Law students sharpen skills at JAG Corps moot court competition

Law students competed in the Navy JAG Corps moot court competition at Naval Air Station Jacksonville. The competition allowed the students to sharpen their legal skills before experienced judges. Front row: CAPT Bruce MacKenzie, Chief Judge of the Navy-Marine Corps Trial Judiciary; CAPT Paul Kiamos, Commanding Officer of Region Legal Service Office Southeast; James Gardner, Judge of the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania; Andrew Effron, Chief Judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces (CAAF); Charles Erdman, Judge of the CAAF; H. F. Gierke, Senior Judge of the CAAF; and CAPT Daniel O'Toole, Chief Judge of the Department of the Navy.

By Jen Zeldis
Public Affairs Officer

Teams from the best and most diverse law schools in the country argued over military justice in the Navy Judge Advocate General's Corps inaugural National Moot Court Competition Nov. 12-14 at Naval Air Station Jacksonville, Fla.

The overall winner of the competition was Stetson University College of Law. Duke University School of Law received the best brief award. Additionally, Nicholas Mahrt of The University of Denver was recognized for best oral argument.

"The caliber of the competitors was just outstanding, and being able to interact with the JAG officers and learn about what they do on a day to day basis has been very exciting," said Virginia Branham, a George Washington University law school student.

Twenty-three teams, representing a cross-section of the highest caliber and most diverse law schools, according to U.S. News and World Report, were selected to participate in the competition.

"The unique thing about this competition is its national scope and its focus on military justice – there is not another competition like this in the country," said the Deputy Judge Advocate General of the Navy, RADM Nanette DeRenzi. "Also, the thing that makes it truly a premiere event is the opportunity for the competitors to argue before sitting judges, because most moot competitions don't offer that chance."

"The unique thing about this competition is its national scope and its focus on military justice – there is not another competition like this in the country," said the Deputy Judge Advocate General of the Navy, RADM Nanette DeRenzi.

To prepare for the competition, each team was given a record of appeal and tasked with writing an argument for the Navy-Marine Corps Court of Criminal Appeals. The problem was developed by LTJG Ian Maclean, Region Legal Service Office Southeast (RLSO SE), and featured the conviction of a Navy lieutenant commander for violations of Uniform Code of Military Justice article 106a (attempted espionage), article 95 (flight from apprehension), and article 112a (wrongful possession of a controlled substance). He was sentenced to a dishonorable discharge from the military, 53 years of confinement, and total forfeitures. The basis for the appeal were evidentiary rulings by the military judge suppressing physical evidence seized from a accused's residence, refusing to suppress physical evidence seized from the vehicle, and refusing to suppress statements made by the accused to the Naval Criminal Investigative Service.

"The problem that has been given to them is one that, although a military law specific topic, involves general constitutional principals of self incrimination and search and seizure," said the Chief Judge for the United States Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces, Andrew Effron. "So they get to apply the legal skills they have learned in law school, have those skills tested in competition with other students, and have experienced judges ask them tough questions and evaluate them in oral arguments."

The competition consisted of four full rounds and three final elimination rounds, with students arguing in front of a distinguished panel of judges, including a sitting federal district court judge, three sitting CAAF judges, and the Chief Judge of the Department of the Navy.

North Carolina Central University School of Law student Matt Reeder argues before a panel of military judges during the Navy's Judge Advocate General's Corps 2009 National Moot Court Competition

In all, more than 27 judges, both civilian and military, judged the oral arguments. They scored each round and provided substantive feedback to the students after every round.

Participating students also had the opportunity to learn about life in the Navy during visits to Patrol and Reconnaissance Squadron Five (VP-5) and USS *The Sullivans* (DDG 68). Students interested in applying to the Navy JAG Corps had the chance to be formally interviewed and to network with judge advocates to learn more about the practice.

"I would definitely recommend this competition to other law students because I believe the additional preparation required for this competition is a great experience for anyone in law school, whether they are interested in becoming a JAG officer or not," said Robert Williams, a Texas Southern University law school student.

Several months ago, the Navy JAG Corps' RLSO SE hosted the first-ever Military Justice Regional Moot Court Competition. Six schools from within the Southeast Region competed and based on the success of that event, the JAG Corps decided to develop a national competition.

"Building upon the overwhelming success of that event, the Navy JAG Corps strove to expand the breadth and scope of this inaugural competition by planning and conducting an event to attract students and competitors from the finest and most diverse legal institutions from across the country," said RLSO SE Commanding Officer, CAPT Paul Kiamos. "What was accomplished was an event punctuated by an unparalleled assembly of practitioners and scholars in military jurisprudence. By balancing hospitality, professionalism, and logistical execution, RLSO SE hosted an event universally acclaimed as the premier military justice moot court competition ever undertaken. I could not be more proud of the RLSO SE team which planned, coordinated, and executed the 2009 Navy JAG Corps National Moot Court Competition with the utmost style and grace."

The winning Stetson University College of Law team consisted of Joseph Etter, Amie Patty, Brice Zoechklein and team coach, Larry Miccolis. Duke University School of Law's team included Andrew Shadoff and Greg Dixon.

Eight schools advanced to quarter-final rounds including Barry University, Duke Law, Florida A&M, University of Florida Levin College of Law, University of Houston Law Center, The John Marshall Law School, Southern University Law Center, and Stetson University College of Law.

Other school participating included Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law; Florida Coastal School of Law; George Washington University Law School; Georgetown University Law School; Georgia State University College of Law; Harvard Law School; North Carolina Central University - School of Law; South Texas College of Law; Texas Southern University Thurgood Marshall School of Law; University of Alabama School of Law; University of California Berkeley Law; University of Denver College of Law; University of Georgia Law; University of Southern California Law School; and Yale Law School.

For more information about the competition, please visit the website at www.jag.navy.mil/nationalmootcourtcompetition.htm.