

The following is from an audio recording and in some cases, it may be incomplete, or inaccurate due to inaudible passages, or other transcription errors. Nothing from this show or any others would be construed as legal advice. Please consult an attorney for any legal issue. Nothing from this show is endorsed by the Federal Government, Air Force, or any of its components. All content and opinions are those of our guests and host. The inclusion of hyperlinks and references does not imply any endorsement by the author(s), by the Federal Government, Air Force, or any of its components. They are meant to provide an additional perspective or as a supplementary resource. The Department of the Air Force or any other department or agency of the United States Government does not exercise any responsibility or oversight of the content at the link destination.



AFJAGS Podcast:

Episode 82

JAGs on the Job: Operations and International Law

Host: Major Laura Wheat

Guests: Colonel Simone Davis and Colonel Corrie Mack

Major Laura Wheat closes out the “JAGs on the Job” series by interviewing Colonel Simone Davis and Colonel Corrie Mack about their experiences serving as judge advocates in the United States Air Force, and more specifically, working in operations and international law capacities.

[Intro music – The Air Force Song (Instrumental)]

Introduction

Major Laura Wheat:

Good morning, afternoon, and evening listeners. Welcome back to The Air Force Judge Advocate General's School Podcast. I'm Major Laura Wheat, and I'm your host for this podcast. Now, today's episode will be the last in our JAGs on the Job series. We've already had an episode focused on military justice and discipline, as well as civil law and litigation. If you haven't heard those yet and are interested in hearing from some subject matter experts in those areas, go back and listen to them at Episodes 76 and 80. But today we have a couple of JAGs who have vast experience working in operations and international

law. Those two are Colonel Simone Davis and Colonel Corrie Mack. I'm going to introduce them briefly before we get started.

So, at the time I recorded this episode, Col Davis was a student at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies. Specifically, she was in the West Space Scholars Program, which is the United States Space Force's new independent senior level education program. She just graduated that program and is on her way to her next assignment. She has served in various roles as a judge advocate, first starting out in criminal law, or, as we call them, military justice roles to being an instructor here at the JAG school where I'm at. She's deployed to Afghanistan as the Chief of Contracts

and Fiscal Law. She then got her Masters of Law degree in air and space law. She's been Chief of Air and Space Operations at the North American Aerospace Defense Command, or as we call it, NORAD. She's been the Deputy Staff Judge Advocate at the U.S. Air Force Warfare Center, a two-time Staff Judge Advocate, both of which were overseas, and one was a deployment assignment.

As for Col Mack, her current role is as the chief of international and administrative law at the Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Like Col Davis, she's held various roles, but to sum them up, she's served in military justice roles, as Chief of Operations Law at a base legal office, she's deployed as a liaison officer to the Central Criminal Court of Iraq. She's also been an AFJAGS instructor and Senior Trial Counsel. She's been Chief of Education and Training at our headquarters level. She's been Deputy Staff Judge Advocate at the Joint Special Operations Command, then-Fort Bragg, but now called Fort Liberty. She's been a Staff Judge Advocate, Deputy Chief of Operations International Law, and was also selectively picked to study at National War College, which is a senior level course of study in national security strategy.

So, without further ado, I'm going to turn it over to the interview.

Colonel Simone Davis:

Good afternoon. Thank you for having me. I'm so glad to be here.

Colonel Corrie Mack:

Hello, thanks for having me.

Maj Wheat:

And thank you so much to the both of you for being here today. So, listeners like the last couple episodes in this series, this topic today encompasses a large area of the law. So naturally, we're not going to be able to talk about everything today within the operations and international law domain or subject area. But, to get us started, Col Davis, could you please give us a

general overview of the various areas that could be encompassed within this area of the law?

Overview of Operations and International Law

Col Davis:

Absolutely. So, when we talk about the field of operations and international law, and sometimes it's affectionately known as "OIL," it's really a variety of different subspecialties, and that can be anything from your base operations, so that might be working in the base level command center or sometimes we call it the emergency operations center. And that might stand up if there is an accident on base or an active shooter on base, so you'll have a variety of base personnel coming together to kind of work that issue. It also encompasses, things like environmental law, so maybe there's a fuel spill or there are noise complaints, or there are issues about where the actual end of the base perimeter is. It also encompasses more of the traditional when you think of operations law, like when you're in combat, are we talking about what your rules for the use of force are, what your law of war, law of armed conflict rules might be?

And kind of more generally, when we're talking about international law and international agreements, those are kind of going to be us interpreting the agreements that we as the military might be engaged in on a bilateral standpoint, so when we're stationed in another country such as Korea, we might have a Status of Forces agreement, or a SOFA. So understanding what is encompassed in that agreement as well as your general international law agreements, such as the UN Charter. When I think of ops and international law, I—it's kind of in my mind a combination of our two other main domains—our civil law and our military justice—just with an international flavor to it.

Maj Wheat:

Thank you, ma'am, so much for providing some of that background information. Now, I would like to shift gears here. I gave some of your background overall as JAGs

in the Air Force, but I want to hone in more specifically on the types of experiences you both have had in the operations and international law domain. So let's start with you, Col Mack. What types of experiences have you had in this area of law?

Operations and International Law Experience

Col Mack:

All right. Thank you. So, I try not to drone on too much about this, but I'll just start off by saying and you'll hear this as Col Davis goes over her career as well. There is no particular career path to getting to do international and operations law in the JAG Corps, and that's one of the reasons it's so exciting, because there's so many different things that we can be involved in.

So, for example, I would say in my, like, just about over 18 years of active duty, I worked about a third of that time in operations law, pure ops law. And the first was just that six-month deployment to Iraq that you mentioned way back in 2007 to 2008. And that was basically like deployed criminal law, kind of like Col Davis mentioned that we get to do, where I was helping prosecute detainees into the Iraqi criminal system. So, I'd be prepping service members who had been involved in combat to present evidence to Iraqi judges. And at this time in our nation's history and everything we've been involved in, there was about 30,000 different detainees in our various detention facilities throughout Iraq. So, it was very important that we were getting these individuals prosecuted through the Iraqi system, helping—helping the Iraqis do that in their own country.

So, that was just a six-month experience, though, and then you fast forward to my time after I got my LL.M. in international and operations law. Then I spent three years in the Joint Special Ops Command at Fort Liberty there in North Carolina. And it was just one month after starting there that the President approved the first engagement in Syria. So we immediately went to 24/7

ops. And there's a lot of, obviously a lot of classified stuff that goes on in that command, but I didn't touch on it at an unclassified level. You know, the Joint Special Ops Command supports all of the combatant command activity worldwide. So we forward deploy special operations troops in support of combatant commands. And for people not as familiar, combatant commands are those big unified commands that support either a geographic area or kind of a subject. So you think, Africa Command, European Command, Central Command, which covers a large part of the Middle East, or you have Special Operations Command or Cyber Command. Those are those are our combatant commands.

So during these three years, we had the opportunity to kind of touch all sorts of ops law issues that Col Davis kind of touched on before, everything from fiscal and contracting to ethics to intelligence law, cyber law, humanitarian assistance and foreign disaster relief, as well as, of course, targeting and LOAC and the law of war.

And then from there, I did some—some other work that's not pure ops law work at our headquarters, and then I became a Staff Judge Advocate. And after that, I went to a year at National War College, which is, of course, where we focus on how to best position the United States to remain safe from our enemies, and most successfully compete against rising peers like China, using all the instruments of power available to the United States Government. This was an incredible year.

And then follow on to that, I'm now at the Joint Staff. So by statute, the Joint Staff is a little bit over 2000 individuals who are supporting the Chairman to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who is statutorily the lead uniformed military adviser to the President of the United States, Secretary of Defense, National Security Council, and Homeland Security Council. And then in the legal shop, we also support all of the Joint Staff legal issues that come through. So, I think I'll pause there, and head on over to Col Davis.

Maj Wheat:

Great. Thanks for sharing that. Col Davis, over to you, ma'am, on some of your specific experiences in ops and international law.

Col Davis:

So my first kind of real foray into ops and international law was when I was just a first-term captain and I got selected to go on the deployment line and kind of be the JAG that was giving out last minute wills, etc., etc.. And although that wasn't my primary portfolio, like actually being part of the mission front and center was what really kind of stoked my interest in ops and international law. And so from there, I kind of always sought out opportunities to do things that had an operational tinge to it, whether, again, it was volunteering for the emergency operations center or volunteering for you know—I had always had my hand up for a deployment. It took me a couple of years to get there, but from the very beginning I wanted to deploy, so I finally did get the chance to deploy and that was kind of, I guess, my real first time foray into operations and international law. And that was to Afghanistan, where I was the Chief of Contracts and Fiscal law at a Joint Task Force with the Army.

I was actually—there were three Air Force JAGs, and we were embedded with a Army legal office. And like I said, our main portfolio was contracts and fiscal law. And kind of in that role, we were responsible for reviewing all kinds of requests for helping, namely the war in Afghanistan, whether that was actually reviewing contracts and fiscal law related to services that we wanted to provide to military members on base, or whether they were humanitarian aid that we wanted to provide to the Afghani people.

So, after that deployment, I came back and kind of decided that, yeah, I really—I really like ops and international law and I think I want to specialize in it. So I applied to get an LL.M in air and space law and I was fortunate enough to get picked up for that. So,

I spent a year up in Montreal getting my master's in air and space law, which again is a very unique and interesting opportunity that the JAG Corps offers. I was in a completely civilian institution, so I got to take off my uniform for a year and I got to be in class with civilians from around the world. There were other military members, as well, but with primarily civilians from around the world, and just having the ability to converse with them and hear different perspectives from around the world was an invaluable experience.

After my degree, I got sent to your NORAD U.S. NORTHCOM. And as you mentioned before, Ed is the North American Aerospace Defense Command. It is a joint command that the U.S. and Canada are in a partnership with. And essentially the role is to defend the airspace of the U.S. and Canada. It is a joint command with U.S. Northern Command. And as Col Mack mentioned, combatant commands have different specialties, whether it's by region or by function. The U.S. Northern Command covers North America. So as a joint command, again, that was kind of a unique experience because, again, I'm getting to work with my fellow service members from Canada on a day-to-day basis and also work with my fellow service members from around the other services. So, I had—my boss was a Coast Guardsmen one year and a Navy Captain the next.

And I think the thing that I found most impactful about that experience was the fact that what we were doing on a day-to-day basis was being translated—that I could see immediately the results from it. So, our main mission was Operation NOBLE EAGLE, which is the operation to defend the airspace of the United States. And so whenever you have an airplane that maybe went off track and is not responding as it might or the Operation NOBLE EAGLE is figuring out what's going on, whether there is a mechanical issue going on or whether it's something nefarious going on. So, being part of that and the fast-paced and the real world operations, that was very exciting.

We also did search and rescue operations. So, for example, you know, if there are there were wildfires going on in Colorado, in California at the time. While that wasn't our primary mission, we would assist in helping the local guard units with their wildfire support, in that respect. After NORAD NORTHCOM, I went to the Warfare Center at Nellis Air Force Base where I was the Deputy Staff Judge Advocate. And while I didn't have as much operations in my portfolio, I did get the chance to work on some wargaming. I attended a couple of base exercises while at Nellis.

From Nellis I went to the Air Staff, which is in the Pentagon, so that was my first foray into the Pentagon. And on the Air Staff, I was part of JAO, which is our operations branch on the Air Staff. In that role, I was responsible for the Air and Space Law division. And when you're on the Air Staff, kind of one of your main roles is to advise—for us as JAGs our Three-Star General. We advise our Three-Star General and then our three star general will in turn advise the Secretary of the Air Force or the Chief of Staff of the Air Force and now the CSO.

So, two of the kind of main portfolios that I worked on when I was at JAO was initially drones because at the time we had a lot of small drones kind of going over the fields and going over the fence line of our—our bases, and, were trying to figure out how we can deal with that. And unfortunately, what happens a lot of times in international law is that the law had not caught up to the technology. So, we're trying to kind of build the plane as we're flying it, so to speak, in figuring out, hey, what can we do legally to help our commanders on the ground take care of these drones, Because we don't know whether these drones are you know some kids just having fun or whether they're bad actors. So, figuring out kind of what the Air Force's, you know, drone policies were going to be and what the wider DoD drone policy would be. It was one of the programs I worked on while at JAO.

And also while I was there, the U.S. Space Force stood up, so I was actually got to be on the ground level in designing what the Space Force paradigm would look like, and again, figuring out how big it was going to be and what authorities they were going to be given from a—from a new service standpoint.

Maj Wheat:

Thank you so much for providing that background. It sounds like you've held some really cool positions. I can't even imagine advising on drones before there is law on that subject matter out. So that's—that's very interesting. I also want to ask you about your joint experience and what it was like working with the other services.

Serving in the Joint and International Environment

Col Davis:

So, I love working with other services. I love being able to kind of get a feeling for what the different personalities are of the different services. And also you just gain different perspectives from different services. They obviously deal with different domains. The Army dealing with the land and, you know, the Navy dealing with the sea. And so their perspectives are unique when we're kind of coming together and trying to think of, you know, ways to tackle a problem. And it's not only working with it in a joint environment in terms of with other services, but also, again, I'll foot stomp, being able to work with other countries is also an invaluable experience.

Working at NORAD NORTHCOM, as I mentioned before, on a daily basis, I was interacting with my Canadian counterpart, particularly when we were in the command center and having to advise the commander on, you know, some error operations that might take an asset from the U.S. into Canada. Obviously, while we do work together, we do have different rules, so being able to understand the Canadian perspective, but also make sure that we're meeting our—our commanders intent.

Maj Wheat:

Yes, ma'am. That's really interesting. And Col Mack, I know you also had the joint experience, so did you want to chime in here as well?

Col Mack:

Sure, yes. I would absolutely foot stomp Col Davis's point about loving to work in the joint environment. Actually, all my ops experience has been in the joint environment. So, my deployment, you know, obviously was joint, worked with—worked for a Navy O-6, but with all the services. Joint Special Ops Command is obviously—crosses all the services. National War College is all the services, but also all the interagencies that come, and I realize that is not—that is a school year, but just to bring up the point about working with our other military services, sister services, as well as interagency and foreign partners. And then now at the Joint Staff is also joint.

So what's really interesting and I think pretty cool about something that Col Davis mentioned is, you know, on the one hand, joint when we label it like a Joint Special Ops Command or Joint Staff, what we're talking about there is everybody serving from the sister services that we work with. It could also include foreign partners maybe assigned to that location, or as a—as a kind of alternative, is when you are working on an operation, you know, overseas, they're—you're going to be—they may not be in the same command as you, they may not be assigned there, but you're going to be working with all of the partners that the U.S. has, right? And she mentioned Canadian officers, but we—because of who our nation is, we have a lot of partner and allied forces that we work with all over the world on all different operations. And so we get to work with those—the lawyers that represent those—those military services and foreign partners as well, which is always very interesting and very fun to be a part of.

Maj Wheat:

Yes, ma'am. And that also reminds me of one of the first experiences you talked to us about, which was prosecuting in a foreign jurisdiction. And I know in your initial assignment you would have been prosecuting cases in, of course, Air Force jurisdiction. So what was that like? Anything that you can think of about the difference between prosecuting in different jurisdictions?

Col Mack:

No, absolutely. So in Iraq, I mean, the only thing that really translated was that I was trying to prep witnesses, like kind of prepare witnesses, just like we do for U.S. cases or courts-martial. But otherwise, it was very different. So they're—the way that they prosecute criminal law cases is very different. They have a preliminary hearing and then they have a very short—their trial is very short. I don't know if it's the same. At the time, preliminary hearing is where the judge would gather all the information. So in the room would be the Iraqi judge, there'd be a translator or interpreter, there'd be myself, and then there would be the detainee and a defense counsel and then a personal security detail, usually from the Army standing by the door to make sure that it was a safe hearing. And that's what I was prepping the witnesses for.

And under Iraqi criminal law at the time, you had to have two eyewitnesses to every event to even make it in the courtroom door. And so, I was prepping the Soldiers and Marines to be able to present that evidence of some of the combat operations they were in like, you know, they would either observe the person planting an IED or they maybe they were part of an operation where the person was shooting at them. And that was—so that was the work we were doing there, so my criminal law experience and training helped in trying to prepare for witness testimony, essentially, during the—during the time I was there.

Maj Wheat:

Wow. That's really interesting from a legal perspective for the fellow lawyers out there to hear that in that jurisdiction, they required at least two eyewitnesses before they would even let a case in the door. So that's just something that was really interesting and kind of stands out to me. But, Col Davis, it looks like you wanted to say something. I'll turn it over to you, ma'am.

Col Davis:

So that actually reminded me of one of the interesting opportunities that we have here while I was at the Air Staff. Being at JAO, we have an exchange program with both the U.K. and Australian Air Forces where they will send officers to embed with us here in the Pentagon for a 2-to-4-year tour. And we will in turn send Air Force officers to both the U.K. and Australia for a similar tour. So, again that's an interesting opportunity that you get to have as being part of the ops and international field.

Maj Wheat:

Yes, ma'am. Thanks so much for bringing that up. You know, being here at the JAG School, I've had the opportunity to see multiple students, international attorneys, come through, you know, our initial Judge Advocate Staff Officer Course, I saw one come through our Gateway course, which is a developmental kind of leadership course for our major JAGs. So, definitely a very unique opportunity on both sides, right? For them to experience the United States Air Force and how we practice law and also gain wisdom from their own experiences in comparison.

So, now I want to kind of shift gears, ladies, and ask the two of you whether you have any specific cases or issues you've worked that are either particularly awarding or even just interesting or cool, for lack of a better words. So, Col Davis, let's start with you, ma'am.

Interesting Operations and International Law Experiences

Col Davis:

So one of the cool experiences that I was involved in is when I was at NORAD NORTHCOM, and we would sometimes sit down in the command center, and in the command center, you have loads of people. You know, you have Air Force personnel, all the service personnel, as well as personnel from the FAA, the National Transportation Safety Board, etc. So, one day we're down in the command center and everything, all the lights and bells and whistles start—phone started ringing off the hook because there is a—a plane that has kind of gone off course. It's a civilian plane that has deviated from its flight plan. So, as I mentioned before, one of your NORAD NORTHCOM's missions is to protect the homeland with respect to airspace.

So, we ended up scrambling some jets to go and look and see what was going on. Unfortunately, when they got up, they saw that the pilot was incapacitated. So, we ended up following that plane throughout its course. It had taken off from New York and it was headed towards Florida, but had actually ventured out towards the Atlantic Ocean. By this point, it had gotten picked up by national news, so we had CNN on in the background and we were kind of dealing with the real world in the command center, as well as watching what was going on on TV.

But what made this kind of interesting and—was that the flight plan that it was on, it was going to fly over Cuba, so we needed to figure out, okay, how do we make sure that the Cubans don't shoot this down? So making sure that we got the State Department involved and again, we didn't know how quickly things were going to unfold. So we just had to work very quickly in getting everyone on the line. But that was kind of one of those things—I just happened to be down in the command center at the time, and you never know when—when you might end up on CNN.

Maj Wheat:

Wow. And are you allowed to share what the outcome of that situation was?

Col Davis:

It did have an unfortunate ending. Like I said, both the pilot and the passenger were incapacitated, so the plane ended up crashing off the coast of Jamaica, unfortunately.

Maj Wheat:

Oh, goodness. What—what an intense situation to be dealing with. I can't even imagine the pressure you all were probably under having to assist in that type of situation.

Col Mack, over to you, ma'am. If you have any interesting or cool experiences in your time serving in ops law or international law.

Col Mack:

Sure. So how many hours do we have? No, I'm just joking. Yeah, no what—what I'll talk about. I mean, there are a few different ones that stick with you, like Col Davis, you know, she described one. I'm sure there are others that have stuck with her through her time in ops. And I think this is one of the reasons that—and I'm speaking for her a little bit so she can correct me if I'm overstating here, but I think it's one of the reasons she and I love it so much. And we crossed paths when we when she was at JAO and I was at JAA working on the Space Force stuff. But, you know, ops is—what is so exciting about it is it changes every day, and what can be so stressful about it is it's not pre-planned. There's no set schedule for when your court's going to happen, and courts are very stressful. But, you know, we don't know when Russia's going to invade Ukraine with 100% certainty. We don't know when the next terrorist attack is going to happen. We have intelligence that tries to help us predict, but ops is—you have to be adaptable and flexible all the time.

So the you know, one of the most meaningful to me that I would talk about is when we first started our operations against ISIS in Syria, I don't know if you or any of the

listeners will remember, but there was a situation where there were a bunch of Yazidis that were trapped on Sinjar Mountain in Iraq, and the U.S. helped to save their lives, and there's actually a book, *The Last Girl* by Nadia Murad, that is not a military book. It is her story of being a Yazidi in captivity, and the fact that she was able to eventually escape from ISIS, but she is one example of the types of individuals that the U.S.—that the U.S. military helps in these types of situations.

And, you know, we get—we are the DoD, the Department of Defense, the military. We can get a lot of positive press and a lot of negative press for—for decisions that are made and things that we are—we are tasked to do. But there are a lot of things that we do to help a lot of people around the world, and it's not just this experience, but we are doing humanitarian and disaster relief all the time around the world, and we—you don't see it as much in the press because, you know, there's so many—there's so many other things going on. But, you know, being part of an operation that helped save those lives was—will stick with me for a long time.

Another really great experience when I was there for me personally was just—I got to work—you know, that's one side, that's like targeting, and you are advising the commanders who are making decisions on those—those operations. This other one is very legalistic in that I got to kind of help stop a logjam on some sensitive air ops because there was a misinterpretation of the law on something, and my boss kind of tasked me with figuring out, digging into it, what it was, and it was actually stopping operations that we were trying to do—that some special operators were trying to do—some sensitive air operations. And I was able to help work through the law with that and—and basically break that logjam. And I think that's what is so, you know, one of the many things that's interesting about this is we can we can really provide that helping hand to make sure that our commanders can, you know, operate to the maximum flexibility within their authorities and, you know, and make sure that they have that maximum operational flexibility to do what the nation and what

the President tasks us with and what the nation expects out of us.

Col Davis:

If I could also add kind of on a—on a micro level, Col Mack talked about, you know, helping out the commanders and kind of helping out the bigger picture, but we also do it on a micro-level. So, for example, if you're stationed overseas, your first or second assignment, you might be one of the JAGs that is tasked with going downtown to help a service member who's in trouble downtown. So that is part of the operations law portfolio, as well. So making sure that their rights, and they are being respected both under, you know, U.S. law, under the Status of Forces Agreement and under local law. So, from the very beginning of the baby captain all the way up to O-6, you have, you know, a lot of great responsibility.

Maj Wheat:

Yes, ma'am. And that makes me think about what Col Mack was saying. With, you know, military justice, you generally know when a court martial is going to happen, you generally know what the timelines of these types of things are. But with ops law, you really kind of never know what you're going to get, right? And so, Col Mack, I want to circle back and ask you about when you were at then-Fort Bragg, Fort Liberty at JSOC, it sounded like you had a fairly high ops tempo, so what was that like working in that type of position from your day-to-day experience?

Working in High Operations Tempo

Col Mack:

Yeah, absolutely. This is something that definitely wanted to talk about a bit, and I know Col Davis will add her experiences in there, as well. Ops is such an exciting world, but it is hard to be a part of operations law. And when I was at now Fort Liberty, my husband was down in Florida, so I was at North Carolina, he was in Florida. He was a squadron commander—he's also active duty. And so he traveled a lot and we—so we lived apart those three years, and I was pregnant with my first child when I got there. I had to deal with thyroid cancer

and treatment there, and then I got pregnant my second job at the end of my time there. So it is—it is hard on you personally and mentally and emotionally, and it is definitely a sacrifice for your family, you know, whether that is a family with children, whether it is just with a spouse, whether it is your parents, because they're never quite sure where you're going or doing, your siblings, whoever it is, you know, and whatever the shape of your family is, but it is definitely a sacrifice and it is hard. I personally think it is rewarding, and I think that, you know, it is worth the sacrifice.

That's the choice we've made for our family, but it—it may sound trite to say you have to miss a kid's birthday or two, but when you're doing that and you also can't plan for it because you're never quite sure when it's going to happen, it does take a toll, but it is what, you know, what keeps me going, what makes me committed to living that lifestyle. And what drives me is that despite all of our flaws and—and the mistakes we've made in the past, this is the best country in the world. And part of that is that we have a military that is so committed to keeping us safe and to constantly focusing on our national security and giving us the flexibility and the room to grow is that nation that makes mistakes and continually improves.

Maj Wheat:

Wow, that is incredible that you do that with a commander for a spouse, as well. That must be incredibly difficult, but thank you for your service, ma'am. And Col Davis, over to you. I want you to share with our listeners some of what you've experienced working in that high ops tempo environment.

Col Davis:

So again, to foot stop what Col Mack said, I mean, you have to be flexible because you never know what's going to come at you. But again, that's what makes it exciting. Part of the reason that I joined the military is that I wanted to kind of—I wanted to be up front. I wanted to be kind of in the fight. And for some, that being in the fight is being in the courtroom. That's not

me. For me, being up front is, you know, being with our operators, whether that is our maintainers, whether that's our—our pilots, our Security Forces members. Their fight is my fight. So whatever I can do to make their jobs easier is what I'm here to do.

I echo what Col Mack said in terms of it's exciting, but you have to be flexible. Like I said, some days when you are at a—at your job, it might be a slow day. You know, maybe you're just reading policy all day, but the very next day something might pop off or you have to roll into 24-hour ops. I remember when I was at JAO, it was during COVID, so I got there before COVID, and about halfway through COVID popped off. I happened to be—the week that we decided to stand everything up, I happened to be one of the few attorneys in the office because everyone had gone down to the JAG school to teach an ops law course. And then all of a sudden the command center gets stood up and they were like, well, you're it. I'm like, well, I can't do 24 hour ops by myself, so we actually had to pull some people back from the course to help out and pull those 24 hour ops. But again, no one expected that. I thought I would have an easy week just—just attending meetings all week. And it turned into oh we're about to—you know, the next three years of our lives are about to be disrupted. So, it's fun, but you've got to be flexible.

Maj Wheat:

And as they say, flexibility is the key to air power. I know that was cliché.

Col Davis:

Absolutely. [Laughter].

Maj Wheat:

Col Mack, over to you, ma'am.

Col Mack:

Yeah, and I just wanted to add on there, too, as I'm thinking through listening to—to Col Davis and what she's saying, you know, the commitment is—is what drives you, but also could not be where I am and being

able to—to get through this if it were not for the mentors and other people I watched go through this, you know the mentors that I have in the service and other people that have gone through some of this. So, in thinking about this—this podcast and thinking about, you know, 18 years of service and thinking about the time at JSOC, especially, you know, having some—some pregnancy complications and cancer and making it through, it's like, well, how do you how do you get through that, right? It was my boss. Much credit goes to him. He was very continually supportive and he's still a mentor of mine. It was, you know, the commitment and the patriotism. And then it's those other mentors.

In the beginning, I didn't really think about mentors because I was going to do four years and then get out of the service. [Laughter]. I was going to get the Corps experience and I thought I wanted to go be an attorney on the outside doing justice on the outside of the military, but then I kind of fell in love with—with the military. But, you know, when you're fortunate to work with good leaders, sometimes they're just your mentors without like the formal declaration of such. And then I've had people, some very particular female mentors who have touched my career when I wasn't even realizing that that was happening. And I found out maybe later and then, you know, they've become closer and a more formal mentor relationship as my career has gone on.

And that's so important. And I don't have any experience in the civilian legal world to know if it happens that much on the outside. But talking to friends, I don't know that it does, and that is something that's so special about the military, is we really value those relationships and trying to create those mentor-mentee relationships and building up leadership experiences.

Inspirations to Serve

Maj Wheat:

And I'm so glad you brought that up, ma'am. I actually wanted to ask the two of you, because here you are as full bird Colonels and you are women, and so I kind of wanted to ask you about your inspirations in that regard.

If you felt like being a woman made it more difficult at times or if it was not a barrier at all. So just in that kind of line over to you, Col Davis.

Col Davis:

So when I think about my journey, I think I was kind of like Col Mac. I thought I was going to do my four years and then go and do something else. But they kept giving me, you know, assignments that I liked and kept challenging me in ways that I never knew that I could be challenged. And so I stayed. And I think part of the reason I stayed was because I did have—I don't want to say that I didn't have mentors, but I usually find my inspiration from my peers. It was usually the women around me who were in my same rank and grade, who—we kind of motivated each other. When we were struggling, we would chat with each other to try to figure out how do we get through. It's like, you know, things are tough, I think I might get out of it and, you know, chatting with my peers, I found that to be kind of the linchpin on why I stayed. I mean, obviously I did have bosses and superiors who were looking out for me and those that I did go to for career advice. But I—I found that my relationship with my peers, especially my female peers, was the ones that I drew on the most.

Maj Wheat:

Yes, ma'am, I agree. Those peer-to-peer relationships can be so important. And I know I've had some that have probably helped form and shape my career, as well. Col Mack, over to you, if you have anything to add, ma'am.

Col Mack:

I do. One of the—one other thing about the—the senior female mentors. In thinking about mentorship through the service, you know, when I was screened for—for JSOC, there were three Deputy SJAs, Staff Judge Advocates. There's an Army, Navy, and Air Force who serve under one Staff Judge Advocate. That was at the time in 2013. And and it been that way since since JSOC was stood up. I was the first female deputy from any of the services to serve as the deputy, and there hadn't been one as a SJA. And the reason I bring this

up is only to say that I think the most significant reason for that has nothing to do with me at all. I think the reason that it happened in that way and the reason there had not been another female to serve is because this opportunity to screen for and go for JSOC comes at about 8 to 10 years in our careers, and that's the time when a lot of female service members either have young kids or maybe trying to start a family and it is a really demanding job.

And so, you know, just looking at it and talking to people, I know a lot of my peers, like Col Davis mentioned, is that people choose not to go—even go out to that opportunity because, you know you're going to be pulled from your family. And so I think the fact that I was—we started our family when I was there and also had a couple complications, pregnancy and cancer with—with the pregnancy and then cancer after, you know, I think it's clear like those personal situations didn't negatively impact my career in the end.

And I do have some funny stories. I mean, there was an ops floor situation where I was pumping and it was 3 a.m., and I said, I got to go pump. And the operator sitting next to me, he was like, "well, that's a first." And I was like "yep, I'll be back." Or, you know, another time when I was on the back of an airplane, a small plane with a General Officer flying from North Carolina to Colorado for a work trip. And, you know, I had to sit in the back of the plane and go pump in the bathroom. So, you know, there's some—some interesting situations. But I think that the point is like it can be done. And, you know, was it challenging? Absolutely. And were my choices—are they the best for everyone? Of course not. But it is possible. And I think, you know, Col Davis mentioned our peers, and I felt consistently fortunate through our career that we have so many females that serve in the Air Force JAG Corps, in particular—they're across the JAG Corps, but, you know, some career fields have much fewer females than we do. And I think that is—has been just absolutely invaluable. As Col Davis mentioned, you have those people who are experiencing similar things, and it's not that you can't have great male mentors

and great male bosses, which I have had, but there is something about that, I think, having female peers and—and mentors.

Maj Wheat:

Ma'am, I have to say that's actually really inspiring for you to share. You know, you being in that joint special operations environment and starting a family, holding down the fort, fighting through your own medical issues and still taking care of everything you needed to take care of. So that's really inspiring. And with that, I would like to segue now that we're talking about inspiration into both of your inspirations to serve. So, Col Davis, would you like to start, ma'am?

Col Davis:

Sure. So I actually I don't come from a military family, so I didn't really have that as an example growing up. But I have always just had this desire to be part of something bigger than myself and also this desire to give back. When I try to pinpoint what kind of, you know, guided me into the military, the one thing that I kind of point to was when I was in high school, we had to do externships. So I did an externship at the Navy Marine Corps Relief Society here in Washington, D.C., and you know, just being on the facility and let's be honest, seeing everybody in the cool uniform, I was just so enamored with the professionalism and that I went to my parents and said, "I want to go to a military academy like for the remainder of my high school."

They said no—

Maj Wheat:

[Laughter].

Col Davis:

—I think I was a sophomore by that point. They said "you should you should have thought about that when you were a freshman." But then I thought about joining the Naval Academy, and while they supported it, my parents were kind of like, "I don't really know that you have the

temperament for that. You can't really keep your room clean and you talk back a lot."

Maj Wheat:

[Laughter].

Col Davis:

So—so I didn't end up going, but in the back of my mind, I still always had this desire to want to be part of, you know, that, that military family. So, after law school, I worked for a couple of years, and I said, you know what? I think I'm to give it a try. So I joined, then I said, I mentioned before, I thought I was only going to stay four years, but, you know, just being part of it and all of the opportunities and all the challenges, I mean, I am such a different person than I—than I was 18 years ago, and I have nothing but the military to thank for that. So, yeah, when I think about why I joined, it really was to be part of something bigger than myself and—and I and I really am.

Maj Wheat:

Thank you, ma'am, for sharing. Col Mack over to you.

Col Mack:

Thank you. Like Col Davis, I was—like I mentioned earlier, I was going to do the four years and—and get a crim law job on the outside, but I also soon discovered that the military was for me. For me, a little bit variation in that I was at law school here in D.C. where I'm stationed now on 9/11, and I watched the Pentagon burning on my walk home from school after class was canceled that day. And then during my law school time, I met Judge Sparky Gierke from the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces. He was an adjunct professor and I took military justice from him. And so, I learned that was kind of the my introduction to, hey, this—I can combine that feeling of wanting to serve after 9/11 with doing the law, and I didn't even know what a JAG was before then. So, you know, kind of being in D.C. at the time and then combined with meeting him and working for him and then I clerked with him after law school really sent me on that path. And I specifically remember a very heated

discussion with my dad when I was looking to sign up because he was not only kind of physically worried about me, right, because he's my dad, but he was also worried about my financial ability to repay my loans, [laughter], which did take a long time, but they are now paid off just for anybody who's concerned about that.

Maj Wheat:

[Laughter].

Col Mack:

It does happen. But, it's been worth it, you know, absolutely every day. Every day is not easy, and sometimes you think through what if I had made a different choice, obviously, but I feel the same as Col Davis. I'm definitely in a much different place, and I feel very fortunate to have had the opportunities that I have had while being a part of the Air Force.

Maj Wheat:

Yes, ma'am. Well, I'm glad to hear you were able to pay off your loans. We're lucky enough now to have that Student Loan Repayment Program in the Air Force JAG Corps and then, of course, the Federal Public Student Loan Forgiveness Program. But anyway, before we close out today, I want to turn it over to the two of you one last time and ask if you have any words of wisdom for any current JAGs or paralegals or really anyone who's just thinking about joining the JAG Corps.

Guidance for Future and Current Judge Advocates

Col Davis:

So for me it's always follow your heart and follow your interest. In the JAG Corps, and I think in military kind of legal professions, the thing that gets the most attention is military justice, so a lot of times that will be the focus. But for me it was always ops, and I just followed my heart. And even when I wasn't doing ops jobs, I did the best job that I could and that, you know, opened doors for me because you engender trust in your superiors

that, hey, you know, she does a good job, so if there's an opportunity out there, you know, we trust that she'll be able to handle it. So if I had one word of advice, it would be to always kind of follow your heart and follow interests, whatever they may be. And don't let anybody steer you off your path.

Maj Wheat:

Great words. Thank you. Col Mack, over to you.

Col Mack:

Yes, absolutely 100% agree with what Col Davis said. And then to add on to that, I would say, you know, as mentioned before, every career path is unique and special. And as you're following your heart, I would be also maybe open to experiences you didn't think that you would necessarily love. Like for me, you know, I thought criminal law was it for me, and then after so many, you know, certain types of cases and then being exposed to ops, I was like, this is—this is more for me my passion. And it took—took a bit to get there. And I think sometimes, you know, in the Air Force JAG Corps, typically you're not going to, other than the base ops Col Davis mentioned, you're not going to touch kind of more pure operational law issues with these heavy impacts until later in your career. But if that is something you want to do, yes, follow your heart, like stick with it. And if you have, for any current JAGs out there, or people thinking about joining the JAG Corps, I'm always available to talk and I'm happy to answer your questions or walk through anything with you, but know that there are people out there that would love to have you, you know, as part of the family or continue on as part of the JAG Corps family. And it is not only the cool issues we get to—to be a part of, but being a part of the JAG Corps family. We're everywhere. Like I said, I met Col Davis a few assignments ago and we've been friends ever since. And everywhere you go, you get to, you know, you'll move places where you've worked with people in the past, and it's—it's an awesome experience. So, that's all I'll add.

Closing Remarks

Maj Wheat:

Absolutely, I'm constantly hearing that it's a small JAG Corps, and isn't that the truth? Okay, ladies. Well, thank you so much for joining us on the AFJAGS Podcast. It was really great to close out our JAGs on the Job series with operations and international law.

Okay, listeners, that's all we have for you today. I hope you enjoyed this episode with Col Davis and Col Mack.

As always, feel free to review, rate and subscribe. And with that, this podcast is in recess.

[Gavel bangs twice].

Are you interested in joining the Air Force JAG Corps? You can learn more information at airforce.com/jag. That's J-A-G. You may also call us at 1-800-JAG-USAF. That's 1-800-524-8723. Or you may email us at af.jag.recruiting@us.af.mil. That's M-I-L.

Disclaimer:

Nothing from this show should be construed as legal advice. Please consult an attorney for any legal issues. Nothing in this show is endorsed by the Federal government, the Air Force, or any of its components. All content and opinions are those of its guests and host.

Glossary

- **AFJAGS:** Air Force Judge Advocate General's School
- **CNN:** Cable News Network
- **CSO:** Chief of Space Operations
- **DoD:** Department of Defense
- **FAA:** Federal Aviation Administration
- **IED:** Improvised Explosive Device
- **JAA:** Administrative Law Directorate
- **JAG:** Judge Advocate General
- **JAQ:** Operations and International Law Directorate
- **JSOC:** Joint Special Operations Command
- **LOAC:** Law of Armed Conflict
- **NORAD:** North American Aerospace Defense Command
- **NORTHCOM:** Northern Command
- **OIL:** Operations and International Law
- **SJA:** Staff Judge Advocate
- **SOFA:** Status of Forces Agreement
- **U.K.:** United Kingdom
- **U.N.:** United Nations
- **U.S.:** United States

Transcript edited by Major Laura Wheat

Layout by Thomasa Huffstutler