

Lore of the Corps

“For Excellence” as a Junior Paralegal Specialist/Noncommissioned Officer: The History of the Sergeant Eric L. Coggins Award

“I only wish I could put on my uniform and soldier one more time.”¹

*Fred L. Borch
Regimental Historian*

Those fourteen words above, spoken by Sergeant (SGT) Coggins shortly before his untimely death, speak volumes about both his character and his love for our Corps and our Army. These words also explain why the Sergeant Eric L. Coggins Award for Excellence was created in 1998.²

Born in May 1973 in Shelby, North Carolina, Eric L. Coggins was the son of John D. Coggins and the late Kwang Chayi Coggins, who John Coggins met while in the Army in Korea. Eric attended East Rutherford High School in Forest City, North Carolina, where his extracurricular activities included weight lifting, speech and debate. He was also active in the church youth group at the Tanner’s Grove United Methodist Church.³

When his father had to leave the area in 1989, Eric went to live with Carlton “Lee” and Janice Waugh. They were the parents of John Waugh, a high school classmate of Eric’s who also was a good friend. The Waughs became Eric’s foster parents and Eric soon considered himself to be a part of the Waugh family.⁴

After graduating from high school in 1991, Eric enlisted in the Army. He completed basic and advanced individual training, and earned his wings as a parachutist at Fort Benning, Georgia. After serving as an airborne Soldier at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, Coggins volunteered for a twelve month tour in the Republic of Korea. One of this reasons for choosing Korea was to be reunited with his mother, who had returned to her native home several years earlier. Unfortunately, she died a few months before now Specialist Four (SP4) Coggins arrived in Seoul.⁵

Assigned to the 2d Infantry Division at Camp Casey, SP4 Coggins soon demonstrated such truly outstanding abilities as a legal specialist (as paralegals were then called) as well as such superb leadership skills, that he was chosen to be the noncommissioned officer-in-charge (NCOIC) of the 1st Brigade legal office.⁶

After his tour in South Korea, SGT Coggins volunteered for a deployment to Kuwait, and after arriving in March 1996, he became the NCOIC of the Camp Doha legal office. Despite the difficult conditions, he excelled in this assignment. When Iraq once again threatened Kuwait, SGT Coggins was among the first to volunteer for squad automatic weapons training and serve as a machine gunner on the Camp Doha perimeter. Later, Coggins also asked to be trained as a tank gunner. He became so proficient that he was selected as the gunner on the commander’s tank.⁷

Although his future as a Soldier was incredibly bright, SGT Coggins’ career was cut short in September 1996 when he was diagnosed with liver cancer. He was medically evacuated to Walter Reed Army Medical Center, where he learned that his cancer had metastasized and that his prognosis for recovery was grim.⁸

Major General (MG) Walter B. Huffman, then serving as The Judge Advocate General, visited SGT Coggins several times at Walter Reed. Major General Huffman was so impressed with Eric’s spirit and attitude that ten days before SGT Coggins was medically retired and left the hospital to return to Forest City, North Carolina, MG Huffman presented him with the Legion of Merit. This high level decoration, rarely if ever awarded to a junior noncommissioned officer, reflected the character of SGT Coggins’ service to our Corps and our Army. As might have been expected, Eric Coggins response to receiving the Legion of Merit was to tell MG Huffman: “I only wish I could put on my uniform again and Soldier one more time.”⁹

Eric Coggins spent his final days in the Waugh home, where his second family cared for him. He died in November 1996. Eric Coggins was just twenty-three-years-old.¹⁰

In 1998, convinced that SGT Coggins had been a model Soldier for all paralegals to emulate, MG Huffman established the Sergeant Eric L. Coggins Award for Excellence. The award was to be given annually to the junior “Legal

¹ TJAGSA Alumni Association, *SGT Eric Coggins: A Profile in JAG Corps Excellence*, REGIMENTAL REPORTER, Winter 1998, at 7 [hereinafter *SGT Eric Coggins*].

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

Specialist/NCO who best approaches the standards of legal and Soldier excellence” for which Eric Coggins was known.¹¹

Today, any active, reserve, and National Guard Soldier who possesses the 27D Primary Military Occupational Specialty (PMOS), and is the grade of Specialist (E-4) through Staff Sergeant (E-6), is eligible for the award. That Soldier must “embody Army and JAG Corps’ values . . . and must demonstrate exceptional Soldier and paralegal skills.”¹² In this regard, the Soldier’s last two Army Physical Fitness Test scores must be 250 points or higher (although this may be waived for individuals with a valid medical profile). Finally, “a specific, noteworthy military or civic achievement may be an additional factor” in the selection of a recipient, but “will not be the sole reason for selection.”¹³ Nominations from the field are considered by a selection board appointed by The Judge Advocate General (TJAG). That board, one member of which must be the Regimental Command Sergeant Major of the JAG Corps, evaluates the nominations and makes a recommendation to TJAG, who determines the honoree.¹⁴

On June 15, 1998, MG Huffman and Sergeant Major (SGM) Howard Metcalf, then serving as the Regimental Sergeant Major, presented the first Coggins award to Staff Sergeant (SSG) Michelle Winston. At the time, SSG Winston was serving in the Office of the Staff Judge Advocate, III Corps and Fort Hood. She was presented with a plaque during the 9th Senior Legal NCO Management Course at The Judge Advocate General’s School. Coggins’ foster mother, Janice Waugh, also participated in the ceremony, along with SGT Coggins’ father, John Coggins.¹⁵

Today, the Coggins Award is presented during the Advanced Law for Paralegal and Law for Paralegal Courses,

usually in May of each year. Whenever possible, TJAG makes the award personally. Mrs. Janice Waugh has been present, and participated in, every Coggins Award from its inception in 1998.¹⁶ Recipients receive a number of items, including an Army Commendation Medal awarded by TJAG, a challenge coin from the Sergeant Major of the Army, and a NCO sword from the Judge Advocate General Corps Retired NCO Association.

Sergeant Eric L. Coggins was the epitome of a Soldier and a paralegal, and his courage in the face of adversity has been an inspiration to all who hear his story. The Coggins Award ensures that he will not be forgotten and that paralegals who follow him have a model to emulate.

Since the inaugural award in 1998, the following paralegal specialists have been recipients of the SGT Coggins award:

1999	SGT David Panian ¹⁷
2000	SSG Michelle Browning ¹⁸
2001	SGT Ryan L. Wischkaemper
2002	SSG Melissa Burke ¹⁹
2003	SSG Osvaldo Martinez, Jr. ²⁰
2004	SSG Troy D. Robinson
2005	SSG Joshua L. Quinton ²¹
2006	no award
2007	SSG Francisco R. Ramirez ²²
2008	SSG Samuel R. Robles ²³
2009	SSG Jose A. Velez ²⁴
2010	SSG Juan C. Santiago ²⁵
2011	SSG Margarita G. Abbott ²⁶
2012	SSG Raymond E. Richardson, Jr. ²⁷
2013	SSG Ana I. Hairston ²⁸
2014	SSG Angelica Pierce ²⁹

¹¹ TJAGSA Alumni Association, *First Coggins Award Presented*, REGIMENTAL REPORTER, Winter 1998, at 6 [hereinafter *Coggins Award Presented*].

¹² Memorandum from Command Sergeant Major (CSM) Joseph P. Lister, subject: Memorandum of Instruction, 2016 SGT Eric L. Coggins Award of Excellence (21 Dec. 2015).

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *SGT Eric Coggins*, *supra* note 1.

¹⁶ *Coggins Award Presented*, *supra* note 11.

¹⁷ Sergeant Panian successfully completed the “green-to-gold” program and is now an active duty major. He serves as the Executive Officer, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment

¹⁸ Staff Sergeant Browning (now Austin) retired as a legal administrator and Chief Warrant Officer Four.

¹⁹ Master Sergeant Burke is currently attending the Sergeant Majors Academy. She previously served as the First Sergeant at the noncommissioned officer (NCO) Academy at The Judge Advocate General’s Legal Center and School, U.S. Army (TJAGLCS).

²⁰ Sergeant Major Martinez served as First Sergeant, Judge Advocate Officer Basic Course (JAIBC) Student Detachment.

²¹ Master Sergeant Quinton served as First Sergeant, Judge Advocate Officer Basic Course Student Detachment, and is now the Paralegal non-commissioned officer-in-charge at XVIII Airborne Corps and Fort Bragg.

²² Sergeant First Class Ramirez now serves as a paralegal at 7th Special Forces Group, Eglin Air Force Base.

²³ Master Sergeant Robles now serves as senior military justice operations NCO at 82d Airborne Division.

²⁴ Master Sergeant Velez is now a senior military justice operations NCO at U.S. Army Europe, Wiesbaden, Germany.

²⁵ Chief Warrant Officer 2 Santiago is now serving as a legal administrator in Kabul, Afghanistan.

²⁶ After serving as a court reporter at the 82d Airborne Division, Abbott successfully completed Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning, Georgia. Second Lieutenant Abbott is currently stationed at Joint Base Lewis-McCord, Washington.

²⁷ After his promotion to Sergeant First Class, Richardson applied for an appointment as a warrant officer and is now in helicopter pilot training at Fort Rucker, Alabama.

²⁸ Sergeant First Class Hairston is now a paralegal at I Corps, Joint Base Lewis-McChord.

²⁹ Sergeant First Class Pierce is now a paralegal at I Corps, Joint Base Lewis-McChord.

2015 SGT Maran E. Hancock³⁰
2016 SSG Cardia L. Summers³¹

More historical information can be found at

The Judge Advocate General's Corps
Regimental History Website
<https://www.jagcnet.army.mil/8525736A005BE1BE>

*Dedicated to the brave men and women who have
served our Corps with honor, dedication, and distinction.*

³⁰ Sergeant Major Hancock now serves as a paralegal at the 2d Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2d Infantry Division, Joint Base Lewis-McChord.

³¹ Staff Sergeant Summers is now serving as the Senior Paralegal, 207th Military Intelligence Brigade, Vicenza, Italy.