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Hinshaw Veteran Spotlight: Conrad Nowak, Chicago

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Our Veterans Employee Resource Group is pleased to bring you a continuing series of "Veteran Spotlights" that highlight different Hinshaw veterans or military family members. We thank our veterans for their service, their commitment to the veteran community, our firm, and the firm's clients. Today, we introduce you to Conrad Nowak, partner in our Chicago, Illinois office.

What motivated you to join the military?

A number of reasons. First, my parents were immigrants from Poland, and my father was actually a political refugee from what was then a communist country. Growing up, I heard countless stories of appreciation for what the United States meant to my parents in terms of opportunity, freedom, and the ability to raise a family in a diverse, open society. My grandparents and other extended family in Poland fought against the Germans in WWII, so I grew up hearing about the Polish underground, various battles, and military service in general. This created a very patriotic and grateful environment in my household, and that always stuck with me. That, coupled with the fact that I was an athletic, driven and adventurous young man—perhaps a little too adventurous at times, my mother claims—made it a somewhat natural choice.

How did you decide what branch to join and can you give us a brief history of your service?

I was very fond of military history and history in general as a young man, so I read a lot and was familiar with the various branches, their responsibilities, and opportunities within. All were great, but for me, it was the Army, and I enlisted right after high school in 1991. This might be a generational reference, but do you recall the scene from the film "The Breakfast Club" where Bender runs down the hallway yelling, "I wanna be an Airborne Ranger?" Well, the U.S. Army operates the only airborne/paratrooper school in the military, so I thought my chances were best there. With Reserve time and other temporary duty assignments, I served a total of nine years, finishing as a non-commissioned officer. During that time I had the opportunity to serve in a variety of units, but my most rewarding assignment came when I applied to transfer into the U.S. Army Special Forces (SF) and was accepted. The particular SF Group I was assigned to had a regional responsibility and focus on East and Central Europe, the Balkans, Ukraine, Russia, and Caucasus countries. I served on what was called an SOT-A (Special Operations Team – Alpha) in a military intelligence capacity. With my fluency in Polish and knowledge of other Slavic languages

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and cultures, this was a good fit. As many in the military will tell you, it's not so much what you did, but who you did it with. I was extremely lucky, as a very young soldier, to work with and be mentored by some of the most exceptional individuals I have ever known—a truly humbling experience. And while my own experience was limited since I left the military in 2000, many of my colleagues—indeed, anyone in the service who deployed overseas post-9/11—continue to humble me to this day. In many ways, this was mirrored in my experience when I started at Hinshaw. The ability to work with some incredible lawyers and colleagues, learning, and growing in the profession.

What skills did you learn in the military that have been transferable to your work at a law firm?

There's quite a few that transfer quite well, in my opinion, including inviting and negotiating challenges, stress, and working in a dynamic environment. Focused teamwork, pride in your organization, and being "mission-minded" also come to the forefront. Developing lasting relationships based on trust, leadership (which means both following and leading) are as integral to the success of a military unit as they are to a law firm. Trying to do more, volunteering, and being active are similarly favored and rewarded—always saying "yes." But one of the less obvious qualities the military instills in you is an extremely good sense of humor. When your life consists of getting up while the world sleeps, carrying heavy things long distances fueled by questionably flavored and preserved government-provided food sources in all kinds of weather ("if it ain't raining, we ain't training"), you quickly develop ways to laugh off your particularly assigned momentary misfortune. In military-speak, you "embrace the suck." While we seldom encounter such extremes as lawyers, plenty of things happen in our daily practices that make the ability to laugh a really good thing. Ask a veteran to show you how!

And of course, one can't talk about the military without discussing diversity. There aren't many places where you can have a Polish kid from Chicago, one from rural Tennessee, another an immigrant from Korea, and yet another from Compton, California, all standing side by side—and that was just my basic training class. While college is supposed to provide a similar experience, it tends to be more social. In the military you rely heavily on each other to succeed every single day, and social bonding is just the frosting. It's an incredible environment to expose different groups to each other that might not have naturally crossed paths elsewhere. Wherever you came from, whatever your parents did or the color of your skin, we all wore the same flag on our sleeves.

Thank you for being a leader of our new ERG, what do you hope to accomplish and/or achieve?

Several things. First, I want to highlight the amazing veterans and military family members within the firm. We have had an informal veteran's group in existence for many years that was started by Carl Fisher and Tom McGarry, so many of the Hinshaw veterans and supporters have known each other for quite some time. Now I'd like everyone else to get to know them too! They come with an incredible array of experiences, wisdom and accomplishments that I think contribute wonderfully to our firm culture. I would also like to utilize this experience to help our firm, clients and community. Finally, I would like to provide a resource for veterans to come together and support each other.

What is one thing about you that might surprise people?

After all that neat training and wonderful familiarity with the great outdoors, for almost 20 years after I got out you couldn't pay me enough to spend a night in a tent. No chance. National Parks? All yours, you can keep them. Oh, you say you can see the stars at night? Awesome, I'll be in the hot tub. Fresh air? Thanks, I'll just turn up the A/C. I vividly remember the many shivering, wet, freezing, hot, humid, nasty evenings I had in the service and said, nope, never again. It wasn't until I had two young boys, growing up fast, and they wanted a taste of the outdoors—so of course I had to show them, and continue to do so. And you know what? Those modern camping mattresses and fancy fiber hiking attire aren't half bad after all. So, at least for now, see you out on the trails!