

2007



LIEUTENANT GENERAL ERVIN ROKKE, '62



COACH GREGG POPOVICH, '70

THE DISTINGUISHED GRADUATE AWARD

HONORING TWO OF THE ACADEMY'S BEST AND BRIGHTEST

BY KYLE DAVIDSON

As 2008 gets under way, it is once again time to honor two of the Academy's most accomplished and successful graduates. The Air Force Academy's 2007 Distinguished Graduates are retired Lieutenant General Ervin Rokke, '62, and coach of the NBA San Antonio Spurs, Gregg Popovich, '70.

The careers of these two gentlemen could not have been more different, but each has shown the fortitude, grit, determination and leadership that represents the best the Academy has to offer.

LIEUTENANT GENERAL ERVIN ROKKE, '62

Lieutenant General Ervin Rokke has made an enormous impact in both the fields of military intelligence and academics over the course of his career.

Upon graduation from the Air Force Academy, Rokke completed a graduate degree in international relations from Harvard University, then went on to Air Force Intelligence training. The young officer served several intelligence assignments in Japan and Hawaii before being brought back to the

Academy as an instructor for the department of political science.

Rokke's career would seem to run in similar cycles, as his operational Air Force intelligence assignments would be segmented with various Academic assignments at the Academy.

Rokke served in four different capacities for the Air Force Academy including assistant dean of faculty, head of the political science department and dean of faculty. He is the first Academy graduate to have been appointed a permanent professor and he served as the dean of faculty during the Academy's first major curriculum revision allowing cadets to complete more majors and courses of their choosing.

As an intelligence officer, Rokke's career has been expansive. Early on, he was heavily involved in negotiations with NATO in promoting standardization of the organization's military force structure, has served as the air attaché to the United Kingdom, defense attaché to the Soviet Union and has held high-level positions with the National Security Agency including deputy director for operations for military support during Operation Desert Storm and director of intelligence, U.S. European Command. Rokke's counsel and negotiations have been integral in promoting U.S. initiatives and alliances in numerous globally strategic locations.

Upon retiring from the Air Force in 1997, Rokke became the president of Moravian College and Theological Seminary in Bethlehem, Penn., during which time enrollment substantially increased, average freshman SAT scores improved nearly 70 points and several new academic majors were introduced.

While it is clear the retired general has led an amazingly successful career, he deferred the credit to the Academy for setting the foundation and to the tremendous people he has worked with over the years.

Rokke stated so much of the success he has had over the course of his career has been due to the principles of dedication, hard work and leadership learned while at the Academy. He admitted he has also been blessed to have worked with so many amazingly gifted and talented officers and enlisted airmen.

COACH GREGG POPOVICH, '70

Gregg Popovich's career is a true testament to the determination, competitive spirit, and drive to succeed instilled by the Air Force Academy and Air Force Athletics.

Popovich was recruited to play basketball for the Academy, and started all four years. He explained that while basketball was definitely a benefit it wasn't his reason for coming to the Academy.

"My family had no connection to the military, but I did well in high school and participated in a variety of activities, and heard about the Academy through my counselor and applied ... I realized what a great educational opportunity it was and a beautiful place," commented Popovich on his reasoning for coming to the Academy.

Upon graduation, he was part of the U.S. Armed Forces Basketball team that toured Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. He got his first taste of coaching in 1973 when he returned to the Academy as an assistant coach, a position he held for six years – three of them even after separating from the Air Force. During his tenure under then Air Force head basketball coach Hank Egan, he was also able to earn a graduate degree in physical education from the University of Denver.

Popovich was given his first shot at being a head coach in 1979 when Division-III school Pomona-Pitzer in Claremont, Calif., selected him for the position. His eight years as head coach there were highly successful. He led the team to its first conference championship in 68 years and to a berth in the NCAA Division III Tournament. He also served as a member of the school's academic community working as an associate professor and chairing the college's Student Life Committee.

As head coach at Pomona, Popovich became close friends with then University of Kansas head coach Larry Brown. When Brown was named head coach of the San Antonio Spurs in 1988, he brought on Popovich as the lead assistant coach, a position he held until 1992 when Spurs owner Red McCombs fired the entire coaching staff.

After a two-year period as an assistant coach with the Golden State Warriors,

the new ownership of the San Antonio Spurs brought Popovich back to Texas as the team's general manager. Midway through the 1996-1997 season, Popovich fired head coach Bob Hill and appointed himself head coach, a position he has held since.

As head coach of the Spurs, Popovich has led the team to four NBA championship titles, has a career winning percentage of .676 with a record of 576-276 (entering the 2007-2008 season), is the fastest coach in NBA history to reach 500 wins, holds the second best playoff career winning percentage and his 92 playoff wins is fifth most in NBA history, all of which are feats he credits his Academy experience for helping him achieve.

"I give the Academy a lot of credit for instilling certain qualities and beliefs that still remain, first of all, organizational skills. You know, as a cadet you certainly learn to organize your time and your priorities ... Beyond that, being dedicated and having a work ethic where you work to be persistent in trying to achieve a goal and not faltering in that regard... And then the idea of teamwork, and understanding that you don't do it on your own."

The Academy and the Association of Graduates will honor these gentlemen during the Founders Day dinner on April 4. ✓