

“‘Change, adapt, and find new opportunities.’ That is how Rick Lynch commanded in Iraq during the surge. But it could be any of us leaders anywhere: We all have to adapt. This is a superb book on leadership written by a thoughtful, courageous, and authentic leader himself. As wise, practical, and inspiring as any I have ever seen.”

—Gen. Fred M. Franks, U.S. Army (retired)

“General Lynch’s book *Adapt or Die* is a wonderful reflection of the importance of truly caring for people in a very emotional and deeply connected way. I have worked with Rick in helping take care of our soldiers and their families during these difficult times, and the leadership principles listed in this book are an invaluable guide on how to accomplish that goal. Those principles apply not only in the military, but also in corporate America, in academia, and even in the entertainment industry.”

—Gary Sinise, actor and founder of the Gary Sinise Foundation

“General Lynch is a great American hero. He’s led our troops in battle and he’s managed the bases for thousands of military families around the world. He’s got insights into leadership and taking care of people that are great lessons for leaders of any organization. He makes a compelling case for leaders to constantly improve and adapt their organizations; it’s really all about people. Lynch’s mantra of ‘touching lives and making a difference’ should speak to leaders of all types of organizations. A must-read for any student of leaders.”

—Craig Boyan, president and COO, HEB

“Three Cheers for *Adapt or Die*! General Lynch shows us that leadership is not just a matter of the head, but of the heart; not just an acquired skill, but a gift bestowed. With accuracy, detail, and precision, Ricky Lynch hands his reader a magnifying glass, allowing us to peer upon the essential qualities of a caring, effective, passionate, and successful leader.”

—Rev. Dr. Russell J. Levenson Jr., Rector, St. Martin’s Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas

“This book deserves a place on the shelf of contemporary leadership tomes. A personal tour through an exciting life as a soldier, it will provoke an interesting self-analysis in those who have led or want to lead.”

—Lt. Gen. Walter F. Ulmer Jr., U.S. Army (retired);
former president and CEO, Center for Creative Leadership

“*Adapt or Die* is an inspiring story of the lessons learned about faith, life, and leadership from one of America’s great soldiers. General

Lt. General (Ret.) Rick Lynch with Mark Dagostino, *Adapt or Die*
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Lynch's enduring principles and practical insights will help people from all walks of life turn work and family obstacles into opportunities for success."

—Chet Edwards, former U.S. Congressman,
Texas 17th District, 1991–2010

"General Lynch offers a rare and powerful perspective on leadership. Not only is he a proven leader through his experiences as a U.S. Army general, but he is a natural leader from his innate understanding of and care for people."

—Jorgen Pedersen, president and CEO, RE2, Inc.

"Rick personifies what leadership is all about. He has a way of communicating how to lead through strength, compassion, and most of all integrity! No matter if you lead a corporation, a small business, a nonprofit, or an academic institution, Rick's principles will guide you to success."

—Doug Harward, CEO and founder, TrainingIndustry.com

"Hard-hitting, straightforward Rick Lynch captures a lifetime of lessons learned from a very distinguished military career—invaluable for corporate and military leaders alike."

—Gen. Ben Griffin, U.S. Army (retired)

"With boldness and candor, Rick Lynch relates his own experiences from a distinguished U.S. Army career to illustrate essential leadership principles for all of us. General Lynch is an authentic American hero, yet he writes with a common touch. He demonstrates a deep understanding of how to be a leader and to live a full, balanced life."

—James D. Spaniolo, president, University of Texas at Arlington

"Leadership is what we desperately need, yet it's not an innate trait. Fortunately, it can be learned, and we have Lt. Gen. Rick Lynch to teach us. From the heartland of America to the distant ramparts of Iraq, Lynch knows the importance of leadership and wants to share his gift with others. This book is more than the fascinating journey of an accomplished American patriot. It is a guide for all of us on how to lead and how to live."

—Dr. J. D. Crouch II, former assistant to the president
and deputy national security advisor

"I personally have experienced the wonderful impact of Rick and these stories. He will touch all of your emotions. Most important,

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you will leave feeling more prepared and motivated to lead yourself, your team, and your organization.”

—Al Triunfo, vice president, sales and operations,
MEDA Pharmaceuticals

“*Adapt or Die* is an invaluable addition to a leadership library and can truly help people who strive to be leaders in the godly way. General Lynch shows us how he leaned on God throughout his career, especially in difficult circumstances, and how that relationship was a source of strength for him. I wish I could have read this book forty years ago.”

—Dan Wallrath, president/founder, Operation Finally Home

“This book deserves a look as an example of how one aggressive general officer sees his profession, himself, and his responsibilities. It is a candid, straightforward review of the challenge and response of a military leader in today’s complex environment.”

—Brig. Gen. John C. (Doc) Bahnsen, U.S. Army (retired)

“General Lynch gives pragmatic examples of how investing in and trusting your employees can and does lead to significant productivity and morale changes. *Adapt or Die* is a must-read for anyone who has been blessed with people responsibility or for those who aspire to lead effectively.”

—Bob Jansen, president and CEO, Zensights

“Managers, pastors, military leaders, educators, and anyone seeking to lead well will find great help in the pages of this book. General Lynch has earned the right to be heard, and listening to his instruction and stories will lock fresh new leadership lessons in your heart.”

—Rev. Kevin G. Harney, pastor, leadership trainer,
and author of *Reckless Faith* and *The Organic Outreach Series*

“An inspiring book by one of our nation’s premier strategic and spiritual leaders. Having achieved success as a military professional at every level of the army’s organizational structure, General Rick Lynch’s valuable and practical leadership principles captured in this volume should be required reading for any organization’s entire management team—no matter the position or level. Quite simply, this might be one of the most positive, candid, and encouraging books I’ve read on leadership in recent years! Truly an invaluable resource for those wanting to take their effectiveness as a great, adaptive leader to the next level.”

—Chaplain (Major General) Doug Carver, U.S. Army (retired)
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ADAPT OR DIE

LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES
FROM AN AMERICAN GENERAL

LT. GENERAL (RET.)
RICK LYNCH
WITH MARK DAGOSTINO



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To Sarah,
for all of your love and support through the years

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Introduction

If you picked up this book, chances are pretty good that you've made up your mind: You want to be a leader. Or maybe you're already a leader and you want to be a better leader. A stronger leader. Either way, that's a very good thing.

We need more leaders. True leaders. Leaders who know what it means to “lead” and not just “manage.”

America's got problems. Our governments (both national and local), our businesses (both big and small), our education systems (both private and public), even our churches and community organizations are facing budget cuts and shortfalls, global competition, shifting demographics, loss of morale and of moral direction, and a never-ending series of rapidly changing technological challenges that seem almost too big to bear. Yet all of this can be solved. I believe the solution to almost every problem we face is strong leadership—leadership built on the ability to adapt.

Adaptation, as history shows us, is the key to survival not only in business or out on the battlefield, but in life. The phrase “Adapt or die” exists for a reason, and the best leaders, the strongest leaders, live by it.

The world moves fast today—faster than a lot of seemingly capable leaders and even some well-oiled machines and top-notch

organizations can handle. But true leaders know how to adapt and how to get those around them to adapt to any situation.

Think you've got what it takes to be that kind of a leader? I think you do. I believe in the power of individuals to change their circumstances, to change their environment, to change the course of their home life and workplaces, and to change for the better. You have the strength it takes to do that, using the tools that God blessed you with. The question is whether you have the belief that you have what it takes to get it done, and whether you can recognize how to use the tools you've been given.

My aim in writing this book is to help you do just that.

The thing is, once you know your foundation, once you have your guiding principles in place, leading is basically a matter of digging deep and choosing to do the right thing—no matter how big or how small the challenges before you may be.

So what are those challenges? After thirty-five years in the army, leading groups of American heroes as small as one hundred soldiers and as large as 120,000 civilian employees, chances are I've not only faced it, but survived it, overcome it, and come out the other side better for it. In fact, no matter how big your challenges might seem, I bet I've got a story that'll help put it all into perspective for you.

Got a budget to trim? I was required to trim \$5 billion from one of my budgets over a two-year period without cutting back on any of the services we were tasked to deliver. Facing a tough negotiation? In Iraq, I sat across the negotiating table from sixteen heavily armed Sunni insurgents who were hell-bent on killing me, with no one but a translator to back me up on my side of the table—and won. How did I do that? The same way I've adapted and pushed through every decision and struggle in my life: by seeing opportunities instead of obstacles; by acting as an engaged leader; by standing up as a lifestyle evangelist who leads not just with words, but by example; and by knowing my priorities and standing on a solid foundation that allows me—and therefore, those around me—to adapt and persevere with resilience.

It took me a lifetime to learn how to master those principles. In the pages of this book, I'll share stories and examples from a variety of points in my life and career in the hopes that you'll learn a little faster than I did, and start leading with courage and conviction right away, no matter what challenges come your way.

In life and work, it's almost a certainty that you'll face challenges you don't see coming. In fact, one of the toughest foes to ever face me down in my entire career was a young woman—an army wife—who stopped me on the street with tears in her eyes three days after I took over command at Fort Hood, Texas, the largest army base in the free world.

“You generals are lying to us!” she said to me.

I was taken aback. “Ma’am, I don’t understand,” I said.

“You tell us that you’re bringing our husbands home between deployments. You say it, but you don’t mean it. Here at Fort Hood, my husband comes home every night after our kids go to bed. He’s always working weekends,” she said. “Just keep him. You’re teasing my family. My kids understand why Daddy’s gone when he’s in Iraq or Afghanistan, but they don’t understand why they never get to see him when he’s right here in Texas.”

A manager might hear a complaint like this, show some sympathy, and basically go back to whatever he or she was doing before. “Tough,” might be the internal response. “There’s work to be done and our soldiers are here to do it.” But neglect and denial just aren’t my style. What this young woman was telling me was something that had been churning in my gut for some time: We as the army hadn’t done enough to adapt our systems, schedules, and routines back home to a war that was now stretching toward a decade in length. The war, with its multiple back-to-back deployments, was taxing our soldiers and their families to the brink. We knew it, but we weren’t doing enough about it. We needed to adapt to this new reality before the whole system simply died under our watch.

As a leader, I realized it wasn’t anyone else’s responsibility. It was my responsibility to do something about it, and to do something about it right away.

That very day, I demanded that all 63,000 soldiers at Fort Hood be home by 6:00 to eat dinner with their families. It's a demand I would enforce from that day forward. Five days a week. I also insisted that every soldier and officer (the equivalents of "supervisors" and "bosses" in my organization) leave work at 3 p.m. on Thursdays for mandatory family time—to join in afternoon ball games and bonding activities that had been set up prior to my taking over Fort Hood, but which were never truly enforced. I also declared that no soldier would be allowed to work weekends without my personal approval. (And guess how many soldiers were willing to seek approval from a general for *that*?)

I know there are CEOs all across the country laughing at the very idea of ever demanding that their employees leave early, shaking their heads at the ridiculous notion that a workday could end at 3 p.m. even one day a week without destroying productivity.

I'm here to tell you CEOs that you're just plain wrong.

This sweeping order not only resulted in a significant drop in incidences of domestic violence, divorce, and failed relationships, but Fort Hood, which held the dubious distinction of having the highest suicide rate of any base in the army, exhibited the *lowest* suicide rates in the army just a year later.

By guiding people toward better balance in their lives, morale went up. Productivity went up. We didn't lose anything. In fact, just the opposite. Work got done and then some. Our soldiers became more efficient, more productive, more effective during the course of the day, and we all enjoyed the benefits. Traffic accidents, which were rampant—we had traffic fatalities every fifteen to twenty days on base—nearly disappeared. At one point we went 245 days without a single fatality, thanks to a broad spectrum of directives I put into place to improve work/life balance, and by insisting that platoon leaders (my "middle management" as it were) pay more attention to the personal safety of our soldiers at every level.

It's a documented example of "family first" policies that made a major difference in a lot of people's lives, including my own. I walked the walk. If I told my soldiers to be home for dinner by six

o'clock, you'd better believe I was home for dinner by six myself. If I told them to leave at three o'clock on Thursdays, I left at three on Thursdays. And if I said, "We're not working on weekends," I wouldn't work on weekends. Period.

I did find myself getting up at four in the morning to work two and a half hours before heading into the office most days because I didn't want to sacrifice the time with my family the night before. So you do have to work hard as a leader—harder than anyone else on your team at times—but you don't have to sacrifice your family or anyone else's family time in order to do that.

My bold move resonated across the entire army, and a long-entrenched culture began to change almost overnight. In 2009, the *Austin American Statesmen* wrote an article dubbing me "The Family First General," and I couldn't have been more proud.

You might be asking yourself, *What on earth does that story have to do with leading "my company" or "my department" or "my university" or "my organization"?* It has to do with treating your subordinates, your workforce, your team—the individual members of whatever group it is that you're tasked with leading—as if they were your very own children. And that may sound like a lot of soft talk coming from a three-star general, but I hope you'll see by the end of this book that it's actually just about the toughest talk I could lay on you. I hope you'll learn that the only way you're going to get ahead, the only way you're going to get on course, the only way you're going to move your company forward, and the only way to move this country forward—in education, in business, in politics, in everything—is to live by one very important rule: Treat your people well, and they'll treat you well in return. I've followed that rule from life-or-death situations on the battlefield to nine-to-five obligations back home, and the results have always, always been positive.

Of the many examples of my personal leadership style I'll share in this book, one tenet that undergirds everything is that our people are our most important resource. If we don't take care of them, they won't have the ability to adapt. And what happens when you don't adapt? That's right. You die. Your organization dies. Your

government dies. Your business dies. On the battlefield, your people themselves will die. Today in America, if we don't take care of our people first and lead them through the example of strong leadership, I'm afraid the very spirit that keeps this country thriving is going to die, too.

I don't mean to sound overly dramatic here, but in life, you worry about the things you love. And I love our nation. We've got some big problems, and I don't see a way out of these problems without strong leadership on our side.

Our leaders have to know that our people are what matter. When leaders forget that, I believe it is to our great peril.

I ask that you keep this in mind as we forge ahead. It's at the root of everything I have ever done as a leader. Everything I hope that you, the leaders of today and the leaders of tomorrow, will embrace for the sake of us all.



PART 1

OPPORTUNITIES, NOT OBSTACLES



Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.

Joshua 1:9

Obstacles are a part of life, and great leaders see obstacles for what they really are: opportunities. Nurturing your ability to see through obstacles is one key to becoming a great leader. The fact is, if you're not facing obstacles in your life and work, if you find yourself gliding along in your comfort zone all the time, you're probably working in the wrong place. Push harder. Look for opportunities to work outside your comfort zone. Face obstacles head on, find the strength to push through them, and you'll find that the rewards on the other side are almost always greater than you could have expected. It takes some strength and a whole lot of faith to push through sometimes. But do you know what it all comes down to? Your attitude. It's up to you to choose: Is this obstacle the thing

that'll do you in? That'll shut you down? That'll stop you dead in your tracks? Or is this obstacle simply a challenge that's going to cause you to grow and learn and become better at whatever it is you do?

I choose to see opportunities, not obstacles. What do you choose to see?

No Money

Growing up as a kid in Hamilton, Ohio, potato soup was the highlight meal of my week.

Needless to say, my family had no money.

Our household included not only me, my mom, my dad, and my younger brother, but since Dad had been married previously, I had two half brothers who were there sometimes as well—and all together we rarely had a nickel between us.

Like a lot of other parents in our small city, Mom and Dad both worked shift work at the paper mill: seven to three, three to eleven, or eleven to seven, day in and day out, and despite working all those hours, neither of them brought home much of a paycheck. They provided for the family as best they could. I'm not complaining. I'm eternally grateful for their hard work, but there was simply nothing left over at the end of the week. That posed certain challenges. It didn't matter that things cost less then. It didn't matter that my parents could give me a dollar to run to the store for a half gallon of milk, a loaf of bread, and a pack of cigarettes, and I'd bring 'em back change. We were still barely scraping by.

It was clear to me by the age of thirteen that if I wanted to have nice school clothes or have my own transportation or be able to go to McDonald's with my buddies, Mom and Dad weren't going to hand me a ten-dollar bill and say, "Go have a nice time."

So at thirteen I went looking for work.

That was a pretty big turning point and a springboard into many life lessons learned. Even before that I was ambitious. I worked on my cousin's dairy farm in Indiana, pulling in sixty cents an hour as a kid. But the first real job I found as a teenager was painting houses. There was a guy who worked with Mom at the paper mill who had a side business painting houses, inside and outside. So I threw myself into it and started putting money away for the things I wanted.

Over the next few years I migrated from that to the restaurant business. I was a busboy and then a grill cook—like a lot of kids. And by the time I was a senior in high school I was working as the assistant manager of a pet store in Hamilton.

Nobody ever said, "Hey, Rick, you gotta get a job." It was just clear to me that if I didn't get a job, I wasn't going to have what I wanted. And if I give my parents credit for anything, especially my mom, it's instilling this profound work ethic: Working hard is the right thing to do, and if you ever find yourself not working hard, then you're probably not in the right position.

There are people in life (and a lot of people in today's America) who would look at my thirteen-year-old self and see the whole situation as something negative. As if it were a burden that I had to get a job. But I didn't see it that way then, and I certainly don't see it that way now. The fact that my parents didn't have money and didn't hand me everything I wanted wasn't an obstacle. It was an opportunity—an opportunity of a lifetime, because it set me up for a lifetime of success.

When I got my first job, I got my first sense of independence. For the first time in my life I wasn't relying on my mom or dad. I had my own money. I could buy my own clothes. I could go to McDonald's whenever I wanted without relying on anyone else's handouts. And when I turned sixteen I bought my own motorcycle: a Yamaha 175

Enduro. That's how I got back and forth to school, and it's also how I got back and forth to work in the restaurant business.

Many years later, when I became a lieutenant in the army, I read an article on career development that pointed to one very important trait of success: Do every job superbly. I already knew that firsthand because of my early work experience as a teenager, and because it was something my mom taught me. Regardless of whether you're a house painter, a dishwasher, a grill cook, or a lieutenant, do the best job you can and you'll always be successful, Mom used to tell me. Of course, the article also said that another aspect of success is to make sure people know that you're doing a good job: Be visible and widely known! That would get easier for me over time. I wasn't much of a people person early on. I was more of an introvert. But in time I would grow to enjoy talking to people and getting to know everyone, no matter where I worked.

Seeing opportunities instead of obstacles is about having the right mind-set. For me, beginning at age thirteen, part of that was a realization that your current set in life does not have to be permanent. You have a choice, and you can change whatever it is that's holding you back. You can make those changes with a positive attitude, and as a result of that positive attitude you can work through it. If you don't do that—and unfortunately I see this all the time—you can fall into a state of resignation: “It is what it is. It ain't gonna get any better than this.” Think of the state of the nation these days, and this overwhelming sense of resignation that's swept across America. People talk as if everything just is what it is: Unemployment is the way it is, the deficit's the way it is, governmental paralysis is the way it is, and there's nothing we can do about any of it.

That's letting the obstacle blur the opportunity.

I go back to Joshua 1:9 all the time: “Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.” That conviction and determined spirit alone gives me the strength and courage to plow on today. But I didn't have the Bible and those teachings in my life when I was thirteen years old. I didn't get that until I started going to church almost twenty years later. So where did I get that conviction and spirit from?

I think I got it from my mom. I love my dad, but he wasn't the nurturer. He was the guy with the belt. Mom was the nurturer: caring and loving, with an infectious laugh. Her name was Dorothy, but everyone called her Dotie. It was a fitting nickname because, in fact, she doted on my brother and me all the time. She doted on us so much that it was a major bone of contention between her and my dad. He would always complain that she was "trying to spoil those kids." Maybe she *was* trying to spoil us, by spending more time with us. Every year she would go into debt to buy us Christmas presents, and then we'd see her work even harder just to pay off that debt. Because of that extra time and affection she showed, she has proven to be the most influential person in our lives.

I never saw my mom complain. The lot in life that she had was good enough for her—even if she knew it wasn't good enough for my brother or me. She wanted more for us, and she made that clear. To be fair, so did my dad.

My father, Calvin, graduated from the seventh grade, and that's as far as he got in school because he didn't think he needed any more than that. Mom graduated from the eleventh grade, so neither one of them were high school graduates. But Mom was the gal who always advocated that we needed to get straight A's if we wanted to get ahead in life. She pushed us in her kind and gentle fashion. Dad, on the other hand—if you didn't get straight A's, you had some explaining to do when you got home. It was that level of discipline with him: Even though he only had a seventh-grade education, he wouldn't have tolerated anything but the best from my brother and me.

It's funny to think about, but the roots of your upbringing run deep. There is something that happened there in Hamilton, Ohio, in all of those lessons and all of that pushing from my parents during my formative years that really carried me to where I am today. There was something in all of it that gave me the foundation of optimism—this steadfast belief that I could overcome obstacles and turn them into opportunities, every time.

Colin Powell says, "Optimism is a combat multiplier." I believe that's true. When you look at lists of famous people's quotations,

especially famous leaders, you see a lot about optimism. Abraham Lincoln said, “A man is about as happy as he makes his mind up to be.” I believe that’s true, too.

As you’re confronted with difficult circumstances, your outlook is everything. Your outlook is going to help you overcome the obstacles and turn them into opportunities. Every time. But you need to have a positive attitude—otherwise you risk shutting down. Otherwise you miss seeing the opportunity that’s right there in front of you, or asking for advice that just might lead you to an opportunity you never knew existed.

Beast Barracks

Getting over the “no-money” obstacle was pretty easy as a teen. I found work. I made money. Problem solved. But I was a junior in high school when that obstacle grew into a problem that I thought was wholly insurmountable: There was no way that my parents could ever afford to send me to college, and even though I was working, I knew in my heart there was no way I could ever afford to pay a bill as big as college tuition.

I was a good student. My parents saw to that, and I saw to it. I got all A's. It wasn't like I was a genius or something. I just worked hard. I worked hard at whatever I did, be it schoolwork or house painting. But what good would that do me if I couldn't go to college? If I couldn't find a way to pay for school, I thought, I might wind up working at the paper mill just like my parents, and I knew I didn't want to do that.

How on earth could a kid go to college if he didn't have a way to pay for it?

Since my parents didn't have an answer, and my peers didn't have an answer, and I couldn't seem to come up with an answer myself, I went to see the guidance counselor at my high school. “Ma'am,”

I said, “I’m getting all A’s, as you well know. I’m on the honor roll here, I’m in the National Honor Society, but my parents can’t afford to send me to college. Is there any way I can still go to school?”

Her response? “How about a military academy?” I had no idea what a military academy was, so I said, “What’s that?” Her answer just about blew my mind: “Well, that’s a place where they *pay you* to go to school.”

No one had ever told me that such a place existed! Ever since the inkling of an idea of a college education was put into my head, I had been told that it was something that cost a whole lot of money. All it took was asking the right question to the right person with the right knowledge, and the whole notion that college wasn’t affordable was no longer a concern. “Okay!” I said. “Let’s try that!”

So basically, the fact that I didn’t have any money suddenly turned into another amazing opportunity: Not only could I still go to school, but there were schools out there that would pay me to go! Talk about a win-win situation.

Of course, my interest in going to a military academy had nothing to do with an aspiration to join the military.

My dad was a private E1 in 1945 when he was drafted into the army—that’s the lowest rank on the totem pole, so to speak—and he was a private E1 when he was kicked out of the army two years later, in 1947. He was the world’s worst soldier, a fact he’s very proud of to this day. So the inspiration certainly didn’t come from him.

To tell the truth, I didn’t really think a whole lot about the military part of the equation. All I saw was the possibility of my getting a free college education, and the unbelievably big bonus of getting paid for the chance to go get it.

That guidance counselor’s advice marked a significant moment in my life, that’s for sure. She also said I should look at Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) scholarships to non-military schools because they could provide for a four-year education as well. That was a whole other way to get the education I desired with no money out of my own pocket. I could hardly believe it! So I applied for and received a four-year ROTC scholarship, and wound up applying

to ten different schools that would've taken it. I only went to visit one, though: Ohio State. That school seemed really appealing, and I thought in my heart that's where I was going to go and put that scholarship to good use. But this was 1972. If you recall, in 1972, people didn't like the United States military very much. On the heels of Vietnam and the incident at Kent State, I stepped foot onto the campus in Columbus and quickly realized that if I went there in uniform, I was sure to be a *persona non grata*. So I said to myself, "I might as well go to the military academy where everybody's the same and nobody's throwing stuff at you!" The military academy was the clear choice.

I went through the application process to both West Point and Annapolis. I got my West Point acceptance on a Tuesday and my Annapolis acceptance on a Wednesday. The only reason I chose West Point was that the acceptance letter came in first. The postman determined my fate.

"West Point? Are you crazy?!" my dad said when I told him that I was accepted there. "That's the army!"

By that point there was no way he could have deterred me. My independence had pretty much been established. So I ignored his warnings about how tough it would be and how much I would hate it, and I packed my bags with no idea what lay ahead.

Money was still an issue of course. I had to buy a pair of black shoes before they'd let me step foot onto that campus. And I had to have \$300 set aside in order to open the account where the army would deposit my pay while I was in school. Luckily my grandmother loaned me the money for both. There's nothing like family to back you up when you're first stepping foot into the world.

I still remember vividly the sight of Coco, our family poodle, looking out the door after me as I got into the car and drove off to the airport. I was scared to death that day. I had no idea what I was getting into. Everything I was fixing to do was going to be a first for me. I cried when the car pulled away from the house, and I cried when I got on the plane. This young green kid flew to New York City all by himself, and I cried when the plane landed! I had rarely been

out of the state of Ohio, and there I was plopped in that sprawling metropolis with no one to guide me. I was literally the country boy in the big city. All the new recruits had to stay at a particular hotel, and after I checked in, I basically spent the night by myself. I'm an introvert by nature, and I was particularly introverted early in my adult life, so it was very difficult for me to talk to strangers or to make new friends. I remember going to see a James Bond movie instead of trying to get to know anyone.

It was July 2, 1973.

Representatives from West Point came and picked us all up the next morning and drove us down to that beautiful high-ground campus overlooking the Hudson River. But as soon as we got off the bus, the yelling, screaming, harassment, and drills began. I vividly remember thinking that everything at West Point was uphill, because they made you run all the time and it seemed like everywhere you ran was uphill—there wasn't a downhill stretch to be found!

Even something as simple as eating dinner was a challenge. The way West Point is organized, the mess hall has these ten-man tables. The upperclassmen are all at the head of the table, and at the foot are three plebes (that's what freshman were called). One plebe is designated the "cold beverage corporal." He's required to know what everybody wants to drink. One is the dessert cutter. And one guy is there just to take all the wrath of the upperclassmen. The long and short of it was that those three plebes—of which I was one—never got a chance to eat. I would leave that mess hall just about starving every single day.

If you've ever seen a movie depicting the sort of harassment that goes on in these places, you have some idea of what I'm talking about here. But believe me, you have no idea what it feels like to be chastised and yelled and screamed at for hours and hours for days on end until it actually happens to you. And it is miserable.

There's a name for this six-week indoctrination period at West Point. They call it Beast Barracks, and there couldn't be a more fitting name. I think I went in weighing 175 pounds, and six weeks later I was down to 145. And remember, I had no idea what I was getting

into before I got there. I hadn't prepared for that experience at all. I only went there because I couldn't afford to go to any other college. Nobody had prepared me for this extreme entry into adulthood.

Three weeks into it I felt defeated. I thought, *This is not going to work for me*. I was completely overwhelmed.

I called my dad and said, "You were right. I can't do this. The army's not for me. I'm coming home."

Guess what my dad's reply was?

"Oh yeah?" he said. "Where are you gonna sleep?"

Tough love.

I didn't appreciate it much at the time, as you might imagine. But that tough love was exactly what I needed in that moment. The fact is, the army wanted to break me down. And they had. They did a good job! They wanted to break me down to build me up; instill a discipline that would be lifelong and unforgettable. We don't do that so much anymore in the army because, candidly, that was just pure, unadulterated harassment. We don't want our officers to treat their subordinates that poorly in the field, so why were we treating them like that at the academy? But good, bad, or indifferent, Beast Barracks was a part of what it took to get to the glorious education that awaited me on the other side. Only I was so broken down that I nearly succumbed to the obstacle, right there. I nearly gave in. I was overwhelmed by the negativity of it all. I couldn't see the bigger picture, couldn't see the opportunity that getting through this harassment and pain and suffering was going to bring my way. I needed my dad's tough love, his refusal to let me quit, in order to get through it.

"You started it—you're going to finish it." That was his message. So I hung up the phone and went back to Beast Barracks. After another three weeks of hell, it was over. Then it started to feel more like school—a really good school with fantastic teachers, and students who wanted to succeed. Sophomore year was called our Yearling Year, and by the time I was halfway through it, I started to hit my stride. I went back to what I knew: Hard work yields results. I did all of the things that cadets were supposed to be doing. I saw the rewards

of that hard work in my grades. I became a Star Man, which meant I was in the top 5 percent of my class. I was also selected to command one of four regiments at the school. Becoming a regimental commander is one of the highest achievements at the academy! And before long, I found myself truly enjoying my time at West Point.

If I had given up, if I had given in to the obstacles they threw at me in those first six weeks, I never would have found that sense of enjoyment. I never would have discovered the passion for leadership that would launch me into a thirty-five-year career. It was a great lesson in the power of commitment.

Applying that sort of tough love to myself is something that would take years to master. Heck, I still haven't mastered it! There have been plenty of other times in my career when I wanted to quit—I'll talk about those in upcoming chapters. But not giving in, not giving up, and following through until you get to the other side of the challenge are important first steps in learning how to lead—not to mention learning how to adapt and move forward when the going gets tough.

Resist the urge to quit—and do your best to instill that resistance in those working under you. You won't regret it. There's opportunity in the obstacle. Every time. You just have to work a little harder to see it.

RE M I N D E R

FOCUS ON OPPORTUNITIES, NOT OBSTACLES.

"It can be done!"