



Hon. Robert R. Rigsby

Associate Judge, Superior Court of the District of Columbia

by CPT Emily R. Ittner

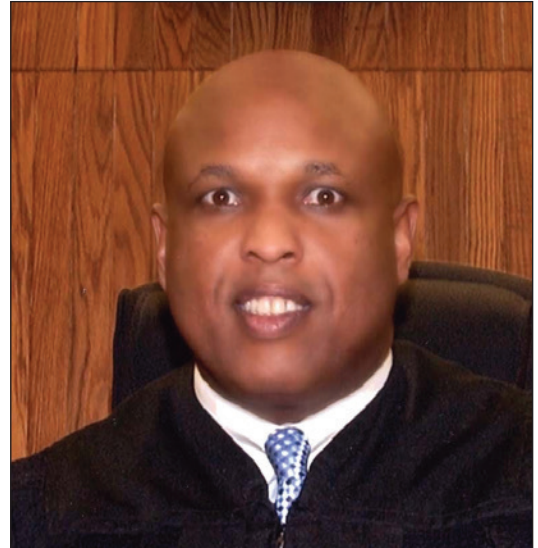


Captain Emily R. Ittner is an appellate attorney at Defense Appellate Division, United States Army Legal Services Agency. She represents soldiers convicted of felonies and capital offenses before the Army Court of Criminal Appeals, Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces, and United States Supreme Court. © 2026 Emily R. Ittner. All rights reserved.

Judge Robert R. Rigsby's path to the bench is anything but conventional. Although he is the son of a World War II veteran, becoming a lawyer and joining the military were not part of his original plans. He was born in San Francisco and raised in Vallejo, California. In 1981, Judge Rigsby and his brother Rick were arrested for shoplifting and ended up in juvenile court. A mentor at the Omega Boys [and Girls] Club in Vallejo¹ encouraged Judge Rigsby to join the Navy Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (NJROTC), a decision that wholly changed the trajectory of his life.²

Inspired by this experience, Judge Rigsby later went on to earn an ROTC scholarship at San Jose State University, where he also played football. He pledged a fraternity and as a freshman, nearly ended up on academic probation after earning a 1.6 grade point average (GPA). Although Judge Rigsby's father only possessed a third grade education and could not read or write, he also had an unparalleled work ethic after serving as a cook for 50 years at the California Maritime Academy. After finding out about his GPA, Judge Rigsby's parents moved into the second bedroom of his college apartment to put him on a path to success. Judge Rigsby's days began with breakfast at 0430 and lasted well into the evening with classes, football practice, and homework. Judge Rigsby's parents told him they would stay with him as long as it took until he received straight A's. Luckily, Judge Rigsby academically excelled (and received straight A's) for the rest of his college career at San Jose State. He graduated, with distinction, with a Bachelor of Science degree.

Describing the impact of his parents on his career, Judge Rigsby stated, "I was born into a family of public servants. My parents made it clear that we had to be part of our democracy." At the end of his sophomore year of college, Judge Rigsby commissioned as a Second Lieutenant, and military police officer, in the U.S. Army Reserve. He describes his commissioning as "the happiest day of [his] father's life." After learning that the military would help fund his law school education, Judge Rigsby decided to become an attorney and judge advocate. He attended



the University of California College of the Law, San Francisco (formerly UC Hastings)) before transitioning to active duty. Judge Rigsby describes his 33-year career in the military (1981-2014) and as a member of the Judge Advocate General's Corps (JAG Corps) as the "best job in the world" where he "loved the people and mission."

Judge Rigsby served on active duty from 1987 to 1992, where he took on a variety of challenging assignments around the world as a prosecutor, defense counsel, administrative law attorney, and law of war attorney. He began his JAG career at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. Judge Rigsby has vivid memories from his first assignment, such as graduating from Air Assault School and leading a professional development event for his office for Black History Week. He also recalls accidentally elbowing the Commanding General (CG) during lunch on one of his first days on the job. Luckily, the CG ended up becoming a close mentor and running buddy. While on active duty, Judge Rigsby served in Egypt, Israel, Korea, Japan, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. He had a variety of fascinating international assignments, including serving as the legal advisor to an infantry battalion in Israel and with the Multinational Force and Observers in Sinai, Egypt.

Judge Rigsby met his wife, Judge Anna Black-

burne-Rigsby, in September 1991. He proposed to her two months later, at the same time that he received deployment orders to Turkey.³ Judge Blackburne-Rigsby is an accomplished jurist in her own right and currently serves as the Chief Judge of the District of Columbia Court of Appeals.

After transitioning from active duty to the U.S. Army Reserve in 1992, Judge Rigsby served as an assistant U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia. Afterward, he joined the Office of Corporate Counsel for the District of Columbia, now renamed the Office of the Attorney General. He held a variety of roles of increasing responsibility, culminating in his appointment as the attorney general for the District of Columbia in February 2000. As the attorney general, Judge Rigsby oversaw 225 lawyers and a \$48 million budget. He served as the D.C. attorney general until 2002, when he was nominated to serve as a judge at the Superior Court of the District of Columbia by President George W. Bush.

In June 2003, Judge Rigsby was appointed to serve as a military judge. In 2009, Judge Rigsby made history by becoming the first military judge in the Army to deploy full-time to an active theater of war, serving as the sole military judge in Kuwait, Afghanistan, and Iraq. He was awarded a Bronze Star Medal for his service. Judge Rigsby was selected to serve as the Chief U.S. Army Reserve Trial Judge in 2010. After over three decades of military service, he retired from the U.S. Army in May 2014. Reflecting on his military career, he said, “For 33 years of wearing the uniform, I feel blessed. I was so proud to put it on every single day of my life. I felt I made a contribution and felt the Army gave me an opportunity few would give to an inner-city boy. I am grateful to serve my country.”⁴

Inspired by the incredible role models who shaped him, Judge Rigsby has always prioritized being a mentor and giving back to his community. He has served on countless boards, including the District of Columbia National Guard Youth Challenge Foundation; Capitol Area Council for the Boy Scouts of America; Washington Healthcare, Justice, and Economic Empowerment Coalition; and the Omega Boys and Girls Club in his hometown of Vallejo, California. He has also taught at local universities and law schools and instructed military judges and lawyers in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Guyana, Jamaica, Grenada, Bahamas, St. Kitts, and Barbados.

In December 2010, Judge Rigsby began the Law and Government Explorers Program, also known as “Law Camp,” for inner city students in Washington, D.C. The mission of Law Camp is to mentor and enrich the lives of underprivileged children by exposing them to a mock trial program. Law Camp has now expanded to over 50 students and 25 mentors.

Burth Lopez is an Administrative Law Judge at the D.C. Office of Administrative Hearings who has appeared in Judge Rigsby’s courtroom as an attorney and had the opportunity to work closely with him in

chambers as his judicial law clerk. Judge Lopez has also served as a mentor for Law Camp. Judge Lopez stated that Judge Rigsby is “in his most essential form” in his interactions with Law Camp students and is “motivated by a deep calling and love for others (especially youth), which he shows by all of his efforts to help others find their own capacity to be great.” Describing Judge Rigsby in the courtroom, Judge Lopez said, “Judge Rigsby has a no-nonsense approach to his cases that cuts to the heart of a matter but is also fair and compassionate.”

Judge Rigsby describes his most rewarding cases as those in which he has guided a criminal defendant onto the right path. In one memorable instance, Judge Rigsby described a troubled juvenile defendant who appeared in his courtroom. The teenager had been arrested 12 times and initially could not read or write. Judge Rigsby created a structure in which the teenager lived with his grandmother, underwent weekly drug testing, had a curfew, was assigned a mentor, and completed a weekly book report. The accountability and structure provided by Judge Rigsby ultimately was the catalyst in the boy’s positive transformation. The formerly problematic teen not only successfully completed probation but ended up graduating from college and later attending Howard University School of Law.

Describing what he has learned over the years, Judge Rigsby emphasized the importance of being “invested in what you do” and “treat[ing] everyone with dignity and respect.” When asked what inspires him, Judge Rigsby responded, “Public service and family are everything to me. My wife allowed me to go overseas to be a judge in Kuwait and Afghanistan, and I couldn’t have done it without her support.” Judge Rigsby is also motivated by a steadfast belief in the rule of law and the importance of three separate but equal branches of government. He stated, “We [judges] have an ethical, moral, and legal obligation to always get it right, so that democracy will not only survive, but thrive.” ☺

Endnotes

¹The Continentals of Omega Boys and Girls Club was founded in Vallejo, California by Philmore Graham in 1966 to mentor young people and guide them toward future success. Richard Freedman, *Philmore Graham, Omega Boys and Girls Club founder, dies*, VALLEJO TIMES HERALD (Aug. 29, 2018), <https://www.timesheraldonline.com/2014/06/13/philmore-graham-omega-boys-and-girls-club-founder-dies/>.

²*Id.* See also Richard Freedman, *Judge Rigsby decides to end Army career*, VALLEJO TIMES HERALD (Jun. 17, 2014), <https://www.timesheraldonline.com/2014/06/17/judge-rigsby-decides-to-end-army-career/>.

³Richard Freedman, *Judge Rigsby decides to end Army career*, VALLEJO TIMES HERALD (Jun. 17, 2014), <https://www.timesheraldonline.com/2014/06/17/judge-rigsby-decides-to-end-army-career/>.

⁴*Id.*