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## Amicus Curious

### He's marshaled more troops to aid veterans

By Pat Milhizer  
Law Bulletin staff writer

Brian M. Morris was on his second tour with the U.S. Army in Iraq in 2005 when he reported to a legal office that didn't need any more military prosecutors.

With his mission canceled in Baghdad's Green Zone, Morris had to improvise.

"The Army wasn't about to let me go home," said Morris, a member of the U.S. Army Reserve. "So instead, I started trying to find a job for myself. I very quickly realized that there was a great need for legal assistance inside and outside of the Green Zone."

With approval from Gen. David Petraeus, Morris put up his shingle, so to speak.

He established his own legal assistance office and helped an estimated 800 to 900 service members with matters related to their civilian jobs, wills, divorces, child custody and child support.

"We had service members working under extreme circumstances. The last thing I wanted was for a single one of them to end up injured or killed because they have their mind on a problem at home," Morris said.

He traveled throughout the country, also advising troops on their legal rights as a service member, such as liability for missing or damaged government property.

As a result of his work, Morris was awarded a Bronze Star.

Morris, 35, is now a staff attorney at the Veterans Legal Support Center at The John Marshall Law School. He supervises 16 students who help veterans with various matters, which primarily are disability claims before the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

If a student can't handle a particular matter, the case is referred to one of 120 lawyers who have volunteered to work with the clinic on a pro bono basis.

Since it opened in January, the clinic has received about 300 phone calls.

"We spread the word that we're here to help," Morris said. "And if we can't help, we'll find somebody to help you."

Morris grew up just outside Tampa, Fla., the



Brian M. Morris

Paul McGrath

son and grandson of U.S. Army veterans.

He joined the U.S. Army Reserve when he graduated from high school in 1990, finishing basic training before attending the University of West Alabama. He was elected student body president in his senior year, and earned bachelor's and master's degrees in education in 1994 and 1995, respectively.

"My initial goal was to be a history teacher. Unfortunately, I found there wasn't a lot of opportunity for people with master's degrees to be history teachers in the public school systems in Alabama, Mississippi and Georgia," Morris said.

A professor who Morris worked under during graduate school convinced Morris to give Chicago a try, and he decided to attend John Marshall.

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After earning a law degree in 1998, Morris was commissioned on active duty in the Army as a judge advocate. He served three years at Fort Hood, Texas, as a legal assistance attorney, then as a tort claims defense attorney.

After the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, Morris went to Fort Dietrich in Maryland where he handled freedom of information law matters related to the investigations of anthrax mailings throughout the country.

He left active duty in March 2002 to work for the U.S. Department of Defense Counterintelligence Field Activity where he continued to advise on freedom of information matters, the Privacy Act and intelligence oversight.

In July 2002, Morris went to Bosnia on active duty for nearly a year as a command judge advocate. He was in a camp with 600 National Guard troops from Pennsylvania and was the only lawyer to handle criminal matters and claims from Bosnian citizens concerning war damage done by NATO forces.

In May 2003, Morris was back in Chicago and became an insurance defense attorney at the Chicago firm that was then known as O'Hagan, Smith & Amundsen LLC.

After the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, Morris was called back to active duty and assigned to the Balad Air Base in Iraq with an engineer brigade, which he explains are the soldiers who "build stuff and blow up stuff."

He served as a military prosecutor in the engineering unit and also provided legal assistance to troops in other units.

"I did my very best to try to help out each and every person, realizing that I may be the last lawyer that service members saw for many months," Morris said.

"I thought that my No. 1 job was to make sure that a service member kept their mind on the mission and, that way, they could focus on the task at hand and not be burdened by problems at home," Morris said. "I hopefully was able to help these service members not only survive their deployment but prosper and not have to worry about the things at home that, most of the time, were resolved with a simple phone call, letter or e-mail."

Morris returned to the states in July 2004, and he soon left for Bentonville, Ark., to work on loan

from the O'Hagan law firm to Wal-Mart Stores Inc., serving as an in-house assistant general counsel.

He returned to O'Hagan's Chicago office in December 2004, before he was redeployed to Iraq the following year.

In September 2006, Morris took a job as a senior associate at Sanchez, Daniels & Hoffman LLP in Chicago, where he stayed until starting the job with John Marshall last month.

Every deployment has changed him in positive and negative ways, Morris said.

"Every time I came back, I was a little different," Morris said. "The adjustment is very difficult. I found that I'm a better person and a stronger advocate having been to war. But certainly you sacrifice a little bit of yourself and a little bit of your skill set — especially as a lawyer — having been in combat."

The physical setbacks mainly are due to concussions that he sustained during mortar and rocket attacks. But he quickly mentions that his ailments aren't any different from those of thousands of other service members who learn that anyone can be injured because "war doesn't discriminate on the battlefield."

"I'm a little bit slower in terms of my ability to analyze and to read and to comprehend, but I learned to compensate with preparation. So obviously, in a high-volume defense practice where billing rates are important, it's a little more difficult," Morris said.

The deployments led to the end of his his first marriage to the mother of his 8-year-old son.

"The one thing about separation from your family is it makes you realize how important they are in your life and how important the time you have with them is, because you may not have it in the future," said Morris, who has remarried.

Morris plans to stay in the Army Reserve until his retirement date in 2026. And he would go on another tour if called upon.

In the meantime, his professional focus is at John Marshall.

"I want to help the clinic build a strong foundation so that my generation will be able to look to the John Marshall clinic and find help when they need it," Morris said. "So my generation doesn't go through what the veterans of Vietnam did."

To reach the clinic, send an e-mail message to [bmorris@jmls.edu](mailto:bmorris@jmls.edu).