

The Oath Keepers Started Training to Raid the Capitol in November, Prosecutors Say

“I believe we will have to get violent to stop this.”

by Paul Blest

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Three military veterans affiliated with a far-right militia allegedly began recruiting people two days after the presidential election was called for Joe Biden, and prepared for the Capitol riot with basic training, federal prosecutors alleged in an indictment unsealed Wednesday.

Thomas Caldwell, 66, Jessica Watkins, 38, and Donovan Ray Crowl, 50, of Ohio, were indicted in federal court Wednesday on four counts including conspiracy and obstruction of an official proceeding. All three are alleged to be members of the Oath Keepers, a far-right, anti-government militia, though Caldwell's lawyer denied he's a member. (Members of the Oath Keepers provided security for Roger Stone at a Stop the Steal rally in support of former President Donald Trump the night before the Capitol riot.)

Watkins, an Army veteran who claimed in a Parler post to be a commanding officer of the Ohio State Regular Militia, texted recruits on November 9 about a January “Basic Training” class an hour outside of Columbus. She told one recruit, “I need you fighting fit by the inauguration,” according to the indictment. In addition to the training camp in Ohio, Crowl, a former Marine helicopter mechanic, allegedly attended a training camp in North Carolina.

On November 23, Caldwell, a retired Navy lieutenant, allegedly texted Watkins: “I believe we will have to get violent to stop this, especially the antifa maggots who are sure to come out en masse even if we get the Prez for 4 more years.”

“You are my kinda person and we may have to fight next time,” Caldwell allegedly told Watkins. A week before the Capitol riot, Caldwell and Watkins spoke about coordinating travel and weapons, the indictment alleges. Caldwell allegedly told Watkins that there was “at least one full bus 40+ people coming from [North Carolina],” and that one person had committed to bringing weapons in his truck and “being the quick reaction force anf [sic] bringing the tools if something goes to hell.”

Watkins and Crowl traveled to D.C. on January 4 and Watkins checked into a Comfort Inn in Arlington, which was recommended by Caldwell, prosecutors say. The two “equipped themselves for battle before heading to the Capitol by carrying communication devices and wearing reinforced vests, camouflage helmets, and goggles,” according to the indictment. While inside the Capitol, prosecutors allege, Watkins communicated with others through the walkie-talkie app Zello. “We have a good group. We have about 30-40 of us. We are sticking together and sticking to the plan,” Watkins allegedly told them. An unknown man told them:

"You are executing citizen's arrest. Arrest this assembly, we have probable cause for acts of treason, election fraud."

Caldwell was "stationed on the West Side of the Capitol" and, along with others, "storm[ed] past barricades and climb[ed] stairs up to a balcony on the west side of the Capitol building," according to the indictment.

Later, Watkins and Crowl allegedly recorded a video featuring Crowl exclaiming: "We took on the Capitol! We overran the Capitol!"

Watkins and Caldwell have maintained their innocence. Caldwell's lawyer, Virginia-based attorney Thomas K. Plofchan Jr., denied his client was a member of the Oath Keepers or that he entered the Capitol on Jan. 6, telling the Washington Post that the charges against his client were "a deliberate attempt to find a scapegoat for activities on January 6."

"I didn't commit a crime. I didn't destroy anything. I didn't wreck anything," Watkins told the Ohio Capital Journal earlier this month. "If they want to charge me, that's fine, but you're welcome."