



# Skies to Conquer: A Year Inside the Air Force Academy

By Diana Jean Schemo

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A former *New York Times* reporter's year behind the scenes at the U.S. Air Force Academy.

Diana Jean Schemo covered the Air Force Academy's sexual assault scandal in 2003, one of a series of academy embarrassments that have included drug use, rape complaints, and charges of evangelical officers pushing Christianity on cadets of all faiths. Today, the institution is in flux--a fascinating time to look at the changes being made and the experience of today's cadets.

Schemo followed a handful of academy cadets through the school year. From the admissions process and punishing weeks of basic training to graduation, she shares the triumphs and tribulations of the cadets and the struggle of the academy's leaders to set their embattled alma mater on a straighter path.

- Follows cadets in all grades, with insights on day-to-day academy life and training
- Written by a veteran reporter, two-time foreign correspondent and Pulitzer Prize nominee, with excellent contacts at the academy
- Includes 38 black-and-white photographs

Like David Lipsky's successful *Absolutely American: Four Years at West Point*, this book offers a fascinating window on the training of our military today. But Schemo's book updates the story: the seniors were the first class to sign up after the attacks of 9/11, and the road to graduation, this time, leads to an America at war.

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## **Editorial Review**

### **From the Inside Flap**

They are among the smartest, toughest, and most disciplined college freshmen in the nation. They share dreams and ambitions rarely found among their peers. Over the next year, they will be subject to a battery of unbreakable rules, personal privations, and numbing routines that would send most college students racing back home. Everything they know and believe about themselves will be challenged, shaken, broken, and reassembled. All of this will occur as the elite institution they attend, the United States Air Force Academy, struggles to restore an image and reinvent policies that have been shattered by successive scandals and controversies.

In *Skies to Conquer*, former *New York Times* reporter Diana Jean Schemo follows a group of freshmen, the Bulldawgs of Squadron 13, as they make their way through their first year at the Air Force Academy. From the moment of their arrival, with no cell phones, radios, TVs, iPods, tiny refrigerators, or furniture, and no luggage other than a backpack full of white underwear, they are in for the toughest year of their lives.

The cadets—who boast an average GPA of 3.9 and SAT scores that rival the Ivies, as well as, in most cases, at least one varsity letter—include a recruited athlete from Georgia, who openly doubts his decision to attend the academy; a young woman who took Junior ROTC in high school and figures the Air Force Academy offers her the best chance of seeing combat; another young woman from California whose sights are set on outer space; and the son of a rocket scientist, who was homeschooled along with his nine siblings and looks forward to having only one or two roommates.

Weeks out of high school, these cadets, and more than 1,300 others, begin their careers in an explosion of criticism and punishment that strips their identities raw and demolishes their defenses with the precision of a laser-guided bomb. They will learn to fight with mud soaking through their clothes and covering their ears, to shower in thirty seconds, to drop for fifty push-ups or more on demand, and to sound off, shouting an answer to somebody inches from their face, usually in one of three ways: "Yes, sir!", "No, sir!", or "No excuses, sir!" Those who succeed—and some won't—will emerge stronger, their self-discipline and drive sharpened in the crucible of academy life.

*Skies to Conquer* comes complete with profiles of the upperclassmen who have the power of personal gods for these cadets and a running account of the academy's struggle to put sexual abuse scandals and a controversy over religious proselytizing behind it, while adapting its strongest traditions to the realities of the modern world. It combines powerful and intense real-life drama with a fascinating portrait of a major American military institution in flux.

### **From the Back Cover**

"*Skies to Conquer* is a terrific, important, beautifully written book. Diana Jean Schemo takes readers deep inside one of the military's most important, if least understood, institutions: the U.S. Air Force Academy. It is a book that proves that America's warriors of the air are made, not born. Schemo was granted extraordinary, fly-on-the-wall access to a new class of training cadets who arrive in Colorado Springs as uncertain, undisciplined teenagers and are molded, sometimes brutally, into the future leaders of the United States Air Force. A collection of rich, very human portraits of these young men and women, the book also offers a troubling, if scrupulously fair, portrait of the institution. Written in the wake of the school's 2003 sexual-assault scandal, *Skies to Conquer* contains startling evidence to suggest that sexual harassment and religious

intolerance may still plague the academy."

--Philip Shenon, author of the New York Times bestseller *The Commission*

"Diana Jean Schemo gives us entree to a most unusual school that is not only one of the world's most elite war colleges but also a bellwether of the U.S. military's attempts--and, sometimes, reluctance--to meet the demands of the democratic society it serves. But this is not a book about strategy, policy, or politics; it's the story of young, soon-to-be and never-to-be officers and their education, a balanced and empathetic account of how authority is built, bestowed, earned, and undermined in an institution at a cultural crossroads. A fascinating, valuable work of journalism."

--Jeff Sharlet, author of the New York Times bestseller *The Family*

"Diana Jean Schemo provides a compelling, nuanced, and balanced portrait of life inside the Air Force Academy that raises critical questions about how we are training the next generation of air force officers. The human story of what happens to these bright, idealistic young men and women in the cauldron of the academy is both enthralling and important."

--Douglas Frantz, coauthor of *The Man from Pakistan*

#### About the Author

**Diana Jean Schemo**, a veteran journalist and foreign bureau chief at the *Baltimore Sun* and the *New York Times*, has covered poverty and child abuse, culture, religion, and education. Her reports have tracked rebels in Colombia, counterfeiting in Paraguay, and indentured servitude in Brazil. She has written from more than twenty-five countries and regions, including Somalia, Iraq, Israel, and the Amazon. For more, visit [www.skiestoconquer.com](http://www.skiestoconquer.com).

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