

## Rangers Lead the Way

By [Joseph B. Altonji](#) on April 30, 2015

A common lament we hear as we talk to law firm leaders is the lack of motivation and leadership displayed by so many lawyers at so many firms. Sometimes it's cast as a "generational" problem. *"Gen-X lawyers want everything handed to them, and they don't want to work for it. Back in my time..."* Sometimes it's directed at a group of partners who just don't pull their weight. *"These people are really great lawyers, but..."* Why do many law firms do a good job at finding really smart, entitled people who can't seem to accomplish much other than what's put on their plates? Has the world really stopped producing self-starting, hard-charging go-getters? Or has our industry somehow failed to attract enough of them? Unfortunately, the latter seems to be the case.

I had the honor over the past week of visiting Ft. Benning for Ranger School graduation. 171 amazingly dedicated young men graduated on Friday from the toughest school in the US Army. The course is designed to develop operational leaders, capable of completing the mission under the most adverse circumstances possible. The course is physically, emotionally and mentally exhausting, with training over multiple phases averaging 20+ hours a day, seven days a week, usually with only a couple of hours of sleep and one or two meals a day. The average student drops 30+ pounds, and was highly fit to begin with. They are burning muscle, not fat. If they are tough, dedicated, get a really good team, and have some luck, they might go straight through and finish in about 9 weeks. But less than one in five do that. Most repeat one or more phases of the school, extending the process, sometimes for many months. The graduation speakers joked (I hope!) about the student who started in 2005 and just finished.

The pressure doesn't just fall on the soldier. Ranger School becomes a family trial. The soldier can't communicate normally – no computers, no cell phones, no tech. They get some time for short calls during an 8 hour refit pass after the first phase, but otherwise they are lucky to get in one 60 second call after the second phase of school, and then again after they complete the final phase. They have little time for letters – and when they do write, the only thing on their mind is food. Wives, children, parents and family form their own support network, and they need it. Most of the soldiers are in their early 20's – but often married with young kids. One wife talked about only being married for a few months before her husband started the course, and being two weeks pregnant when he went in. Its at least possible his child will be borne before he graduates. And this course is entirely voluntary!

*Readily will I display the intestinal fortitude required to fight on to the ranger objective and complete the mission, though I be the lone survivor.* So goes the last stanza of the Ranger Creed. Contrast this concept with the mindset of too many people in our industry today. I am not suggesting that the mission of the Ranger, or of the military more generally, is the right mission for all, but we would benefit tremendously if more of our people had the dedication and focus to get the mission done, what ever it is. How many times have we heard:

- *I'd be happy to do more work if someone gave it to me?*
- *I'd like to market. Just tell me what to do?*
- *I would do more if I got paid for it?*
- *If you want me to work on that file, I want half of the origination credit?*
- *It's against our culture to insist on a higher number of hours?*

We could go on, of course, but the point should be clear. There are young (and not so young) people who are fully focused and dedicated to accomplishing whatever is necessary. Give them the mission and turn them loose. As Toby Kieth's lyric's say, *"I don't do it for the money, there's bills that I can't pay, I don't do it for the glory, I just do it anyway..."* It's not just the military, though. We see versions of similar dedication in other industries and callings. Consider the entrepreneurs who work long hours to make their dream come true, or the aspiring doctors who study constantly for years to succeed in Med School and then work long hours for more years for low pay in their residencies, or the young accountants working around the clock during tax season to "complete the mission," also known as the "audit" or "tax return," or the police officers and firefighters who risk their lives for low pay to protect the rest of us. Police are under the microscope everywhere!

So why do we spend so much time in the legal industry lamenting the lack of dedication, self-starting ability, ingenuity and determination? There are plenty of such people in law, of course, but it doesn't seem there are enough. Maybe because its been too easy for too long to make too much money just for being "smart" without really having to be the one to make things happen? (Those people are there, of course, but there are still a lot of highly paid supporting cast members earning livings at the top of their local community working not much more than 9-5.) We built an entire industry profit structure on deploying "smart" people in large numbers to make widgets (hours). For a few, law school became a choice because they weren't prepared to do anything else, and knew they could find a good job. (Those were the days!) I will never forget, though, the comments of a third year law student during the worst part of the downturn who, while participating in an exercise to rethink the industry's business model, seriously suggested that we should design the firm of the future so associates would never have to work on weekends.

Our industry is waking up to this problem, and rethinking what it takes to be successful. Those who want to blame their personnel issues on the attitudes of the younger generations miss a key reality of our times. There are tremendously dedicated, hard-charging, self-starting young people entering the workforce every year. Where are the best of them going? Many different directions, all looking for the mission that they find the most satisfying. Some find their mission in law, but maybe not enough. But whatever the mission they choose, the best performing, most dedicated people will get the job done, no matter what it takes. As Friday's graduation class proudly chanted, *"Rangers Lead the Way."*