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Air National Guard GC says military mirrors values

By Douglas Saunders Sr.

Daily Journal Staff Writer

Lieutenant Colonel Knight is a former San Jose Senior Deputy city Attorney, a seasoned prosecutor and a true veteran when it comes to experience.

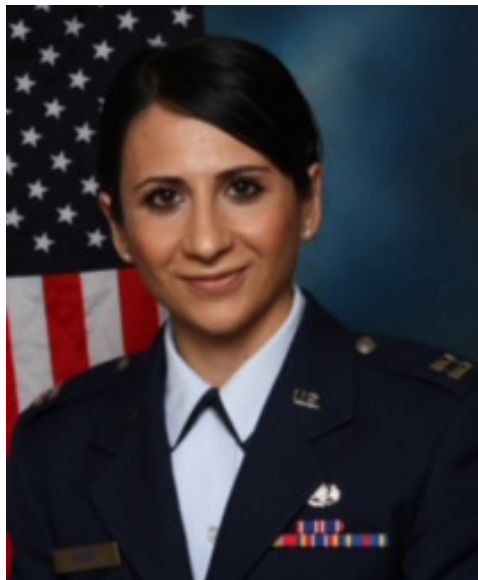
“Having spent a significant portion of my career as a criminal prosecutor before transitioning into civil litigation, I have discovered a powerful synergy between these two areas of law,” Knight said. “The experience and knowledge, especially the trial experience I’ve acquired from handling criminal cases, have provided me with a unique perspective when approaching civil litigation.”

Knight graduated from the University of California School of Law, San Francisco in 2009. While in law school, she noticed military Judge Advocate General Corps lawyers holding on-campus interviews. She took a moment to speak with them, and said she learned the mission and values of the U.S. Air Force mirrored her own.

Her interest in fighter jets and her legal background also attracted her to the Air Force. She signed up and became a commissioned officer. She held a number of leadership positions during her first active duty assignment at Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Tacoma, Wash., including the chief of military justice, chief of operational law, chief of adverse actions and chief of general and civil law.

“I also tried courts-martial cases, primarily sexual assault cases,” she said. “Always being prepared is key: as General Norman Schwarzkopf once said, ‘The more you sweat in peace, the less you bleed in war,’ and this applies to both military and civilian legal work.”

Lieutenant Colonel Knight presently serves as staff judge advocate (chief general counsel) for the California Air National Guard’s 144th Fighter Wing, an F-15 fighter base in Fresno.



Knight - Pictured When She Was A Captain On Active Duty | knightjustice.com

She said that people often associate JAG lawyers with courtroom scenes from movies like “A Few Good Men,” starring Tom Cruise, or the television show “JAG”, starring David James Elliot.

“While conducting courts-martial is indeed part of the job, especially for those on active duty, the role of a JAG officer in the reserves is more similar to that of a general counsel. In this capacity, we primarily engage in transactional work and provide legal advice to commanders on all legal matters affecting the base,” Knight explained. “The key distinction lies in the fact that commanders in the Air Force often make decisions that carry life and death consequences, where their orders hold the weight of law. This is a significant difference between corporate legal work and being the chief legal officer for a fighter wing.”

Violations of those lawful orders can result in criminal sanctions, highlighting the gravity

of the role, Knight said. However, like their counterparts in the private sector, JAG officers provide legal guidance on a wide range of issues, including military justice, fiscal ethics, contract law, tort law, adverse actions, employment matters, and even internal and criminal investigations.

“As the chief attorney for the wing, I work closely with the wing commander, acting as a trusted advisor,” she said. “As a JAG officer, I identify the commanders’ left and right limits and recommend legal courses of action within those limits.”

One of the crucial aspects of being a JAG officer is maintaining operational security or OPSEC. This responsibility extends to exchanging information with commanders and other personnel on base, and when dealing with foreign soldiers.

“In 2022, I had an opportunity to meet and train with Armenian soldiers in the Republic of Armenia on peacekeeping operations. I realized the importance of being particularly sensitive about operational security, especially when conversing in Armenian. While there was a free flow of information during our exchange, I had to remain on high alert so as not to violate any operational security protocols,” Knight said. “As lawyers, we must always operate within the confines of what can be shared with individuals who hold the appropriate clearance levels.”

Knight credits the military with giving her a discipline and work ethic that has helped her to adapt and learn different areas of the law easily.

“The Air Force taught me that successful leaders act decisively, cultivate an overarching vision, and influence people to accomplish the mission consistent with that vision,” she said. “It is very true that the culture of any organization, civilian or military, is shaped by the worst conduct the leader is willing to tolerate.”

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