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CMSgt Lisa List



MSgt Troy Tobaben

# AFJAGS Podcast: Episode 42

## The Paralegal Air Force Reserve Component with CMSgt Lisa List & MSgt Troy Tobaben - Part 1

**HOST:** MAJOR RICK HANRAHAN

**GUESTS:** CMSGT LISA LIST AND MSGT TROY TOBABEN

In today's interview, we speak with CMSgt Lisa List and MSgt Troy Tobaben on the paralegal career field within the Air Reserve Component.

### **MAJOR (MAJ) RICK HANRAHAN:**

In this two part interview, we speak with Chief Master Sergeant Lisa List and Master Sergeant Troy Tobaben on the Air Force paralegal career field within the Air Reserve Component or ARC. This interview builds off of the interview on the ARC from an officer's perspective in episodes 38 and 39. Here are a few clips from part one of the interview.

[short intro background music]

### **SHOW EXCERPT, CHIEF MASTER SERGEANT (CMSGT) LISA LIST:**

And what a lot of folks don't know is there is a lot of options there. Even if you separate from active duty and you join the Reserve you can do full time tours at all different kinds of bases.

### **SHOW EXCERPT, MASTER SERGEANT (MSGT) TROY TOBABEN:**

If you're willing to move around, you have the opportunity to make some rank and experience new things, and gain new leadership skills.

### **ANNOUNCER:**

Welcome to The Air Force Judge Advocate General's Reporter Podcast, where we interview leaders, innovators, and influencers on the law, leadership, and best practices of the day. And now to your host from [The Air Force Judge Advocate General's School](#).

### **MAJ HANRAHAN:**

Welcome to another episode from The Air Force Judge Advocate General's School at Maxwell Air Force Base. I'm your host, Major Rick Hanrahan. Remember, if you like the show, please consider subscribing on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or your favorite podcast platform and

leaving a review. This helps us to grow in outreach to the JAG Corps and beyond. In today's interview, we're going to continue our discussion on the Air Force, JAG Corps Air Reserve Component with a focus on the enlisted paralegal career field.

And we have two amazing guests on the show today. Chief Master Sergeant Lisa List and Master Sergeant Troy Tobaben. Chief List and Master Sergeant Tobaben, thank you for coming on the show today.

**CMSGT LIST:**

Thank you, sir.

## **GUEST INTRODUCTIONS**

**MAJ HANRAHAN:**

Chief Master Sergeant Lisa List is an individual mobilization augmented or IMA to the senior paralegal manager to The Air Force Judge Advocate General or TJAG. In this position, she serves as the principal advisor to the Senior Paralegal Manager, TJAG and senior staff on all reserve enlisted matters for paralegals within the JAG Corps worldwide. Chief List partners with senior leaders to review and manage the overall health of the reserve paralegal program. To include quality of life, morale and welfare issues.

Chief List enlisted in the Air Force on active duty in 1994, where she performed three active duty assignments over about seven years, including two assignments at base legal offices and one at the Numbered Air Force. In 2002, she left active duty and joined the Category A Reserves, which we're going to talk about that reserve component here in today's interview.

Through her career, she has held multiple senior enlisted positions at the wing, Numbered Air Force, and MAJCOM levels to include also as an Active Guard and Reserve or AGR tour at Robins Air Force Base, Georgia. And I would like to personally note that I had the chance to work with Chief List when she was the acting superintendent at The Air Force Judge Advocate General's School from December of 2018 to April of 2019.

And our second guest, Master Sergeant Troy Tobaben, is the Law Office Superintendent assigned to the 10th Air Force at Naval Air Station Joint Reserve Base, Fort Worth, Texas. Master Sergeant Tobaben oversees legal services for all military personnel and dependents assigned to 10th Air Force. Master Sergeant Tobaben began his military career not in the Air Force, but in the Navy on active duty assigned to the USS Constellation, where he served as an Aviation Boatswain's Mate – Fuels for five years.

He was next assigned to shore duty at Naval Air Station Barbers Point Hawaii, where he remained until he left active duty in around 1999. Then, after an 11 year break in service, he joined the Air Force Reserve as a Category A knowledge operations specialist for the 336 Air Reserves at March Air Reserve Base in California. And then he cross-trained into the paralegal career field and transferred to Hill Air Force Base in Utah before moving into his current position.

So hopefully I gave an okay summary for both of our guests there today and they can and they can fill me in on anything that I may have missed. But with that maybe we could start with Chief List if you could provide a little more background on your current position and what you're doing right now.

**CMSGT LIST:**

Thank you, sir. In my current position, I'm basically the Senior Enlisted Advisor to The Judge Advocate General on the enlisted matters. So what does that mean? We monitor growth and development, training—professional and making sure that they're getting their professional development done and their skills training and making sure identifying any trends, negative or positive, and see if we need to make any corrections, such as the manning. We'll do a review of the enlisted training to make sure that we are capturing the skills that we need, because, of course, we're continually evaluating that and updating it based on the current environment. And that's about it.

**MAJ HANRAHAN:**

Thanks. Great, Chief List. And for Master Sergeant Tobaben, where are you currently at and what are you up to these days?

**MSGT TOBABEN:**

So currently serving as a Law Office Superintendent for 10th Air Force and our responsibilities there to help the wings below us to ensure that they're meeting the standards and giving them guidance and helping them get through their service to the members out there in the field, and just we're there for primarily a resource for them to help them along and make sure that they're meeting all the requirements and any issues that they may have with regulations or laws where we're there to provide that assistance for them.

**MAJ HANRAHAN:**

Great. Thank you. Well, today's interview is continuation of the one that we had with General Neurock and guests on the Air Force Reserve Component from an officer perspective. And in today, we like to focus on the paralegal perspective. Before we started this interview today, we had a chance to talk a little bit about both of your backgrounds and your interesting career trajectories that you've both had.

And I was wondering if you could maybe just elaborate a little bit more on that, on your kind of career path and how you got into the career that you're in the paralegal career field within the reserve component. And I'll start off with Chief List.

**CMSGT LIST:**

All right, sir. So I initially enlisted in the Air Force in 1994. I came in as an information management specialist. We did not have a direct route to paralegal at that time. So everybody who came in the career field had to retrain. There were no non-prior service.

I had in high school had been, had a job at a local law firm as a runner. So if there is any lawyers out there, anybody who's done that before, it's not super glorious. You're

running around with papers, getting them signatures, serving people, filing paperwork at the courthouse—just literally running stuff around. And it wasn't super exciting, but neither was personnel.

So I got an opportunity while I was going to tech school, my first tech school to retrain into the paralegal career field because they were having some manning challenges and so they were they were retraining folks straight out of their first tech school. And so I was one of those. I retrained as an airman basic and then reported to my first base, which is Incirlik Air Base in Turkey.

I am from Walla Walla, Washington, which is like a no place town, very small but beautiful. And I had not seen the world. And so going to Turkey was frightening and amazing at the same time. I absolutely loved it. I love the food and the people and getting exposed to that culture. And it was an amazing assignment.

So that is kind of how I started my career. I sewed on my first stripe, so I came with no stripes. I did that. I would have signed up for 20 years that the recruiter had an enlistment paperwork for 20 years. But I didn't realize at the time, that if I would have signed up for six years, I would have got one stripe. But none of that really occurred to me. I was 17. I didn't know anything anyways, but no regrets. After all these years, I have almost 28 years of service and I have loved all of it—good and bad.

**MAJ HANRAHAN:**

And Chief, I could follow up. You did a few assignments on active duty and then you transitioned into the reserve component. Can you talk about that transition, why you transitioned and how that came about?

**CMSGT LIST:**

Absolutely, sir. So I'm married to my super, super patient husband Nathan, and he is security forces and he was deployed. We had two children at the time. I was on active duty at Dyess, and we had just had our second child, our son James, and that was in December of 2001.

So you track on the timeline, right after September 11th occurred. And so he had been gone for, for a little bit and it was just really difficult to have us both on active duty with children and the ops tempo of the security forces deploying.

But I loved serving. I wanted to keep that connection and to continue to grow my career on the military side, but on a part time basis. And so I got a hold of the recruiter and actually joined in my first unit as a reservist, as a traditional reservist, that's the weekend warrior, at the 301st Fighter Wing at NAS Fort Worth right next door to Sergeant Tobaben.

So, I just I really enjoyed the family the camaraderie and feeling connected that way. Even as a part timer, you know, you drill, especially on the traditional reserves side, so your drill with the same folks. They're usually assigned to the same unit for quite some time. So you get to know them really well and you're working with them on a continuous basis. And I just really enjoyed that connection.

**MAJ HANRAHAN:**

Great stuff there, Chief. Thank you for sharing. And for our other guest, Master Sergeant Tobaben, very interesting career path as well. Started off in the Navy. Can you walk us through that?

**MSGT TOBABEN:**

Yes, sir. So 1991, I enlisted in the Navy and much like everybody else entering the service, I did that mainly get some travel in and definitely schooling. That was, that was a big draw for me.

I served on the Constellation, and we actually started out in Philadelphia. The ship was in dry dock and being repaired. I was there for two years and then we actually sailed over to San Diego.

That ended up being our home port and I was there till about 1996. And then the kind of rite of passage in the Navy is to take your shore duty of when it's offered.

So after serving a total of five years on Constellation, I took shore duty in Hawaii at Barbers Point and that was definitely amazing. Great experience there. Once in a lifetime right to live in Hawaii for three years.

After my enlistment was up and discussions with my wife, we actually looked at going full time Air Force and just transitioning services. But for a variety of personal reasons that just didn't work out. And there was no guarantee, of course, where you're going to be stationed initially. So that just didn't work for us at the time. So I took a 11 year break in service and eventually it came to the point of I just realized how much I missed serving, and being a part of the community, and I went and talked to a Reserve recruiter and I was at the age that I was beyond being able to enlist, but I was kind of at that period because I had prior service. They tacked on to your age. So it extends that opportunity that you have to come back in. And I was just right at that cusp. So I took it while I had the chance, and they were able to slot me in a knowledge operations position there at March Air Reserve Base where we lived pretty close to where we lived. And I did that for about a year.

Change of civilian jobs and I moved to Utah, looked for an opening and got a call and said, "Hey, we have this paralegal position up there. Would you be interested?" Well, I knew nothing about it. And I thought, you know, yeah, yeah, that sounds like an amazing opportunity. I went up there and interviewed with master sergeant, the LOS at the time and the SJA, and was selected and that started my career in the paralegal career field.

And I've been at Hill for about nine years and I bounce between the 419th Fighter Wing as a CAT A reservist and did some time as a IMA reservist at the 75th, and then went back to the 419th for a while before transferring and accepting a position at 10th Air Force.

So it's kind of been a long career, a long, a long path to where I am now, but as Chief List no regrets. I mean it was kind of the right place at the right time and I've been able to excel in this career field. The people are great. It's just been amazing experience all the way around.

**MAJ HANRAHAN:**

Well that's a fascinating story there. If I could ask just a few follow up questions. What did you do in the civilian sector once you got out of active duty?

**MSGT TOBABEN:**

I actually started out as a currency room manager for Brinks in Los Angeles. And then moved to a job as a security lieutenant for Mattel Toys, believe it or not, for four years. And after that, I just I had this draw towards IT and got into computers and eventually worked my way up made a temporary personnel service, to now I work with the National Weather Service as IT administrator for them.

## DESIRE TO SERVE

**MAJ HANRAHAN:**

Well, thank you for sharing. One other question, and this is kind of for both our guests, but it seems that you've kind of had within you at least this desire for public service, right? MSgt Tobaben, you mentioned how you were thinking about this. You'd been out of the military for almost a, for over a decade and still you still had this kind of sounds like a calling or this feeling that you wanted to go back into service. Is that a fair statement?

**MSGT TOBABEN:**

Yes, sir. I think that's accurate. It's there's a certain sense of pride to be being able to help others and it was just, it's something that's always been inside me and just being willing to serve and help others where I can, that's absolutely been a primary driver for me.

**MAJ HANRAHAN:**

And for Chief List. I mean, also some the same way that you I mean, you're ready to sign for 20 years, right, on active duty, and because of a family situation you had to make a decision, maybe a hard decision, right, and go into the Reserves, but you've been very successful in the Reserves. So have you always kind of felt that sense of that mission as well?

**CMSGT LIST:**

Absolutely. It was a hard decision for me personally outside of, you know, family was definitely a driver. I probably would still be on active duty if circumstances were different, I don't know, but I absolutely love service. I loved serving. Initially it was, I needed a job and wanted to see the world. That's initially why I joined.

But after serving, I just found my fellow Airmen just, I just love them. I love serving alongside them. And like Sergeant Tobaben said, you know, it's a sense of pride. It's a sense of doing something a little bit more that may not have been there when I initially joined, but it absolutely was there when, you know, when I was trying to weigh my options about between full time and part time service.

And what a lot of folks don't know is there is a lot of options there. Even if you separate from active duty and you joined the Reserve you can do full time tours at all different kinds of bases. You can you can work when you want. You don't necessarily have to do orders, besides your statutory requirements, if you don't want to, but you still get all these amazing benefits.

So just like with anything, it's whatever you make it out to be. And I've just I never thought I'd be active duty again, but I had the opportunity to serve five years on active duty tour, and that was a great experience. My tour with The JAG School where you and I cross paths was an extended activity duty tour.

That was absolutely an amazing tour. So you get a lot of different opportunities and it's just great. I just love it. I'm going to be one of those chiefs. They get a kick out of, you know, [laughter] screaming and dragging out because I really, really enjoy serving the Airmen.

## RESERVE OPTIONS

**MAJ HANRAHAN:**

And Chief List, could you elaborate on that a little bit? Because I think there is some misconceptions out there about how people think about these career, right? They

think like either going to go active duty and do that. And then when you're done, you're done right? You're out of the military or you're in the Reserve, and you're in there. Probably a lot of people think it's this traditional one week in a month, two weeks a year type of thing. But you're saying actually there's other types of options out there. Can you talk a little bit more about that for our listeners?

**CMSGT LIST:**

Absolutely. So the other thing I'm not sure about the other services, but for the Air Force and the paralegal career field in particular being able to serve in the different components such as the IMA the CAT B or the traditional reserve, the CAT A, is very easy. So we want our folks to serve in the category that suits their lifestyle best at that time.

So I have been, I started off as a traditional reserve, reservist. I went into the Active Guard and Reserve tour, which is an AGR tour. It is a statutory tour where you're full-time active duty 24/7 365 supporting your Reserve Corps, and then I was also an IMA and I switched back and forth, as my bio shows, switched back several times just because I wanted to experience different things.

And when I was younger in my life, the tradition reserve worked better for me because I was working as a civilian and to be able to do my, complete my duty for the majority of the time on the weekend worked better for me. But then as I grew in my civilian career and did different things that IMA worked a little bit better.

So it just it just depends. And sometimes you need to take advantage of different opportunities based on what your own goals are. I mean, Sergeant Tobaben is living in Utah, but performing his drill once a month in Texas. I mean, that's, that's huge. That's a that's a time change. That's a plane ride. It's it's a big lift. And you got to really have that drive for service to do that.

But he and I don't want to speak for you sir, but I'm sure he took advantage of that opportunity to grow his career. And sometimes decisions aren't always easy or convenient, but if it's what your goal is and you have the support of your family and friends, it makes it worth it for sure.

**MAJ HANRAHAN:**

Master Sergeant Tobaben and I see you shaking your head in concurrence on a lot of these points. And obviously our listeners can't see you, but I can hear on our Skype platform. But for our listeners that are listening, could you maybe elaborate on that?

**MSGT TOBABEN:**

Yes, the JAG Corps offers some amazing room for growth. And as Chief List said, yes, I travel every month to Fort Worth and it is an opportunity to grow my career. I mean, as you mentioned, going between CAT A and Category B, and just gaining that experience. There's lots of things out there that are offered. If you're willing to move around, you have the opportunity to make some rank and experience new things and gain new leadership skills.

I've had the opportunity to serve at the Air Force Academy twice on short tours orders, and that was amazing experience. It's a definitely a different environment for the JAG Corps there's a couple of different components there. So so gaining that experience has been amazing. That's the great thing about the JAG Corps. You have a couple of different options there.

If you're happy with where you're at and the mission you're doing and the people you're serving, you can certainly stay at, you know, one particular base or one particular office, or maybe if the base like Hill has a reserve component and an active component maybe can bounce back and forth between the different categories and serve those offices, but if you're willing to grow and travel a little bit, to use the phrase, "the world is your oyster", I mean, you can travel and gain those experiences and get some really unique experiences.

## MILITARY PARALEGAL

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### MAJ HANRAHAN:

Thank you so much. And yeah, I think through so many episodes we had with so many different guests that both of your experiences just showcase again that there is not necessarily one path right through a military career. There's many paths, probably a million and one ways that can be worked. So thank you for kind of sharing that.

And for folks that are listening to maybe just this episode for the first time. I know we're throwing around some terms here, like Category A, Category B reservist—that was discussed in detail with General Neurock in a previous episode [episode 38] and guests from the officer perspective. So, I would encourage you to go to that episode to listen to that where he talks about that in detail.

So I'd like to kind of move in to just kind of a broad question on the career field of the paralegal career field. So maybe, I'll start with Chief List again, what is a military paralegal and what do they do?

### CMSGT LIST:

So a military paralegal is a judge advocate's right arm, and [laughing] sometimes their left too. Basically, they are administrative support. They are, they augment and are kind of like a force multiplier for that judge advocate, and do legal research. They can do legal writing. We are very military justice heavy in our career field. So we do case analysis. We have a database where we input in our cases. So a lot of data entry checklist centric. You got to make sure that you are giving the Airmen due process. And also we do legal assistance. We are on all the deployment lines.

When our Airmen are getting ready to go to the front, we make sure that they are prepared legally with wills, power of attorneys, any outstanding legal issues that they might have. Our attorneys don't represent them, but they can definitely give guidance, and we are there, part of the team every step of the way as a paralegal.

And again, the paralegal career field is what you make of it as well. I am, I am not shy as Major Hanrahan would know. I definitely am constantly asking, even at this level where I'm at, I'm asking my JAGs and my fellow paralegals, "What can I do to make your job easier?"

And sometimes it's as simple as answering the phone—that's not super sexy, but that's just as important as a legal brief sometimes. So it is definitely all of what you make of it. And and I've been really blessed in my career where it had worked with a lot of attorneys who are willing to allow me to stretch my legs in my legal writing and research skill set. And as we've moved on in the years since I've been in, it's now more than the rule rather than the exception. So I think that's really, really important.

## PARALEGAL CAREER PATH

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### MAJ HANRAHAN:

And maybe I'll offer this question to both guests. What is kind of a, I don't know, quote unquote "normal career path" for a paralegal? Like, where would a paralegal typically start off with their first assignment and then second assignment, etc.?

### CMSGT LIST:

I'll go ahead and start off on that. And a normal, normally what you would be is, you would go to your tech school and you would be assigned to a base wing legal office. You would get general expertise and skills in a few different areas. So general, civil law and military justice. And once you've kind of honed those skills you would then typically move up, you would be like a NCOIC—that's noncommissioned officer in charge of a section or an area of law. And then you can move on to being a Law Office Superintendent and that's where you would manage the entire office. And then once you get experience in there, there's a few different paths. You can go to the Numbered Air Force like MSgt Tobaben, and then also that major command level as well.

And you definitely would want to get your breadth of experience in the different components or different categories like the IMA or a traditional reserve just to kind of broaden and round yourself out. That's typically it on the Reserve side and then other ways to grow your experience with to be special duty assignments like do a tour of the Academy or The JAG School or different areas just to kind of expand your knowledge and mission set.

## **PRIOR CAREERS**

### **MAJ HANRAHAN:**

And for Master Sergeant Tobaben you obviously had previous careers prior to going into the paralegal career track. How did that help set you up for success in the paralegal career track for folks out there that maybe are coming from prior careers?

### **MSGT TOBABEN:**

You know, I think the big thing is just having experience with different types of people and understanding that not everybody's the same. I mean, it's like Chief List said, I mean, part of it, part of our duties is to ensure that people are given due process, that they're given the opportunity to whether it's defend themselves or what have you. But just understanding that, you know, there are circumstances behind a lot of what we see. It's not always cut and dry. It's not always, you know, this person did wrong, and it's, you know, black and white because it's really not. There's circumstances behind people's motivation to do right and wrong. And I think having that experience from the outside world, whether it's, you know, prior military service or even your civilian career, you kind of understand that there's motivating factors there, whether it's family situations or just, you know, stressors that, you know, contribute to people's actions.

And I think the outside world kind of makes you realize that. And you can take that experience and apply it to this career field, and understand how you can better serve these people.

## **MILITARY VS. CIVILIAN PARALEGAL**

### **MAJ HANRAHAN:**

One question I could probably see from some folks whether they're in the military or not, but if they're outside of the legal profession and there might be considering this kind of path, what are some of the, I guess, the similarities and or differences of a military paralegal versus maybe in the civilian sector?

### **CMSGT LIST:**

I was a civilian paralegal and in New York, Buffalo, New York, when we were out there for about three years at a general law firm. And there's not too much of a difference, honestly. And in fact, I think that my attorney utilized me a lot more as a civilian, but it was a small firm, very similar set up to like a traditional reserve office where there was just two attorneys and then me that was it.

I think that these skills translate very, very well and the way I marketed myself was, you know, they didn't initially want to hire because it's a one deep, but I didn't have any—so their primary practice was family law and real estate law, neither of which we really deal with in the military side of things. But the basic skill sets are exactly the same.

So I marketed myself with my research, my writing, my management and my office management skills, and just, you know, I basically said just, I promise, just give me a shot. And like within the next day, you know, so I was started off on temporary and the next day he wanted to hire me full time.

So we are used to working under pressure. We're used to timelines. We're very organized. We're very detail oriented, and we are mission centric. So we bring a lot to our civilian counterparts in that some many if you start off as a civilian paralegal, maybe you're not so much you get burnt out or you're not necessarily focused on getting stuff done because you know it'll get done eventually, it's not as much of a driver.

But when you grow up in the military, that's it, that mission is it. You're going to get it done. And and I think that's something that really, really resonates with the civilian law practice as well.

**MAJ HANRAHAN:**

And kind of looping with Chief List just said for Master Sergeant Tobaben how have you been able to utilize what you've learned as a paralegal over this last, what, close to ten years or so within your civilian career?

**MSGT TOBABEN:**

You know, I think what I've gained from the paralegal career field that can be applied to the civilian is more leadership opportunities and more—that foundation is definitely gained from not only the military, but the paralegal career field. We have plenty of opportunities to lead. And I think a lot of responsibility is put on us to assist our JAGs and kind of help them along as well.

You know, I think you learn that you're a little more valuable than just your job, right? It's it's you have an opportunity to help them and lead a little bit. And as Chief List said, you know, they give you the chance to kind of spread your wings and learn. And I think that translates very well to the civilian side.

It just it shows that you're willing to take on task and lead those and lead others. It gives you the opportunity to grow on the civilian side as well, where a lot of times those opportunities aren't offered.

**MAJ HANRAHAN:**

That concludes part one of our interview with Chief Master Sergeant Lisa List and Master Sergeant Troy Tobaben. Please stay tuned for part two in the next episode for the remainder of this interview. Thank you for listening.

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**ANNOUNCER:**

Thank you for listening to another episode of The Air Force Judge Advocate General's Reporter Podcast. Please subscribe to our show on [iTunes](#) or [Stitcher](#) and leave a review. This helps us grow, innovate, and develop an even better JAG Corps. Until next time.

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## GLOSSARY

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- **AFJAGS:** Air Force Judge Advocate General's School
- **AGR:** Active Guard and Reserve
- **ARC:** Air Reserve Component
- **IMA:** Individual Mobilization Augmentee
- **JAG:** judge advocate general
- **LOS:** Law Office Superintendent
- **MAJCOM:** major command
- **NCOIC:** noncommissioned officer in charge
- **SJA:** Staff Judge Advocate
- **TJAG:** The Judge Advocate General