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From civilian to serviceman and back

Lawyer Mat Tully has first-hand knowledge of the challenging transition former members of the military face

**By Billy DeLap
July 23, 2014**

COLONIE — It doesn't matter whether you are a career soldier or someone who has transitioned from the professional world to the military and back again several times over. Reintegrating into civilian life can be a challenge. Lt. Col. Mat Tully, founding partner of Latham-based Tully Rinckey, knows those challenges first hand, and he has used that experience as a lawyer to protect other servicemen and women from employer discrimination and help those returning from military service navigate the return to civilian life.

When Tully returned to the law firm permanently May 5 after being medically retired from the Army National Guard, it had almost doubled in size, growing from three offices to six offices with 120 employees. While it was a change for Tully, it wasn't entirely unexpected. Tully and his partner, Greg Rinckey, had planned and prepared for the growth before he left.

"Before I went, Greg and I put together a detailed five-year plan. The execution was done without me being there," said Tully, whose most recent tour kept him away from the firm for almost two years.

Tully was ordered to report for active duty in March 2012, and the following month, he left for a nine-month deployment to Afghanistan. On Aug. 7, 2012, at a forward operating base in the Logar Province, a vehicle bomb detonated on the fence line. The truck was carrying 10,000 pounds of explosives, and the concussion blast threw Tully, knocking him out and caused the roof of the building he was in to

collapse.

Drawn to serve

Tully grew up on Long Island in Massapequa — a hometown shared by a famous comedian.

“It’s where Seinfeld grew up,” Tully said. “He used to drop in the high school once in a while, and he signed my yearbook.”

Tully’s father served in the Coast Guard, but other than that, Tully is the only other person in the family to serve in the military — and the only lawyer.

When he was younger, he knew he wanted to perform some sort of community service and considered politics. He figured that most politicians were lawyers, so in 1991, he signed up for Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) and attended Hofstra University. Not wanting to be stuck all day at a desk as a lawyer, Tully decided his main job in the military would be field artillery so he could see action.

“What’s the point of being in the Army if you don’t want to do Army stuff?” he asked.

Tully would go on to be deployed five times over the course of his career, serving in Korea, Egypt, Iraq and Afghanistan.

In his most recent deployment, he was part of the Army Intelligence Security Command, performing security duties in Afghanistan. The majority of his time was spent far away from the relatively safe and secure large bases that had been established over the course of the war.

“I was able to visit 75 percent of the American facilities in Afghanistan. ... There wasn’t more than two days I wasn’t being shot at or shooting at someone,” said Tully. “I found it rewarding, and I was very glad I wasn’t a JAG stuck at a base.”

From the explosion that took him out of service, Tully sustained herniated disks, nerve damage in his back and neck, and damage to his right knee. He was transferred to a wounded warrior unit in October at Fort Benning and then to another in Concord, Mass., in January 2013.

While this was taking place, time was still moving forward in the civilian world, where Tully had a growing family and business. Just after he was wounded, his daughter was born, and the firm opened up offices in Syracuse, Buffalo and Rochester. Shortly before he was medically retired, the firm’s D.C. office was relocated to just a block away from the

White House.

Becoming a civilian again after military service can be a very difficult and challenging time. Even in a war zone, the structured life can seem easy compared to the struggles of dealing with a family and planning out daily routines. On top of that, Tully came back to better technology in the office and a company two times the size. After going from winning battles in the courtroom to battles in the field, Tully had to get re-acclimated to an office.

“It goes to the main problem most civilians go through. I had to go through new training to use phones and photocopiers,” said Tully. “I was on top when I left. I won a Supreme Court case. It’s difficult going from the top of your game to the zenith of my military game and back to civilian world.”

Family life was a challenge at first, too. Tully knew his time away was difficult for his wife and children.

“There’s very little correlation between military and civilian life, and it’s tough on the family,” Tully said. “She was pregnant and gave birth, and it was another three to four months until I was home. She was home with a 4-year-old, 2-year-old and a newborn.”

As a single person, Tully said, deployments are much easier because you have less to worry about.

“When I was deployed to Korea, I didn’t have a girlfriend. When I went to Iraq, I was married. The more the family grows, the more difficult it gets,” he said. “The kids are used to mom being the rule enforcer, cooker, maid and then, all of the sudden, there is a new guy back in the house.”

The business

After Tully and his fiancé survived the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center Sept. 11, 2001, they decided to move Upstate, where he and fellow veteran Greg Rinckey opened their firm.

Their success in part is due to a unique business model and a niche of law that became so important after 9/11 and the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom. The Uniformed Services Employment/Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) protects the rights of reservist and National Guard members and prohibits employer discrimination based on military service or obligation.

Knowing that deployments and USERRA cases would be winding down in coming years, the firm invested its gains and increased its ability to help more clients across the state and country. The law firm currently

covers everything from military law to traffic tickets and has a lawyer specializing in almost every practice in at least one of its offices. As the firm expands it has an eye on opening offices on the West Coast.

With neither he nor Rinckey having a business background, Tully jokes about the firm's unlikely success.

"Honestly, we can't figure it out. Greg and I had no business background. We have no clue how we lucked out. We got into USERRA and landmark cases. It just seems to have come without a lot of flukes," said Tully.

One of the things the firm has expanded to do is help veterans create new businesses and make the most of other opportunities the government has created to give them a chance when they enter the civilian world.

"That's part of the reason we give back as much as we do, because we realized what is working well for us today, and we want to inspire people to do great things," said Tully.