

Buchalter CEO On Why Law Firms Should Hire Military Vets

By Tracey Read

Law360 (May 24, 2024, 11:34 AM EDT) -- In 1948, attorney Irwin R. Buchalter joined California lawyers Jerry Nemer and Murray Fields and founded a firm to serve the Los Angeles area's growing postwar commercial community.

In 1979, Buchalter Nemer Fields & Younger was established when Evelle Younger, former Los Angeles district attorney and attorney general of California, joined the practice as a senior partner.

The addition of Younger — who served in the U.S. Army during World War II and the Korean War — was the start of the firm's penchant for hiring military veterans, said Adam J. Bass, president and CEO of Buchalter PC.

The firm now has over 470 lawyers and 12 offices. But although its size and footprint have increased, Buchalter continues to see the value of hiring military personnel as attorneys and nonattorney staff.

"We hold a special place for veterans," Bass said. "We have a bunch of veterans who are lawyers and then we have a number of nonlawyer staff who are as well. Our director of IT is a former Marine. My assistant — we worked together for 25 years before she passed away — was an Army vet."

Buchalter currently has 12 military veteran attorneys. Less than 1% of the population serves in the U.S. military, and 2.5% of the attorneys at Buchalter are veterans, according to the firm.

Bass said he thinks of hiring veterans as another way to create a fully integrated and well-balanced firm, similar to ethnic and racial diversity.

"Veterans on average are just a terrific addition to a law firm," he added. "We can never pay them back for their service. But at least we can help in a small way."

Bass added that veterans come with built-in leadership skills.

"Even among our staff who started as enlisted soldiers, most of them moved up and served in officer positions," he said. "That's a great leadership situation. And everything in the military works on a team basis. And a law firm is a team-based environment."

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Adam J. Bass
Buchalter

In addition, veterans tend to be selfless and put others before themselves. Attorney veterans generally are all about being part of the firm and put the clients' needs before their own. They also have problem-solving skills for difficult situations, resilience, and a great work ethic, he said.

"There is also an incredible spirit of volunteers in the service," Bass said. "Whether it's doing a Habitat for Humanity home or whatever it is, they're always the first people to say, 'I'm in.' And when there's a work project that needs to be done, they're the first ones to say: 'I'll help out. I'll be there. Whatever you need.'"

Bass said he also has a special, personal connection to veterans. His father was in the U.S. Navy during the Korean War, his grandfather served in the Army during World War II and his uncle was in the Air Force during the Korean War.

"Most of my relatives served, so there's that," he said of his interest in veterans. "In our San Diego office, I can look out the windows and into San Diego Bay and see the aircraft carriers stationed there and Naval Air Station North Island — which is where my dad had been stationed — and that kind of brings it all around."

One of Buchalter's veterans, Marcus J. Williams, a corporate practice group shareholder, served in the U.S. Marines and then the Navy as a flight officer, Bass said. Williams is a Federal Aviation Administration-licensed airline transport pilot with ratings in single-engine and multiengine airplanes, single-engine seaplanes and gliders.

"He was an infantry officer in the Marine Corps, and he then became a naval aviator who flew attack fighter jets," Bass said of Williams. "If you want to know that you can rely on someone to deliver in an intense, high stakes environment, take a guy who's landed a fighter plane on an aircraft carrier. He's just an amazing, amazing guy."

Los Angeles-based Bill Holbrow, co-chair of the firm's intellectual property litigation group, is a former first-chair trial attorney in the Air Force Judge Advocate General's Corps.

"Bill actually got his law degree while serving in the Air Force," Bass said.

Benjamin D. Wigger is a special counsel in the firm's San Francisco office and a former captain in the Marines who was an F/A-18 pilot.

"He went from flying a fighter jet to intellectual property law," Bass said with a laugh.

Another firm veteran is Marshall Olney, a Los Angeles-based tax, benefits and estate planning attorney. Olney is a former Army officer and Black Hawk helicopter aviator.

"Marshall was deployed in Liberia during the Ebola breakout and was there as part of the U.S. mission to fight the spread of disease," Bass said. "So it's not just fighting or conflicts, but it's also doing a lot of good in the community."

Bass said as Memorial Day approaches, it's important to remember not only those who made the ultimate sacrifice for our country, but also the veterans who are still here and fought for our freedoms.

"Especially as lawyers and law firms, where we are in the middle of justice and living in a democratic society," he added.

--Editing by Robert Rudinger.

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