

# Wounded in Iraq, Virginia Veteran and Attorney Receives Purple Heart

by Deirdre Norman



Clockwise from left: 1. 2017 Operation Eager Lion: In the desert of Jordan with Captain Richard Blanchette, United States Marine Corps JAG, Lt Col Alexis Stackhouse who served as the Joint Staff Deployment Training Team Legal Analyst. 2. Purple Heart Medal front. 3. Military portrait. 4. Stackhouse was the varsity statistician in high school. 5. Engraved back of Purple Heart medal.

Alexis N. Stackhouse describes the day she was hit in the head by razor-sharp shrapnel from an Al-Qaeda rocket as being “in the wrong place at the right time.” Nine months into her year-long tour in Iraq, Stackhouse was seeking cover in a bomb shelter in Baghdad when rockets hit the heavily fortified Green Zone, causing death and injuries.

Stackhouse was injured when she and others shielded the vulnerable opening to a concrete bunker (she was wearing Kevlar) from errant shell casings and mortar debris pulsing through the air. Stackhouse and other military members helped the injured while the rockets continued to explode around them, and in November 2017 she received the Purple Heart, which “is awarded to members of the armed

forces of the US who are wounded by an instrument of war in the hands of the enemy.”

Stackhouse’s career has included an array of accolades and accomplishments from being the Rule of Law Coordinator for the entire country of Iraq, to representing detainees at Guantanamo Bay in her role as Senior Defense Counsel for the Office of Military Commissions, to earning a Bronze Star. Today, Lieutenant Colonel Stackhouse, still a reservist in the United States Air Force Judge Advocate General Corps (JAG), has logged many more miles around the globe (Jordan, UAE, and Dubai just this year) as an operational law subject matter expert (SME).

In all of these roles, Stackhouse has travelled a long way from her childhood in rural Horry County, South Carolina, where “they didn’t get cable until 1990 and they didn’t have 9-1-1 until about 1996.” The eldest of four girls, all college graduates, born to two educators, Stackhouse considers herself “an example of what happens when America

makes a tiny deposit on the promissory note” that Martin Luther King Jr. espoused in his 1963 speech.

Looking at herself and other legal professionals of her generation, she notes that they are often beneficiaries of their parents, who faced broad-based discrimination in the South... “lots of preachers, teachers, and morticians” she recalls. After an “unfair, unjust, and unexpected” encounter with the law, a 13-year-old Stackhouse decided to become a lawyer. Falsely accused of theft, Stackhouse says she thought, “I wish I knew what I should have said to stand up for myself,” when questioned by a police officer who immediately took a store clerk’s accusation as gospel. Though her mother later made sure that the clerk apologized, Stackhouse says, “I knew this had something to do with my race, and I wanted to grow up and help people in those situations.”

A natural student, Stackhouse went on to graduate from Clemson University with a master’s degree before receiving her law degree from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Law. In 2012, with Chief Judge Rebecca Moore of the Alexandria General District Court serving as her practitioner faculty advisor, she also earned an LLM with concentrations in trial litigation and national security law from Georgetown University Law Center. Though it was at Clemson where she met her husband, textile chemist Ramon D. McMillan, Stackhouse considers herself a Tar Heel — and it was at UNC law school where she was selected as one of only 80 law school graduates nationwide to be direct appointees to the USAF Judge Advocate General Corps.

Stackhouse served 10 years of active duty — working her way across a number of air force bases and serving as special assistant United States attorney in Ohio before she was deployed to Iraq. After her year in the combat zone, Stackhouse was selected in 2008 as a senior defense counsel for detained enemy combatants by the Chief Legal Defense Counsel for the Military Commissions at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. “I had just come out of Iraq,” Stackhouse says, “where I spent a great deal of time imploring Iraqi judges and lawyers to implement legal protections such as due process. It was surreal to find myself at Guantanamo actually litigating to ensure that

the ideals I spent a year touting to the Iraqis were observed during the military commissions.”

Stackhouse is proud of the groundbreaking work she and other JAGs from all the military services completed. Teamed with prominent lawyers, including Harvard law professors and famous TV legal commentators, Stackhouse represented an innocuous sheep herder and an infamous jihadist. Stackhouse served a pivotal role as a military lawyer who provided information to team members not familiar with combat or the fog of war that envelops a situation, even a legal one, rather quickly. Speaking of the unexplored legal frontiers at Guantanamo, Stackhouse notes that “many of the legal conundrums we faced as a country, and as a military, had not been seen since the Nuremberg trials. The military lawyers found themselves teetering on the edge of Occam’s razor in trying to understand how inalienable principles of *jus in bello* (law of war) seemed to evaporate overnight.”

Stackhouse’s team ultimately won the freedom and repatriation of the sheep herder she was assigned, but it was during a freezing flight on a cargo plane to Guantanamo Bay that she decided to make a shift in her career. Sitting on a crate of tomatoes, pumping breast milk for her newborn son, Alex Zhi, watching folks around her head to the latrine she thought: “I think I have done enough for my country in this capacity,” she says laughingly, as she planned her transition from active-duty to reserve citizen-warrior.

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Now in private practice, Stackhouse has established a small, boutique firm, The Litigation Practice of Alexandria PLLC. Stackhouse works as a criminal defense attorney and a military law consultant, as well as serving as a reserve JAG on the J7 Joint Staff.

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Well-versed in civilian statutes and the code of military justice, with her military training and clearances, she is afforded the ability to handle cases that might prove extremely difficult for other civilian attorneys. This was the case when she assisted in representing an individual for the federal public defender's office who was accused of terrorist activities in plotting to blow up several northern Virginia targets.

In her free time, Stackhouse has done pro bono work for the Guest House in Alexandria, which assists women who have been incarcerated with legal issues upon their release. She also works with the Veteran's Consortium to advocate for veterans issues and represent those former service members who may not be able to afford attorneys. When not completing duties as the chair of the Alexandria

Bar Association Criminal Practice group or the chair of the Virginia State Bar Military Section, she also watches quite a bit of *The Andy Griffith Show* (she has all eight seasons on DVD) and plays Sudoku to relax.

After spending some time as a weekend court judge for teenagers while stationed in Arizona, Stackhouse says her goal for the future is to become a civilian judge and a reserve military judge. "I have the education, I have the training, I have the experience and most of all, I have the desire. One time, I walked into a civilian courtroom, and was asked to remove myself to 'behind the bar' because where I stood was for attorneys and judges only. Being dressed as I was, with a suit and briefcase and all the other accoutrements, such as a bar card hanging from a lanyard around my

neck, I told the deputy I appreciated his attentiveness but that since I was the prosecutor, it would be helpful for all concerned if I were as close to the bench as possible." I knew then that I wanted to be a judge because the scarcity of people like me in "front of the bar" skews the perception that equal justice applies to everyone. She says, "Some people have to see it to believe it and I want to give them an eyeful!"

And though the Purple Heart leaves her deeply humbled, she laughingly says that the experience taught her "not to stand outside a bunker for anyone else again! You're on your own!"

It is not difficult to imagine that Stackhouse will continue to achieve her goals, and make an impact to whatever arena she brings her talents.

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