



Washington, D.C. Judge Heads to Iraq

By James Wright
AFRO Staff Writer



D.C. Superior Court Associate Judge Robert Rigsby is the first judge from the District to be deployed in a war zone. He will hear military cases in Iraq and Kuwait. (Photo courtesy of D.C. Superior Court)

"We will miss Judge Rigsby," said Satterfield at Rigsby's send-off ceremony on April 16. "I think it's going to be a loss to the court and the D.C. community when you leave."

Rigsby was born in San Francisco and raised in Vallejo, Calif. He has a bachelor's degree from San Jose State University and was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Army Reserves after his sophomore year.

He graduated from the University of California-San Francisco, the University of Hastings College of Law and went on active duty as an attorney in the Army Judge Advocates' General Corps from 1987-1992.

After active duty, Rigsby worked as an assistant U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia, in middle-level leadership positions in the Office of the District of Columbia Corporation Counsel and as the interim and, ultimately, head of the Corporation Counsel.

He was appointed to the D.C. Superior Court by President Bush on March 4, 2002 and the U.S. Senate confirmed his nomination three months later. Rigsby was appointed a military judge by the Judge Advocate of the United States Army in 2003.

While it's unusual for a judge to be called into active duty, other high-ranking public servants have also performed military service for their country while in office. Maryland Lieutenant Gov. Anthony Brown (D), for example, has been a member of the active and reserve parts of the United States Army since 1984.

Brown is currently the highest-ranking elected official in the nation who has served a tour of duty in Iraq.

Sen. Lindsay Graham (R-S.C.), also a colonel, has served in Iraq and Afghanistan. Reps. Christopher Carney (D-Pa.) and Matt Kirk (R-Ill.) are reservists in the Army and Navy, respectively.

(April 21, 2009) - A District of Columbia judge will take an unprecedented step and leave his job and family to work as a military jurist in Iraq and Kuwait.

D.C. Superior Court Associate Judge Robert Rigsby plans to deploy on April 25, taking a break from his felony cases in the court's criminal division to hear cases of a different nature - matters dealing with military law. Rigsby, 48, said when he received the call from the Army Judge Advocate to go to the war front, he did not hesitate to say yes.

"I realize I'm the first judge from D.C. to be deployed in a war zone and I did it without a second thought," said Rigsby. "I've been an Army officer for 28 years and when I enlisted, I took an oath to defend this country against all enemies. My country needs me and I'm here to serve."

Rigsby said he will be away from the District at least six months "if not longer." He will serve as the Army's only judge in Iraq and Kuwait during his tour, overseeing cases involving soldiers such as desertions and mistreatment of enemy combatants.

Before deploying, he'll undergo some combat training for a week on how to use weapons and gas masks and getting into formation.

"Even though I'm a judge, I'm a soldier first," said Rigsby. In the reserves, he is a lieutenant colonel.

District of Columbia Superior Court Chief Judge Lee Satterfield told Rigsby that cases on his docket will be distributed to other judges in the criminal division. Satterfield also said he supports Rigsby's decision.

The hardest part for Rigsby will be leaving his wife of 17 years, District of Columbia Court of Appeals Associate Judge Anna Blackburne-Rigsby, and his son, Julian Christopher, 11. He said his wife at first was not enthusiastic about his tour of duty, but now she's fully supportive.

"My wife knew that I was an Army officer when we got married," he said. "She has accepted it and she is a strong woman but she understands that this is what I do."

Rigsby said he will miss some activities such as coaching his son's soccer team, working with the 100 Black Men of Greater Washington, participating in Shiloh Baptist Church and socializing with members of his fraternity, Omega Psi Phi. He realizes he could have gotten out of the commitment by "contacting certain people" but he chose not to.

"It's my time to go and I do it gladly," he said. "I know I'm putting my life on the line, but I think of all the wonderful things that the men and women in the war zones are doing without fanfare and I say it's worth it for my country."