

Practitioner Profile

By:

1 Lt. Darrell Baughn, JA*

“A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A JAG OFFICER IN IRAQ”

What's my day like? Well, every one is different but there are certain key items which take place every day for an Army lawyer like myself in the middle of Iraq. Here's what a typical day might offer. I normally arise around 0600 (6:00am) and run on the sidewalk performing individual physical training. Then, every other day at about 0630, I will walk a mile to drop off my laundry while it is still cool. At 0700, once a week, I place a phone call home to my wife and check in with her; this is known as a “morale call.” At around 0800, I eat breakfast at the nearby dining facility. The breakfast is usually a relatively elaborate meal with bacon, sausage, custom-cooked eggs, French toast, pancakes, and a wide assortment of fruit. Not surprisingly, I stick to the fruit and cereal to stabilize my weight.

I open up the legal assistance office at LSA Anaconda (a logistical support base) at 0900, but clients tend to come in anywhere from 0700 to 0900. Mondays are usually very busy and Saturdays are usually pretty quiet. The paralegal assists me with notarizations and powers of attorneys, and I handle 4-5 family law/divorce cases each day. I even assisted several clients with proxy marriages and handled numerous clients with serious custody concerns.

A large number of clients come to see me on immigration and citizenship issues. I assist them in completing several forms, I fingerprint them and assist them with their passport photos, I track their cases, and I assist them with the overseas citizenship ceremony. In July 2005, I was the company commander during this ceremony and helped 144 servicemembers become American citizens. I helped about 1000 soldiers in all with their citizenship.

I also see a large number of servicemembers on appeal matters. I assist them with appealing adverse personnel evaluations, financial liability charges, reenlistment issues, financial issues, and emergency leave requests. These matters can involve a great deal of paperwork. I once spent over 17 hours on the successful appeal and overturning of a lieutenant's two-year-old punitive action and a General Officer Memorandum of Reprimand. I also appealed her evaluation record and her nonselection for captain.

I am constantly surprised by the questions that are asked of me in the miscellaneous category, such as “Can the Army require me to take a flu shot? Or “Can I keep an invention I created while on duty?” I handle general law questions when I see clients about landlord or consumer issues, indebtedness, re-employment cases, issues involving the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act, and everything in between. I saw 6,000 clients in all in my year in Iraq. I also make trips to other locations in Iraq and assist servicemembers there with legal issues.

Lunch most days is at about 1300 hours, but some days were so hot (about 150 degrees was the hottest) that I did not want to venture outside my tent. My air conditioner stopped about half-way through the summer, so it was a very hot legal office most of the time.

Another part of my job is to adjudicate claims for the military. If a soldier's tent has an electrical surge and catches on fire, or if his property is stolen or damaged on a convoy, I assist him with claims to pay for the lost or damaged personal property. Also, if an Iraqi citizen is injured while by the Army and the injury is not combat-related, I adjudicate those claims as well. I even went "outside the wire" for one case where we took a soil sample for possible damage to the local's crops from the waste that was burned at our camp.

Since my duty day is 0900 to 1830, I usually try to go eat at the dining facility at 1830 hours. If the alarm goes off because of a mortar attack, we stay in the office until the "All Clear" sounds. Some nights we have very good food, such as steak or seafood, but for weight reasons I stick to salads and fruit mostly. I normally come back to the office and work on information papers, or write an article for The Anaconda Times, or I work on a complicated liability rebuttal, which on average takes about three hours. In all, I edited or drafted about 100 information papers and about 4 articles in the Anaconda Times.

I like to stay busy, so I volunteered to teach classes at the Education Center on base. Servicemembers can take my humanities classes, sit for a proctored exam on-line, and earn three hours of credit toward a college degree. I spent a good bit of time creating power point lectures for poetry, drama, fiction, non-fiction, philosophy, art, architecture, music, film, and dance.

A memorable and unique experience was manning the guard tower. Since I was directly commissioned into the United States Army two years ago, I had no prior military background or training, so I thought it would be a good experience to man a few towers. In this way, I could also relieve some soldier who has much harder duty than I do every week. A good sentinel must maintain tight "light and noise discipline" and call in anything that appears suspicious.

I would usually stay in my office until about 2330 hours each night. Some nights I might watch a movie on the laptop that someone had sent me, or I work on a paper or an article or just research various topics. Many servicemembers depend on the legal assistance attorney to know all the Army Regulations, so I sometimes review topics as they came up to ensure I understood the basics.

On Sundays I attend chapel and have the rest of the day off. Invariably, however, I'd find myself going back to the office because many soldiers can only see me on Sundays. On Thursday mornings I go to the Joint Operations Center to see all the latest on the attacks and events from the night before.

Also, on any particular day I answer about 50 e-mails from soldiers and commanders on issues ranging from immigration problems to family law emergencies to help on income taxes. My fellow JAG officers work in administrative law, military justice, Trial Defense Service, and contracts. It is hard to be away from your family and loved ones, but it feels good to help servicemembers with their legal concerns so they can concentrate on their mission. I will never forget my time spent in Iraq and I hope that I am a better lawyer, soldier, and person as a result of this experience.

I redeployed in October and after about 2 weeks was back home in Mississippi. Since I did not take my R&R while in Iraq I was on active duty leave until December and then I

returned to work at the Mississippi Department of Human Services, Division of Child Support Enforcement.

I am currently taking a two week advanced course in Virginia at the Army JAG school and then I may be deployed to work at The Office of the Judge Advocate General for six months.

*The Section made special recognition of 1 LT Darrell Baughn at the Fall 2005 meeting in San Diego for his outstanding service to military members and their families while serving in Iraq as a mobilized member of the Army Reserve. He left Iraq on October 23 2005 and returned to work at the Mississippi Department of Human Services, Division of Child Support Enforcement as the Interim General Counsel. He is currently attending a two week advanced course at the JAG school in Virginia and in early February will be deployed to the Office of The Judge Advocate in Virginia for six months.