

From JD to JAG: Serving the Country through Law

By Benes Aldana, Marty Lorenzo, and Kay Wakatake

Have you ever wondered what attorneys do in the military? Perhaps you're a law student or contemplating a change in your career. Service as a judge advocate (sometimes called a "JAG officer") is not at all as it is portrayed in movies like *A Few Good Men* or the tv shows like *JAG* – but it does offer a great opportunity to develop technical skills with lots of experience at the early stages of your career. It is also a great way to serve our nation and develop leadership and communication skills.

To give the broader NAPABA membership a glimpse of life in the military as a JAG officer, the Military and Veterans Affairs Committee Co-Chairs interviewed two NAPABA members currently serving in the United States armed services: Captain Sam Kim (U.S. Marine Corps) and Lieutenant Janelle Kuroda (U.S. Navy).

What is your name, rank, and current position?

Sam Kim: Captain, U.S. Marine Corps Reserve. Deputy Staff Judge Advocate for Marine Forces Europe/Africa. In my civilian career, I am a prosecutor in the Department of Homeland Security, Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Janelle Kuroda: Lieutenant, JAG Corps, U.S. Navy Reserves. I am assigned to Navy Reserves Europe, Africa, Southwest Asia. In my civilian capacity, I am a Foreign Affairs Officer at the U.S. Department of State.

Why did you join the military?

Sam Kim: I had considered joining the military in high school, but ultimately I chose the "regular" route of going to college. While I was in law school, the 9/11 attacks occurred. That was the tipping point. At the time, I was young, able-bodied, and unattached. I figured I could do private practice when I was 75, but this was the best time to join the Marines. Ironically, I joined to serve in the Marine Corps, but in

retrospect, the Marine Corps may have ended up serving me more by presenting opportunities to develop my leadership and litigation abilities.

Janelle Kuroda: I joined the military to serve our country, to develop my advocacy skills as an attorney, and to become a leader and a mentor as a Naval officer. My service in the Navy was also a way for me to honor my family's tradition of military service, from my granduncle's service in the U.S. Army's 442nd Regimental Combat Team during World War II, to my uncle's service in Korea, and my father's service in Vietnam.

What did you find the most surprising about military service and why?

Sam Kim: An organization's strength is predicated on its people within. In the Marine Corps, I was pleasantly surprised with the incredible talents and stories of my fellow Marines. From both enlisted and officer ranks, people joined this all-volunteer force not because they lacked options in life, but rather because they believed it was the best option out of many they had. A service member may have been the child of a billionaire or may have earned a PhD in biochemistry prior to joining. One of my junior enlisted Marines earned a bachelor's degree and secured a seat in business school – all during his initial four-year active duty obligation. Before joining, I simply underestimated the caliber and diversity of talents in the Corps, and the opportunity to lead so many of these gifted Marines was an absolute privilege.

Janelle Kuroda: The most surprising thing that I found about military service in the Navy was the dynamic way the Navy values diversity and focuses on excellence and mission accomplishment. Sixty years ago, the Navy didn't value diversity, but today, leaders across all levels within the organization recognize that diversity of background, thought, and experience enhances the Navy's ability to be a forward-thinking, dynamic organization that reflects the changing demographics of America.



Left: Lieutenant Janelle Kuroda, JAG Corps, U.S. Navy Reserve

Right: Captain Sam Kim, U.S. Marine Corps Reserve

What are some interesting cases you have handled or experiences that you have had in the military?

Sam Kim: I had a case where the Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS) used a cooperating witness in a murder-for-hire scheme. This case was memorable because I had to put on my victim-witness counselor hat so many times, and because forensics expert testimony was needed at trial. Another memorable case involved one of the largest housing entitlement conspiracy-fraud cases in the Department of the Navy. The sheer volume of documents involved was astronomical. The United States Attorney's Office got involved, and a state department of justice put up international billboards for one of the co-conspirators, who was one of their top 10 most wanted. I also represented the Government in the case against one of the actors in the Hamdania massacre.¹

Janelle Kuroda: Hands down, my most interesting experience in the Navy was being the sole attorney for a multi-national coalition of navies at sea in the Gulf of Aden combating Somali pirates. I reviewed rules of engagement and provided counsel on the implementation of U.N. Security Council Resolutions and international counter piracy guidance, tailored to each navy.

During one incident, we received a distress call from the captain of a merchant vessel, who was being attacked by suspected pirates. He was worried about the safety of his crew, who could be held hostage for months if his vessel was successfully pirated. Our coalition Admiral directed our closest vessel, a ship from the Republic of Korea, to close in on the suspected pirates. I advised on the rules of engagement. After a successful boarding, the suspected pirates were captured and their weapons were destroyed.

How has your perspective as an Asian Pacific American added to your service to our country?

Sam Kim: Asian Americans are underrepresented in the military, particularly in the Marine Corps, and especially among the officer ranks. When leading Marines, I had to prove that race was not a deficiency

or weakness. Within my legal office, I had an ethnically diverse group of Marines that included an African American from Detroit, a Hispanic from New York City, and a Caucasian from a small town in Tennessee. I don't think any of them ever had an Asian American leader before, and I wanted to dissolve any ethnic stereotypes they may have had and impress upon each of them that "we all bleed [Marine] green."

Janelle Kuroda: That's a great question, and I've been really thinking about this. While my cultural heritage does influence my military service, my uniqueness doesn't come from solely being an Asian/Pacific Islander American, but rather from the totality of the experiences that make me diverse – growing up in a rural town, being fourth generation Japanese American, the daughter of an Army veteran, a graduate of the University of Hawaii at Hilo and Boston College Law School – these experiences together make me diverse and give me a unique perspective that I add every day in my work, whether it be in a particular legal recommendation or when problem-solving during a team meeting. Serving as a judge advocate in the Navy is to be a part of an exciting, dynamic organization. I'm honored to put on the uniform and carry on the tradition of those who have served before me.

Endnote:

1. The Hamdania massacre refers to the case of members of the U.S. Marines involvement in the death and alleged cover-up of an Iraqi man on April 26, 2006, in Al Hamdania, a small village in Iraq. The defendants in the case were initially charged with murder, kidnapping, housebreaking, larceny, obstruction of justice, and conspiracy. These charges were later dropped.

NAPABA's Military and Veterans Affairs Committee is co-chaired by Captain Benes Aldana, U.S. Coast Guard, currently assigned as Chief Counsel, Legal Engagements Division for AFRCOM in Stuttgart, Germany; Major Marty Lorenzo, U.S. Marine Corps Reserves, currently assigned as the Executive Officer of "A" Company, ISB and a practicing corporate law partner at Mintz Levin where he is the co-chair of the Defense and Aerospace practice group; and Lieutenant Colonel Kay Wakatake, U.S. Army, currently assigned as the Budget Officer, Office of the Judge Advocate General at the Pentagon where she has responsibility for budget issues related to Trial Defense Attorneys and Army Judges world-wide.



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