

RAGE COMPANY

*A Marine's Baptism
by Fire*

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BECOMING A BANDIT: THE BAPTISM

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Lieutenant James Thomas walked out the front door of Combat Outpost (COP) Grant. Two concrete structures made up the American fortress in southern Ramadi. A few months earlier, two Iraqi families had called the structures home; now the buildings were covered in camouflage netting, sandbags, and reinforced wooden fighting positions. About three feet away, directly in front of the lieutenant, was a seven-foot wall of dark green sandbags. He briskly walked out from underneath the camouflage netting, following the wall as it snaked back to his left. The ground-level view of Ramadi confronted Lieutenant Thomas.

This was a city—a dense, quiet (for the moment) urban sprawl of structures. Block after block of small storefronts and houses occupied his vision. If you replaced the towering minarets and mosques with steeples and churches, Ramadi didn't look all that different from urban America. That is, assuming you could visualize what the city had looked like before undergoing years of conflict and neglect.

The neighborhood surrounding COP Grant was mostly residential, single-family homes. Three and a half years earlier, before the invasion, a hundred thousand people had lived in this southern part of Ramadi.

Now it appeared to be uninhabited. Most of the streets were covered in so much sand and dust that one might mistakenly assume they weren't paved.

The reinforced squad of Marines was already in formation, clearly visible to any observer. The nervousness of the first patrol was obvious. The purpose of the patrol was routine, nothing more than an orientation for the recently arrived Marine unit. If faces could tell a story, however, not many of the Marines were excited. Even the handful of soldiers who accompanied the Marines looked uncomfortable—and they had been here for months.

“Departing friendly lines,” said Corporal Jesus Davila’s voice in Lieutenant Thomas’s left ear. The corporal was talking over the personal role radio (PRR), an unsecured intrasquad push-to-talk radio.

Lieutenant Thomas looked at his watch: 1547. It was the height of the day, and there hadn't been a gunfight yet. He stepped down into the dusty street, a one-foot drop. A Bradley fighting vehicle and an M1 Abrams tank were still in the COP's parking lot, both engines running. The vehicles were COP Grant's quick reaction force, on standby in case of an emergency. There was another Abrams tank 300 meters east down Farouk Way, the east-to-west-running street where COP Grant was located.

The squad's lead element, Lance Corporal Jason Heidbreder and an army sergeant, turned north and started to walk up Daytona Street. The men were 200 meters away from Lieutenant Thomas. Thomas stopped to adjust his gear and allow the formation to spread out. The red-and-white bandana under his Kevlar helmet was already soaking wet, and the thought of how nervous he appeared to his Marines must have crossed his racing mind. It was their first combat patrol. The dispersion was good, and the final element began to move. The dust in the street was probably a solid two inches deep on Farouk Way, but as the Marines turned onto Daytona, the asphalt was visible to the naked eye.

Lieutenant Thomas saw something out of the corner of his left eye. A dark black sedan, probably a BMW, was paralleling the formation on Colt, the adjacent street to the west. Although the lieutenant had seen vehicles being driven around the COP all day, this was different. The platoon commander for Rage Company, 2nd Platoon (Rage 2), maneuvered around the concrete barrier that prevented vehicular traffic from entering Farouk Way. His attention was precisely focused. The situation was heavily to the enemy's advantage.

The entire squad was on the same street, which limited its firepower to the front. On the flanks were two- and three-story homes, all surrounded by an exterior wall. Each had a two- to four-foot retaining wall on the roof, making every structure a small fortress to fight from. Every fifty yards there was also a narrow single lane, a path between houses, too small for a sedan to fit down, but a perfect spot for someone to shoot from and then quickly disappear out of view. The difficulty of winning in the urban landscape of Iraq was immediately clear to the religion major from the University of Rochester.

The formation now stretched about 250 meters along Daytona Street. The point element was coming up on the first four-way intersection they were supposed to cross. Heidbreder and the sergeant stopped to allow the rest of the first four-man fire team to catch up. They would provide security as the point element crossed. Lieutenant Thomas's eyes were fixated on the sergeant; something did not look right. The sergeant turned around to yell at the rest of the team to move faster. The concern on his face would soon become warranted. As the sergeant turned back to the front, a black sedan appeared at the far intersection. The sedan was less than 100 meters north of the point element. It looked like the same BMW the lieutenant had seen earlier.

"Rage 2 Actual, this is Dirty Beans, we got a . . ." Corporal Davila was on the PRR again.

Lance Corporal Heidbreder's weapon went to the ready. The black sedan slowly moved through the intersection. As soon as it left sight, it immediately went into reverse and reappeared. Lieutenant Thomas was already running, as Heidbreder began sighting in on the vehicle through his scope. The distinct sound of high-velocity 5.56mm projectiles filled the air. It was quickly followed by the chattering of dozens of rounds of 7.62mm.

Instinctively, Lieutenant Thomas focused in on the source of the noise, the BMW. The twenty-six-year-old New Yorker was sprinting now, his body propelled by adrenaline. He looked back at his Marine. Heidbreder was down. The lieutenant's ears were bombarded with sounds of pandemonium: on the left blared continual verbal traffic via the intrasquad radio, and on the right, the shouting of the combatants and the deafening din of gunfire going downrange. The black BMW sped off as the sergeant on point unloaded his entire magazine, almost thirty rounds, into the back windshield.

“Far right! CCP far right!” the young platoon commander shouted as he ran. His Marines knew that he was directing them to establish the casualty collection point in the far right building of the intersection. Heidbreder was struggling to get up. He couldn’t. The sergeant on point dragged him to cover against a courtyard wall. Within seconds, Corporal Davila had dynamically breached the locked gate to the structure’s courtyard, by using a small charge of plastic explosive. Inaccurate insurgent rifle fire filled the street. Lieutenant Thomas made it to his wounded Marine, kneeled next to him, and tried to analyze the wound’s severity. Blood sprayed the lieutenant in the face. Heidbreder had been shot in the right side of the throat, and the semiconscious Marine was aware enough to recognize his platoon commander. “I’m sorry, sir. I’m sorry,” said Heidbreder. The apologizing Marine was foremost in James Thomas’s mind. He asked himself a single question: can I get Heidbreder out of here fast enough?

Hearing the gunfire, I walked from my half of the platoon’s staging area in COP Grant and crossed over into the command building. I had to sidestep a soldier in full combat gear wearing workout shorts and a pair of sandals. Ten minutes earlier, Lieutenant Thomas had been briefing me on his squad-size patrol. We discussed the areas my patrol would hit following his. Rage 2 was graciously allowing me—the company Fire Support Team and Intelligence Cell leader—to command his Marines in combat. It was a subtle display of trust that weighed on my mind as I listened to our first firefight. Just then, Corporal Brian Holloway’s hand slammed hard into the cinder-block wall next to the door. We were face-to-face, our noses only inches apart, but the sound of gunfire forced the twenty-one-year-old squad leader to shout, “Lieutenant Daly, they won’t let us leave the building! The lieutenant is asking for the rest of the platoon to maneuver out down Farouk Way to the intersection of—”

Corporal Holloway continued speaking, but my train of thought was interrupted by one of the army captains who was in command at the COP.

He screamed into my ear, “You’re not fuckin’ going! I have one case-vac vehicle, and when it leaves, it leaves with the best medical care we have, our docs. This is my COP and I am telling you, you aren’t going anywhere unless *I* say you can.”

The professionalism of our earlier conversations was gone, the second casualty of this brief firefight. I turned to Corporal Holloway and said, "Get every Marine in your squad in this room!" I pointed to the foyer directly behind him. With its spiral staircase and ornate tiles on the walls, it was the most decadent staging room I had ever seen.

I looked back at the captain. I am sure he wanted to choke the life out of me. He knew there was only one reason to stage the unit, so I could brief them on the situation and leave to assist Lieutenant Thomas. Before he could act on his thoughts of strangulation, the combat operations center (COC) went deadly quiet as Lieutenant Thomas's voice came on the radio.

"Cobra Main, this is Rage 2 Actual. We have gone firm in building 146, patrol sector Juliet 8. We have one urgent surgical Medevac, gunshot wound to the throat. Requesting Medevac at our position."

The captain responded without hesitation. "Bullshit. We are not sending any of our vehicles down Daytona; those roads are not cleared and blocked by concrete barriers. Tell him he will have to 'man pack' the casualty back down to Farouk Way, where the casevac will link up with him." The radio operator relayed his intent to Rage 2 Actual, Lieutenant Thomas. The captain and I stared at each other. We both knew that an Abrams tank could roll right over a concrete barrier without a problem. And Lieutenant Thomas had just walked down Daytona—so what was too dangerous for the captain's tanks was safe enough for the dismounted Marines of Rage 2. I put on my Kevlar helmet and walked out of the COC, wondering whether he would have made the same call if one of his soldiers had been shot. The Marines were assembled. As the senior Marine, I had a decision to make.

Lieutenant Thomas threw the handset at his radio operator in disgust. Blood was beginning to pool on the courtyard floor, and he could hear one of the Marines screaming at the Iraqi family huddled inside to "shut the hell up." The family's loud sobs were intermingled with the distinct sound of oxygen and blood mixing in Heidbreder's throat as he lay unconscious. Doc Rodriguez looked up at the platoon commander, maintaining pressure on the torn arterial tissue.

"Less than an hour, sir." The navy corpsman was calm and somber.

Lieutenant Thomas jumped on the PRR. "Davila, we are man packing the casualty back the way we came to the intersection of

Daytona and Farouk Way. We need to move ASAP. Use a fire team to carry Heidbreder with a hasty litter, send two flankers with the litter team, lead and follow the litter with a team.” Lieutenant Thomas released the push-to-talk button on his chest and looked down at Doc Rodriguez. Sweat was pouring out of the lieutenant. “Get him ready to move,” he ordered.

On the roof, Corporal Davila was concerned. He had been to Ramadi before as a private first class back in 2004, and there was only one reason why the enemy was currently not engaging the patrol with small arms: they were moving closer. From his position he had limited observation to the west, and he knew the enemy was most likely going to exploit this by engaging the Marines as they left the relative safety of the home they occupied. The squad leader spotted a pile of two-by-fours in a corner and called up one of his fire team leaders. The team leader, Corporal William Bradford, took a knee next to him.

“Use these two-by-fours to get across to the roof of the house next door,” said Corporal Davila. “I need you to cover the approach to the west so we don’t get cornered in this house. The far side of that roof over there is slightly elevated above all the others around here so use that to your advantage. Take your sweet-ass time, too, and I will leave you.” The team leader was moving before he finished. The thought of insurgents using the two-by-fours for the same purpose flashed in the squad leader’s mind—why else would they be up here?

Davila got on the PRR. “Rage 2 Actual, this is Dirty Beans. I am putting a fire team on the roof of the home to our north to get a better field of fire to cover our movement out of here.”

The lieutenant responded instantly. “Roger. I’ll let you know when we are ready to move down here. We will start moving as soon as you displace from the roof.”

Lieutenant Thomas began to account for each fire team in his mind. His attachments were already staging in the courtyard, and the first fire team was lifting Heidbreder as Thomas released the PRR.

A rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) streaked over the roof, and the sounds of gunfire again pierced the afternoon sky.

Corporal Bradford was on the PRR: “Muj three hundred fifty meters to the west on a rooftop. They just shot an RPG without—” The sound of his fire team’s M249 SAW (squad automatic weapon) firing at the cyclic rate cut off the end of his transmission. A second RPG flew over the building. The urgent need to be decisive must have flashed in

Lieutenant Thomas's mind. They may have been there for only about five minutes, stabilizing the casualty, but the enemy was quickly maneuvering on the Marines' fixed position. The longer the patrol was stationary, the more precarious the situation would become.

"Davila, are you ready to displace?" asked Lieutenant Thomas.

"I am, sir," replied Davila.

Corporal Bradford launched two grenades from his M203 before he crawled back over the two-by-fours and onto Davila's roof. The team skipped down the stairs and through the Iraqi home, passing Lieutenant Thomas as they reached the courtyard. The first fire team was already out the gate. The squad anxiously moved out onto Daytona Street, with Corporal Davila and Lieutenant Thomas being the last two out. It was the same problem for the platoon commander, his entire unit spread down a single street.

Two Marines carried Heidbreder's unconscious body in a standard-issue poncho. The waterproof, camouflage material was the quickest improvised stretcher Doc Rodriguez could put together. As Lieutenant Thomas made it out into the intersection, a world of mayhem erupted. Numerous RPK and PKM machine gun positions opened up on the squad from multiple directions. Every man ran down the street toward Farouk Way.

The fire came perpendicular to the direction of their movement, and the Marines instinctively used the courtyard walls as cover. Lieutenant Thomas paused at the first alleyway he came upon. He watched as his men sprinted down the street, rounds skipping in the dust and debris. Then a burst of machine gun fire exploded over his head, slicing through shards of glass at the top of the wall. In slow motion, the green glass seemed to float past the lieutenant's face, glaring in the sunlight as it fell.

Down the street, Corporal Davila threw an M67 fragmentation grenade into a second-floor window. It was a hell of a throw. Then the stretcher team sprinted out into the open, exposing themselves to the alley directly in front of Lieutenant Thomas. Another burst of machine gun fire shot down the alley toward the Marines. They made it through, but Lieutenant Thomas noticed blood pouring out of Heidbreder, and the poncho that carried him was tearing apart under his weight.

The platoon commander unloaded his magazine as he went past the alley, trading inaccurate fire with the enemy machine gun position. Arriving at the improvised stretcher, he helped Doc Rodriguez apply

pressure to the wound. The Marines resumed the mad dash toward Farouk Way, taking fire as they passed each alley. Two Marines carried Heidbreder, alternating between the different two-man buddy carries taught at boot camp. Doc Rodriguez continued to work on the wound as they moved between courtyard walls. Still 100 meters from the casevac site, Lieutenant Thomas watched as the M113 ambulance pulled out into the intersection, waiting for Heidbreder. Corporal Davila was already there; he popped green smoke to obscure the vehicle and make it more difficult for the enemy to target. As Rage 2 sprinted, the air filled Lieutenant Thomas's lungs with gunfire smoke; yelling and screaming bombarded his ears. The platoon commander was oblivious to these distractions as he closed in on the vehicle. He allowed only one thought into his mind: get Heidbreder out of here.

One of the flankers went down just off to Lieutenant Thomas's right. The platoon commander could see the elation on the Marine's face as he got back up and realized he had only tripped and not been shot. Nearing the vehicle, Lieutenant Thomas saw the army first sergeant responsible for Medevacs coming out of COP Grant. The experienced soldier casually walked toward him on his left, indifferent to the bullets and ricochets dancing around his feet. The ramp to the vehicle was open, and the first sergeant helped Doc Rodriguez and Lieutenant Thomas place Heidbreder inside. Then he grabbed Lieutenant Thomas by his flak jacket. "Is any of this yours?" the first sergeant screamed over the .50 caliber machine guns blaring away around him. Lieutenant Thomas looked down and noticed that his entire torso was covered in Heidbreder's blood.

"No. Now get him out of here!" said the lieutenant. He took a knee behind a concrete barrier next to Corporal Davila. The two Marines began to engage multiple muzzle flashes as they waited for the convoy to move out. "Sir, we need to move!" Davila shouted at Lieutenant Thomas. The platoon commander ignored Davila, intent on engaging the enemy that had harassed him all the way to the Medevac site. Davila shouted again. Lieutenant Thomas turned to see his squad leader moving back to COP Grant. He also noticed that a humvee had pulled up right behind him, only a few feet away. The barrel of the vehicle's .50 caliber machine gun was directly above his head. Lieutenant Thomas immediately regretted ignoring his squad leader. The concussion of the machine gun opening fire knocked him flat on his back. He watched from the ground as the large-caliber bullets punished the origin of the muzzle

flashes he had been engaging. Lieutenant Thomas got to his feet and quickly moved past the convoy, entering the confines of COP Grant. The inaugural running of what would be known as the “Daytona 500” was over.

I was still standing in the staging room of the command building. The rest of the platoon had formed in a small circle with all eyes fixed on me. Each pair was pleading with me to lead them out into the fire. The Marines knew one of us was down, and they wanted to get even.

Standing on my left was Lance Corporal Benjamin Eakin. Shaking and muttering that he was ready, he gazed toward the ceiling. Dust fell from every crack in the building as the MK-19 grenade launchers and other crew-served positions on the roof covered Rage 2’s movement back into the COP. I had already decided not to move out of the COP, and the decision was killing me. It was my first day in Ramadi, on unfamiliar terrain, and I was in no position to coordinate a response to the insurgents’ challenge. I had no support from the army leadership who owned the battle space. I barely knew the call signs of friendly units and would have spent half the time outside the wire staring at my map trying to figure out what building I was looking at. I knew that any initiative on my part would most likely end up costing us more casualties with little to show for it. I came to accept that on this particular mission we had been beaten by the jihadists. As the Marines accompanying Lieutenant Thomas began to filter back into the COP, I wondered how such a routine patrol had come to this.

As roommates at the University of Rochester, Lieutenant James Thomas and I had dreamed of this moment during our final two years. We prepared ourselves mentally and physically. We took Arabic courses at 0800 after two hours of physical training and drank a mixture of Kahlúa and black coffee to stay awake. We debated the war, protested Michael Moore’s speech on campus, and skipped classes when something big was on the television news from Iraq. We were both exactly where we’d prepared ourselves to be, yet I had failed.

James Thomas was the last man of the patrol to walk back through the door. So much had changed in such a short period of time. I didn’t know what to say. Our eyes met, and I knew there must have been a million things going through his mind. I had seen that face so many times before. It was tired and dreary, the exaggerated pick-me-up-because-I-am-down look. But I was dumbfounded. I let my best friend, covered in blood that dripped from his hands, walk right by me without

saying a word. I even had to suck in my gut so he could squeeze past me in the hallway. I had control of half of his platoon, and I couldn't get them out the door. Now I couldn't even utter a single word. I never felt so low in my life. Welcome to Ramadi.

After five minutes, I finally mustered the intestinal fortitude to go talk to my friend James. I found him in the outhouse between the buildings, scrubbing the blood off his hands. He noticed me standing behind him.

"That was the first day-patrol the army has done since they established this COP a few months ago." James was scrubbing and talking at the same time.

"What?!" It was all I could think to say.

"Yeah, as I came back into the COP, one of their lieutenants told me that *this* was why they don't patrol during the day, ever." He held his hands up, showing the bright-red blood to emphasize his point.

"And the insurgents, they were waiting for us. They must have watched Rage 1 and Rage 4 head out on successive patrols. So the third time trucks carrying Marines arrived at another southern Ramadi COP, they knew what would follow—another patrol." James scrubbed harder.

I couldn't stop thinking about what had just happened. Our purpose on that patrol replayed itself in my mind. The company was dispersed to four different combat outposts in order to gain some familiarity with the area. On arrival at the COPs, each platoon would conduct a day-patrol, followed by another at night. Because we had only a limited number of vehicles to transport the platoons to the COPs, we were forced to conduct multiple trips from Camp Ramadi. Through the course of the morning the following happened: convoys went out, and, on arrival at a COP, a platoon of Marines dismounted, conducted hasty planning and preparations, then went out on a joint patrol with some soldiers from the respective COP. Well, by the time Rage 2 got to COP Grant, it was nearly 1500, and insurgents had watched two other platoons perform the previously stated plan.

With regard to the enemy, Lieutenant Thomas was absolutely right: we had set ourselves up. We were 100 percent predictable, and Heidbreder was the price we paid. The soldiers' apprehensiveness as we stepped off on the patrol began to make sense as well; it was their first day-patrol, too. The bastards might as well have been using us as their guinea pigs. I headed back into the command building and waltzed arrogantly into the COC.

“You still want to conduct—” said Cobra 6, the army commander. He was sitting with his feet propped up against the wall.

I didn’t let him finish. “Yes, let’s execute the night-patrol as soon as it is dark, and I want to head right into the area of the earlier firefight.” I was shocked at the captain’s response.

“You’ll get one of my squads, eight soldiers. Do not bring more than fifteen out there. And come brief me on the route when you have it.”

I nodded and headed back to our staging area in the far building. I found Lieutenant Thomas relaxing on the second floor, smoking cigarettes with Corporal Holloway.

We quickly discussed the plans for the upcoming patrol, and I got Lieutenant Thomas’s blessing to take Holloway and one of his fire teams. I then went back to the command building to find Sergeant Arias, the army squad leader who would be on my patrol and the very same sergeant who was on point with Heidbreder earlier in the day. He had already been briefed on the patrol, and his boys were loading their assault packs with C4 and extra ammunition when I found him. He pulled out his strip map of the immediate area.

“Sir, I recommend we offset our approach a few blocks to the east.” He pointed to the map, tracing the route as he spoke. “Then we will hit the cluster of six homes making up the block where the CCP was earlier today. We start at the northeast corner, and 146 will be the fourth house we hit. I have been to this block multiple times at night and each house has its own family living in it.”

I was impressed with his unsolicited recommendation. The houses on the northern side of the block were slightly higher than the others in the area, and establishing ourselves there first made perfect sense.

“Roger-that, Sergeant. Have them downstairs at 1830.” I looked around at each of his soldiers as I spoke, but not one of them looked up at me. The group was focused.

I walked down the spiral staircase, again amazed by the decorative Arabic script lining the tiles. I stopped in the COC and gave Cobra 6 a quick brief on the patrol’s route. His demeanor told me that whatever I wanted to do would be approved. I spent five extra minutes staring at the situation map in the COC. A prominent intersection only 200 meters east of building 146 was circled in red.

“Sir, what’s this intersection circled for?”

“That’s where the insurgents would have ambushed our casevac if I sent ’em to pick up the casualty earlier.”

I was puzzled.

Sensing it, the captain stood up and moved beside me. “The insurgent’s wet dream is to cause a casualty, because then you, the injured dog, become predictable. Wounded, you choose the quickest way out, and at that point where casualty meets vehicle he is always waiting. He has already calculated where he wants to shoot you, so that you use his ambush site as the casevac location. Lieutenant, never take the easy path.”

He was serious. I knew then that he had learned this lesson through immense pain. My earlier doubts about this man’s judgment were instantly erased.

I headed back to the rest of the platoon and found a spot next to a snoring Lieutenant Thomas. I pulled out my own strip map and began to memorize the building numbers and the patrol sectors of every dominant structure that would affect my patrol. If we took fire from one, I wanted to be capable of coordinating a rapid response. I circled each intersection we would cross and added them up at the end. The number opened a pit the size of Texas in my stomach: twelve. We were moving a total of 700 meters, and I would go through twelve intersections. I slowly got up and tiptoed through a maze of sleeping Marines. I walked into the mess room and grabbed an O’Douls. No sooner had I taken it than I put it back. I jokingly reminded myself I didn’t even like the taste of alcohol, and an O’Douls was someone’s attempt to replicate it without the actual kick. I’d be better off drinking a bottle of Pepto-Bismol. I returned to the corner in the wall next to the sleeping Lieutenant Thomas and stared at the ceiling for twenty minutes until I was ready. Then I headed back to the staging room in the command building.

Flak, Kevlar, side-SAPI’s, drop pouch, bandolier with 162 rounds, AN-PRC 148 radio (the size of a large walkie-talkie), and PVS-14 night-vision goggles (NVGs). I touched each item as I mentally went through my own pre-mission checks. I grabbed my groin pad and crotch as I noticed Corporal Holloway staring at me, probably wondering what the hell I was doing.

“Made you look, fag,” I said with a smile. He shook his head in amusement. The soldiers and the Marines were ready to go, and Sergeant Arias was heading out the door. Two-thirds of the way back in the formation, I followed the same path out of COP Grant that Lieutenant Thomas had taken a few hours earlier. It was a completely different world at night. Through my NVGs, everything seemed to tower over me. The formation moved down the thick dust of Farouk

Way and passed Graves, heading east. We were moving pretty quickly, but the pace wasn't too fast for us to notice our surroundings. I could tell Sergeant Arias had done this a few times before, and his squad knew what was and wasn't out of place in the random piles of debris that littered the street.

We approached the first intersection and halted. A flickering light illuminated the far side and would have revealed our shadows to distant observers as we passed. A soldier lifted a broken piece of the curb at his feet and nailed the light with a forty-yard throw. The elongated bulb shattered into a thousand different pieces. The soldier congratulated himself, and I began to rethink my decision to play soccer in high school.

We continued north on the side street, passing multiple parked cars with low-lying power lines drooping over the road. Although none of the wires actually ran to the vehicles, I fully anticipated that each one would explode as I walked past. We finally hit the target block of houses. The formation staged for entry on the northeast courtyard wall. I could hear Arias trying to pound his way through the locked gate without success. His voice came over the PRR: "Breaching in five . . ." The small charge of C4 blasted through the gate, giving the soldiers entry. My ears were still ringing as I went through the gate, and our presence was definitely known by the entire neighborhood. I came through the door to the sound of soldiers shouting, "All clear on two." Sergeant Arias stood in the foyer and said, "All clear, sir. The family is in that room on your left." He began to stage his soldiers for movement to the next house.

I grabbed the interpreter and entered the family room. The man of the house was about sixty years old, with gray hair and a well-trimmed mustache. His wife, daughter, and three grandchildren huddled in the corner, sharing a pile of blankets around a kerosene space heater. The interpreter began to go through the scripted list of questions I'd given him before we left. From my basic Arabic, I could discern that the old man answered each question with "No" or "I don't know what you are talking about." I felt insulted—this man had experienced 40mm grenades and .50 caliber machine gun rounds landing all around his home earlier that day, and now he denied even knowing about the firefight. I became more frustrated. Through his fear, the old man was telling me that the insurgents were the obvious power in the area. I had a limited amount of time. I jumped on the PRR and yelled, "Next house, *go!*" I staged in the courtyard, as Arias mechanically breached the gate this time.

The superbly quick clearing of the home repeated itself, as it would all night, only this time no one was home. I walked into the foyer, where Sergeant Arias greeted me again.

“They scattered, sir; they must have known we were coming.” The sergeant pointed to the plates of half-eaten food on the floor. I looked over his shoulder and saw a brown leather jacket draped over the refrigerator in the corner of the room. I had seen a middle-aged man walking outside the COP in that jacket earlier in the day, before our first patrol. Added adrenaline was pumping through my body.

“Search it for two minutes; there has to be something here.”

“Already on it, sir. Last time I was at this house, there were three middle-aged men living together. All three were teachers, surprisingly enough. Unfortunately, I couldn’t find anything then, and I will be surprised if we do now.” The soldiers searched for a few minutes in an extremely detailed but messy manner. They found nothing.

We moved on to the next house, which was occupied by another extended family. The man of the house refused to provide any information about the neighbors and again denied knowing anything about the earlier firefight only yards from his home. He even said he didn’t know that Marines had been on his roof. Again I was frustrated.

Standing in the courtyard, I began to think there was no way in hell this city would ever get any better. Firefights like the one today were a daily occurrence, and the locals didn’t seem to care anymore. The next house was building 146, the CCP. Sergeant Arias had no problems with the gate; it was already blown open. I sprinted down the sidewalk and into the confines of the courtyard. The driveway was smeared with a dark red bloodstain. Corporal Holloway’s team of Marines picked up external security at the gate.

I moved in through the main door to the house. It was almost a replica of the previous four homes we had been in. The stark similarities between the houses reminded me of suburban America. Arias was pointing to the family room on the left as he directed his soldiers with verbal insults. His extended finger told me where the family was. As I entered the room, the man of the house, about thirty-five years old, with black hair and a dark complexion, immediately asked my interpreter to put his wife and three children in a separate room. As soon as they left, he began to speak candidly. After a solid minute of fast-paced conversation,

the interpreter turned to me mid-sentence and asked, “Can he see the map you have, Lieutenant?”

I quickly pulled it out of my drop pouch. I placed it at the man’s feet and kneeled on the floor. It was only a strip map and didn’t show the distant sectors of the city, so I quickly oriented him to the confusing satellite imagery he was looking at. I pointed to the north and said, “Qatana,” pointed to the east and said, “Mila’ab,” and then pointed to his home and said, “*Casa*.” Realizing I had spoken Spanish, I laughed and the interpreter filled in the word I was looking for. The man grabbed my orange map pen out of my hand and began to circle intersections on the map. He was almost barking orders to the interpreter.

“He says you should place checkpoints at each circle he has drawn on the map and that if you give him back his Kalashnikov you took last time you were in his home, he will kill the insurgents next time they come near his house,” the interpreter translated. The man continued to talk while the interpreter relayed the information. “About a week ago insurgents used a parked car near his home to snipe at COP Grant, and they often come into his house during the day to observe you at the base. The three men who live a few houses over moved in after the family who lives there moved to Syria a few months ago. He thinks they are terrorists.”

Sergeant Arias interrupted the interpreter and told me, “We had a guy shot on the roof of the COP a week ago from this general direction. Luckily, it didn’t penetrate his body armor.”

I looked back at the Iraqi man and asked whether he had been in the army before the war. He smiled, revealing a few missing teeth, but said nothing in response.

The man’s wife appeared at the far end of the room. She was crying. She began to speak quickly, all her words directed at her husband, who immediately stood up and waved at her to go away. The interpreter translated: “She wants us to leave right now and is upset for him talking to us. She says insurgents will know he spoke to us because we have stayed here so long, and they will come kill him. We must leave.”

The woman was right—we could not stay any longer. As we prepared to move out of the house, the man grabbed me by the arm and said two words: *irhabi* and *Qatana*. He was telling me the terrorists lived in the Qatana sector of the city. We made it back to the COP without incident, and the following morning Rage 2 loaded up on its trucks and headed back to Camp Ramadi.