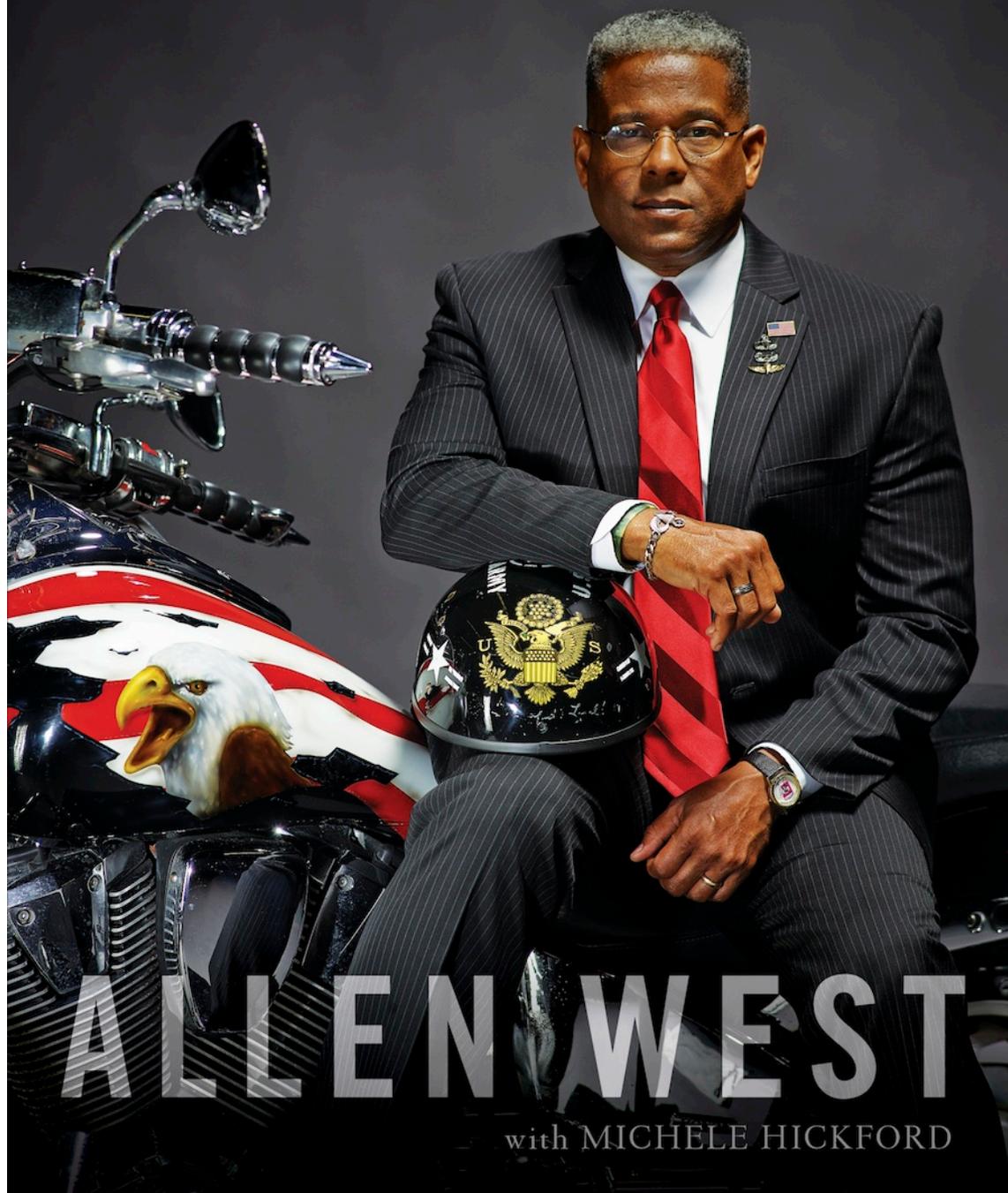


An American Ronin's Journey to Faith, Family and Freedom

GUARDIAN OF THE REPUBLIC



ALLEN WEST

with MICHELE HICKFORD

An excerpt from Chapter 2 of *Guardian of the Republic*

I'd gone to college thinking I wanted to be an engineer. I spent a year and a half in that major, and Statics and Dynamics just about did me in. I loved math, but I wasn't an abstract thinker. So I switched my major to political science. My grades were restored and I was reinstated into the ROTC program. During the summer of 1982, I found myself flying off to Fort Lewis, Washington, for summer Advanced Camp, a boot camp for ROTC students seeking to earn a commission.

Advanced Camp was long at seven weeks, and back in the day it was tough. The nights in the Pacific Northwest were damn cold, especially for this southern boy. It was always wet, and I had never seen mosquitoes that bad! I ended up getting quite sick and was coughing up blood at one point, but I was not about to quit or be recycled. This was it. I had completed all of my ROTC requirements. All I had to do was complete Advanced Camp and I would be Second Lieutenant Allen B. West.

Well, I finished, and on graduation day I was ecstatic. I'd met friends who would be my colleagues for years to come. I flew from Fort Lewis back to Atlanta, and there was my dad waiting with this huge smile on his face. He looked at me and how skinny I was and said, "They kicked your butt, didn't they, boy?"

I was always going to be his boy. Years earlier he'd gone to the airport to collect his boy who'd run away; now he was picking up soon-to-be "2LT" West. The entire family traveled to Knoxville for the big day. It was July 31, 1982, and my parents and brothers watched me take the oath—the third member of our family to do so—giving my pledge to "support and defend the

Constitution of the United States against all enemies foreign and domestic, and bear true faith and allegiance to the same.” What a day. What a special honor. I was on top of the world.

I returned to Atlanta and worked at Sears while awaiting my order to active duty. Then the orders arrived, and I was instructed to report to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, for Field Artillery Officer Basic Course, class 2-84. Before I departed, my dad sat me on the front steps and gave me the lecture I surely needed. These were the words that stuck in my mind: “You are a brand-new, fresh second lieutenant. You don’t know nothing and need to come to that realization. You need to find your platoon sergeant and listen to him. Make sure you allow him to teach you. He will respect you because of the rank, but he needs to respect you as a man and leader. Never forget that if you take care of your soldiers, your men, they will take care of you and hold you in high esteem and respect. Screw your men over, and they will screw you over. A good leader is first a good follower. Listen and lead, but most of all, take care of your men.”

Those parting words would guide me some twenty-two years later to make a spontaneous decision on the battlefield in Iraq, one that would have an indelible impact on my life.

The trip to Fort Sill was my first time driving to this part of the country. Entering Key Gate, I was at the home of the Field Artillery, a truly historic place, and one now part of my history. The six months at Fort Sill were something special. I was introduced to the Army culture. I was also introduced to the precision of gunnery and shoots. Since I was passionate about math, gunnery was especially fun for me. Others hated it, but I really got into the old-school calculations using slide rules and charts to solve problems. In fact, some of the other fellas would come to me for gunnery tutoring before exams. Having to devise gunnery firing solutions was awesome, and the shoots . . . well, sitting on a hilltop striving to put an artillery round within fifty meters of the

target was challenging, especially in an Oklahoma winter. Crap, I had never been that cold. And don't forget, these were the days before Gore-Tex and all that high-tech, high-end gear. My follow-on orders came for the Second Infantry Division in Korea. I didn't mind. If I was to excel in my trade, I wanted to be where there was an adversary, and that was certainly true in 1984 in Korea with its demilitarized zone.

Without my knowledge, however, my name was also submitted—and selected—for an Airborne unit in Vicenza, Italy. Airborne? Jumping out of airplanes? Doggone, now that was a bit of a surprise. Our TAC officer told me I had been chosen because of my class standing, physical fitness level, and sharpness.

So from Fort Sill, I came home to Georgia for Basic Airborne Course. I was roster number A114 in Airborne School and I successfully graduated, but then came the real challenge. With only five jumps under my belt, I was supposed to pass one of the toughest schools in the Army, Jumpmaster School. I was adopted by an Airborne instructor who took a liking to me, and after two weeks of intense training, studying, and written and hands-on exams, I passed. I was off to Italy.

In Italy I was assigned to the 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion, which was soon designated as the Fourth Battalion, 325th Infantry Regiment. This was the perfect unit for an officer beginning his service. I had many memorable experiences during my Vicenza assignment. I learned to ski, and, before redeploying, I was even the winter training base camp OIC (officer in charge). The moment that began my political maturity, however, came in the winter of 1985 when I went through Checkpoint Charlie into East Berlin. President Ronald Reagan had given his famous “evil empire” speech in 1983, and during that winter I saw the reality of communism and

socialism and the importance of President Reagan's words. I walked the streets with Soviet officers and soldiers as well as East Germans. I saw the plight, the lack of freedom, and the emptiness in the eyes of the people. Right then I understood what makes America exceptional. I also recognized that there was indeed an ideological enemy, and I didn't ever want to live under its thumb. I came to understand what freedom and liberty meant and why it was worth fighting for.

I came back from Italy in 1987 and attended Artillery advanced course, after which I was reassigned to Fort Riley in Kansas. I had asked for Fort Benning, Fort Stewart, or Fort Campbell, as I had thoughts of resigning my commission after this second tour and wanted to be back down south. Coming from an Airborne unit, now heading to a Mechanized Division, First Infantry, I didn't know what to expect. The assignment ended up being a blessing, because I met a man who would be a great friend and mentor for many years—Colonel John R. Gingrich, aka Da G-Man. I was recommended for early battery command. Again I jumped ahead of peers and senior captains.

My professional career was thriving, but I felt empty emotionally. Then God sent an angel my way. Her name, fittingly enough, was Angela. Her dad had been a career military man, and she was completing her MBA at Long Island University in Brooklyn. Somehow I convinced her to marry me and come back to Manhattan, Kansas, where she had been an undergrad at Kansas State University. Naturally I was concerned about being a better husband and man, and I'm still working on that today.

No sooner had we been married than a little something kicked up far away in a place called Kuwait. Colonel Gingrich chose me to lead the advance party for the battalion, and I left my new

bride not knowing what the future would hold. I had experienced the ideological evil of communism and socialism in my first duty assignment in Europe. I was now about to experience the evil of a Middle Eastern dictatorship.

We routed the Iraqi army in no time, maybe a hundred hours. We were just that good at open desert warfare. However, once our major combat operations were over and we had pounded the enemy, something struck me hard. An Iraqi woman found her way into our headquarters base camp. She was dehydrated and had her children with her. Soldiers in the Iraqi army had raped her and killed her husband and brother. We quickly got her medical support, but that level of brutality was something my colleagues and I discussed long after. I was learning about another type of evil, and I became interested in reading about and understanding Muslim culture in a historical and contemporary context so that I could make sense of what I had seen.

After Operation Desert Shield/Storm I witnessed the mistake we always seem to repeat in America. We drew down our forces to reduce defense spending and made the military pay the bills for other government programs. I headed over to Kansas State to teach ROTC, where Angela was a professor in the business college.

At Kansas State I was responsible for training cadets during their most important junior year to prepare them for their officer boot camp. Coincidentally they would attend the same Fort Lewis Advanced Camp that I had trained at back in the summer of 1982. We were very successful at K-State and created what would become one of the best ROTC programs in the nation. In 1994 I was honored to be named the Army ROTC Instructor of the Year.

At the same time that I was training cadets, I was working on my first master's degree. In 1995, after our daughter Aubrey was born and I had completed my academic work, I received a one-

year assignment to Korea, the place I was originally supposed to have been sent in 1984. So off to Korea I went, to the Second Infantry Division as an operations planner and assistant operations officer in the Division Support Command—a great assignment. I was promoted to major there and selected for the Army Staff College back in Kansas. In Korea I saw evil once again. Standing on the demilitarized zone—the DMZ—and looking into North Korea, I could see the totalitarian Stalinist state.

I returned to the States. Between 1996 and 1997, I completed work on two master's degrees and graduated from Army Staff College. I received orders for a new assignment at Fort Bragg. I would be working for my next great teacher, coach, mentor, and friend—Colonel Denny R. Lewis, incoming commander of the Eighteenth Field Artillery Brigade (Airborne).

This was the largest artillery unit in the Army. Colonel Lewis selected a brand-new staff college graduate and major—me—to be his operations officer. He was hard as woodpecker lips in the winter, but also brilliant and laser-focused. Serving under this gentleman set me on a course to be an exceptional leader, trainer, and manager of resources. One day when we were sitting in the backseat of his command Hummer discussing his vision of a battalion evaluation exercise, Colonel Lewis gave me the simplest order in my military career: “Al, don’t screw this up.” Truth be told, he used more colorful language than that. My time with Colonel Lewis at Fort Bragg played a tremendous role in shaping me into the leader I am today.

Not too long after that assignment, I got word I was being assigned to a joint exchange to the United States Marine Corps at Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune. Heck, I thought I must have pissed off someone in the Army to get that, but the three-year assignment was one of the best in

my career. I made friendships that have transcended time and distance. I was reintroduced to the spirit of the warrior, and my toughness was challenged and strengthened.

Two seriously traumatic events occurred during this tour. First, Angela was diagnosed with breast cancer. She fought hard and is in complete remission today, but there were dicey moments. From her and through that experience, I learned what real toughness is. I am so very proud of her.

The other traumatic event affected not only my family but our entire nation. It was September 11, 2001—the Pearl Harbor of my generation. As soldiers, we knew America would call upon us, and we had to be ready.

I would not deploy to Afghanistan or Iraq with my Marine brothers and sisters. Instead I was promoted to lieutenant colonel in the Army in 2001 and had the honor of being promoted by a Marine, Brigadier General Flanagan. I was then selected to command an artillery battalion.

I had requested Fort Bragg, but my path would take me to Fort Hood in Texas for what was to be my final duty station. I became Deep Strike 6, commander of the Second Battalion, Twentieth Field Artillery Regiment (Multiple Launch Rocket System), Fourth Infantry Division. The battalion's strength was around 450 soldiers, and in Iraq, as Task Force 2-20, we grew by another hundred.

It was a great bunch of soldiers. I took command in 2002 on the sixth of June, the anniversary of D-Day, in the same division that took Utah Beach. In January 2003 we got our orders for Iraq,

and we were ready and well trained. This assignment was the culmination of years of training that began the first day I donned the Army uniform as a young high school JROTC cadet.

In August 2003 we received intelligence reports that a particular Iraqi policeman had been providing information to the enemy, leading to an increase in ambushes on our patrols. We needed to detain the policeman for questioning because we believed something was about to happen in the next couple of days. I felt a sense of urgency, because my utmost concern was for the safety of those under my command.

The policeman had been stonewalling our interrogators, and we needed results. So I made the decision to put additional pressure on him with a psychological intimidation tactic. I drew my pistol and threatened to kill him if he did not provide information.

We took him outside, where he was held over a sand-filled weapons-clearing barrel. After a count of five, I fired my Beretta 9-millimeter pistol over his head into the sand. He began talking. He cried out for Allah and provided several names of individuals who intended to do harm to me and my unit. Afterward, there were no further attacks on my unit while it was under my command.

I immediately reported the incident and subsequently submitted to an investigation and Article 32 hearing. During the hearing my defense attorney, Marine Lieutenant Colonel Neal Puckett, asked if I would do it all again. Without hesitation I responded, "If it is about the lives and safety of my men, I would walk through hell with a gasoline can."

Ultimately, as a result of the hearing, I received an Article 15, a nonjudicial punishment similar to a traffic ticket. I was fined five thousand dollars, given an honorable discharge, and retired with full rank and benefits.

If my dad had still been alive, he would have been proud. I had lived up to the parting words he shared back in October 1983 as I prepared to depart for Fort Sill: “Most of all, take care of your men.” I faced the test and lived up to the standard of all those who had been teachers, leaders, and mentors in my life. At the time I didn’t realize the impact this event would have, how big it was perceived back in America, and how it truly changed my path.

I stood by my actions then, and I stand by them now. Much has been written about the choice I made, and there have been plenty of jackasses who have called me a war criminal and worse.

What none of them realize is that everything in my life, especially my military life, had shaped me for the decision I made in that moment. Every mentor, every soldier whose eyes I had ever looked into, shaped me to make the stand that I did.

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