



A Veteran Reflects on His Pro Bono Attorneys' Fight to Restore His Honor

DANA MONTALTO

Dana Montalto is a clinical instructor in the Veterans Legal Clinic at the Legal Services Center of Harvard Law School.

© 2022 by the American Bar Association. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved. This information or any or portion thereof may not be copied or disseminated in any form or by any means or stored in an electronic database or retrieval system without the express written consent of the American Bar Association.

In April 2022, Dana Montalto sat down with Kevin Monroe, an Air Force veteran recently granted a discharge upgrade to Honorable, to hear what it was like to clear his name with the [help of pro bono attorneys](#).

Why Did You Join the Military?

There were a lot of reasons. I chose the Air Force because I wanted to be a part of something, serve my country, and travel and get an education. I come from a military family—my dad was in the Coast Guard, my brother went into the Navy, my other brother went into the Army, and my youngest brother went into the Marine Corps.

What did your military service mean to you?

I really enjoyed my service. I was a medic in the hospital, and it meant a lot to me that we could help put airmen back together, especially if we got into wartime.

When you were kicked out less-than-honorably after more than eight years in the Air Force for an isolated instance of drug use, what impact did that have?

A lot led up to it. I was under tremendous stress and had depression, and I felt like I was being racially targeted [as a young Black man]. I tried to drink it away. When I returned from overseas, I ran into some people who were doing drugs, and it ruined my career. I admitted to it and took the consequences that came along with it. It destroyed my family and my marriage, making me [homeless and jobless](#).

Did you ever try to upgrade your discharge or access veteran benefits?

One of the first things I did when I got out was go to the VA, and they told me I was not eligible for anything. So I walked out the door and spent the next years trying to rebuild my life, get a job, remarry, and go on with my life. But something kept gnawing at me and telling me “you had unfinished business”—I needed to clear my name.

Eventually, in 2015, the Veterans Justice Pro Bono Partnership at the Legal Services Center of Harvard Law School connected you to pro bono attorneys at Goodwin Procter LLP to represent you in a discharge upgrade petition. What was it like to work with that pro bono team?

Wow! They were great. They would always do more research, follow-up, and go the extra mile. They had me get letters of support from family members, pastors, and others, and then they called every person to ask questions, which I thought was very thorough. They had me get a background check, and they paid for everything. And that’s what it took, and I am forever grateful.

When you got the news that the Air Force Board for Correction of Military Records upgraded your discharge to fully Honorable, how did you feel?

I cried. I couldn’t believe it, after how long of a road it was. When I read the decision, it was unanimous and said I should get all of my [rights and benefits](#) back, and it made me feel so good. That was the work that the lawyers did.

What would you say to other attorneys thinking about volunteering for veterans?

Don't miss out! If you don't volunteer, you don't know what you're missing. This case not only brought joy to me but also to my lawyers—they were so happy. Also, you'll learn something about other people and yourself, and money can't buy that.

If you are interested in getting involved in pro bono work for veterans, consider reaching out to the [ABA Military Pro Bono Project](#), the [Veterans Consortium Discharge Upgrade Program](#), [Harvard Law School's Veterans Law and Disability Benefits Clinic](#) (New England attorneys), or your local bar association or veterans legal aid office.