

‘Go Out of Your Way to Look for Veterans’: Increasing Recruitment and Breaking Barriers in Big Law

By Jessie Yount

What You Need to Know

- Military veterans are underrepresented in Big Law.
- Veterans bring many qualities that are well-suited to the practice of law such as determination, integrity and a diversity of perspective.
- Lawyers from Jenner & Block, Orrick Herrington & Sutcliffe, Holland & Knight and Covington & Burling spoke with Law.com about their experiences, the progress and the remaining barriers to representation in the legal industry.

Veterans are few and far between in the legal industry, accounting for just 2.8% of attorneys and 1.8% of those in Big Law, but they bring a unique set of skills and varied life experiences that firms would be remiss to overlook.

“This is a population of people who have a strong work ethic, values, aptitude and grit,” said Matt Reeder, a U.S. Marine Corps veteran and an associate at Orrick Herrington & Sutcliffe. “Any firm that doesn’t give serious consideration to someone who has gained that life experience and demonstrated a desire to join a big firm is missing out on an incredible talent pool.”

Despite a swell of recruitment and community-building efforts for veterans in the legal industry, there are still barriers to entry, such as non-traditional backgrounds and skills

that get lost in translation in recruitment, prompting lawyers to speak up.

“There’s an extraordinary amount of effort being done to bring diversity to Big Law, and I think veterans need to be part of that discussion,” said Brent Caslin, a U.S. Army veteran and partner at Jenner & Block.

“There are a lot of ways to do it, and one is to go out of your way to look for veterans,” Caslin said. “It might require a bit of out-of-the-box thinking, but the industry is already doing so for other diversity efforts.”

For his part, Caslin sees many common threads and characteristics among veterans that make them well-suited to practice litigation and law in general.

“I’ve had a lot of different jobs, and I’ve practiced at Kirkland and Jenner,” he said. “But I’ve never worked as hard as I did when I was in the Army, when I was putting a 45-pound rucksack on my back and walking for 18 hours a day with a rifle. When you think about the sacrifice those men and women are making ... it is incomparable.”

It’s not just the grit, but the sense of honor and integrity and the ability to lead in dynamic situations that overlaps with being a lawyer, according to Todd Toral, a former infantry officer in the U.S. Marine Corps and a fellow partner at Jenner & Block.

“It is not an easy or seamless transition,” Toral said. “But take that



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notion of integrity ... always doing the right thing, bringing the level of grit to do the hard cases and litigate the very best for sophisticated clients.”

Despite these unique characteristics, there is still a lack of representation among veterans in the legal industry. There is a civilian-military divide, lawyers said, which makes it difficult to assess a military career and achievements. And often, military veteran lawyers aren’t coming from a T-14 law school and are headed into a second or third career.

Take Nicholas Hasenfus, an associate at Holland & Knight who enlisted after high school and served as a sergeant in the U.S. Marine Corps, where he built rockets, maintained weapons systems and was deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan.

Hasenfus explained that while it’s more common for officers or those who took the ROTC path to the armed services to end up in law firms, it was different for him.

“It’s generally the case that enlisted personnel aren’t going to get an undergraduate degree and then go to law school,” Hasenfus said, recalling that he was applying to four-year colleges while in Afghanistan.

“I was shocked when I got into college, and I went to a small state school,” he said. “I had always thought it would be cool to be an attorney, but it felt completely out of reach.”

Hasenfus said that veteran lawyers who were willing to make the time to take a call or grab a coffee, or offer advice on how to present in an interview without appearing too formal or rigid, made all the difference.

It was a different path for Orrick’s Reeder, who went to law school to pursue a career as a lawyer for the Marine Corps. He served on active duty for eight years, where he litigated dozens of criminal cases as a prosecutor, worked as a staff member for a U.S. senator and served as a legal adviser in Afghanistan.

“There isn’t a clear path for uniformed lawyers to leave active duty and transition to a position in Big Law,” Reeder said. “Someone coming out of the military doesn’t have a resume that looks like a typical lateral associate’s. It’s sort of a square peg/round hole situation.”

Reeder ended up attending the Veterans’ Legal Career Fair, an annual event launched by Orrick in 2015 with Microsoft and Morgan Stanley that aims to help veterans and military spouses make connections and find an employer.

“I drew a hard line that I didn’t want to start as a first-year, and Orrick didn’t say I needed to do that,” Reeder said. “It was a conversation about starting at a reasonable level of seniority that recognizes the experience I have, but also offered a runway

for me to build cases and position me to make partner.”

Nik Matthews, a partner at Orrick and a former judge advocate in the Army, noted that the career fair has grown over time to include resume writing, practical sessions and even headshots. The fair has helped more than 500 active duty members and veterans connect with top legal employers.

One of the most important things that firms can do, lawyers said, is build a community of veterans and create opportunities to get involved in the community.

“Working alongside another veteran who understands where I’m coming from and my motives allows us to have a simple, easy rapport to achieve a common objective,” Jenner’s Toral said. “There is this immediate sense of trust with other veterans. That is precious.”

Chip Hall, an associate at Covington & Burling and a former member of the U.S. Coast Guard, recalled that meeting other veterans at Covington and learning about the firm’s involvement in the community made a big difference in his career trajectory.

“To see people who I respected, who had done similar things to what I did, that was a huge part of the reason I joined the firm,” Hall said, noting that he received chances to participate in several pro bono opportunities, such as a class action for veterans who experienced inexcusable delays by the Department of Veterans Affairs in processing appeals of benefit denials.

Benjamin Block, the leader of Covington’s veterans affinity group and an Army veteran, noted that a personal highlight has been recruiting junior lawyers such as Hall.

“In the last five years, we’ve recruited the next generation of lawyers who are veterans,” Block said, noting that the firm has several dozen veterans among its ranks. “There is a cadre of newer lawyers that we’ve brought in, and when you have that critical mass, the light bulb goes off.”

Block pointed to several programs that provide support to veterans at Covington, such as in an interview process that includes other veterans, providing mentors, and having a policy that supports those in the reserve service.

Daniel Sylvester, a partner at Holland & Knight who served in the Army for more than 10 years, with much of that time being stationed overseas in Germany, Italy and Croatia, said he has seen progress as the community has become more connected.

It runs the gamut from veterans groups within law schools, to partnerships between law firms and large corporations. Holland & Knight, along with JPMorgan Chase & Co. and more than 250 companies, is a member of the Veterans Job Mission, which began in 2011 with the goal to hire 100,000 veterans by 2020. Today, it aspires to hire more than 2 million veterans and 200,000 military spouses.

Sylvester noted that throughout the pandemic, despite the challenge of remote life, technology assisted in creating deeper connections, such as finding veterans on LinkedIn and connecting with law schools.

“There are still challenges, but I think in general in the industry there is a desire to hire veterans and military spouses, and we believe we’ve taken a lead within the legal industry to support that,” Sylvester said.

“There has been progress, and there needs to be more progress,” he said.