

Each spring the Pentagon Chapter hosts a unique event known as “Jobs for JAGs.” This year’s event was held on April 28 at the Army and Navy Club in downtown Washington, D.C. The title JAG is the moniker for judge advocates, the uniformed attorneys integrated into each of the military services. The title judge advocate in American history dates to the earliest days of the Revolution, when Gen. George Washington insisted that the Continental Congress appoint a lawyer to help with the many courts-martial being conducted. Congress acceded, and a judge advocate, William Tudor, joined Gen. Washington’s staff. From that single officer, the JAG Corps’ ranks have swelled to more than 8,500 members, about evenly split between active duty and reserve forces. Judge advocates have been on the front lines of every American conflict — from the Revolution to Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. Currently, more than 400 JAGs from all services are deployed in combat zones, advising operational commanders on everything from settling minor tort claims to prosecuting violations of the laws of war.

But law degrees notwithstanding, JAGs are first and foremost military officers. As such, they are subject to the same military personnel structure as any other officer is. The military’s force structure places a premium on youth, as one would expect in a physically demanding occupation such as combat. The military is dependent on a steady infusion of new recruits — with heavy attrition during the early years, followed by continuing attrition at each successive rank — in order to maintain the necessary mix of skills and experience while providing opportunities for advancement to more junior officers.

Many JAGs choose to remain only for their initial period of obligated service — usually three or four years. Others make the transition from active duty to reserves, maintaining their JAG status while taking other primary employment. Those who wish to remain in the JAG Corps stay in an up-or-out

system, in which officers face competitive selection boards every four or five years. In some cases, the opportunity for promotion is 50 percent or lower. Those who survive are eligible to retire after 20 years of service and face mandatory retirement after 30 years of service — typically at an age at which lawyers are considered to be in their prime. The net result of this system is a steady stream of talented and experienced military attorneys looking for new opportunities in civilian practice.

For many years, the Pentagon Chapter has hosted a one-day seminar to facilitate this transition. The seminar features various panels focusing on particular practice areas, such as federal civil service, state and local government, in-house counsel, private practice, and so forth. The panels are composed mostly of former and retired JAGs, approximately balanced between those who made the transition at a relatively young age and those who did so after a full 20- or 30-year career. The focus is not on specific job openings but, rather, on general job search and transition strategies; panelists at the session also offer practical tips and insights about selling the JAG experience. JAGs often bring a unique set of skills to the table, and translating these to civilian practice requires some degree of dexterity. After all, prospective employers can easily overlook the agility of mind, body, and spirit required to move seamlessly from drafting a contract to laying down suppressive fire.

Aside from the practical advice, the seminar provides a valuable opportunity to meet and socialize with the panelists and other JAGs. Given the turnover in the ranks of the JAG Corps, the network of former and retired JAGs is vast. A surprising number of successful and highly placed civilian lawyers have done a stint — and sometimes spent their career — in the JAG Corps. This network is a priceless resource for the job hunter. JAGs share a bond of commonality and experience that rivals any law school alumni association. The JAG connection has been a pipeline to countless terrific

job opportunities.

A mainstay of the Jobs for JAGs program has been a luncheon speech by Maj. Gen. (Ret.) William K. Suter, clerk of the U.S. Supreme Court. Gen. Suter is a former assistant judge advocate general of the Army and a tremendous supporter of JAGs and the Pentagon Chapter. Every year, Gen. Suter supplements his speech with his annually updated booklet *Thinking About Retirement? Some Observations by Bill Suter & Bill Lehman*, which he compiles along with fellow JAG retiree Bill Lehman. Gen. Suter’s perceptive advice ranges from the strategic — develop your network of friends and acquaintances who can assist in your job search — to the tactical, such as “get rid of your Infantry ‘rubber watch’ with the compass attachment.” Gen. Suter’s luncheon speech is the highlight of every Jobs for JAGs program.

The Jobs for JAGs program, which has been well-received by the many attendees over the years, draws JAGs stationed around the world — this year including some from Germany and Japan. Such is the program’s reputation that it has attracted attendees who are not even JAGs. But key to the program’s success has been the generous support the event has received from other entities of the Federal Bar Association, including the association’s Federal Career Service and Younger Lawyers Divisions, which co-sponsored the seminar, along with the D.C. Chapter. The program has also received generous support from the American Bar Association’s Government and Public Sector Lawyers Division and the Judge Advocates Association. These co-sponsors and contributors allow the Pentagon Chapter to hold the Jobs for JAGs seminar in a first-rate location at nominal expense to the attendees. The chapter hopes to continue this successful and worthwhile program for many years to come. TFL

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*Cmdr. Jeffrey C. Good is the chief of military justice for the U.S. Coast Guard and president of the Pentagon Chapter.*