

Profile: Doug Saeltzer

Talk about *jumping* into the law: From paratrooper to plaintiff's trial attorney

By Stephen Ellison

Like many who aspire to be trial attorneys, Doug Saeltzer, upon graduating from law school, sought as much courtroom experience as he could possibly get. So, naturally, he joined the U.S. Army.

It may not have been the traditional route for a prospective plaintiffs' trial lawyer, but he found out soon enough that the military tends to give young officers a lot of responsibility, which for him included the trial experience he so desired, plus the bonus of receiving the best leadership training in the country.

"When I got out (of law school), I was 25. The only client who's going to give a 25-year-old new attorney any responsibility to go try cases is the government – even back then when I was starting in the mid-'90s," explained Saeltzer, now a shareholder with Walkup Melodia Kelly and Schoenberger. "So, I joined the JAG Corps instead of going to a public defender or district attorney's office.

"I didn't know then that if you're going to be a trial attorney – and this probably came from my dad – that it isn't as glamorous as everybody thinks, as on TV," he continued. "I didn't know that you're behind a desk, you're working. I figured I had a lot of that in front of me, so I might as well try to do something different and still get the experience. So, I went to the 82nd Airborne Division. I was in the Army and tried criminal cases."

Before he could get into the courtroom, however, Saeltzer had to serve. And serving in the 82nd Airborne usually means jumping out of airplanes. He jumped into Panama in what was the division's last combat jump before 9/11, he said. Once he finished his service as a paratrooper, he was assigned to prosecute criminal cases for the JAG Corps, where



Saeltzer

he once argued a case in which current Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin sat as the foreperson on the jury.

"You're in the chain of command," Saeltzer said of his time with the JAG. "So, you know, from a professional point of view, I got to develop my skills, try criminal cases, handled federal rules of evidence. It was a very transferable skill because it's trial work. And then on the other side of it, the leadership training was invaluable. It's just priceless."

25 years in the plaintiffs' bar

That training has served him well over the past 25 years as he earned his place among the top plaintiffs' trial attorneys in California, if not the entire nation. Saeltzer has obtained multiple seven- and eight-figure awards in his time with the Walkup firm and has numerous accolades to show for his accomplishments, including the 2011 Trial Lawyer of the Year from the San Francisco Trial Lawyers Association (SFTLA) and a spot in the exclusive American Board of Trial Advocates (ABOTA).

He is currently serving as the second vice president on the Consumer Attorneys of California (CAOC) board, for which he is slated to become president in 2026.

Saeltzer is the first to admit he's come a long way for someone who started out not fully seeing a purpose or mission in his work on the plaintiffs' bar.

"It's grown over time, as a huge part of the benefit of what I'm doing," he said. "I feel really lucky, actually. Because my initial driving force was I wanted the trial experience, I wanted the autonomy, I wanted to be in court. I wanted that responsibility, especially the autonomy part of it. Then I started doing it and meeting the clients and the realities of people's lives and how important a role you can play in it, in an individual's life. That really appealed to me. And now, it's just kind of grown into a full embrace of the cause, so to speak.

"I feel very fortunate," he continued. "A lot of my peers have had the cause as a driving force from a very young age. They were very motivated to get in, to fight for justice on behalf of individuals. I came about that later, and I almost feel like it was unplanned good fortune that landed me there. That's why I haven't left; because I kind of got everything I wanted. I got autonomy, I got to try cases. It's very challenging, and it turns out, it's for a great cause."

Father was a defense lawyer

Though Saeltzer said his desire to become a lawyer started long before he made it to law school, he couldn't pinpoint why. His father was an attorney, but he knew little about his dad's day to day as a defense lawyer because his dad kept the work to himself – no stories, no anecdotes, no waxing wise about the

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profession, Saeltzer said. So, he was certain that his dad's job had little influence on his career choice.

The lawyers portrayed on television or on the big screen, however, may have pushed him a bit on the path to law, he believes. The one thing he knew for sure was it happened at a young age, and once he made up his mind, there was little anyone or anything could do to change it.

"I wanted to be a lawyer for quite a long time," Saeltzer said. "I always wanted to be in court. That looked fun. That to me was what being a lawyer was all about. It looked exciting and important, and I think I was pretty young. I don't even know if I was a teenager – it might have been before that – when it caught my attention.

"And I kept on that path, telling myself this is what I want to do," he continued. "I'm going to keep pointing that direction until something happens that tells me I'm wrong. When you pick a profession pretty young, you either grow out of it or, as you start to get into it in your adult life, you don't like it. I didn't grow out of it. I had the opposite reaction. The more exposure I got to it, the more enthusiastic I was about it."

Before Saeltzer's atypical path to law through the Army, he attended UCLA for his undergraduate studies then went straight to what was then UC Hastings College of the Law (now UC Law San Francisco).

Once out of the Army, he found a place in the Walkup firm that would serve as a mutual fulfillment of needs, he said. They had an immediate need for a trial attorney, and not one that would handle the big cases. He needed to be left alone to try his cases. It was all set up really well for him to do plaintiff's personal-injury work.

"They had a stable of cases that weren't particularly complex or big, and they had a need," Saeltzer recalled. "And (leaving the Army), I wanted to go somewhere that would continue to give me the autonomy to still try cases."

REDIRECT:

Getaway Spot: Any outside activity, preferably a sports field. Playing or watching.
Go-To Music or Artist: Taylor Swift before she started dating Travis Kelce.
Recommended Reading: Hemingway. Short and not complex. Right up my alley.
Dream Job: Living it (otherwise a soccer coach).
Words to Live By: "Things are rarely as good or as bad as they first appear to be."

Bigger cases require a team

Today, the cases on Saeltzer's desk are definitely bigger and more complex. The vast majority of them involve representing individuals, though he does sometimes dip into mass torts. The areas typically include negligence, product liability, medical malpractice, premises liability and condition of public properties, among others, he said.

Saeltzer said he doesn't really have a specialty area, but as his caseload evolved over the years, he came to realize that his desire for autonomy soon would become a thing of the past. Preparing to try the higher-level cases would require assistance.

"I think anybody who goes to trial has their organizational system of getting ready," he said. "It's no different for me. It's handling the same issues. It's just a matter of organizing so that all of the things that are coming together towards the end of trial are getting done and managed and handled. Initially, you can do a lot of that yourself, and then once you gain experience and get a little more complex cases, you've got to start having more of a team approach to get things ready. There's just too much for one person to do. That's been a skill I've had to learn: It does take more than one person to get a successful result at trial."

Saeltzer counts credibility as the most important part of success for a trial lawyer. He said you can't become somebody you're not for trial. For instance, he's a fairly serious person, not flamboyant. So, that's the way he tries his cases. A good trial lawyer cannot put on a fake personality for 12 people, he said.

Finding that winnable issue

In terms of strategy, Saeltzer said anything he does at trial he has taken from somebody else, learned from somebody else.

"You want to find your winnable issue, and you want to make sure that the discussion and the focus of the trial is on the point that you want to have it on," he said. "Finding that issue and having the case be about that winnable issue is really important."

To that end, Saeltzer added: "You've got to prepare. Everybody knows that. But it's harder than it sounds because there's constant distractions. The other side doesn't want to talk about what you want to talk about, and I think ignoring arguments is hard. It's hard to know when not to engage. I'm still practicing and learning it every day. I'll let you know when I get it perfect."

Love work, love play

When he's not in the office or the courtroom, Saeltzer enjoys watching, playing and coaching sports, pointing out that he has always been a competitive person. As his children grew up, their games or matches or meets allowed him to maintain a deep connection with them.

"I found it was something that you could put on your calendar because you have to force yourself to plan around that," he explained. "I really enjoyed that. Now they're older, so I'm not coaching them, but I'm still enjoying their activities and trying to stay active myself. I think it's important to try to stay physically active when you have a stressful, sedentary job. I find that I'm happier if I'm active and out and about. I can get a little grumpy around the office."

Saeltzer said he also loves to travel, and now that his kids are older, he and his wife are starting to get back into it. He actually missed a family trip to Europe last summer due to a trial, but they've

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enjoyed their share of treks to Lake Tahoe and other nearby getaway spots.

On the subject of passing on wisdom to younger lawyers or law students in this day and age, Saeltzer said it's a simple matter of fondness for what you're doing.

"Make sure you love it," he said. "It's a great profession; it's a great use of your time. But make sure you love it because it's not easy. And if you don't love it, it's not worth it. It's fantastic, worthwhile, wonderful. But make sure you love it."

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