

ATJ PRO BONO CHAMPION

Col. Bryan S. Spencer

Volunteer & Director of Operation Enduring LAMP — Austin

How did Operation Enduring LAMP originate and how did you become involved with the program?

Dean Frank Newton was chair of the State Bar's pro bono committee at the start of Operation Desert Storm in 1990. He called a meeting of the committee to determine how the State Bar could help the Guard and Reserves being called to active duty and the active military. He invited the chair of the Military Law Section who asked me to attend in his stead since I lived in Austin. My chair said, "Don't agree to anything!" It was obvious we needed to have a CLE for local attorneys on military-specific laws for them to be more effective in providing legal support to the service members being called up. I suggested a four-hour CLE to accomplish this. Dean Newton said, "Can you put this program together?" Failing to adhere to my chair's direction, I said, "Yes, sir!" He got me a desk in Texas Lawyers Care and it took off from there. We called that program Operation Desert Storm. ... Fortunately, Desert Storm only lasted six months and we folded our tent and went home.

Then Operation Enduring Freedom began in Afghanistan in 2001 and Texas Lawyers Care called me and said, "You better get back here," and so I came and am still here. Grant Seabolt in Dallas came up with the name of Operation Enduring LAMP (Legal Assistance for Military Personnel), which has been adopted by the ABA Standing Committee on Legal Assistance for Military Personnel for their program.

What is your key role as LAMP director?

In the beginning, it was putting together the CLE programs and coordinating with local bars to assist service members and their families. Today, I try to find an attorney, pro bono or otherwise, for service members or their spouses who need civilian legal help. I am at Texas Lawyers Care four or five days a week from three to six hours. In addition to service members/spouses referred from legal assistance offices here in Texas, I get cases referred from Germany, Iraq, Afghanistan, Japan, Korea, and from many places in the United States. I get wonderful administrative and legal support from Texas Lawyers Care and could not operate without their help.

How many volunteer attorneys generally participate in the program?

Over the course of Operation Desert Storm and Operation Enduring LAMP, we have been fortunate to have several hundred attorneys do pro bono work for service members or their families. Many of them are members of the Military Law Section and have military experience. We also use a mentoring program for situations requiring specific military backgrounds and where the pro bono attorney needs some assistance.



Have there been any particular success stories that have stood out for you?

Most cases arising out of service members in a combat zone are routine divorce or custody cases, but they are not routine for them. All the cases are a success for the individual service member, thanks to his or her pro bono attorney. A few of our volunteers include Dan Corbin, a Killeen attorney who handled 14 pro bono probate cases for Fort Hood soldiers who died in combat; Jim Higdon in San Antonio, who did a pro bono guardianship for a wife whose husband suffers from a serious brain-stem injury from combat; and Melanie Cowart of Akin, Gump, Strauss, Hauer & Feld in San Antonio, who secured a guardianship appointment for the divorced wife of a soldier killed in Iraq so she could receive on behalf of their daughter, as the next of kin, the government's "death gratuity."

What are the main goals for the program in 2008–09?

Our goal for 2009 is to hopefully close down the operation because the combat will be over. Absent that, we will continue to call on the dedicated Texas Bar members to do pro bono legal work for deserving service members and their families. ☘

Col. Bryan S. Spencer was commissioned as a second lieutenant from Texas A&M in 1953 and served in Korea before returning to Austin for law school. He later served as a staff judge advocate/legal advisor with the 4th Infantry Division at Fort Carson, Colo., and with various other posts before retiring in 1988 as a colonel. In 1993, he joined the Texas State Guard, serving until his retirement in 2005.

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