

# Naval Justice School Innovative Training Prepares Legal Professionals for the Fleet

By Bob Krekorian, Naval Station Newport Public Affairs

**The Naval Justice School (NJS) provides innovative legal training to its students by creating a more operational context to the daily legal issues that are important to commanding officers, to the warfighters and their families, and to the Navy's world-wide mission at sea and ashore.**

NJS, located in Helton and Morrison Halls at Naval Station Newport, is divided into five departments: Marine Legal Service Specialists, Legalmen, Civil Law, Military Justice, and Operational Law. The staff of NJS consists of officers, enlisted, and civilian administrative personnel from each of the sea services.

Based on feedback received from commanding officers, staff judge advocates, and legal professionals in the fleet, a six-month curriculum review at NJS last year determined that changes needed to be made to better prepare judge advocates to practice in the Fleet.

While many Coast Guard and Marine Corps judge advocates have some military background, most Navy judge advocates accessions have little or no military experience prior to accepting a commission into the JAG Corps.

The Basic Lawyer Course (BLC), a 10-week course for new lawyers, trains Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard judge advocates in the fundamentals of military justice and relevant civil law, administrative law, investigations, operational law, and legal assistance. Approximately 150 students graduate annually from BLC.

"We wanted to determine if we were teaching them everything they needed to know," said Marine Corps Maj. Matt Stewart, Operational and International Law department head and curriculum review leader. "We found that our recent Basic Lawyer Course graduates didn't understand the context of the legal issues," said Stewart.

"From day 1, we stress accountability, integrity, professionalism, and commitment to the warfighter and military mission," said Capt. Stacy Pedrozo, NJS commanding officer.

BLC now includes more practical exercises such as mock client interviews, legal briefs to the commanding officer, and mock trials involving alleged sexual assaults and other types of UCMJ violations.

While NJS emphasizes trial advocacy skills for new military attorneys who serve

as counsel at courts-martial, the BLC curriculum also focuses on training in basic operational law for deployed units which covers rules of engagement, law of armed conflict, law of the sea, and environmental law.

"In an increasingly complex warfare environment, we have to train our judge advocates to recognize legal issues associated with the emerging technology such as unmanned systems and cyberwarfare capabilities," Pedrozo said.

Stewart said questions frequently come up about simple legal issues, but the larger mission needs to be considered.

"A problem that we saw is that our students needed to know how military justice supports the commander and how it helps to maintain good order and discipline," he said.

"Part of our mission is to make sure that new BLC graduates are Navy, Marine Corps, or Coast Guard officers first. At the end of day, you have to figure out how to fit into the commanding officer's staff and best support the mission," said Stewart.

Thinking like a military professional is important for the new BLC graduate, and so the Navy JAG Corps, in particular, has instituted an on-going mentoring program to support first-tour judge advocates.

"We need the BLC graduates to be excellent military professionals first. If they are not credible, their advice will fall on deaf ears within the organization," said Lt. Cmdr. Paige Ormiston, NJS Professional Development and Leadership Training curriculum coordinator.

In addition to the BLC, NJS also focuses on enlisted legal training by ensuring Marine Corps legal service specialists and Navy legalmen have the skills to become paralegals. Through a newly-designed continuing education curriculum for the Marine Corps legal service specialists, courses are provided throughout the legal service specialist's career. Legal service specialists also return to NJS periodically to receive more intensive and practical civil, administrative and military justice law training.

The Coast Guard has also revamped their legal technician course at NJS to

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**— Capt. Stacy Pedrozo  
NJS commanding officer**



Lt. j.g. Astrid Brouillard, Naval Justice School Basic Lawyer Course student, role plays the defendant during mock trials in which the new judge advocates are testing their trial advocacy skills. Lt. j.g. Nick Hambley, role plays as her defense counsel. The mock trials are one of the students' final graded events and are a culmination of their ten weeks of training at NJS.

provide new and more practical training to its yeomen, as there is no legal-specific enlisted rating, in order to ensure proper designation to take a billet coded for a legal technician.

For Navy legalmen, the Navy has instituted the Legalman Paralegal Education Program, which begins with an 11-week Legalman Accession course. All Legalman Accession students have prior enlisted service before becoming legalmen.

The 'A' school portion at NJS is followed by a full-time semester taught by the law faculty from Roger Williams University, Bristol, R.I. Graduates earn 10 college credit hours towards an ABA-accredited associate degree in paralegal studies. To date, the vast majority of the legalman community has obtained an associate degree in paralegal studies or is enrolled in classes and working toward a degree.

"This benefits the Fleet, the JAG Corps, and our independent duty legalmen," said Lt. Cmdr. Sara de Groot, NJS Military Justice Department.

NJS also focuses on training beyond the initial accession training. Judge advocates, legalmen, and legal service specialists have the opportunity to expand their knowledge base with just-in-time training via the NJS online legal education program.

"With distance education we are leveraging the technology to support the professional development of everyone in our legal community from accession

to retirement," said Lt. Cmdr. Sean Sullivan, online legal education program manager.

Beginning in the fall of 2012, NJS partnered with the Army JAG School and Legal Center, Charlottesville, Va., to make online courses available for the distance learner using the Blackboard learning management system and Defense Connect Online.

"Because there are only so many resident seats that we can fill at NJS, and considering the current fiscal constraints, we have created an online environment that provides an education and training opportunity that until recently was unavailable," Sullivan said.

Distance Learning provides up-to-date training that allows JAGs to keep their commanders and clients well informed of changes in regulations and law, thereby contributing to mission success.

Not only does NJS focus on ensuring members of the legal community are properly trained, NJS also provides training to several commands around Naval Station Newport. Its detachments in Norfolk and San Diego also provide courses to service members who are legal officers, senior officers, and senior enlisted.

All NJS locations provide a Chief of Naval Personnel-directed senior officer course for all O-6 commanding officers that addresses issues such as standards of conduct, ethics, disposition of sexual assault cases, and other complex legal issues. 🌐