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## **More Than A Few Good Men: How JAG Officers Can Bring Much-Needed Skills to Corporate Legal Departments**

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For many corporate legal leaders, the path to the C-suite begins in a law firm or through years of navigating complex regulatory frameworks in industry. But for some, like Tom Caruso, chief legal officer of Mirabito Energy Products, the journey began in a very different kind of environment — one that involved uniforms, command structures, and mission-critical legal decisions made under extraordinary pressure.



Tom Caruso, Chief Legal

Officer of Mirabito Energy Products

Before taking on the top legal role at the energy company, Caruso served as a JAG officer in the US Navy, essentially acting as the general counsel of an entire military base. And Caruso continues to serve today, as a Lieutenant Commander in the Navy Reserve.

As a Judge Advocate General (JAG), he provided legal counsel on a wide range of matters: military justice, international law, ethics, compliance, and operational risk. The position demanded not just legal expertise, but sharp judgment, rapid decision-making, and the ability to advise commanding officers with consequences that could extend far beyond the courtroom. It's an experience that shaped his leadership style and continues to influence how he leads legal strategy and risk oversight at Mirabito today.

In honor of Military Appreciation Month this May, we sat down with Caruso to learn more about how his military background informs his work as a corporate CLO. His insights offer a unique lens on



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leadership, legal ethics, and the value of service-minded thinking in the modern business environment. For general counsel and legal executives navigating risk, compliance, and leadership, his perspective bridges two worlds — both of which demand clarity, courage, and conviction.

## Highly transferrable skill set

When considering how the Navy JAG Corps prepared him for the CLO job, Caruso shared the following highly transferrable skills:

**Problem solver first:** Navy leaders ask JAGs to be problem solvers first and lawyers second. Within our organizations, we are one of many department heads asked to help solve organizational problems as part of a team. This helps in the corporate world because it's often the legal mindset that helps solve problems, not just the application of the law.

**Comfortable being uncomfortable:** No two days in the Navy were ever the same. So many times, I was brought issues I had never tackled before, and you learn to use resources, mentors, and context to get to an answer. As a new CLO, I am often faced with new and challenging issues, but having done the reps in similar situations makes the newness more comfortable.

**Adaptability:** In the Navy, you change jobs every two or three years. You are expected to get up to speed very quickly to start contributing to your team. This environment where you are always moving and adapting requires you to quickly identify how organizations work and acclimate to the requirements of your clients. Having so many different organizational experiences also helps you improve processes in your new organization. You take the good parts of each and try to apply them going forward.

**Leadership:** The Navy stresses that as a JAG, you are both a lawyer and a Naval Officer. We emphasized leadership at every level and have deliberate training for it at every rank and in every organization. We know our people are our most valuable resource, and getting the most out of them is key as you don't get to hire out in the Navy, you work with the team assigned to you. I am not sure that civilian legal organizations stress leadership in this way. This training has helped me get the most out of all of my teams in the private sector, put them first, and take intentional steps to lead and mentor within my company.

## Q&A with CLO Tom Caruso

### ACC:

To start off, tell us about your path to becoming a JAG lawyer and a bit about the day-to-day responsibilities of a JAG officer.

### Caruso:

I always knew growing up that I wanted to serve in the military. I have some family connections to the military. Our generation has this connection with the military more than some, because 9/11 happened right when I was middle school, which made me think about the world a different way. So, I was always kind of drawn to it. **It was not a matter of if; it was what, when, and how.**

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I thought that after college, I would just join the military as an officer. At the time, I was interning on Capitol Hill, and my boss — who was a lawyer — kept encouraging me. He'd say, 'I really think you should consider law school.' So, I flirted with the idea, but I also had this military thing that was kind of kicking around in my head.

By happenstance I went a hearing of Armed Services Committee for him, and there were all these JAGs. I didn't know what that term meant. I'd never seen *A Few Good Men*, I had never seen the show JAG, I knew nothing about it. Then suddenly, there are these lawyers that are in this hearing that are talking about PTSD, and how JAGs can play a role in being more compassionate during military justice and advising their commanders on issues like military suicide and PTSD that were really having an effect on the Force. (This was back in 2004-2005, so there were a lot of military operations going on, and what we would call [op-tempo](#) fatigue really starting to affect families and mental health.)

It got me thinking about a way to serve that I never thought about like: Wow! I could be a lawyer and serve in the military at the same time. What a perfect marriage. So, I decided early on law school. that's what I wanted to do. I applied as early as I could to the Navy and then I got accepted my second year, and the rest was kind of history. I chose Syracuse University because they had a great National Security Law program, and they had a joint degree program with their policy school, the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, so that's the road I took.

## **ACC:**

Many people may not realize that JAG lawyers often function as the CLO of an entire base or unit. How would you describe the scope of authority and influence you had in that capacity?

## **Caruso:**

I'm going to speak specifically about the Navy because each branch does this a little bit differently. For the Navy, there are four main roles as a JAG.

The first and second are what everyone is familiar with, which is like *A Few Good Men*: **prosecution** and **defense** of military clients. I did some of that early on, both on the defense and the prosecution side. Your first tour in the JAG Corps for the Navy used to be kind of like a medical residency where you do a rotation through each of these four core competencies.

Third, there's what we call **legal assistance**. Consider this to be military legal aid, where your clients are service members or retired service members. They're coming in with all sorts of civil legal issues, and you're providing limited assistance to those clients for those issues.

So those three don't really line up with the CLO role. But I'd say, probably the biggest contingent of the JAG Corps is what we call SJAs — or **staff judge advocates**. Your function as a staff judge advocate is that you are attached to a command, and that commanding officer is essentially the CEO of that unit. They are your principal, and the Navy is your client, and SJAs are the ones sitting in that CLO seat.

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What's unique about the SJA role is that it's kind of a few roles merged into one. You are the general counsel advising day to day on ethics, transactions, and military operations. You occasionally have criminal investigations you're advising on. You name the legal issue that comes through the door, it's yours. But also, the Navy doesn't have a separate HR department for active-duty service members. The JAG is HR. So, any complaints, such as equal opportunity, or hostile work environment, those are ours as well.

So, you wear that CLO hat and a HR hat, and on top of that, you're also wearing a chief investigating officer hat. Any unit level investigation that's happening (e.g., a sailor getting a DUI, or military equipment gone missing), anything that will fall below the level of NCIS, that's yours as well. You are assigning out an investigator, or you're doing the investigation yourself, and then making a formal recommendation to the commander.

What I don't think a lot of people know is that in the military the commander of the unit is like the district attorney. He gets to decide whether you prosecute a case or not. In other words, should we handle this in house with misdemeanor punishment, or should the commander refer it to a court martial. In a way, you're kind of like the Assistant DA because you have to advise the commander on what route to take there.

There are a lot of different roles that you're playing, but a lot of those functions fit well with the CLO role, as well. And those jobs change a little bit as you change units. So, I started off as the Acting SJA for Naval Station Norfolk, which is the Navy's largest naval base. My next tour was with the Submarine Force, where I was the SJA to two submarine commodores and one CO, who owned 18 submarines in Hawaii. And then my next job was with the Navy SEALs, advising the commodore that owned several Teams and support units where I did a lot more advising on military operations, intelligence law, rules of engagement.

But all your normal day-to-day stuff that you do in the CLO role is there. Overall, it was very familiar stepping into the CLO role — much more so than I thought it would be. It's been a pretty seamless transition.

## **ACC:**

And speaking of, transitioning from the military to the private sector is a big shift. What were some of the biggest surprises or adjustments you had to make when moving into a corporate CLO role?

## **Caruso:**

I was lucky. The military has this program called the [SkillBridge program](#), where during your last 6 months of active duty, they'll let you go work for a civilian employer. The Navy will continue to pay you, and you can go find an employer to jumpstart your transition. I was fortunate enough to do that.

Coming out of my last tour in Groton, Connecticut, my boss was fantastic and supported me working for a state court judge. From there, I went to work for a federal court judge. Then I transitioned to the law firm Nixon Peabody, and then finally into my current role as CLO at Mirabito.

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The initial transition from military to civilian sector is harder than you would think because translating your military skill set, which is kind of unknown, is really tough. I found when I went for interviews, that unless the person on the other side of the table had direct experience with a JAG, or knew someone who served as a JAG, it felt like I was describing something very unfamiliar — I was a unicorn to them. I used to describe myself, saying, “I get it. I'm a bit older, nine years out of law school, and I realize my work history makes me a bit of an unknown commodity.” Interviewers had maybe heard of JAG, but they weren't quite sure what JAGs do or how the experience could fit with what a company/firms needs.

I really had to work on that — making sure that my experiences and skillset were translated in a way that a firm or a company could easily recognize them. Some of those conversations went really well, and other times I was asked if I was a real lawyer or if I actually went to law school. The clerkships really helped, and I recommend this to all my friends that are transitioning from military to civilian life. The clerkship is a credential employers recognize, it's a known commodity. Even if they don't understand your military background, they'll understand the value of a clerkship.

**ACC:**

Ethics, compliance, and risk management are central to both military and corporate environments. How has your approach to those areas evolved from your JAG days to your current role?

**Caruso:**

The biggest transition for me in those areas was translating what I used to think of as mission or operational risk into business risk. When you're in the military, there's little civil litigation risk, and our core function is not to generate profit; it's to execute the command's mission to support national security. So, I had to adjust my mindset from thinking solely about mission success to understanding and supporting corporate success, which includes financial success and legal exposure. In the military, the questions were: *Does this support the mission? Is it the right thing to do? Is it legal?* Now, I've had to add a fourth consideration: *Is this good for business?* That's something I still have to consciously remind myself of. Our company, our shareholders, and our leadership value being a positive force in the community and emphasized doing the right thing. But at the end of the day, you can't sustain that impact without generating profit. That added layer was probably the biggest shift for me.

**ACC:**

For other veterans or JAG officers considering a move into the corporate legal world, what advice would you offer?

**Caruso:**

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**Patience.** I know that it's going to sound so generic, but you really have to be patient. For me, it really came down to finding the right company. If you looked at my resume, it appeared like I jumped around a lot, but that really wasn't the case. I was just trying to find my footing in the private sector, and clerkships are inherently short term, so from the time I got out in 2022 to the time I landed at Mirabito in June 2024, I had had three different jobs. It's important to understand that your transition will likely be in increments. And that's okay. In the military, your timeline is determine for you: they tell you when to transfer from unit to unit. When you're in the private sector, you've got to figure that out for yourself. You have to be open to opportunities, recognize when something feels like a good fit, and be willing to pursue it. But most importantly, don't get discouraged if the right fit doesn't come immediately.

Also, I can't stress **networking** enough. The number of people that I connected with along the way was crucial to getting to where I am now. I really made networking my second full-time job — and not networking in a way that sounds opportunistic. As a JAG, I knew nothing about the private sector. If someone asked me coming out of the JAG Corps to name an AmLaw 100 law firm, I couldn't do it. So, it was really about educating myself, finding connections, and then turning networking opportunities into mentors, and most importantly being humble and willing to learn.

There were a few people along the way that really gave me a first-class education on the private sector and how it works. Without them, I wouldn't have been able to navigate these challenges as quickly as I did. I'd say patience and networking were critical for me.

## **ACC:**

As we celebrate Military Appreciation Month, how does Mirabito support veterans, and what does this month mean to you personally?

## **Caruso:**

I served nine years of active duty, but there are many veterans out there who served much longer and contributed much more than I did. To me, it means anytime I get an email from someone on active duty who is trying to find their own path, I'm picking up the phone and connecting with them right away. It's staying connected to the Syracuse Law School and continuing to show support for the veterans legal clinic that I helped set up there. To me, it's Military Appreciation Day every day. These are my brothers and sisters. Throughout my career, there were so many people that were willing to pick up the phone and have a coffee, so I want to pay that forward.

As for our company, there are no bigger supporter of veterans and the men and women in uniform than Joe and Jason Mirabito and Dave Bonczek, our CEO. Recently, I went and did my reserve duty for two weeks, and we had all this work going on. They said without hesitation, "we understand. Go, do your military duty, go support our country. We appreciate you."

I am eternally grateful for the Mirabito family and our leadership team for taking a chance on me. They gave me a shot to interview, even when my background was a bit unconventional. Being a part of this Team gives me a similar pride to what I felt being part of a Navy unit. I feel very much at home.



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Mirabito Energy Products also provides tremendous support to veteran organizations like the Wounded Warrior Foundation, Folds of Honor, and Honor Flight and several other military-related causes. A lot of companies say “we support our troops” — this company defines it. It makes me very proud to be a part of the Team.

If there’s anyone out there that is looking to make this transition: Reach out. Call me, email me, [look me up on LinkedIn](#). These transitions are hard, and we can’t do it without each other. There were so many people along the way that helped me, and they didn’t have to. They did it out of kindness and likely because somewhere along the line, someone helped them. We all need to pay it forward. The military has done so much for me, and it’s a debt I can’t ever fully repay.

## **Diverse experience strengthens the legal profession**

As general counsel and CLOs increasingly take on broader responsibilities in enterprise leadership, Caruso’s story serves as a compelling reminder of the power of diverse experience. The discipline, resilience, and ethical grounding instilled through military service can be a strong foundation for legal leadership in any organization. This Military Appreciation Month, his journey not only honors those who have served, but also illustrates how service can shape and strengthen the legal profession in lasting ways.

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