

Hinshaw Veteran Spotlight: Ruel Smith, Tampa

Press Release | 3 min read

Jul 28, 2022

Our Veterans Employee Resource Group is pleased to bring you a continuing series of “Veteran Spotlights” that highlight different Hinshaw veterans or military family members. We thank our veterans for their service, their commitment to the veteran community, our firm, and the firm’s clients. Today, we introduce you to Ruel Smith, partner in our Tampa, Florida office.

What branch and years did you serve, and what was your military occupational specialty?

I spent thirteen years total in the U.S. Army, with the first five years in the Florida Army National Guard (as a Radar Technician and then as an Infantryman) and the next eight years in the Regular Army (as a Short Range Air Defense Artillery Officer). In this role, I was privileged to lead soldiers as a lieutenant in the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) and later command an air defense artillery battery as a Captain in the 3rd Infantry Division (Mechanized) during Operation Iraqi Freedom I in 2003.

Can you share a fond memory of your time in service?

As a platoon leader in the 101st, my platoon included a squad of Avengers. An Avenger is a gyro-stabilized air defense missile turret mounted on a modified heavy Humvee. As an “Air Assault” unit, the 101st can move every piece of equipment in the entire division by helicopter over long distances. This includes the Avenger, which can be picked up using a 25,000-pound sling set hooked to the underside of a Chinook helicopter. Rigging an Avenger to fly takes the crew hours and requires special skills learned in an intensive training course with a 55% failure rate. Late one night, I was with an Avenger crew in a large open field. They had rigged their Avenger and were waiting for a helicopter to pick up them and the system and fly them to the night’s “objective,” a hill overlooking a mock village in the Kentucky woods.. All of this was going to happen without any visible light, using only night vision goggles and infrared chemlights. I remember looking at the Avenger team chief, twenty-one-year-old Specialist Saul Melendez, and thinking: how many other jobs can you have at that age where the U.S. government will put you in charge of a multimillion-dollar weapon system, trust you to rig it for a forty-kilometer flight

suspended from the belly of a cargo helo in the dark, and have you disembark at the other end to put the system back into operation and drive it away to perform your mission? Specialist Melendez made it look easy. So many of my favorite Army memories are like that: soldiers barely older than kids, entrusted with enormous responsibility, who consistently exceeded every expectation and accomplished extraordinary things every single day.

How does your time in service, the skills, and lessons you learned, help you now in the practice of law?

The Army taught me that leadership means trusting others while taking ultimate responsibility. Before any young lieutenant takes command of an Army platoon, she or he has hopefully been taught to trust and empower the platoon's soldiers and sergeants, who've usually been doing their jobs far longer than the lieutenant. Like Saul Melendez; even at 21, he had way more experience than I ever would in making Avengers fly. Any leader would be better off deferring to that experience than assuming she or he has all the answers because of education or rank.

But on the other side of that coin, an Army leader has a one-sentence job description: the leader is responsible for all the unit does or fails to do. No matter how the leader delegates responsibility to the team, any shortfall the team experiences is the leader's to own and ultimately to fix. This is particularly true for attorneys. At the end of the day, every document that leaves the office with the attorney's signature is entirely his or her ethical and professional responsibility. The leader/attorney should own the shortfalls when they happen, but should make sure the successes belong to the team.

Can you share any involvement in veterans organizations or any work you may do in the veteran community?

I'm a current member of the Hillsborough County Bar Association's Military and Veterans' Affairs Committee (MVAC) and have served in the past as its continuing education subcommittee chair. Since 2015 I've also been a Court-appointed mentor in the 13th Judicial Circuit's Veterans' Treatment Court (VTC). VTC is a diversionary program where veterans who enter the criminal justice system can elect to undergo a highly structured treatment program, with dismissal of their charges on successful completion. The mentors are veterans within the community who serve as "battle buddies" to the veterans in treatment, checking in with them regularly, providing an additional layer of accountability, and advising the court on each veteran's progress.

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