As well as each of the previous volumes, *Reveille* has come to signify something that can be found in abundance time and again among our Section members and leadership – dependability.

**Member Spotlight: Ernie Lee**

By Charles R. Raphun

In many ways, the role of North Carolina’s prosecutors reflects the intersection of implementing legal principles and navigating the practical realities of protecting the public. One public servant who exemplifies this is Ernest R. ("Ernie") Lee – District Attorney for the Fourth Prosecutorial District – a four-county district covering Duplin, Jones, Onslow and Sampson Counties. Ernie's dedication to supporting the rule of law and promoting the rights of crime victims and the public is remarkable. His military career as an Army Reserve Judge Advocate officer mirrors his civilian legal career and his skill at understanding the unique needs and concerns of the military is a model for North Carolina attorneys striving to support service personnel, veterans and their families.

Ernie is a 1982 graduate of Atlantic Christian College (now Barton College) in Wilson, N.C., where he majored in political science and, during the course of his undergraduate program, served in the Legislative Intern program through North Carolina State University in Raleigh. After college he attended law school at Campbell University where he graduated in 1985. His first job in the law was in Windsor, N.C., where he worked for the firm of Pritchett, Cooke & Burch, serving with attorneys whose primary practice was real estate as well as civil appeal cases. In reflecting on that time in his life, Ernie mentions the strong mentoring that he benefitted from at the firm, and noted how much it helped him in later years.

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He joined the District Attorney’s Office in the Fourth Prosecutorial District as an Assistant DA in January 1987 and has served in various capacities there ever since. After a successful 24-year stint, he sought and won election as the District Attorney in 2010 and took office on January 1, 2011. He was re-elected in 2014 and will run again for this post this year. In that district, which encompasses Camp Lejeune, Ernie oversees many cases involving military personnel and their families – as defendants and as victims – that end up in his office. He has observed an increase in violent crimes involving military personnel over the last 10-15 years and sees it as part of his duty to act wisely and promptly in order to contain such crime. Overcoming an environment of fear and criminal expansion is essential to protecting the military communities in his district, and Ernie sees his role as essential to keeping good and successful civil-military relations in his part of the state.

Ernie grew up in a military family. His father, Phillip E. Lee, retired in 1977 after a successful Air Force career and provided a role model for serving the public. His brother, who also retired recently from the Air Force after serving as a missile launch technician, provided further inspiration to Ernie. It was their examples that, in many ways, led Ernie to public service while also devoting himself to the military. Some of his early inspirations for becoming an attorney came from his childhood experiences (in Tucson, Arizona while his father was stationed at nearby Davis-Monthan AFB). He fondly remembers how his fifth grade teacher so impressed him with her knowledge and enthusiasm for civics and the rule of law that he knew that a legal career was in his future. A few years later he began to see himself as a prosecutor for his life’s work, noting that the prosecutor is the main government official with the duty and authority to best consider the rights and interests of the victims of crime. Being a prosecutor is a job that he knew he could really make a difference. In many ways, this concept of duty has been a guidepost for him in his civilian legal career.

Ernie joined the U.S. Army Reserve as a Judge Advocate General’s Corps officer in 1992. He recently retired after 22 years of federal service. While he undertook numerous assignments, he is most grateful for the opportunity to serve as a defense counsel for dozens of Soldiers facing administrative separations boards. Although separation boards are not by doctrine designed to be punitive in nature, their outcomes can have lifelong effects on the Soldiers involved, including unfavorable discharge status and denial of veterans benefits. So Ernie undertook those duties with enthusiasm and professionalism, thereby not only serving his clients well, but also ensuring the fair and impartial nature of the boards that he appeared before. Ernie found his work in the Army Reserve extremely satisfying – both personally and professionally. Ernie elaborated, “... Before joining the Army, I never would have imagined the wide range of attorneys and the great leadership that I would have encountered in the Reserve. We had attorneys from all areas of legal practice – federal and state litigators, general practice attorneys, judges from all across the country, as well as public officials, legislative and Congressional staffers. So many sharp, thoughtful individuals serving in the JAG Corps of all branches. It was both inspiring and humbling. I gained so much experience and perspective having served.”

When asked what is most needed to improve the legal system to better support military and veterans, Ernie points to the need for better understanding by attorneys when listening to and interacting with veterans and service personnel. “One of the attributes that an attorney with prior military experience often has is the ability to understand the nature of the veteran’s problems, what he or she is talking about, and comprehending the issues that the military establishment/bureaucracy, by its nature, creates. Those dimensions can be imposing obstacles to an attorney or paralegal trying to help, counsel, or even considering prosecuting a military person or their family members. Sometimes, being able to make sense out of a given scenario being told to a counselor can set the stage for better legal or judicial actions, and better outcomes go a long way toward better military relations with the civilian communities nearby.”

Ernie is married to his wife of 27 years – Misti C. Lee. Misti is a respected journalist and author in her own right – freelancing for many years, while also having frequently penned stories and columns in Our State magazine, the Marine Corps Times, the New York Times, The Wilmington Morning Star and the Jacksonville Daily News. The Lee’s are blessed with three children as well: one in high school, one in middle school and one in elementary school.

Ernie’s commitment to the legal profession is solid. Although being an attorney can be very demanding, he has never regretted it and, as he describes it, he has been “blessed beyond measure” in his civilian and military legal careers. We are grateful to have public servants such as Ernie Lee counted among our State’s profession.

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