

USAWC Fellow Focus – A professional development opportunity

By Patricia Hayes, USAWC Fellows Program Staff 28 May 2023



COL Rob Rodrigues is an Army War College Fellow at the U.S. Department of Justice - Office of Legal Policy, Judge Advocate. We chatted with him recently to hear about his Fellowship experience at DOJ.

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I've wanted for some time recently to hear about the Fellowship experience at DOJ.

Can you tell me about your fellowship this year?

The fellowship is at the U.S. Department of Justice in Washington, DC. I work in the Office of Legal Policy, which develops and implements significant policy initiatives and handles special projects that implicate the interests of multiple DOJ components. I've been fortunate to assume responsibilities related to the U.S. government's Unmanned Aerial System ("drone") policy. The biggest highlight in my first few months has been chairing DOJ's UAS Working Group, which brings together UAS program managers and legal counsel from across the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives, Bureau of Prisons, FBI, DEA, U.S. Marshals Service, and others to share information and address challenges that affect the use of UAS in conducting law enforcement investigations or protecting federal facilities and persons.

What's been your favorite part of being an AWC Fellow?

This fellowship has been an incredible learning and professional development opportunity. I've gained a true insight and appreciation of how the U.S. government works at the highest levels. The interagency process is very different from what I'm used to in the operational Army. In my regular duties, I am used to dealing with discrete issues and a clearly defined chain of command. In this fellowship, I have had to take a different approach to problem-solving. I frequently deal with other federal agencies with unique interests and equal standing to support or challenge an initiative. There is no chain of command to give guidance or make a final call. We're forced to work together to devise a mutually agreeable solution. In the backdrop are policy and political considerations that don't frequently factor into Army decision-making.

Any unique or memorable experiences because of fellowship?

I recently had the opportunity to observe a training event of the ATF Special Response Team---similar to a SWAT Team. They used a mock residence setup. I observed how they incorporated drones and working dogs into their operation. After watching the team from inside the house with a drone buzzing past my head, a working dog barking ferociously, and a 5-man squad shouting commands with rifles raised in my direction, I was ready to surrender immediately, even though I was just an observer.

How has your experience been at your agency? What surprised you?

My experience has indeed been remarkable. I was welcomed from day one and integrated into the office like any other team member. I've worked with career officials, political appointees, and several former Army officers within DOJ. Regardless of politics or background, the office is entirely dedicated to seeking justice, enforcing the laws of the United States, and enabling DOJ components to do the same. Much like in the Army, this singularity of purpose brings everyone together in a collegial atmosphere to accomplish this meaningful work. My biggest surprise was the amount of responsibility I was given in a concise amount of time.

What advice would you give officers interested in getting the most out of their Fellowship year at your institution?

One enduring piece of advice I've received in the Army is the warning that you should never volunteer for anything, lest you get stuck with some undesirable additional duty or responsibility. I promptly forgot this advice when I got to DOJ and raised my hand to get involved in as many things as I could handle (and perhaps some beyond that).

My opportunities here have only been possible by displaying a willingness to take on responsibility for something outside my comfort zone or expertise. In other words, what you get from this fellowship is what you will put into it. The work has been more challenging and time-consuming than anticipated. Still, the experience has been invaluable in gaining a strategic perspective on how the federal government works at the highest levels. To be able to represent the DOJ on several important and complex issues has been professionally satisfying and an essential step in my development as a senior leader in the Army.

What's next for you after this fellowship?

I'll be going to the Chief, Army Defense Appellate Division at Ft. Belvoir, VA.