

**MILITARY VALUES AND  
LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES  
CAN BENEFIT LAW  
PRACTICES, TOO**

**JOHN THOMPSON  
VETERAN LAWYERS NETWORK**

**DIVERSE LEADERSHIP  
STYLES CAN HELP  
LAWYERS AND THEIR  
FIRMS ACHIEVE SUCCESS**

**JONATHAN HARMON  
CHAIRMAN**

## **Military Values and Leadership Principles Can Benefit Law Practices, Too**

► **McGuireWoods partner John Thompson served as a captain and helicopter pilot in the U.S. Army before earning his law degree. He commanded a company of 275 soldiers at Fort Eustis, VA, and led an air cavalry platoon of the 24th Infantry Division based in Fort Stewart, GA. He is a member of McGuireWoods' Restructuring & Insolvency Department in Washington, D.C., and leads the firm's Veteran Lawyers Network.**

**CCBJ: Tell us about your military service and how you draw on that experience in your law practice.**

**John Thompson:** I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to serve as a company commander and platoon leader during my career in the Army. The core values and leadership principles that guided my military service certainly carried over to practicing law. Serving your clients and your community as a lawyer is about serving causes larger than yourself. Officers become familiar with the phrase "mission first, people always." In the military, it's about balancing the need to get the job done with the need to look after your soldiers. In a law firm setting, it's important to be mission-focused – to make sure we deliver for our clients. But it's also important to build cohesive teams to ensure that every member is invested in the outcome. Above all, integrity is an essential value that can't be compromised.

**How can law firms and corporate law departments benefit from the unique perspective that military veterans offer?**

In corporate or law firm life, there are times when we can lose perspective. What is hard work? When are

things really challenging mentally, emotionally or physically? What does it mean to make the tough decision between the easy "wrong" and the hard "right?" What does loss look and feel like? There are times when law firms and corporate law departments can benefit from the perspective of a veteran who has faced and answered these questions in a completely different environment and context, particularly when it comes to managing a crisis.

Veterans also understand the value of teamwork and building a collaborative culture, qualities that are critical to success in a law firm setting. Now more than ever, lawyers must work together across disciplines and practice areas to effectively serve the needs of their clients.

**You lead McGuireWoods' Veteran Lawyers Network, made up of attorneys who have served in the military. What is the mission of the network and how does it add value for the firm and its clients?**

McGuireWoods' Veteran Lawyers Network (VLN) is dedicated to identifying new ways to enhance or expand support for veterans both inside and outside the firm, while ensuring that we continue to leverage the expertise of our veteran lawyers to serve our clients.

I think the VLN brings value to the firm and its clients in multiple ways. Our veteran lawyers provide that perspective I referred to earlier for our colleagues and for the young lawyers we mentor. The VLN also offers many opportunities for McGuireWoods lawyers to provide much-needed pro bono services to the active-duty and veteran communities. We recently hosted a webinar with the National Veterans Legal Services Program (NVLSP) to educate our lawyers about the

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types of pro bono services they can provide for veterans. We also partner with a number of our corporate clients on pro bono and community service projects to benefit veterans in communities across the country.

**McGuireWoods recently worked pro bono to help craft and build support for the Honoring American Veterans in Extreme Need (HAVEN) Act, which allows military veterans to protect VA benefits in consumer bankruptcies. President Trump recently signed this bill into law. How will this help veterans in financial distress and why was this an important issue for McGuireWoods to tackle?**

In short, the HAVEN Act corrects an error in the Bankruptcy Code that resulted in systemic discrimination against our veteran community. The new law requires disability benefits received from the Department of Veterans Affairs or the Department of Defense to be treated in the same way as benefits received from the Social Security Administration, making such disability benefits exempt from the calculation of “current monthly income” or discretionary income and thus protected from the reach of creditors.

It was important for McGuireWoods and our McGuireWoods Consulting colleagues to help change the law because veterans, disabled through service to their country, were being denied a fundamental right afforded under our legal system – the right to relief from their debts. For many, these debts were incurred as a result of their service-based disabilities. This law will allow them to get a fresh start under the Bankruptcy Code without losing these essential, hard-earned benefits. They can use those benefits for their own needs.

It was gratifying to see broad, bipartisan support from Congress and the White House for this important law.

**You mentioned that McGuireWoods partners with clients in pro bono initiatives to assist veterans. Where can these partnerships be most effective in helping veterans with legal matters?**

McGuireWoods recently collaborated with Wells Fargo and Charlotte Center for Legal Advocacy on a “Wills for Warriors” program. Veterans from three North Carolina counties were paired with volunteer attorneys who helped them prepare wills, living wills and power-of-attorney documents. In similar legal clinics across the country, we have partnered with clients to help veterans with matters such as disability appeals, landlord-tenant disputes, consumer debt and bankruptcy, and estate planning. We find that corporate clients are eager to provide in-house legal resources to help veterans and their families in the communities they serve. That shared commitment also enhances our relationships with our clients.

Through NVLSP, our lawyers have represented veterans and their families in matters concerning discharge upgrades and disability appeals. The firm also has taken on



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## Above all, integrity is an essential value that can't be compromised.

individual pro bono engagements for veterans and active-duty service members because we respect their service and sacrifice.

**You serve on the American Bankruptcy Institute's task force on veterans affairs, which played a key role in raising awareness about the need for the HAVEN Act. What are some of the task force's other priorities?**

Now that the HAVEN Act has passed, we are working to educate the bankruptcy community about the new law

and the benefits that qualify for protection. The task force is also working on financial literacy education efforts for both veterans and service members on active duty using trained volunteers who can help them better understand consumer credit issues and avoid pitfalls that can lead to a cycle of debt.

In addition, the task force continues to look to examine other areas of the legal structure, such as the Service Members Civil Relief Act, for opportunities to improve or enhance protections for our brothers and sisters in uniform. ■

# Diverse Leadership Styles Can Help Lawyers And Their Firms Achieve Success

► **McGuireWoods Chairman Jonathan Harmon graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and served in Operation Desert Storm as a first lieutenant in the Army's 1st Cavalry Division before earning his law degree. He joined McGuireWoods in 1995 and became chairman in 2017.**

**CCBJ: In discussing the challenge of bringing greater inclusion to the legal profession, you've framed the problem — and the solution — in terms of leadership. What's the connection between leadership and inclusion?**

**Jonathan Harmon:** I believe it's important for any successful organization to have leaders with diverse backgrounds and leadership styles. Everyone brings their own strengths, ideas and unique perspectives to a team. Having a range of leadership styles helps ensure that everyone's needs are met and that everyone feels invested in the team's mission.

It's also essential that we, as leaders, hold ourselves accountable for building a more inclusive environment. At McGuireWoods, we have established specific metrics to evaluate our progress in meeting our hiring, retention and promotion goals. We have created programs to develop and retain women and diverse lawyers and partnered with clients on innovative initiatives. We have leveraged in-house expertise to create a diversity dashboard that will help us identify where our biggest challenges and opportunities are. But it takes leadership to ensure that these approaches are effective and move us closer to achieving our diversity and inclusion goals.

**You've spoken publicly about your days as a green West Point graduate charged with leading grizzled combat veterans in the heat of battle in Operation Desert Storm in Iraq. How has that experience shaped your approach to leadership as a trial lawyer and as chair of a leading law firm?**

My training prepared me to lead people who have more knowledge and experience than I have. There were soldiers in my platoon who fought in Vietnam and other conflicts. It was humbling to lead people who had that experience and perspective. I knew I couldn't come in as a young first lieutenant on day one and start dictating how they should do their jobs. I had to motivate the team to teach me.

I developed what I call a "servant leadership" style, which served me well as a military officer and as a lawyer. I believe everyone on a team is important, regardless of rank. A leader cannot succeed unless every person on the team understands they are needed. When everyone is encouraged to step up and contribute, the team performs more effectively. I learned early on that creating an inclusive environment is not just the right thing to do, it is essential for success. ■



**Jonathan Harmon** litigates on behalf of Fortune 500 companies across the country, including some of the largest U.S. financial institutions and telecom giants. Reach him at [jharmon@mcquirewoods.com](mailto:jharmon@mcquirewoods.com).

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