

by Joe Surkiewicz

Defending Our Defenders

JIM RICHARDSON '73 doesn't like shortcuts. After serving in the Marines for 12 years—including a stint in Vietnam as a field artillery officer—he knows they can be deadly.

In 1967, Richardson's artillery battery was north of Danang and received a routine resupply of 100-pound artillery rounds. His sergeant insisted on not only counting the number of new rounds, but also recording the lot numbers, a time-consuming chore required by regulations, but skipped by most other units. The sergeant noticed some rounds that didn't look "right," and set them aside for a more thorough inspection.

Several days later, another nearby unit was in the middle of a fire mission when a round from the lot the sergeant had questioned exploded just outside of the muzzle of the cannon, wounding several Marines. "The decision to shortcut the procedure for receiving ammunition had resulted in the injuries to several Marines, and could have easily caused a death," Richardson recalled. "My young sergeant did things correctly and probably saved some lives."

Incidents like that help explain why Richardson has dedicated his post-retirement career to helping other veterans get the benefits they earned: "I know how the system is supposed to work, but people take shortcuts. That's something that bothers most military officers. As a field artillery officer, you know that shortcuts can get someone killed. In personnel matters, a shortcut can mean that someone gets a discharge they don't deserve, and they're out on the street."

"I started doing this out of a sense of obligation," continued Richardson, who lives in Queenstown, MD. "I've been close to the Department of Defense my entire career. I ran the review section for the Department of the Navy for over two-and-a-half years, where I reviewed over

10,000 discharges. My sense of obligation is to give something back."

Before retiring, Richardson served as a senior attorney for the Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces for 26 years. He also was president of the Federal Bar Association in 2008.

After retirement, Richardson started volunteering with Mid Shore Pro Bono, where he's now board president. He is also general counsel to Veterans Service Corp., a nonprofit shelter for temporarily homeless veterans in Salisbury. His work with homeless veterans led him to the Homeless Persons Representation Project (HPRP) in Baltimore, where he helps veterans denied military benefits because they were discharged with "bad paper."

Jim Richardson '73



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“Bad paper” is a discharge “other than honorable” or a court martial. “It’s stigmatizing and generally cuts off any military benefits,” Richardson explained. “Procedures have changed over the years.”

Up until the late 60s or early 70s on, you had very few rights when you were discharged. Then, due process became the norm from the 70s on. So we had fewer of those problems, such as misconduct issues resulting from PTSD and alcohol abuse. Behavior became the underlying cause of the discharge.”

These days, Richardson is an advisor and mentor to other pro bono attorneys. “Helping vets with bad paper is dependent on pro bono activity,” he said. “There are very few veterans with bad paper who can afford to hire a lawyer. And it’s not an area of law that’s going to interest most attorneys, because there are usually no damages to collect.”

It doesn’t require a military background to help a veteran. “As a pro bono attorney, you need to understand a little about how the military works, but not too much,” Richardson explained. “We’ll train you and get you familiar with the buzz words. We can tell you how it works. If you understand litigation, you can help someone. It’s all about rebutting presumptions. In fact, people without military backgrounds have a fresh, clean perspective which can be very helpful.”

Private lawyers are exactly what veterans need to help them with a system that is often bewildering. “A lawyer can take the facts, arrange them and present them. But the clients can’t pay \$300 an hour,” he said. “For a private client, I need \$5,000 up front and then I charge \$300 an hour. People who wander into HPRP don’t have that kind of money. We need more volunteer lawyers who can help these folks.”

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Joe Surkiewicz is director of communications at the Homeless Persons Representation Project in Baltimore and the “Of Service” columnist for the Daily Record.

If you are interested in volunteering for the Veterans’ Benefits Project, please contact the Homeless Persons Representation Project at 410-685-6589, or at info@hprplaw.org.