

## Taking Justice to a War Zone

D.C. Judge and Army Reserve Officer to Oversee Trials in Iraq and Kuwait

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Normally, when D.C. Superior Court Judge Robert R. Rigsby dons his black robe and takes the bench to hear cases, he doesn't strap a 9mm gun to his hip. But next month, he will.

On April 25, Rigsby, 48, will be the District's first sitting judge to leave for a war zone. He's headed for Iraq to oversee military trials there and in Kuwait. The cases involve U.S. soldiers accused of murder, rape, desertion, robbery and mistreatment of prisoners. His first trial is scheduled for May 5.

Sitting in his chambers in the courthouse, Rigsby reviewed a two-page list of items the Army has told him to bring for his six-month tour. It includes a pair of boots, six sets of undershirts and underwear, a rigger belt, an alarm clock, a toiletry kit and a Kevlar helmet. He will pick up the helmet at Fort Benning, Ga., his first stop after he leaves the District en route to the Middle East.

"Being a judge and being a soldier is pretty much the same," he said. "You take an oath to protect and defend the Constitution. That's what I'm doing."

Last week, at a crowded Superior Court send-off ceremony for Rigsby, Col. Stephen R. Henley, chief trial judge for the Army, said he picked Rigsby from among 40 Army judges worldwide to be the first to serve in a combat zone. "He's a brilliant lawyer and has outstanding courtroom skills," Henley said. "He was a logical choice."

Rigsby will be stationed in Kuwait but will travel to and from Iraq.



Julian Rigsby reads to his dad, Judge Robert Rigsby. Julian's advice for the trip to Iraq: "Remember: Stay in the back." (By Dominic Bracco II For The Washington Post)

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Anna Blackburne-Rigsby sits on the D.C. Court of Appeals, Robert R. Rigsby sits on D.C. Superior Court, and Julian Rigsby, 11, sits on his father's shoulders. (By Dominic Bracco II For The Washington Post)

Until this deployment, as with most judges, most of Rigsby's battles have been in the courtroom. Superior Court is the District's main trial court. As part of the court's criminal division, Rigsby oversees assault and drug cases.

Other roles have included overseeing the five-person judicial committee that decided in 2007 to oust Roy L. Pearson from his job as a D.C. administrative law judge. Pearson had sued a Northeast Washington dry cleaner, seeking \$54 million in damages over a claim that the business had lost a pair of his pants.

Rigsby has been in the Army for 28 years, the past 20 as a member of the Reserves. He was commissioned a second lieutenant in 1981 while a student at San Jose State University. He then attended Hastings College of Law at the University of California at San Francisco.

After completing law school, Rigsby went on active duty as a judge advocate general's officer, otherwise known as a JAG. He was promoted to colonel in 2008.

His father was a cook in the Army, and his mother was a private nurse. Public service, Rigsby said, was a calling. He remembers that as a youth growing up in Vallejo, Calif., he saw an African American four-star general. The Air Force fighter pilot was the first black man Rigsby had ever seen wearing shiny bars on a uniform. That was something, he decided then, that he wanted to do.

"I consider this an honor and a privilege to be joining these men and women overseas to fight for the Constitution -- to fight for this country," Rigsby said.