

The New Leadership, New Year: Challenges for a New Judge Advocate General in 1950

In late January 1950, Major General (MG) Ernest “Mike” Brannon took the oath of office as the new chief of the Army’s legal corps. It was a new year (and a new decade), but little did TJAG Brannon know that, within months, he would face unforeseen challenges that would require him to lead the Corps in a new direction--and which would change legal education in the Army forever.

Just five months into his new job, Major General Brannon, the Corps, and our Army were back at war--the result of North Korea’s invasion of South Korea on 25 June. After poorly trained and equipped U.S. soldiers who joined the battle on the Korean peninsula were quickly overrun, the Army fought a desperate (but successful) defense along the Naktong River. In the meantime, with the United States now committed to repelling North Korean forces from South Korea, the Army began recalling thousands and thousands of Reservists, including Judge Advocates, who would deploy to the Korean peninsula sooner rather than later. (At the beginning of the Korean War, there were a total of 650 Judge Advocates on active duty; two years later, there were 1200 (of whom approximately two-thirds were Reservists)).

Major General Brannon believed that these Reserve Judge Advocates needed some sort of refresher training when they came back on active duty, if for no other reason than that an entirely new military criminal legal system, called the ‘Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ),’ had recently been enacted by the Congress. Since these Reserve lawyers were only familiar with the Articles of War, something had to be



done to introduce them to the UCMJ. Major General Brannon’s decision -- reopen The Judge Advocate General’s School, which had closed in 1946 at the end of World War II.

Under Brannon’s leadership, the school not only re-opened, but the following year, was permanently established on the grounds of the University of Virginia -- where it remains today. In retrospect, one might think that Major General Brannon was doing the obvious -- reopening a school for lawyers and moving it permanently to a first-class university near Washington, D.C. At the time, however, this was a radical idea. No other service had a permanent “JAG School.” The Air Force TJAG, Major General Reginald C. Harmon, was adamantly opposed to any formal legal education program and, during the twelve years that

he was the Air Force’s top uniformed lawyer, blocked all attempts to create a permanent Air Force JAG school. Harmon believed that a school for lawyers in blue was unnecessary; he had learned “on the job,” and this was sufficient. (Harmon did open an Air Force JAG School during the Korean War, but closed it as soon as hostilities ceased; the Air Force did not have a permanent school until the late 1960s). As for the Navy and the Marine Corps, they, too, had no formal legal education program. But then again, there was no Navy JAG Corps; like the Marine Corps, all lawyers in uniform were line officers who happened to serve in legal billets (and the Navy did not create a JAG Corps until 1969).

So, Major General “Mike” Brannon’s decision to re-open and then permanently establish TJAGSA in the middle of the Korean War was very much an example of great vision and inspiring leadership--and it changed legal education in the Corps and our Army forever.

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MG Brannon visits Army lawyers on an Article 6 visit to U.S. Army, Europe, 1951.