

An Insurance Attorney's Call To Military Service

By **Jennifer Mandato**

Law360 (March 14, 2024, 4:02 PM EDT) -- Jeffrey Bristol of Parrish Law PA is a self-described "later-in-life lawyer" wearing many hats because he has dedicated more than a decade to serving in multiple branches of the U.S. armed forces.



Jeffrey Bristol

These days, his work schedule litigating insurance and admiralty disputes for the two-person firm is broken up by serving as an officer in the U.S. Navy Reserve, where his time oscillates between keeping up with training and supporting active duty commands.

The Reserve is a partner of the Navy's active duty component, offering members the opportunity to serve part-time until called to active duty.

Law360 sat down with Bristol to learn more about his military service and how that role impacts his work as an attorney both in and out of the courtroom.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

What is your military background, and how did you get involved with the Navy Reserve?

I was active duty in the Army from 2001 to 2006 after I graduated from high school. I then had a long break in service, and felt like I wanted to go back into the service in about 2016, so I looked around at different commissioning programs and the Navy Reserve has a direct commissioning program that really worked out best for me.

I contacted them, went through the training process and got commissioned in about 2017 and have been doing it for the last seven years now.

What was the transition from the U.S. Army to a different branch like?

It actually wasn't too difficult. There's definitely a different kind of way of looking at things and operating between the Navy and the Army, so it was a little bit of a culture shock.

The Reserve definitely has the culture of the active duty service, but people also bring so much in from their daily lives and their other careers that it's an interesting mix, it makes it easy to get into. You wind up with people who have weird combinations of things. My commanding officer is an attorney, although he doesn't practice, but is also an engineer, so he does a lot of consulting work.

What does a typical day look like when working with the Navy Reserve?

It kind of depends on whether I'm on active duty orders or whether I'm on reserve orders.

Reserve orders are usually a drill weekend, so you show up and there's a set goal for the weekend. I'm with a destroyer squadron that oversees all the afloat ships in Latin America. Sometimes the active duty might have some stuff that they need us to help with, otherwise there's training requirements to keep up on, like at the maritime staff operators course, where you learn to be a staff officer or do job training needed to further your technical proficiency.

For the active duty side, we often plug in on their watch standing schedules. A big thing in the Navy is battle watch, which is the home point of contact for ships when they're operating. So if they need any help, if they have an engine component break or if they need to report their position, they call back to the battle watch and the battle watch can coordinate between the ship and the rest of the world.

Also, one of the big things we do are planning conferences, especially naval exercises, kind of like war games. Next week in Chile is the big Latin American conference, UNITAS, so we'll help augment the active duty side there with about 12 nations participating.

When you're on orders, which is two weeks or longer up to a year, you fit into the rhythm of whatever active duty command you're supporting. It can be really different depending on what unit you're with, so you usually try to get integrated as well as you can, following their daily rhythm and helping them out where you can.

There are also readiness requirements because the whole job of the Reserve is to be ready to

deploy when needed. You go to medical and dental and make sure that's all together, that you have an official passport to be ready to go. Readiness and training is usually on a month-to-month basis.

How has your military background influenced your work ethic as an attorney?

It's had a big influence on it. I noticed that sometimes attorneys can be, I'd say, a little scattered in their work process. I think a lot of attorneys tend to put out fires, waiting until deadlines come up and then chase them.

So I think one big difference is just the need to organize and stay ahead of things. I generally try to get things done well ahead of deadlines and have a very structured way of going about the things that I do, with task lists and tools of that kind to get things done.

I think that it's actually helpful because it allows me to do a little bit more than I otherwise would be doing.

What aspects of your work as an attorney do you feel like you bring into the Reserve?

Since I'm an information warfare officer, that involves a lot of different laws. A big thing that you're always dealing with in the military is title responsibilities, there are heavy restrictions that the military has based on its operations.

For example, the Southern Command, which is the combatant command I support, does a lot of drug interdiction operations. The military can't actually handle any of the drug interdiction due to a restriction under Title 10. Basically, the military is restricted from being able to do law enforcement operations, so we have to hand it over to the properly titled authority.

So I think I have a little better idea of how that works and why it works and what some of those rules and regulations are because of my legal background.

Are there any challenges to juggling both responsibilities?

There are. You don't have weekends off, that's the first one.

Sometimes you need to take chunks of time off in order to get stuff done. So I might need to take a week or two off here or there in order to be able to go and do Navy stuff and that definitely interrupts deadlines, sometimes you have to move things around.

But that's why it's important to have that level of organization there and to really work with people who understand and appreciate what you're doing in that regard. My boss and my legal staff have been really instrumental in enabling me to do the reserve stuff. I couldn't do it without them, they're a huge part of it.

I think it really does kind of depend on what organization you're with, and that's part of the advantage to being with a smaller firm. I've often heard attorneys who are in larger firms get a little bit of push back sometimes because — it's not necessarily that other people have to cover your work because you can arrange that, but sometimes you're going to be gone for a certain amount of time, and you're not going to be billing hours or getting to other things.

What being an effective litigator is really about is managing relationships, maybe more so

nowadays, than your courtroom demeanor. A lot of it's just dealing with opposing counsel and dealing with co-counsel, so in a lot of ways the Reserve is a little bit of an extension of the everyday life of a litigator.

What do you envision for your future in the Reserve and as an attorney?

I don't have any plans to leave the service, and I'm very happy with the arrangement that I have here, so I'm just trying to grow our business and keep developing clients and developing cases.

For the Reserve, I'm looking to continue my career progression, moving around. It's the thing I look forward to in both, actually. To enjoy the work that I'm doing, always looking for another challenge or another opportunity in both and trying to get them to harmonize with each other.

Is there something you wish more people knew or understood about working in the Navy Reserve?

I think the No. 1 thing is that it is more flexible than you might think; generally people are willing and ready to work around your schedule. Obviously there are some drop-dead commitments, like if you get mobilized and you're on long-term orders, but generally the Reserve is pretty good at ensuring that you can maintain a good work-life balance and that it's not this difficult thing because it's extra work that's going to take time.

--Editing by Neil Cohen.

Correction: An earlier version of the story misstated the title for military responsibilities. The error has been corrected.