



A Marine Platoon's Story
of Courage, Leadership, and
Brotherhood

DONOVAN CAMPBELL

COMMENTARY BY MAX DESPAIN

How War Becomes Love: Donovan Campbell's Memoir *Joker One*

LINED UP ON MY PLATE LIKE MINI-SOLDIERS IN FORMATION was the canned baby corn that passed for fresh vegetables. The small, silk bouquet of flowers wilted and wobbled with the motions of our eating. Outside our window, a piebald stray cat lapped from the corner of the steaming blue swimming pool that mirrored an equally misty and blue sky. One of the Nepalese Gurkhas, known for the saying “Better dead than a live coward,” slung his semi-automatic weapon over his shoulder and patrolled beneath the crumbling wall topped with concertina wire.

Sitting across from Donovan Campbell in the cafeteria at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, I didn't realize he had a story to tell. After all, he was humble and unassuming and nothing like the other Marines I had been working with for the past four months. Charged with checking up on me after my burly Special Forces friend left Kabul, Campbell would meet me for lunch once a week. We would talk about our families and the crazy circumstances that landed us in Afghanistan. I grew to understand there was more to this quiet officer.

I teach English at the U.S. Air Force Academy. When Campbell said he had written a book, I took it with the same grain of salt that English teachers take most people's declarations of literary endeavors. With thoughts of aliens or detectives, I asked him to tell me more. What unfolded was not galactic battles or the plot twists of an illegal weapons ring, but a love story filled with training, trauma, and

troops—more specifically: Marines. The modest man toying with noodles and red sauce revealed a compelling story of love, duty, and integrity that finds an arresting home on the pages of *Joker One*.

Five years after the events in his memoir, he still chokes up when he explains his motives for writing this book to a room full of Air Force Academy cadets who are reading *Joker One* in their war literature class. He opens his conversation with these young officers in the making by explaining why he thinks it is so important that they always, *always*, represent the armed services well. Campbell points out that civilians don't know the differences between military branches. So when Air Force Academy cadets make an impression, they are representing all service members; especially those Marines Campbell knows personally who have died as members of our armed forces. He wipes away a tear. There is no doubt about Campbell's own commitment to honoring people who have given their lives in the military and that leads to why he wrote this memoir. The way he tells it to the cadets is that he didn't give his Marines enough recognition. He thought that all the units in Iraq were facing the same level of danger as the Joker One platoon faced in Ramadi, and Marines are careful not to be too generous. But he grew to understand that what his Marines went through was exceptional. Some of the Marines he still spoke with said that they had difficulty relaying their experiences to their families. At that point, Campbell will look you straight in the eye and say, "I owed it to them. I couldn't give them more medals but I could help tell our story."

Campbell left the Marines after his tour in Iraq. He entered Harvard Business School, and he particularly remembers one leadership class where they watched the movie *Twelve O'Clock High*. He says "one of the great tensions is the struggle that Gregory Peck has between his love for his people and his duty as an officer and a commander to send them out to go on missions that he knew would get them killed...and ultimately that tension came up in class." As Campbell puts it "Quite frankly, I just broke down crying and walked out of the class because it sort of all hit at once." That professor and another who both had combat experience would often hang out on Friday afternoons with Campbell and another former military student. Campbell says they talked about world affairs, politics, and about their program. As their rapport developed, Campbell realized that he could work out an independent study with Professor Nitin Nohria and decided to write the story of his Joker One platoon as a part of his leadership coursework at Harvard.

Now Campbell describes himself as an accidental author. He told me that it took quite a long time to tell their story right or to "tell it well." And while he is an avid reader, he said there was not a particular voice from a military memoir

that influenced his own writing. He adds “I think in the back of my mind there was a book *A Rumor of War* and I thought [Philip Caputo] was fairly honest.” He also appreciates the sincerity in James A. McGee’s *Phase Line Green*. He notes that James Webb’s *Fields of Fire* deals with some of his same issues of officership but he can’t say that he specifically lifted a technique: he says that he just told the story the best he could. While his account is genuine and compelling, his writing belongs to an intelligent Marine and businessman. If you’re looking for the lyricism of Tim O’Brien, you will not find it here. If you’re looking for a heartfelt, honest description of a young man’s war experiences, *Joker One* is an essential read.

Campbell’s memoir consists of four sections that describe his mood and his platoon’s mood. The moment he begins with sets us in jittery chaos. He places us right at the shattered cinder block wall that a rocket has penetrated. The hectic moment delivered with on-edge irony shows “a bizarre world where explosions were so commonplace that we had ways of distinguishing the more from the less harmful...The absurd had become our baseline.” Campbell backs off from that scene to start at the beginning by spelling out his reasons for writing the memoir. But the first section boils down to a brand new platoon leader at a new job learning how to lead young Marines into battle.

His earnest desire to represent people honestly leads to detailed character descriptions that enliven the members of his platoon for readers. Portrayals of the battalion executive officer who shakes his hand and is mostly muscle with “a close cropped sandy blond flattop...spiked into crispy gel-laden perfection” show how physical attributes are at the forefront of Marine first impressions. Campbell’s first outing with his Marines is a strenuous hike in full gear where he first assesses his platoon as “shorter and smaller...bowed under the weight of all the gear.” The narrative leaves no doubt that personal fitness and stamina are primary concerns and that this platoon is questionable in its attributes. But Campbell grows closer to his main characters and the nuances of their qualities begin to shine through. By the time the platoon steps out into the Kuwaiti desert, we are invested in the people Campbell will be forced to put in harm’s way.

The need for training was incessant. Even in the Kuwaiti makeshift staging camp, a powdery red haze of misery, Campbell and the others pushed their troops to practice. He remembers that “the Marines didn’t like the mind-numbingly repetitive nature of the drills...but every time we did something tedious and painful, we tried to lay out the reason behind the drills to everyone.” He was impressed by how much the men would tolerate if he justified the training’s purpose. Campbell and I talked more about how necessary training is when entering a combat

environment over our lunches in Afghanistan. And the next time I drove with him to the Special Forces training site, Camp Morehead, he took the time to do some training on covering fire for me and the two people in the car who worked in his office. I asked him what he thought about people showing up in a hostile country with little training for these moments. Our minimal training shocked him. He speaks with passion when he says, "I can understand not equipping people if you don't have the equipment...but training them is perfectly under anyone's purview." He adds that he had been in very fierce combat and knows "you have to train for the absolute worst thing to happen in the improbable event that it does, and that way you'll be fine."

As their mission to "win the hearts and minds" of the Ramadi local populace disintegrates much like an Iraqi *awat*, "a soft, sugary cake that crumbles to the touch," they find themselves facing a vicious enemy ready to fight their presence. Without armored Humvees or radios that could cover more than a block or two, the Marines patrolling on foot had to meet a formidable force of hundreds of insurgents intent on killing them. When Campbell visited the Air Force Academy, one question he fielded was if he felt betrayed by the lack of equipment. He is unequivocal in his response: "I never felt betrayed and one of the things that has been surprising about the book is how many people have latched on to my descriptions of radios that didn't go for more than a block or Humvees without armor on them. I have been shocked. I was literally saying 'this is what we had.'" He describes the Marine mindset that "less is more. Equipment can be a crutch. You win not with gear and not with equipment but with good training. You win with a flexible and creative mindset and with good leadership." He said they worked around everything else. His perspective sounds almost like down home commonsense when he describes the historical precedents of Hannibal marching through the Alps with elephants and the Marines wading ashore in Vietnam with leather boots that promptly rotted off their feet. He emphasizes, "I didn't volunteer under the premise that I will only be happy and do this if you give me the right gear and the right equipment or if you send me to the places I want to be sent. I volunteered and I said, 'Here I am and I know what I am getting into. You can do with me what you want because that's what I'm here to do.' So I chose of my own free will as we all did and I did not feel that I was betrayed by the lack of equipment." Instead, his memoir details the creative mindset he and his Marines employed to make it through persistent attacks and intense combat.

As his memories unfold, we understand that Donovan Campbell is motivated by the need to serve. What he calls a servant-leadership approach that he applies

in both his military and civilian leadership roles is firmly rooted in his Christian faith. He says that, whether or not you believe in Christianity, few people doubt that there was an historical figure, Christ, and that he was crucified. As a Christian, Campbell takes that act as the ultimate portrayal of leadership which really translates into the ultimate act of service. And as I listened to his rationale, I began to understand the perspective from which he led his men in Ramadi, and how that faith grounded his everyday leadership.

The most chilling point he drives home about his perspective as a platoon leader in an unrelenting combat environment is that he had to believe that he would die. He points out that such a perspective grows from understanding that a lot of people he knew had died. Proximity to death reminded him to reexamine deeper issues. He claims the deepest issue on their minds when Marines were firing a 21-gun salute over dog tags dangling from a rifle is exactly where the soul that accompanied those dog tags had gone. The concept came down to modeling himself after Christ and realizing that he was there as a platoon leader to serve his men. In his memoir he writes "Finally I had gotten to where I needed to be as an infantry lieutenant. Finally, I considered myself already dead, with each day a precious gift that I didn't deserve...it didn't remove the responsibility of combat leadership in any way, but it did help me to make decisions with less consideration of my personal welfare." This attitude permeates the remainder of his tour.

Much shorter than the rest of his account, his final chapters bring us to wonder how he bears the weight of the accumulated misery and pressure of his and Joker One's responsibilities in Ramadi. I want to ask Campbell how he can stand some of the negative reactions to his story about these men he grew to love. When he describes how the *New York Times* review is convinced that his narrative exemplifies the lack of planning and resources that preceded the war, you can hear his frustration. Preferable to him are the combat veterans who appreciate the honesty in the book because, he says, "it seems that the book mirrors a lot of what they encountered and doesn't try to play anything up or down." He tells about others who "can't talk about anything but the tremendous heroism and courage of our Armed Services, although the book makes it clear that not everyone in uniform is a hero, and not everyone in uniform makes good decisions." Campbell is sincere in his effort to give a candid version of the events he experienced, even when it puts him and others in less than favorable light. But no one can deny the commitment he and his platoon offered to their mission and to each other in Ramadi.

Energetic training, fighting against faulty equipment, and incessant combat all lead to the moment that Campbell and his Marines finally wind up their tour in

Iraq. Campbell depicts his own obsession with avoiding casualties which reduced his effectiveness as a combat leader while praising the way his enlisted leaders picked up the slack and helped make the final push for their last two weeks in country. Much as Tim O'Brien insists that war stories are love stories, this final section reminds us that Campbell ultimately offers us a story about the unusual connection that binds his Marines together. Marine after Marine in his platoon tells him that they won't be sure how they'll feel without these men they've grown to depend upon around them every day when they return home. This bond between Campbell and his men is not new to war literature. The books we present to our students in the senior English course on war literature inevitably reveal relationships that mirror blood ties between the people who experience the tragedy of combat together. Campbell's memoir is no different in that he ultimately feels a poignant sense of family and love with the men who shared his experiences.

Even though he left these bonds to pursue further education, he was faced with a big surprise when he was required to return as part of the first Marine involuntary recall since the Korean War. As if the Marines couldn't bear to sever ties with him, one morning of Harvard Business School found him receiving 17 phone calls from his mother in a space of two minutes. Although he had heard about the recall in the news and had to answer a survey, he was stunned. He knew that he could be involuntarily recalled for four years after separating from the Marine Corps, but a recall was completely unexpected. Campbell describes his thoughts as "Shoot, I don't really want to do this. I have a two-year-old, I'm in business school, and I've got a great job lined up that I'm going to start here in September. I've got kind of a summer off with my family and I'm really looking forward to all this stuff." But Campbell's character comes through in his decision to stick to his word. He was pretty sure he could get out of this requirement if he wanted to. After all, he had broken his leg and had just returned to running. But he talked it over with his wife. She agreed that it was important for him to keep his promise. At this point Campbell always injects into his story that his wife is "phenomenal and she is truly [his] better half." Her understanding left him free to follow his instincts. He needed to be sure he could look himself in the eye 20 years from now. The way he tells the story of arriving at the mobilization center is how he ran into one of his peers from Officer Basic School who had been a staff officer in Ramadi when Campbell was leading his platoon. "Fast Eddy," with only a fraction of the combat experience Campbell had seen, already had a PTSD diagnosis and said he was going to get a medical exemption. When Fast Eddy learned Campbell was going through with the recall, he couldn't meet his eyes. He said, "I know I'm a weasel,

but I just don't want to do this." Campbell says that he told himself, "Yeah, I don't want to do this. But I don't ever want to call myself a weasel."

The recall eventually evolved into a staff job for Campbell at Special Operations Command Central in Tampa which was also not what he had in mind. He wanted to go somewhere he was needed to do an important job. Eventually he ended up in the Special Operations Command liaison office in Kabul and sitting across a table from me in the U.S. Embassy dining room. We ended our meal by ordering cappuccinos and finding some patio furniture in the sun next to the pool. The cat that had lapped clean water out of the pool now lay sunning his spots near our feet. Campbell's love story was being repeated around us in its own ways throughout Afghanistan. Military people were forming bonds of love and camaraderie forged in their willful struggle against a shadowy enemy that planted improvised explosive devices and fought from amongst the civilians they were there to protect. I glanced over at the composed features of a man I'd grown to admire, knowing we had become friends, but that our exchanged stories and shared meals would never make him my brother. Yet reading the pages of *Joker One* allows all of us the opportunity to vicariously experience those wartime bonds of love.



LIEUTENANT COLONEL MAX DESPAIN graduated from the United States Air Force Academy in 1991 and returned from a tour in Afghanistan to teach literature and writing in the Department of English & Fine Arts at the Academy.