

PARALEGAL IN A COMBAT ZONE

by SGM Michael W. Glaze and LTC Anne Ehram-Holland

This paralegal works for the largest law firm in the world, one that demands that he not only do challenging legal work but that he also be a soldier. Jumping out of an airplane or preparing legal memoranda are all in a day's work for Corporal Ryan P. Griffiths, a paralegal for the U.S. Army Judge Advocate General (JAG) Corps. "What I love about the JAG Corps," states Corporal Griffiths, "is that it demands my excellence not only as a paralegal, but also as a soldier." Dedication to duty and country and achieving results for the soldiers and attorneys they serve are the hallmarks for Army paralegals such as Corporal Griffiths.

Corporal Griffiths is presently assigned to the XVIII Airborne Corps Staff Judge Advocate's Office located at Fort Bragg, NC. He enlisted in the Army as a paralegal in June 2000 after his high school graduation. In fall 2000, he attended basic training and Advanced Individual Training (AIT) school at Fort Jackson, SC. Upon his arrival at Fort Bragg, Corporal Griffiths was put to work at the XVIII Airborne Corps Claims Office, where he processed personnel and federal tort claims. Later, he was moved to the Criminal Law Division, where he assisted the attorneys with criminal procedure and Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) issues. In May 2002, Corporal Griffiths was informed that he would be deploying to Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. He was immediately put to work at the Fort Bragg pre-deployment site, working at a frantic pace to ensure that the multitude of deploying soldiers had prepared wills and executed powers of attorney.

Corporal Griffiths arrived at Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan, in summer 2002 and was assigned as the base paralegal for the Legal Assistance and Foreign Claims Office. At Bagram, he performed traditional legal assistance duties such as notarizing civilian and military documents and screening clients with a myriad of problems from consumer law associated with the deployment to more unusual issues.

He was quite surprised to find himself spending a significant amount of time assisting soldiers in obtaining their U.S. citizenship. "If you would have told me before I deployed that I would be working on immigration law issues in a combat zone, I would have said you were crazy," says Griffiths. He attributes the prevalence of immigration law issues to an Executive Order President George W. Bush signed on July 3, 2002. The Executive Order made all service members eligible for citizenship if they served even one day on active duty in the armed services after September 11, 2001, regardless of their time spent as a permanent resident. Word of the Executive Order spread like wildfire among

non-citizen service members at Bagram, and they rushed to the base legal assistance office to take advantage of the new rule.

Corporal Griffiths began organizing a "Citizenship Day" event designed to assist a group of soldiers to complete their in paperwork simultaneously. When Citizenship Day arrived, he instructed the soldiers, line by line, on how to complete the paperwork. He also arranged for military police to prepare the fingerprint cards and a photographer to take the application pictures. Corporal Griffiths' efforts resulted in the forwarding of ten citizenship packets to the in.

Corporal Griffiths spent most of his time in Afghanistan investigating and processing tort claims brought by local nationals against the U.S. Army. His duties often required him to travel via helicopter or motor vehicle to remote and dangerous places to question a claimant or interview a witness. "Investigating foreign claims enabled me to see a lot of Afghanistan and gave me an opportunity to put my soldier skills to use," says Corporal Griffiths.

Griffiths explains that he also performed duties that are unusual for Army paralegals. For example, he says he became well known to a nomadic tribe in

the vicinity of Bagram Airfield, and he soon found himself assisting the tribe with some of their humanitarian needs. "I would often travel to their tent village to investigate a claim, and while I was there, they would show me a sick child or an injured adult and ask me to help them," says Griffiths. As a result, he spent a lot of time coordinating doctors' appointments at the base hospital and transporting sick or injured tribe members to and from the base.

Life as an Army paralegal has truly been a rewarding experience for Corporal Griffiths. "The great thing about being an Army paralegal" says Griffiths, "is that you are constantly moved around from section to section, forcing you to learn new areas of the law, and the skills learned can be put to use in the civilian world." Corporal Griffiths returned to Fort Bragg to continue his JAG experience as the noncommissioned officer (NCO) in charge of the XVIII Airborne Corps Operational Law Division. Recently, however, just when he was getting comfortable in this job, he was reassigned as a paralegal for a Special Forces unit. He will assume his new duties in the coming weeks, and there is no doubt that this position will take him on adventures that few paralegals ever experience.

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