

OPEN NINTH:
CONVERSATIONS BEYOND THE COURTROOM
FROM COMBAT TO COUNTY COURT
EPISODE 87
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HOSTED BY: DONALD A. MYERS, JR.

(Music)

NARRATOR: Welcome to another episode of “Open Ninth: Conversations Beyond the Courtroom” in the Ninth Judicial Circuit Court of Florida.

And now here’s your host, Chief Judge Don Myers.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Hello, and welcome to Open Ninth. Joining me today is Ninth Circuit Judge Tina Caraballo. Tina was elected to the Orange County bench in 2014 and currently serves in the County Criminal Division. However, she’s here with me today, Veteran’s Day, not to talk about her service on the bench but rather her years in the service.

Tina completed her basic training at just 17 years old, and she spent the next almost 10 years in the Army. She received the General Patton Award for Excellence and 1985 Soldier of the Year Award for her service, and just last month received the Veterans of Influence Award from the *Orlando Business Journal*.

It’s great to have you here, Tina. Thanks for joining me.

JUDGE CARABALLO: Thank you, Don.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So if we can, let’s go back and start at the beginning. From day one, as a child, did you have aspirations to serve in that way?

JUDGE CARABALLO: No, I did not have aspirations to serve in that way. My senior year in high school, I was trying to figure out what I was going to do with my life. I knew that I wanted to travel and see the world and attend college, and I was trying to figure out how to do all of that. And one fateful afternoon, I stopped in at the Army recruiter.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Wow. So you’re a high school student, and you happen to stop in? Really? I mean, literally, that?

JUDGE CARABALLO: I was interested in attending one of the service academies, so I had been researching that. But for a lot of reasons, that wasn't going to work for me and the next option was to potentially enlist. So I stopped in and saw the recruiter. He promised me Europe, and the rest was history.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So I have to ask -- I don't -- I think in some of the places where I've seen recruiters, they're lined up. There's the Army recruiter, there's a Navy recruiter, there's a Marine Corps recruiter. Did you pick Army, or how did that happen?

JUDGE CARABALLO: I did. They were -- all the recruiters were together, and I chose the Army because primarily of the history and tradition of West Point. That was in my mind, so I thought, if I can't go to West Point, enlisting in the Army is the next best thing.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So that's incredible. So you talked to the recruiter, and how does that work for you at 17? You're a senior, I assume, at that point.

JUDGE CARABALLO: Yes, I was a senior in high school. And so I spoke to the recruiter and he told me, you know, the first thing you have to do is take the ASVAB test. And he really didn't give me any high hopes or anything of that nature, because he didn't know how I would do on the test. So once I was scheduled to take the ASVAB and the reports came back in, that's when he got really excited.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: That's really cool. So how does that -- how did that time go for you, then? You graduated, and at some point then you're scheduled to head off to boot camp or basic training or --

JUDGE CARABALLO: Right. I enlisted before I graduated, and my father actually had to sign me over to the Army because I was 17 at the time. So I enlisted before graduation.

And after graduation, I went on active duty. I graduated in June and I went on active duty in August of that same year.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Tell us about what excited you at that time then, about the opportunity to join, beyond Europe.

JUDGE CARABALLO: It was just the opportunity to serve and to be part of something bigger than yourself. Also, you know, I was 17, and I received a bonus for education and a financial bonus, and I was able to come in as an E-2 as opposed to an E-1, and I also had a guarantee of being stationed in Germany. So all of those things really factored into it.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: You're starting to use that military lingo or acronyms, E-1 and E-2. Tell us what that means.

JUDGE CARABALLO: That's the enlisted rank structure. E-1 is your Basic Private. E-2 is a private -- the Second-Level Private. E-3 is a third -- a PFC, a Private First Class. And so the enlisted ranks go from E-1 to E-9 being the highest.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Okay. And then above the enlisted ranks, are those the officer ranks at that point?

JUDGE CARABALLO: They're not necessarily above the enlisted, it's just a separate -- the officers are O ranks, so it's completely separate than the enlisted. The enlisted go from Private to Sergeant Major, and the officers go from Lieutenant to General.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: All right. And I'm embarrassed; my father was a 22-year Marine, but his career in the Marines all occurred before -- and he retired when I was 4 years old, so I don't have any first-hand experience and he didn't talk about those experiences a whole lot, so I'm kind of excited to be able to share your journey with you.

Did you have any family members or other folks that influenced you in your decision?

JUDGE CARABALLO: Not really. My father had served in the Air Force only a couple of years. He didn't talk about it a lot. My grandfather worked with the military, installing missiles in the silos across the United States during the Cold War. He was a private contractor at the time. But that was the only experience I'd had with anyone in the family being in the military.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Okay. Where was your basic training?

JUDGE CARABALLO: My basic training was at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, Alpha Company, 3rd Battalion, 1st Brigade.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Wow. That sounds important. Tell me what each of those things mean. Are those the size of groups that you were a part of, or --

JUDGE CARABALLO: Right. So when you're assigned to a unit, it's different levels. You have -- your company is the smallest level that you're on. The smallest unit is the company. Well, there are squads inside of a company. But it's squad -- our company was Alpha Company, and then 3rd Battalion is above the company, and 1st Training Brigade is above the battalion. So at each level, it gets higher and higher hierarchy.

And there are several training brigades in South Carolina. So as the trainees come in -- it's a massive training facility for the Army. As the trainees come in, they're assigned to different units, and that's how you keep track of where they're assigned.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: That's incredible. So you -- how long is basic?

JUDGE CARABALLO: I don't remember. It seemed like forever. No, it was so much fun. It was maybe -- I don't know -- I think it was about 10 weeks or so.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So I envision it being very physically challenging.

JUDGE CARABALLO: It was. But fortunately I was 17, so I was in a lot better shape than I am now. And plus you're so excited and you want to learn and you want to do these things, and it's so much fun and everybody's in the same boat with you. We're all just kids out of high school, and it's really exciting.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Was the United States involved -- and I didn't even ask you what the time period was. I'm not going to embarrass you with your age. But was this a time period when we were actively engaged in theaters or campaigns of war?

JUDGE CARABALLO: No. It was in 1984. In August of 1984 is when I went on active duty. So we were not at the time -- Granada, Somalia, in that time frame, Libya, but no active wars like we have now.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Okay. And when you head off to basic, do you have an opportunity at that point to select the path that you'll be on in the Army?

JUDGE CARABALLO: Yes. You select your path before you even go to basic. When you enlist, you have to select a Military Occupational Specialty, and the specialties that are available to you are based on the scores that you get on the ASVAB test. So the higher you score, the more Military Occupational Specialties that are available to you. And so there -- when you choose one, you can pick based on what interests you. I did it based on what interested me or what sounded interesting and the cash bonus that they were giving out.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: All right. And tell me, what was that choice again?

JUDGE CARABALLO: That was Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Operations.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: What does that mean?

JUDGE CARABALLO: So that -- the NBC, we detect the presence of chemical, radiological and biological agents as well as plot the fallout from a chemical attack or a

radiological attack, and also train other people in the Army how to protect themselves against a biological, nuclear or chemical attack.

During the Gulf War, we were set up, prepared to decontaminate soldiers as we breached into Kuwait. Had chemical agents been used on any of our soldiers, we were set up and ready to decontaminate them and their equipment.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Okay. Serious business.

You -- where did you do your training, then, for that?

JUDGE CARABALLO: The training at that time was done in Fort McClellan, Alabama.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And so how long would it take you to succeed or complete that coursework?

JUDGE CARABALLO: That coursework -- it took me until February of '85, so I can't really remember now the time frames. But -- so I went on active duty in August and I completed my basic training and my advanced training in NBC by February of 1985.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Is that the place or time at which you get stationed somewhere?

JUDGE CARABALLO: Yes. After you finish your AIT, your advanced individual training, that's when you go to your permanent duty station. So my first permanent duty station was in Kaiserslautern, Germany.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: So that sounds like exotic travel and experience. Tell us about that.

JUDGE CARABALLO: Well, it was wonderful. My soon -- my future husband was on duty the night that I reported to the unit. So we -- I met him that night and we got married a

year-and-a-half later. We've been married for 33 years. But, you know, the Army has a saying. If they wanted you to have a spouse, they would have issued you one. And I feel like they did because he was on duty the night I reported, and we've been together ever since.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: How long were you stationed there in Germany?

JUDGE CARABALLO: I was stationed in Germany for five years, from '85 to '89, and then from the end of '89 right before the Wall came down, we PCSed -- we had a permanent change of station to Fort Riley, Kansas.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: What do you do when you're in a setting like that, having the training that you've had and being prepared in the way that you are? So you're there in Germany, you have your training in this NBC.

JUDGE CARABALLO: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: What were your day-to-day job responsibilities?

JUDGE CARABALLO: Initially, I was assigned to a Chemical Unit. So a lot of what the Army does every day is prepare for war. That's our sole function is to prepare for combat. So every day consisted of maintaining our equipment and preparing and training for war. So we would do exercises in our duty station and also out in the field. There are a lot of areas in Germany that we would go to and simulate war activities. We'd simulate chemical attacks so that we could practice our decontamination procedures to make sure we would clean everything up and not spread contamination.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Great. Ultimately, did you see active duty combat?

JUDGE CARABALLO: I did. I was deployed, and when I was stationed at Fort Riley, Kansas, with the 1st Infantry Division, I was deployed to -- during Operation Desert Shield and

Desert Storm at the end of 1990 -- around December of 1990, we deployed to -- first, Saudi Arabia was our kickoff point, and then out into the field into Kuwait.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And how long was your service there in the Middle East?

JUDGE CARABALLO: The entire time of the first Gulf War was about six months. It was a lot shorter than our subsequent involvement in Iraq.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And how long was that one in Iraq that you were stationed there and had responsibilities there?

JUDGE CARABALLO: My -- it was just the six months that I was there.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: All right. During that six months -- gosh, it's so hard as a civilian, I think, to appreciate or understand what you must have been feeling and experiencing. Tell us some about that.

JUDGE CARABALLO: Well, it was really difficult at the time because both my husband and I deployed and our son was 18 months old at the time. And he went to live with his grandmother and my brother-in-law in Puerto Rico while my husband and I were deployed. So that was really -- if truth be told, that was the most difficult thing that I had to deal with. You train and you prepare for the job that we're doing, but there's no training or preparation for having to leave your child and being worried about if you're ever going to see him again. So that was really difficult.

But the conditions in the desert are difficult. When we first arrived in December, it was actually freezing, and we weren't prepared for cold. But the temperatures in the desert in the evening in December get really cold. And so that was hard. And then it wasn't long after that we had extreme heat.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Were you able to stay in touch with your son and family while you were there?

JUDGE CARABALLO: Yes. We had a lot of letters and they would send us pictures, and so that was very nice.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: How about technology? Could you call or face -- I mean, today we FaceTime. Was there Skype or something like that?

JUDGE CARABALLO: No, there was no -- this was 1990, '91, so we didn't have that. But AT&T actually set up call centers for the soldiers, and so we could go -- at certain times we could go to these call centers. It would be just rows and rows, maybe 100 phones in a tent out in the middle of the desert, and you could place calls home. So that was so precious, those times that we were able to actually speak to someone at home.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Obviously, you're in danger by being in-country. But were there times or experiences that you had over there where you were very much in the way of harm?

JUDGE CARABALLO: Yeah. Well, there -- the first Gulf War was a little different than the wars that we're fighting now and the conflicts that are being carried on right now. The way that the first Gulf War progressed, the -- it was the shock and awe campaign, where there was a lot of planes dropping bombs beforehand. So we were set up in the desert in Kuwait and we could see all of the bombs going off. You could see it, but you have no sense of distance. And you knew it wasn't that close, but we didn't really have a good sense of how far it was away.

But during that -- the aerial campaign lasted for a long time before the actual ground war. And once the ground war started, it was over in about 100 hours. So those 100 hours, we

basically drove the entire time because my platoon was assigned to a Division Artillery Company to support them if they were attacked with chemical agents. We would have to clean the personnel and the equipment so they could go -- continue to fire the artillery. And so we had to follow them through the desert as the war progressed. It was just literally 100 hours of driving and keeping up with the Artillery Unit so we would be there to support them.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: What's your most vivid memory of that time?

JUDGE CARABALLO: Probably my most vivid memory of that time was -- I don't know. (Indiscernible words). Let me -- well, let me give you one. So -- okay, I'll give you one. We had to -- there's -- when a chemical attack is imminent, when the threat is high, we go into certain levels of mission-oriented protective posture. These are suits that have a charcoal lining, and they are designed to protect the soldiers from chemical agents. And they have different levels of MOPP 1, MOPP 2, MOPP 3, and MOPP 4 is the highest level and you're completely protected.

So it starts with putting on your charcoal suit. Then you have overshoes, rubber gloves, and then finally your protective mask. So during the initial phases of the conflict, we thought that the risk was high that chemical agents would be used on the Scud missiles, and so we were in MOPP Level 2. We had on the charcoal and the overshoes, and it was very warm at this time. So finally, at the end of the 100 hours, the all clear came out and we were allowed to remove those charcoal suits. We had been in them for days in the desert and heat. And that was so gross. When everybody could remove them, it was awful. They were like, okay, let's all put them back on until we can bathe properly, because it was so bad. But everyone was so excited. It's so warm that, you know, you want to remove that. But it was really bad. You know, you're sitting in a truck with somebody and it's not pleasant.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: How did you get the news that the conflict had ended?

JUDGE CARABALLO: I think we were on a convoy, and the convoy stopped, and the all clear came back, and then it just spread down the line. You know, it just came mouth-to-mouth from the next truck over.

The communications are a lot better now. We had very limited things. And even GPS was new at the time. We used GPS over in the desert. Our platoon leaders and our captains had the GPS that ultimately we're all using now.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: When you got that news the conflict was over, how much time lapsed between then and your returning home?

JUDGE CARABALLO: Several months. So once you get that notification, you have to go to an area and clean everything and get it ready to go back on the ships to return to America. And it's very important that you clean everything properly because you don't want to bring back something that's going to wipe out the crops in Fort Riley, Kansas. You know, so we have to wash everything and make sure that it was cleaned properly, and also we had to prepare it to go back on the ships.

It's very particular the way that you have to prepare equipment to go on ships because you don't want to start a fire. So no metal can touch metal. And it's very precise the way that everything has to be packed and it has to be put on just so that -- so that everything fits. So it's quite a process to bring troops back from where they were. You have to do a lot. And we had a lot of rounds. We had a lot of ammunition that we went ahead and trained on over there to use up that ammunition so that we didn't have to bring back all that hazardous cargo.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: And you said both you and your husband were deployed.

JUDGE CARABALLO: Yes.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Were you together in the same unit?

JUDGE CARABALLO: No, we were not. I was in the Chemical Company and he was in an Armor Company. He was the NBC NCO in an Armor Company. But I was able to see him at different times during the conflict.

It was interesting. Different units get different things. So his unit would get all of the care packages from the American Red Cross and kids. And his unit would get a bunch of care packages. And my unit had all the water. And so I would see him and we would exchange. I would give him water and he would give me care packages that I would take back to the platoon.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: That's great.

JUDGE CARABALLO: Yeah.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Tina, you find yourself here now as a judge, and you've been with us for how many years?

JUDGE CARABALLO: Five years now.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Okay. And I think it certainly is clear to me, hearing your story and knowing the work that you do now, that you have committed your life to service. Why? I mean, you have a lot of options.

JUDGE CARABALLO: It's just something in you. You know, when you serve people, it's its own reward. I am fulfilled in being able to serve other people. And I feel like I'm helping the community and I'm helping people and that I have a purpose greater than myself. So it fulfills me to serve others.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Were there experiences or things that you learned in your training and service in the Army that have impacted the way that you judge?

JUDGE CARABALLO: Yes. Joining the military so young, it really shaped and formed the person that I am. So I joined at 17 and I left when I was 27, and I'm quite a bit older than that now. But it did shape my entire life, I would say. It has -- a lot of my characteristics and traits were formed during the military.

And I know one of the things that everyone who appears in front of me knows, of course, is my promptness. I start court on time. If I say 9:00 a.m., it's 9:00 a.m. And so that's -- you know, just little things. And I expect them to be prepared. And I think also I have a way of expressing myself that just commands respect and gets the attention that it deserves.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: You won a couple of awards while you were in the service. Tell us about those. Tell us about the General Patton Award for Excellence.

JUDGE CARABALLO: That was when I completed my Primary Leadership Development Course. In the military, as in best organizations, they know that leaders aren't born, they're trained and they're made. And the Army has a definite structure. As you progress in your rank, you have to attend certain schools. So this is the Primary Leadership Development Course -- it's for E-4s and E-5s, newly-minted sergeants -- and it was at that course I was number one in the class and I received the General Patton Award for Excellence. And that was in Bad Tolz, Germany, and it was very cold. I went in January.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: How about the 1985 Soldier of the Year Award?

JUDGE CARABALLO: So that was at my -- where the unit I was assigned to is a higher command. I went through a series of boards and I was ultimately named the Soldier of the Year. And those are recognitions for -- you attend a board and they look at your scores and PT and what else you're doing with your life, going to college and things of that nature.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Well, obviously, you're not a stranger to the awards circuit because just recently here I know that you were named as a Veteran of Influence in the *Orlando Business Journal*. What an honor that must be at this stage of your career.

JUDGE CARABALLO: It's very humbling. The other recipients of that award are so amazing in our community and what they do. And over the history that the *Orlando Business Journal* has been recognizing veterans, we've had some amazing people receive that recognition. And I'm grateful for Judge DuBois for nominating me for that recognition. And it's very humbling, you know, to be recognized with other veterans.

But one award that I'm probably most proud of that I received in the Army was the Sergeant Audie Murphy Award. And that is given for noncommissioned officers who demonstrate care for their troops and excel in leadership. And that's a recognition that I was really proud to receive because it was more on my role as a squad leader and taking care of my soldiers.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: That's tremendous. That's tremendous. So of all the things that you do as a judge, what do you find the most gratifying? You told us about that in your service. As a judge now, what is it?

JUDGE CARABALLO: I think the most gratifying thing is when I can facilitate a resolution of the case that makes the most sense. Being in County Court, we interact with the public a lot, and sometimes I'm able to facilitate a person being able to get their license back or if I can do something -- set them on a payment plan for their traffic tickets, or maybe flip a civil driving while license suspended to a withhold as opposed to an adjudication, I can keep their license from being suspended as an habitual traffic offender. It's that opportunity to really get involved in the cases and to help make a resolution that makes sense to protect the public and

also to, you know, provide the appropriate deterrent for the defendant but also to help the defendant.

Because a lot of people, especially in the misdemeanor cases, these could be things -- the driving cases, that could be any of us. We could fall into that. You know, so many times people come before me and -- I didn't even know about that red-light ticket, I didn't know about that toll ticket that suspended my license. And so, you know, I really find it rewarding when I can help craft a resolution that makes sense for all the parties.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: When the World War II monument in Washington, D.C., was first opened for the public, there was a huge ceremony. And I remember attending that with my father who was a World War II veteran, and really just was amazed at the response of school children who would come up to him and with wide eyes ask him questions about his service and say thank you to him.

One of the most important things I think that we can do is to find ways to honor people who have served in the way that you have served. Any thoughts on ways that we can do that well, to honor the service of those who have fought and sacrificed in a very real way for the freedoms and the life that we enjoy?

JUDGE CARABALLO: Well, I think one of the most important things we can do is keep it in the forefront. I think that a lot of people are unaware of all the places that we have our military men and women in harm's way. We're operating on several continents right now, and it rarely makes the news. We have so much going on with our domestic politics that sometimes we forget about all the places where we have our soldiers deployed. So I think people really need to understand and appreciate that such a small fraction of the public serves in the military and that

we really have them spread out around the world and they're in harm's way every day. So I think we need more awareness of that.

And also there are so many opportunities to send letters at Christmastime, send a care package. There's all the time the VFW's -- the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legions, they continually have events that raise awareness, or school children sending care packages. It meant so much to us when we were to receive a random letter thanking us when we were in the war and, you know, you get a letter from some stranger just saying thank you for being there. It really means a lot. So that's one simple thing that people can do is just send a letter to a soldier. And there's -- you could find it on the internet, but there's -- also in your local community there are so many places that you can get with them, and people do that all the time, and it really means a lot to the soldiers.

CHIEF JUDGE MYERS: Well, the words seem inadequate, but thank you. Thank you for your service in the Army. Thank you for your service in combat. And of course, thank you for the service that you give to our citizens here in the Ninth Circuit.

We love having you as a County Court judge with us. And I've really been grateful for the time we've got to spend today. Thank you, Tina.

JUDGE CARABALLO: Thank you, Don. I appreciate it also.

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