

CLAMO Report

Center for Law and Military Operations (CLAMO), The Judge Advocate General's School

The Best Job in the JAG Corps

This is the first in a series of articles dealing with judge advocates who are serving at the combat training centers. The series will offer judge advocate observer/controller insights into all five training centers and will also provide updates on the operations and issues arising in the training centers. The series will be supplemented by after action reports which highlight the lessons learned. The series should not, however, be mistaken for instructional pieces or primers; for such information, contact CLAMO to receive practical guides and comprehensive after action reports.

I am jerked awake by the sound of my alarm clock at 0330 hours. My one-hour shift on "TOC watch" begins in thirty minutes. Outside, it is a chilly forty-seven degrees, and it is not much warmer inside my "hummer,"¹ my home during every rotation. I reach out of my sleeping bag for the engine start switch, and, with the flick of my wrist, the early morning stillness is broken by the familiar rattle of a diesel engine. I crank the heater switch to high and dress by the light of a red lens flashlight. As I am getting dressed, I reflect on why I believe that I have the best job in the U.S. Army Judge Advocate General's (JAG) Corps. I am the senior judge advocate observer/controller for brigade command and control, operations group, Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC), Fort Polk, Louisiana.

Observer/controllers (O/Cs) provide the interface between the training unit (the BLUEFOR) and the JRTC. The O/Cs are the principal trainers and the most visible representatives of the JRTC. My primary role is to teach, to coach, and to mentor commanders, staffs, and brigade judge advocates throughout the sixteen days of a standard JRTC rotation. Every month, I follow some of the Army's best and brightest young attorneys, "shadowing" judge advocates as they operate in a simulated low-intensity conflict while deployed to the fictional country of Cortina as part of a light infantry brigade staff.

The O/Cs observe unit performance, control engagements and operations, teach doctrine, coach to improve unit performance, monitor safety, and conduct professional after action reviews (AARs). I observe whether judge advocates are integrated into, and synchronized with, the rest of the staff; whether they are proactive or reactive; and whether the legal advice provided to the staff is timely and accurate.

Four times during each rotation, the battlefield "freezes," and the O/Cs conduct AARs. The AARs are the most important events at the JRTC. In the AARs, I discuss what occurred, what was done well, and what could have been done better. I emphasize the lessons learned and focus on applying those lessons in the future. More importantly, I encourage judge advocates and their legal noncommissioned officers to look inward and to do self-critiques of their performances.

As is true with every Army organization, the people make the difference. The personnel assigned as O/Cs at the JRTC are hand-picked experts in the doctrine and tactics associated with command and control issues, and they are experts in particular battlefield operating systems (BOS), such as maneuver, fire support, and air defense artillery. In addition to the judge advocate assets,² my unit includes O/C representatives from the Engineer, Chemical, Armor, Infantry, Military Police, Signal, Aviation, Air Defense Artillery, Field Artillery, Civil Affairs, Psychological Operations, and Military Intelligence branches. Every day of a JRTC rotation, I learn something new about one of these BOS areas from my colleagues. Whether it is minefield breaching techniques, area security, or the military decision-making process, each of these lessons learned makes me a better Army officer.

As I write this while on "TOC watch" in the brigade tactical operations center (TOC), the brigade support area comes under a non-persistent chemical attack, and the brigade staff goes to MOPP level two. As BLUEFOR personnel in the TOC get into their chemical protective suits, I ask the senior chemical O/C what effect the outside temperature and humidity will have on the chemical attack OPFOR³ that was just launched. I receive a short, but very detailed, lesson on "moisture density." In the process, I increase my knowledge, and I become a better officer and a better O/C. Learning opportunities like this happen every day during a rotation. All I need do is take advantage of them. This is probably the single most rewarding experience of being an O/C.

While I learn much from my colleagues, I am also constantly educated by those I am tasked to observe. As I follow BLUEFOR judge advocates, seemingly invisible with every bit of exposed flesh painted camouflage and my cover always firmly in place (even indoors), my horizons are continually expanded. I think, in fact, that I learn as much from them as they might learn from me. While every judge advocate has been through basically the same basic course that I attended in 1987, our pro-

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1. The operational law cell within the operations group has two High Mobility Multi-purpose Wheeled Vehicles (HMMWVs or "hummers").
 2. There are three judge advocate O/Cs and one noncommissioned officer O/C assigned to the JRTC.
 3. OPFOR are the permanently positioned opposing force for training units at the JRTC.

fessional experiences since that time vary as widely as the assignments we have held. As an O/C, I am able to share my experience with these judge advocates, and they are able to share their experiences with me. Like a trial counsel who seeks a second opinion on how to best introduce an important piece of evidence, the brigade judge advocate and I are able to put our heads together at any given time on the many legal issues which may arise during the rotation. The issues run the gamut from those considered to be “traditionally operational law-related” (such as targeting, rules of engagement, and the law of armed conflict) to fiscal law concerns, legal assistance questions, and claims.

If it is true that our “teaching, coaching, and mentoring” better trains the Army, I am utterly convinced that the knowledge and professionalism exhibited by our brigade judge advocates has just as great an effect. I and all the other O/Cs learn a great deal as we watch new and unique approaches toward resolving often complex legal problems which face brigade commanders and their staffs during these rigorous and realistic training center rotations.

The JRTC and the other combat training centers strive to provide stressful training under tough and realistic conditions. This realism and rigor demand, therefore, that O/Cs live and work under combat conditions. Life as an O/C is physically and mentally demanding. The duty is tough, the hours are long, and the issues can be complex. We are in the “box”⁴ at least sixteen full days every month. And yes, life in the “box” is Spartan, but O/Cs receive the support and independence to do their jobs effectively.

Both during and out of rotation, the senior O/Cs operate their respective BOS teams autonomously. There is no micromanagement or requirement for strict adherence to a duty schedule. If, out of rotation, a team has completed its tasks by 1430, everyone may be cut free to attend to personal business. There is free time between rotations as well. The first weekend after an exercise is always a three-day weekend; the next is a four-day weekend. The following week, however, another rotation begins.

Every O/C can “refit” three times during the last twelve days of the rotation. A refit is the opportunity to break contact with your counterpart and go home for a quick break. It is a great

opportunity to take a warm shower, eat a normal meal at a dinner table, hug the kids and the spouse, and sleep between clean sheets in a real bed. At the end of each refit, I am fully refreshed, my batteries are charged, and I am ready and eager to get back into the fight.

The JRTC gives O/Cs the equipment needed to do the job and the assets to maintain that equipment. When my hummer has a radio problem or a faulty generator, the crack maintenance staff repairs it right away. If I have a flat tire or my vehicle breaks in the “box,” maintenance comes to my location to make repairs. There is never a lengthy wait to get equipment repaired—both the radio and vehicle maintenance shops operate on a twenty-four-hour schedule during the entire time we are in a rotation. We work our equipment hard, and having such responsive maintenance personnel is a great benefit. It saves a lot of time and frustration, and it allows us to get back to our duties quickly.

An additional, and very exciting, benefit is that I and most of the other O/Cs are on jump status. Often, I will meet the training unit at its home station and fly into the area of operations. What an experience it is to be with an entire airborne brigade as it jumps in to begin a rotation. Literally thousands of parachutes, miles of silk, in the air at one time. And we draw jump pay to boot!

The greatest reward of all, however, is seeing our soldiers, the best in the world, in action. Day and night, in bad weather, and under tough conditions, I witness the perseverance and “can do” attitude which sets the American soldier apart from all others. No other job, short of actual deployment, gives a judge advocate the opportunity to live every day under conditions which prepare our forces to conduct any operation, in any environment.

It is now 0455 and my replacement has just relieved me on TOC watch. I depart the brigade TOC enroute to my hummer under a clear, chilly sky lit by a beautiful, full moon. On the walk back to O/C parking, I reflect on what I have just written and smile to myself. It is a smile of recognition—I really do have the best job in the JAG Corps. Major Banks and Major Kantwill.

4. The “box” is a term for the maneuver area. It is called a box because ingress and egress to the area are controlled.