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Pledge of Allegiance: While Partner Served in Afghanistan, Colleagues Made Their Own Firm Commitment

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Barreling down the Dallas North Tollway, it suddenly dawned on Brian A. Farlow that he was driving differently. He'd been noticing vehicles in the other lanes, sure, but he was-n't giving them his usual level of scrutiny to determine whether they were weighed down, moving erratically or driven by someone whose eyes were trained on him rather than the road.

Farlow, a partner in six-lawyer Dallas trial boutique Elrod, also realized it had been awhile since he'd driven alone -- he was used to sharing space with at least two other guys -- and since he'd had to dodge donkey carts or drive anything smaller than a Humvee.

That's because, until about a month ago, Farlow was an active duty soldier in Afghanistan. He returned to work at Elrod on Oct. 1.

From his post at forward operating base Camp Phoenix, just outside the capital city of Kabul, Army Reserve Capt. Farlow was part of an embedded transition team, an eight-soldier unit charged with helping train the Afghan National Army. He and his unit, nicknamed Wolf Pack, mentored and trained company commanders, battalion executive officers and regular soldiers on how to wage war and keep peace.

Farlow's deployment wasn't totally unexpected. A graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, Farlow had served in the active duty military for about four-and-a-half years. He also served in the first Gulf War as a battalion support platoon leader.

He traded active duty for law school at the Albany Law School of Union University in New York but remained in the Reserve. When the United States invaded Iraq in March 2003, Farlow says, clients and colleagues often asked him if he thought he'd be deployed, especially if they caught sight of him leaving the office in his camos on his way to battle as-sembly with his Reserve unit. "I said I didn't think so. I said, 'No, they'd never need me,' " he recalls.

But then, they did. Farlow left Dallas in September 2007 and spent almost three months training at Fort Riley in Kansas. He arrived in Kabul on Dec. 24, 2007.

Leaving his wife and two young daughters at home was definitely rough on everyone, he says. But he salutes the efforts of his friends, family and the community for honoring his service and recognizing his family's sacrifice. He says his older daughter's class even called him on an Internet telephone line a few times while he was in Kabul. "All the boys wanted to see my weapons, and the girls wanted to know about the weather," he laughs.

Students at the school where his wife works as a teacher also raised money to purchase a "Flat Daddy" for the family, a life-sized picture poster of Farlow mounted on foam board that the family could tote along to places where he normally would have gone with them, such as school dances and soccer games.

"It helped them focus on something other than I simply wasn't there," he says. "It was positive - they got to bring Flat Daddy places -- and it reminded people that I wasn't just busy, I was deployed."

But Farlow didn't just up and leave for Afghanistan. His departure from Elrod took months of serious planning that involved everyone at the firm, from founder David W. Elrod to the newest lawyer, Leane Capps Medford.

"With a small firm such as ours, which handles a lot of complex and large cases as well as some smaller ones, everything we do is from a team perspective," Elrod says. "When we started talking about one of our team members being gone for a year, and then when we recognized it was inevitable, we had to prepare for it, making sure you truly support the person who's under that obligation."

Elrod says that when he hired Farlow in the spring of 2003, the country already had troops in Afghanistan and Iraq and he knew what Farlow's reservist status could mean.

"It was always in the back of our minds that someday he might have to go over there; soldiers do what soldiers have to do," Elrod says. When it became clear over the summer of 2007 that Farlow would, in fact, be joining the theater of war in Afghanistan, Elrod says the firm's lawyers sat down and started to craft a strategy.

There was no written template or master plan that they followed, he says, nor did they sign any sort of contract.

"We basically just sat down and did what we thought was right," he says. "We looked at each other in the eye and shook hands and talked it out."

It didn't hurt that Elrod was already familiar with the ways of the military. He says he grew up on Army bases in the United States and in Germany. "You have to persevere," he says of military life. "It's a different kind of world."

The first order of business was case transition. So no one had to come onto a case cold, Elrod

says, Farlow drafted status reports for the lawyers that summarized his cases, and associate Worthy Walker started working with him in anticipation of teaming with Medford, who would join the firm as a partner the month following Farlow's departure.

"It was a very smooth transition," Medford says, especially since Farlow hadn't been working on his cases in solitude. "We all work on every case," she explains. "We work as a team, because we are a small firm."

Walker says clients were understanding. "They realized what he was doing was awfully important," he says. "They were disappointed to lose Brian, but we found ways to keep them happy and service the clients, and we got some great results for our clients."

Also part of the plan was a strategy to keep Farlow involved in the firm, albeit at a low commitment level, Elrod says. Farlow penned newsletters, long dispatches complete with photos and rich in the details of his daily life, and the firm posted them on its Web site.

Then there were the small things: Elrod says the whole firm banded together to send care packages to Farlow filled with magazines, food and movies. Medford says she included a small gnome in one of the packages as a joke. "You could program the gnome to say things, and we all programmed messages into it with our voices," she says. Farlow says he loved the gnome and sent photos back to the firm of the gnome posed in different places.

And Elrod took on the responsibility of maintaining Farlow's humidior and the cigars in it during those long months.

Avoiding Stress

Despite the newsletters and packages, Elrod says he and the other lawyers were careful not to bother Farlow with the myriad details of firm life. Medford says she did e-mail him about cases occasionally -- mostly questions involving his impressions on a document or a situation -- but "generally we didn't have any questions that needed to be answered immediately."

It was an effort Farlow says he appreciated: "When you're going outside the wire twice a day, every day, you have to keep focused on that. You don't want to have distractions, and my firm really respect[ed] that."

Money was another possible stressor, and Elrod took steps to lessen the economic impact of deployment on Farlow and his family. Although Farlow did not receive a salary while he was gone, he says, the firm did pay him a monthly stipend, which helped make up the difference between his lost salary and his military pay. "That helped an awful lot," says Farlow, who declines to discuss specific dollar amounts. "Captains do not earn what a successful lawyer earns."

Notes Elrod, "We tried to figure out from an economic model what would be fair compensation. Brian listed his combat pay and everything he was getting from the military, and we took a differential from that and came up with a number that was fair." As soon as Farlow returned, Elrod says, he also returned to his usual paycheck.

In addition to their salaries, Farlow says, Elrod partners earn a bonus. He says he did receive a bonus last year, based on the nine months he worked, but he doesn't yet know what his bonus might be for his work during the remaining months of 2008.

"It's simple math," he says. "They lost my work for the nearly 400 days I was deployed."

It was easy for the firm to pay Farlow's stipend, says Elrod: The partners just took less.

"I've got to tell you, not ever have I heard anyone at the firm say, 'Why are we doing this?' It's always been, 'How can we help him?' It's always been proactive," says Elrod. "When you take a partner out of the equation, yeah, the firm takes a financial hit, and there's no doubt about it, and is it harder on a small firm like ours? Yeah, it is, but at the same time, Brian is a partner at the firm. He's a member, and he's part of the team."

The way Elrod dealt with Farlow's deployment was good news to Dwain James, executive director of the Texas branch of the Department of Defense's Employer Support for the Guard and Reserve Office. The ESGR works with employers and service members to explain legal rights and responsibilities and to help plan and prepare for service members' absence. In Texas, he says there are almost 90,000 U.S. National Guard and reservists working for between 20,000 and 30,000 employers; his office employs five full-time staffers and more than 200 volunteers who work to make the situation easier for everyone.

"For the most part, what we're seeing in today's environment is employers recognize that they've got good people, and they want to take care of them and bring them back," says James, who's based in Austin. "It's the small employers who usually get hit the hardest, especially corporations that have executives called out."

For partners and associates who are away from a firm for a year or 14 months, with other lawyers at the firm picking up the slack, James says, "there is always the concern of who will take care of my clients while I am gone and will they be there when I come back?"

Usually, the answer is yes. "They'll continue to have that allegiance to the professional as long as their needs are met," he says. "Chances are they'll remember Joe or Sue when they get back, and they'll resume that relationship."

Lots of Change

The job Farlow performed during his deployment required skills not unlike those necessary for litigation, he says, including patience and issue-spotting, plus the ability to write a succinct report and to pose probing, cross-examination-style questions.

"When you are mentoring someone, you can't tell them what to do," he says. Rather, "you ask a lot of questions, and then they come up with a solution and it's their solution. You ask, 'What about this? What are you going to do?' You make sure you identify the issues and the challenges."

And the challenges were many. Although Farlow says his Afghan troops had practical military experience -- many had fought for and against the Mujahedeen and also for various warlords --

they "were very used to going without."

It became Farlow's job to introduce them to "things most people take for granted" -- such as driving and the concept of supply chains, which he says Afghan soldiers have never needed to know, because they've never had vehicles or supplies.

Teaching map-reading skills posed another challenge. "Just the concept of having a piece of paper that represents the earth looking down," he says, was foreign to them. "If you've never seen one, and a lot of Afghans in the army haven't, it's hard to understand that a map represents mountain ranges from above, and a majority don't know how to read and write, so you can't give them a book [on it]." Further, he says, many didn't get why they needed a map in the first place. "They say, 'We fought the Mujahedeen, the Russians and the Taliban without it, so why do we need it?' "

What Farlow says was not in short supply, however, was courage. "They are fearless and tenacious fighters," he asserts. "We're trying to train them to be a modern army."

Religion posed another challenge. For example, during Ramadan, when Muslims refrain from eating or drinking during daylight hours, Farlow says his team scheduled rigorous trainings in the early morning, preferably before sunup, so guys weren't "dropping from dehydration." He says the Americans ate their own meals inside their trucks, out of sight, to show respect for the Afghans.

But while Farlow was in Afghanistan, he also had to navigate a problem back in the states: identity theft. He says his identity was stolen in 2007, while he was training at Fort Riley, but since he was still in the United States, he was able to remedy the situation. But in early 2008, someone else opened a bank account using his name, and that, he says, "was a lot harder to fix."

"The difficulty was, [the bank] had very set rules on identity verification, and I didn't know the fraud password," he recalls. The bank representative instructed him to go to a bank branch to show his driver's license and a utility bill. He responded that he couldn't do that because he was in Afghanistan.

"They said, 'Well, when you come back from vacation, you can take care of it,' " he says. "I said, 'I am in Kabul, Afghanistan. Just stop and think about that. The only thing worse would be if I told you I was in Iraq. Who goes there for vacation?' "

Farlow offered to e-mail a scanned affidavit from a Judge Advocate General's Corps officer or from the U.S. Embassy, but the bank representative refused, suggesting instead that Farlow go to a bank in Kabul and show an officer there his license, utility bill and Social Security card.

"It's funny now, but at the time it was extremely frustrating," Farlow says.

Finally, he says, he gave up and asked his firm to write a letter on his behalf. However, before the firm had a chance to craft a response, the bank resolved the situation on its own, notifying Farlow that it had closed the fraudulent account.

"In the end we got it all fixed, but for 24 hours, I was trying to convince my team leader to stop at the Bank of Azziz," he jokes.

Farlow returned to the United States Sept. 22 after flying from Afghanistan to Kyrgyzstan to Germany to Maine to Kansas. Out-processing, which began before he left, included such tasks as turning in equipment and identification cards and updating medical and service documentation.

Once stateside, Farlow says, the Army took special care to address post-traumatic stress and anger issues among the vets and to make them aware of how to handle the differentness of life back in the states.

"The Army goes out of its way to train you and to say, 'Things will seem odd to you, but don't panic, just continue on -- it's going to be that way for six months.' " And that helps make it not an issue to you and helps with the adjustment," he says.

"Just standing in the parking lot, does that seem strange? No, but then I'll notice a vehicle parked by itself and will wonder, 'What's wrong with that vehicle?' Because that's what I've been trained to look at while I am on patrol. I can shift into that mode very quickly, but it's something that I have to do consciously. I don't react to it, but I can see it if I want to."

The Army also prepped him on how to deal with change on the homefront. "With your spouse and your family, you have to accept that things are simply not the way you left them. Stuff got moved around, like I used to keep the bottled water in a certain location, and it's not there anymore. They've moved it," he says. Laundry duty also was different. Because of the amount of laundry at the base, there was a laundry service, meaning Farlow hasn't thrown in a load for about a year. "Now I get back, and there's a lot of laundry, and there's a new washer and drier," he says, laughing. "I had to learn how to use it, and there were a lot of buttons on that new washer, holy smokes."

Ultimately, he says, "you just try and focus on the fact that you're home." It's a lesson he has applied to his life back at the office, too, where he encountered changes, big and small.

For example, his office had been moved -- Medford was in his old space -- and he had new business cards, a design he'd never seen before.

"There were changes in the firm. Things change. I've been gone a year," he says. "Change is always stressful, and I am going through a change, and as long as I recognize that, as long as I don't get spun out about it, it will be fine. My business card has changed, but my name's on it, and it's spelled right, so it's great."

Before he started work this month, he made a trip to the tailor to get all of his suits taken in. He estimates he lost about 50 pounds, thanks in part to twice-daily excursions into Kabul, where he donned about 50 pounds of body armor plus a Beretta 9 mm pistol and an M-4 carbine (a smaller version of the M-16) with an M-203 grenade launcher attached just below the barrel.

Farlow had been in shape before -- he's a former Olympic swimmer -- but when he got to Fort Riley last year, he admitted he was not in the kind of physical condition he needed to be in to handle combat, especially at Kabul's altitude of 5,900 feet.

"Part of it was, when I got to Kabul, either I could look at it and just be pissed off that I was mobilized, or I could think of it as something positive and get in shape," he says. He adds that, "when you get there and realize that your survivability depends on your physical conditioning, you get in shape."

The first few days back at work, Farlow says, he spent his time unpacking and organizing his new office, removing the bubble wrap from diplomas and hanging them and finding the spot for the small rectangular hand-knotted rug he had bought at a Kabul market.

He also brought back a gift for Elrod: a colorful metal disc known in the armed forces as a "challenge coin." Higher-ups ranging from officers to generals to the president of the United States can carry these, Farlow explains, to hand out as on-the-spot recognition to anyone they feel is doing a good job.

Where the "challenge" part comes in, he explains, is after hours, at the bar. You're supposed to keep challenge coins on your person at all times. If someone challenges you to produce one and you can't, you have to buy beer. If everyone challenged produces one, the challenger must buy the beer, he explains.

"For the Wolf Pack, I gave them out as recognition for a good job," Farlow says. "I gave one to the Afghan soldier I mentored, and I definitely feel David [Elrod] deserved one."

Once set up in his office, Farlow shifted into outreach mode to let people know he was back. He says he tapped into online resources such as LinkedIn, called clients and former colleagues, and set up lots of lunches.

"I have to make those contacts again. They've grown cold just because all people have received is my newsletter, but now it's time to get back into it," he says.

To support Farlow, Elrod says, "we're arranging lunches, we're brainstorming on marketing and how to utilize his experience. We also get together every Monday morning, the full firm, and talk about marketing." Supporting Farlow, he says, is part of that meeting agenda.

Yet Elrod recognizes that even the best marketing efforts require time to bring returns. "We fully appreciate and understand there will be a transition period that one has to go through to come back and get re-acclimated," he says.

Still, Farlow hasn't packed up his fatigues for good. An active reservist, he remains obligated to serve one weekend a month and two weeks a year, he says. Right now he has entered a period the Reserve calls dwell time, where mobilization during the next two years is "unlikely."

"I have no obligation left [to the military], but I stay because I think it's important to serve. It's an integral part of being an American," he says. And if he gets called up to return to the Middle East? "If my country needs me, I will answer the call again."

In the meantime, Farlow is working to add a new element to his commercial litigation practice -- military contracts and dispute resolution involving those contracts. It's not only a new area for

him, it's new for the firm, but he and Elrod believe his military background and dispute resolution experience will give him an edge over other lawyers in the field.

"I have a lot of energy, I want to get back into it -- the practice of law is exciting to me," Farlow says. "Part of the excitement is I survived. A lot of bad things can happen to you over there, and I was lucky that nothing did, so I want to seize the day and the opportunity to make a difference."

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