



Judge Paul Warner Veterans Court, District of Utah

“Large doors turn on small hinges,” is an adage that U.S. Magistrate Judge Paul Warner has found to be true during his 38 year legal career. It was a legal career, however, that almost never was. After graduating from Brigham Young University in 1973 with a degree in English, a young Judge Warner was trying to decide what to do with his life. That year marked the beginning of BYU’s law school, and Judge Warner became a member of the charter class. Judge Warner did not go to law school because he had a desire to be an attorney; he will simply tell you that law school seemed to be a respectable alternative to finding a real job. While in law school, Judge Warner realized that he made the correct decision. While taking a criminal trial practice class from Professor Woody Deem, Judge Warner found his calling in life: to be a trial attorney.

During his third year of law school, Judge Warner was looking for a job that would get him into a courtroom as soon as possible. Even though he comes from a proud military family (a grandfather fought in the trenches of France during World War I and his father was in the Army Air Corp in World War II), Judge Warner did not immediately consider serving in the military. However, a sharp naval recruiter—not an attorney, but a pilot—convinced Judge Warner to join the Navy by promising him the opportunity to try lots of cases. This was all a budding trial lawyer needed to hear. Judge Warner quickly joined the U.S. Navy’s Judge Advocate General’s (JAG) Corps.

Military Service

Serving in the JAG, Judge Warner honed his skills as a trial lawyer, trying many jury trials. He was not only honored to be serving his country, but he was privileged to serve with “top notch first-rate” military lawyers. In the JAG, Judge Warner’s first assignment was as a criminal defense attorney. He was then reassigned to a position as a criminal prosecutor within the JAG because, in the words of his superior officers, he was winning too many cases as a defense attorney.



After six successful years as a Navy JAG, Judge Warner decided to join the civilian world and took a position with the Utah Attorney General’s Office in the litigation section. Upon leaving the Navy, Judge Warner followed the advice of his veteran father and joined the Utah National Guard. Judge Warner remained with the Utah National Guard until his retirement in 2006, having achieved the rank of colonel.

Notwithstanding his service in the Utah National Guard, Judge Warner continued to develop his civilian career. In 1998, he was appointed by President Bill Clinton to be the U.S. attorney for the District of Utah. Judge Warner was reappointed to the same position by

President George W. Bush, and served as U.S. attorney until 2006, when he was appointed as a U.S. magistrate judge.

Veterans Court

Judge Warner's 31 years in the military significantly impacted his decision to start the first federal Veterans Court in the country. In 2010, Judge Warner accompanied his father-in-law to a medical appointment at the Veterans Affairs (VA) medical center. Judge Warner's father-in-law was a veteran of World War II and a survivor of the Bataan Death March. While Judge Warner sat in the waiting room, he picked up a copy of the *Vanguard* magazine, the VA's premier employee publication. In the *Vanguard*, Judge Warner read an article about Judge Robert T. Russell in Buffalo, N.Y., running a veteran's court in state court. As he read the article, the proverbial light bulb turned on in his head. He thought that a veterans court could be valuable in the federal system as well. That very same day, Judge Warner made contact with Scott Hill, the head of mental health services at the VA in Salt Lake City, Utah. Hill quickly arranged a meeting with Judge Warner and various individuals from the VA, at which Judge Warner met specialists in a variety of areas, including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), hearing, homelessness, employment, and prosthetics. Judge Warner was surprised and pleased to learn about the multiple resources provided by the VA that were available to veterans. The VA professionals were very supportive of his proposal for a Veterans Court and they committed to assisting the court.

Now that Judge Warner knew that the resources were in place, he just needed to get the individual veterans to the VA for the help they needed. Judge Warner's idea was to identify veterans who had been charged with federal misdemeanor crimes and handle all of their cases in a Veterans Calendar (later becoming Veterans Court). Judge Warner's idea was to start in a very modest way and see how the court would develop.

Judge Warner presented his idea to, and secured the approval of, then Chief Judge Tena Campbell and the other district judges in Utah. In April 2010, having received the support of his colleagues on the bench, in Judge Warner launched the Veterans Calendar.

The Veterans Court draws its cases from the Central Violations Bureau calendar. That is the calendar where all petty and misdemeanor offenses are handled. The Veterans Court is run similar to any other misdemeanor calendar with a prosecutor, federal defender, and a probation officer from the U.S. Probation Office. The only difference is the presence of the veterans justice out-

reach coordinator, who acts as Judge Warner's liaison with the VA.

When an individual appears for the first time in the Veteran's Court, Judge Warner introduces himself to the individual. He notes that occasionally the veterans appearing before him give him respect as a former senior military officer, not as a judge. He is able to quickly gain the veterans' trust because they know that he has walked in their shoes and knows where they come from.

After Judge Warner gives them an introduction to the program, they are further interviewed by a social worker from the VA to determine eligibility for VA benefits. Participation in Veterans Court is voluntary—if the individual does not want to be interviewed or otherwise participate in Veterans Court, their case is handled like any other misdemeanor case. If the individual consents to having their case heard in Veteran's Court and the individual qualifies for VA benefits, the individual proceeds with the program.

The typical veteran participates in Veterans Court for 6-12 months. In that period of time, the individual will have monthly personal appearances before the court. In between monthly court appearances, the veteran goes to the VA, receiving benefits, treatment, and other help that is customized to the individual's needs. At the end of the case, if all directives of the court have been completed and the veteran is doing well in treatment, the individual's misdemeanor citation is sometimes dismissed or resolved with a period of probation.

An important part of Veterans Court is that the veteran takes advantage of the many resources available at the VA. This includes treatment, attending classes, training, and counseling. For many veterans, especially those suffering from mental or emotional problems, the VA can be difficult to navigate. Judge Warner knows this better than most. Judge Warner currently goes to the VA for his own medical appointments. He receives no special treatment when attending these appointments; he sets his own appointments and he waits in line. He has avoided receiving preferential treatment because he wants to know what the veterans that come into his courtroom are experiencing when they go to the VA.

Among the individuals in Veterans Court, Judge Warner is especially concerned about veterans suffering from PTSD. "We send these young healthy people to war and they come back broken. We have a responsibility to help make them whole again," Judge Warner explains. He knows that veterans have a warrior's mentality, that soldiers are trained to be strong. Often individuals suffering do not seek professional treatment, but rather self-



The front (far left) and back of the challenge coin that Judge Warner presents to the veterans who complete the Veterans Court.

medicate with alcohol and drugs. “There is no shame in being a wounded warrior,” Judge Warner tells veterans. He feels a compelling duty to help wounded warriors become whole.

Challenge Coins

Challenge coins, about the size of a silver dollar, bear an organization’s insignia or emblem and are carried by the organization’s members. These coins are believed to have originated in the U.S. military during World War I to prove membership in an organization and to enhance morale; it is to be carried by the servicemember at all times. As the tradition goes, if a member is “challenged” he must present his coin to prove that he is carrying it with him. Any individual that is unable to produce a coin has to buy a round of drinks for all those who were able to produce their coin.

Today, challenge coins are used to recognize outstanding performance of duty and to build morale. They are often presented by a commanding officer, and are a constant reminder to the carrier of the coin of his or her extraordinary achievements.

Judge Warner has instituted the use of challenge coins in his Veterans Court. Every individual who successfully completes the Veterans Court receives a challenge coin directly from Judge Warner, a token usually much more meaningful to the veteran than a mere paper certificate of achievement. He tells them it is in recognition of how far they have come, and encourages the individual to keep the coin with him at all times as a constant reminder of success his in Veterans Court. The coins presented by Judge Warner bear the emblem of the U.S. district court on one side, and on the other side have the symbol of the U.S. Department of

Veterans Affairs with the words “District of Utah Veterans Court” around the top of the coin and “First In the Nation” around the bottom of the coin.

Success

One manifestation of the success of Veterans Court is in its growth. Veterans Court is no longer limited to individuals facing misdemeanor citations; other judges in the district court have made enrollment in Veterans Court a condition of pretrial release in pending felony cases, or a condition of probation or supervised release in post-conviction felony cases. If an individual charged with a felony is successful in Veterans Court, the veteran is rewarded with a formal letter written by Judge Warner on his or her behalf and sent to the district judge handling the case.

For the veterans who are lucky enough to find themselves in Judge Warner’s Veterans Court, large doors are opening in their lives, albeit on small hinges. Judge Warner helps veterans open these large doors one at a time. “The goal of Veterans Court” stated Judge Warner, “is to get a veteran to the best place he or she can be.” Success is not the same for every veteran. However, the success of Veterans Court is measured one improved life at a time. ☺