surprising everyone in my family (my mother called me crazy), I joined the Corps after graduation, and I foundered at first in the training, but eventually I righted and eventually I got my wish—I made it to an infantry platoon.

So, that's me: an ordinary young man who once made the choice to serve. I wish I could present someone greater to the reader, someone whose exploits and whose fame could automatically make people sit up and pay attention to the story of my men, but I can't, because I'm not that someone. However, to this day I love my Marines with all that I'm capable of, and in spite of my shortcomings I want to do my utmost to help tell their tale.

Though I can't offer myself to the reader, I can offer my men, and I can tell a true story with love and heartfelt emotion from the inside out. And I hope and I pray that whoever reads this story will know my men as I do, and that knowing them, they too might come to love them.