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A Mission of Justice

Air Force Capt. Sarah Carlson '04 helps Iraqis put their criminal court system on a path to success.

When asking Air Force Capt. Sarah (Williams) Carlson '04 about her job as a U.S. military attorney in Iraq, you discover there are some things she simply can't discuss.

For example, Carlson is not allowed to give specific details about cases assigned to her. "I work extremely interesting cases, many of which involve Iraqis accused of murdering or kidnapping Americans and other Iraqis."

Fortunately, there's still much Carlson can freely describe about her eight-month mission in Iraq, which she completed this summer. While still in Iraq, Carlson took time out after one of her hectic, 12-hour workdays to answer questions sent via e-mail by *IWU Magazine* editor Tim Obermiller about her recent experiences.

What is your specific assignment in Iraq?

I am one of a group of U.S. military attorneys and paralegals deployed to support the U.S. Forces here. As a liaison officer to the Central Criminal Court of Iraq, I assist Iraqi judges and investigators in prosecuting defendants detained by coalition forces for crimes ranging from possession of fake identification to murder to terrorism. We act as a link between the court and the United States. If there is information needed by the court that only the United States or its allies can provide, we attempt to get that information.

The U.S. military is turning over detention facilities to the Iraqis and I'm actively involved in that transfer. After we transfer the final detention facility to the government of Iraq in the coming weeks, we will have almost completely worked ourselves out of a job.

How were you chosen for this mission?

The Air Force tasked my home office at Robins Air Force Base, Ga., to deploy a judge advocate to Iraq in December. I told my boss that I wanted to deploy since 2008. This was my magic opportunity!

What kind of training did you have to prepare you?

I went through officer training and the judge advocate staff officer course to become a judge advocate. When I was tasked with this deployment, I completed a two-week combat skills training. I also attended an operational law course by the Army JAG School. For my specific job here, I received only on-the-job-training once I was in Iraq.

How closely do you work with Iraqi authorities on your cases? Are their cultural or language barriers that are hard to deal with?

I work every day with Iraqi judges and investigators. Many judges and investigators speak a little English and I speak a little Arabic, but not enough to get my job done. Fortunately, my team



Capt. Carlson (above) says, "Being deployed is the closest you'll ever get to doing your mission 100 percent of the time." She was involved in over 500 criminal cases while in Iraq. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

has a number of linguists working with us to help bridge the language barrier. Our judges and investigators have a very positive attitude about us and about our work. We get things done as quickly and efficiently as possible, and the judges and investigators know they can count on us for almost anything.

What is your typical work schedule?

I wake up at 0500 [5 a.m.] and go to the gym. I arrive at work around 0715 [7:15 a.m.] and head out to the court sometime thereafter. After court, I spend the rest of the day answering correspondence from the court and preparing for the next day. I try to leave the office by 2000 [8 p.m.] so I can get a decent amount of sleep at night. In the hour or so I have to myself every day, I read or watch movies on my laptop.

How many cases do you work on at one time?

We go to the court almost every day. Three attorneys actively work approximately 50 cases, but there are approximately 500 cases in the system that require American involvement.

How is Iraq's penal code similar to or different from Western criminal law?

Basic ideas of fairness and justice apply here as well. One of the more interesting requirements of Iraqi law is if a crime occurs, there must be two eyewitnesses of the crime. There also has to be a complainant—even if two people see a third person kill a fourth person, members of the fourth person's family must file a complaint. Finding these witnesses can be extraordinarily difficult.



Carlson (above) discusses a case with the chief judge of the Central Criminal Court of Iraq. Carlson believes the Iraqi justice system “can and will be successful.”

Is it frustrating to adjust to such differences?

I met some attorneys who have trouble adjusting because they expect Iraq to be like the American system. It's different here, but it's easy to adapt. The Air Force has a saying “flexibility is the key to airpower.” That saying is also true of the court system here, but with good communication, we've really made it work, and work very well.

I had an officemate remark recently that being deployed is the closest you'll ever get to doing your mission 100 percent of the time. The bureaucracy tape is unraveled quite quickly. Today my work product is getting briefed to the four-star general in charge of Iraq. Working in a war zone is the closest we get to complete efficiency. It's awesome.

What did your friends and family think of this assignment? Are they concerned for your safety?

My military friends, especially the lawyers, are excited I have such a great assignment. My husband has a more dangerous job [for the U.S. Army Special Forces in Afghanistan], so I think our family mostly worries about him. My parents have been really great since I've been gone. I think they worry quite a bit, but don't tell me about it. My mom sends me a care package every week. We also get a great deal of support from non-profit organizations. It's amazing and gratifying to receive so much support from back home.

Have you confronted violence since your arrival?

There have been direct and indirect threats at the court since I arrived, but no actual violence. There's always a possibility something could happen. Our legal team has a personal security detail that escorts us to and from our base and they do a very good job of protecting us. They are just a few of the many amazing people I have met here.

One of my heroes is my friend and former boss, Capt. Maureen Wood. She signed up for a year over here and just a few months into her tour she and two others were injured when an explosively formed penetrator (EFP) hit her convoy. One Air Force attorney, Capt. Wendy Kosek, was sent home to recover from her injuries. When Capt. Wood recovered in Iraq, she went back to work and is finishing her tour of duty.

She received a Bronze Star for her work in Iraq.

Capt. Wood wrote about her experiences here, saying, “I have learned that seemingly ordinary people who just happen to be standing or sitting right beside you can be extraordinary.”

That comment also applies to many of the Iraqi people I have met. I had the honor of meeting a group of 50 female Iraqi army basic trainees. This was only the second class of female cadets to graduate. Females in the army are limited to medical, administrative and military police positions. As military police, they are often working at checkpoints searching other females. These women are true heroes. Many are single parents whose husbands have been killed and who are trying to support their families. By joining the army, they can face serious repercussions, including being persecuted. They are doing a very brave thing — more courageous than anything I could ever do.

Perhaps the ultimate test of your mission will be after you and other U.S. military attorneys depart and the Iraqis are left to run their judicial system by themselves. Are you optimistic that they will be able to do that successfully?

The Iraqis are already able to run their own court system. Ninety-nine percent of the people I work with at the court are dedicated to improving Iraq and making it a better and safer place for themselves, their children and their children’s children.

I would anticipate the Iraqi court will still need some kind of link to coalition forces to get information only we possess, such as testimony of soldiers, but I believe the system can and will be successful.

Why did you choose the military as the place to pursue your legal career?

I had always been interested in joining the military and serving our country. I love every day I spend in uniform. It’s hard to describe, but the military and I just fit together.

The Air Force is the perfect service for me. I got the experience to deploy, with the opportunities for more deployments in the future. Back home, I have the opportunity to work in many different fields, including military justice (criminal law), family law, environmental law, and contract law.

While I love being a military attorney, I am an officer first. I strive every day to become a better officer. I always hear stories about people being miserable in their jobs, but that cannot be further from the truth for me. I do not know how long I’ll serve in the military, but I cannot see leaving this life in the near future.

Did your Illinois Wesleyan education help you prepare for challenges you’ve faced in Iraq?

At IWU, I learned to be independent and forward-thinking. This job constantly requires working outside the box, looking at the problem from all angles and anticipating future issues. I believe my liberal arts education contributed to my success.



Wearing 30 pounds of body armor, Carlson (above) poses in front of an armored fighting vehicle on her way to work.

I think of what former President Myers said every time I leave for court in the mornings: “Go into the world and do well, but more importantly, go into the world and do good.” I hope I can look back on this deployment having “done good.”

Capt. Sarah Carlson completed her tour in Iraq in July 2010, receiving the Defense Meritorious Service Medal for her work there. She now resides outside McChord Air Force Base, Washington. A history major at Illinois Wesleyan University, Carlson joined the U.S. Air Force in 2008.