5 Veterans, 1 Question: The Best Lesson I Brought to My Legal Career

Insights
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November is National Veterans and Military Families Month, a time to recognize those who have served in the Armed Forces and the families who serve alongside them through relocations, deployments and long separations. On Veterans Day, which marks the anniversary of the end of World War I, we honor the members of the GD community who have worn the uniform.

We asked five of our colleagues across our offices to reflect on their service and how it shapes their work with founders, investors and each other today.

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“The most valuable lesson I learned during military service was that leadership begins with taking care of your people. The mission matters, but it’s accomplished in large part by genuine attention to the well-being of those around you.”

Jesse Birbach

Partner, Strategic Transactions & Licensing
Former Lieutenant Commander, United States Navy

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“Surrounding yourself with hardworking, intelligent, and principled people is a great first step towards success. My experience in the Coast Guard was shaped by phenomenal colleagues who believed in the work and held both themselves and others to a high standard. I feel fortunate that this is also true for those we work with at Gunderson.”

Luke Charette

Associate, Funds
Former Lieutenant United States Coast Guard Service

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“When I first reported to the Pentagon, an executive told our group of new check-ins that we should “wear out a pair of shoes every year.” In an organization where more than 30,000 people come to work each day, a face-to-face interaction often accomplishes more than an email or phone call. He encouraged us to walk over to a colleague’s office, introduce ourselves, and build rapport. That was no small task in the Pentagon where the outermost hallway, the ‘E Ring,’ is nearly a mile long.

At Gunderson Dettmer, investing in relationships with clients, counterparties, and colleagues is just as important. I have found that taking the time to understand another person’s priorities and establish trust often helps resolve issues more efficiently and leads to better outcomes.”

Daryl Dietsche

Associate, Funds
Former Lieutenant, United States Navy

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“The most valuable lesson I learned was the importance of understanding what we called ‘commander’s intent’ - knowing the real objective, not simply completing the next task.

Plans change, information is incomplete, and the immediate assignment is not always the whole picture. If you understand where the team is ultimately trying to go, you can make better decisions, adapt quickly, and keep moving toward the right outcome.

That mindset shapes how I work with startups today. Corporate legal work is rarely just an isolated task. I try to understand what the founders are building, what matters most at that stage, and what a practical win looks like for the business. That helps me provide advice that is not only legally sound, but also useful and aligned with the company’s broader goals.”

Mark Mabry

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Associate, Corporate
Former Captain, Infantry Officer, United States Marine Corp



“The military leadership adage that has most stuck with me over the years is ‘you can delegate authority, but not responsibility.’ In the context of my work today, empowering the full deal team to make decisions, use their judgment, and push the deal forward is important. But when a mistake occurs (and it inevitably will), if I’m the partner in charge of the matter, it’s my responsibility to own that mistake.”

Jonathan Pentzien

Partner, Corporate
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