

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 2025

## Salute to Veterans 2025

# Prosecuting cases in one of Saddam Hussein's palaces gave Jason Mills trial experience any lawyer would envy

Jason Mills, a partner in Morgan Lewis's Los Angeles office and a veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps, cut his teeth as a trial lawyer not in air-conditioned courtrooms but in Saddam Hussein's palaces and desert encampments across Iraq. Two decades later, the litigator said the combat lessons that forged him as a Marine captain continue to guide his practice in high-stakes litigation.

During a seven-month deployment to Iraq's Al Anbar province in 2004, Mills handled courts-martial under conditions no military lawyer had faced since Vietnam — and none have faced since. His unit tried cases in Saddam Hussein's former palaces, conducted Article 32 hearings in the desert, and prosecuted under the constant threat of rocket fire. In one trial, Mills recalled, "the defendant sat at the table with his M16, while the judge sat perhaps 10 feet away. This was standard operating procedure."

Mills and his fellow Marine lawyers operated with an autonomy unheard of in law firms. "We operated as cowboys, not answering to traditional hierarchies," he said. "We felt like gunslingers going to trial because that's what Marines do."

Their most consequential case involved prosecuting five Marines for detainee abuse in the wake of Abu Ghraib. Though narrower in scope, the case demanded constitutional safeguards and resulted in convictions that sent the Marines to the brig in Kuwait. The lawyers traveled by helicopter at night, dropping into combat zones to bring military justice to the Sunni Triangle. "Nobody replicated what we accomplished during that six- to seven-month period," Mills said.

Mills credits the Marine Corps with instilling the principle that now defines his civilian practice: absolute accountability. "Blaming others is never an option — attempting to do so results in immediate destruction," he said. That mindset



Photo courtesy of Jason Mills

shaped his transition into BigLaw, though the move from uniforms and rank to first-name greetings and casual attire was a jolt.

Combat trials also gave Mills what most junior associates lack: trial experience. "At large law firms, trial experience is scarce. For me, trial was the first thing I did as a lawyer," he said. The Marine Corps also drilled a professional bearing that carries over to his OSHA and employment litigation work. "Maintaining calm under fire became integral to my identity as both Marine and lawyer."

Mills continues to channel his military ties into pro bono work. He

represented a Marine implicated in the Haditha incident and later a Guantanamo Bay detainee who, like many others, has waited decades without trial.

On Nov. 19, 2005, an improvised explosive device killed Lance Cpl. Miguel Terrazas and wounded two other Marines during a convoy mission in Haditha, Iraq. In response, Marines from Kilo Company, 3rd Battalion, 1st Marine Division, killed 24 Iraqi civilians, including women and children.

Marines initially reported that 15 civilians died in the IED blast and that they had killed nine insurgents who attacked them afterward. In-

vestigation revealed this account was false. Evidence showed Marines, not the IED or insurgents, caused all 24 civilian deaths.

The Marine Corps charged eight personnel: four enlisted Marines faced unpremeditated murder charges, while four officers were charged with dereliction of duty for failing to investigate. Additional charges included obstruction of justice and making false statements.

All charges were eventually dropped.

The incident occurred during Kilo Company's third Iraq deployment. Most Marines were 21 years old on average, with two-thirds having prior Iraq experience, though the convoy sergeant and most officers were on their first deployment.

"These Marines formed a tight-knit squad," Mills said, "and after losing a member to an IED, they believed they were under attack by townspeople."

Now, Mills defends Fortune 500 companies facing complex employment and business-to-business lawsuits, as well as OSHA investigations and citations, all with reputational and contractual consequences. His Marine Corps training, he said, helps him connect with clients and adversaries alike.

"My Marine Corps background proves especially valuable in this work, helping me relate to various people I encounter in these complex workplace safety matters."

For veterans entering law, Mills offers a sober reminder: "Leverage what made you successful in the military, but don't expect civilian colleagues to fully understand your service. People will respect your service and thank you for it, but you're no longer serving. You're now part of their world."

Mills left the Marine Corps in 2005 as a captain, decorated with two Navy and Marine Corps Commendation Medals.

"It was a unique period with a remarkable group of patriots," he said.