



The setting sun illuminates the West Front of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C.

The **NCOs** *on* **CAPITOL HILL**



Once open only to officers, the Army's congressional liaison program now includes senior enlisted Soldiers, too

STORY & PHOTOS BY MICHAEL L. LEWIS





the Army; a congressional inquiry division that responds to members' inquiries and requests for information; and a division each in charge of operations and logistical support. A separate office, aligned under the assistant secretary of the Army for financial management and comptroller, serves as a liaison to the House and Senate appropriations committees.

Up until two years ago, however, the opportunity to work as a congressional fellow was exclusively the realm of officers. But, as part of 2009's Year of the NCO initiatives, then-Secretary of the Army Pete Geren and then-Sgt. Maj. of the Army Kenneth O. Preston developed a plan to include noncommissioned officers in the Army's congressional efforts. Two NCOs — Master Sgt. Barbara Rubio and Sgt. Maj. Scott Martin — were selected to serve that year as the first enlisted Army Congressional Fellows, who work directly on the staffs of members of Congress.

BEING A FELLOW

The fellowship program typically lasts three years. After fellows are selected, they begin studies toward a master's degree in legislative affairs in May at George Washington University in Wash-

ington, D.C. The following January, fellows begin a year working in a senator's or representative's office, acting as an ambassador on the Defense Department's behalf to the Congress member and his or her staff. There, fellows draft legislation; brief members and their staffs on Army policy issues and budgetary matters; and respond to constituents' concerns.

However, prior to the Year of the NCO, the program was largely unknown in enlisted circles.

"My command sergeant major called me up and said, 'I just heard about this program. I think you'd be great for it. Can I nominate you?'" said Rubio, who was placed in the office of Sen. Mark Udall of Colorado. "He said he didn't know anything more except that I'd be working for Congress for about a year. Within a week, I got an email from the SMA's office and was asked to send in my packet. And when you get an email from the SMA's office, it just about floors you — that's when reality kicked in."

In 60 days, Rubio went from never having heard about the fellows program to working on a senator's staff on Capitol Hill. Martin had a similarly quick turnaround before being placed in the office of Sen. Mark Warner of Virginia. Once they were part of the senators' staffs, they served as subject-matter experts for all things military — not just Army topics.

"The senators rely on the staff to be very in-

The news reports about the political machinations involved in narrowly averting a government shutdown last month exposed the ins and outs of Congress to many Americans. Normally, what the legislative branch of the United States does isn't given a second thought by many service members, unless politics appears about to put a Soldier's paycheck in peril.

But, the work of the Senate and House of Representatives impacts Soldiers every day. From appropriating money needed to keep the Army running to making rules for the military to oversight of the armed services, the decisions of Congress affect every unit.

To formulate and coordinate its congressional policy and strategy, the Army established the Office of the Chief Legislative Liaison at the Pentagon. Today, it comprises seven divisions: two liaison divisions — one each for the House and Senate — that serve as the primary point of contact between the Army and members of Congress, their staffs and relevant committees; a programs division that facilitates Congress' support for Army needs; an investigations and legislative division that coordinates congressional investigative actions involving

Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison of Texas consults with her Army congressional fellow, Sgt. Maj. Jesse Boettcher, in the corridor outside her office in the Russell Senate Office Building on Capitol Hill.



“What an NCO says is listened to very carefully. They just don’t see us very often, and when they do, they equate us to the troops on the ground.”



formed so they can make an informed decision when it comes time to vote,” Martin said. “Congress was looking for the Soldier’s perspective. Sen. Warner would ask, ‘Do you guys really want this or need this?’ I was the NCO’s voice.”

“What an NCO says is listened to very carefully,” Rubio said. “They just don’t see us very often, and when they do, they equate us to the troops on the ground.”

Transitioning from being an NCO leading Soldiers to being one worker among dozens of staffers can be challenging, said Sgt. Maj. Jesse Boettcher, a fellow currently working in the office of Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison of Texas. While a fellow, the NCOs are essentially on loan to the senator’s or representative’s office. But, they don’t stop being Soldiers, despite usually wearing business attire instead of their uniforms.

“My job as a sergeant major in the Army is not to be the decision-maker, it’s to be an advisor to the commander. So, by definition, my job is to be the senior enlisted advisor. And that’s what I’m doing in the office. I’m not in there making decisions on policy and legislation. But I’m giving opinions — the best advice I can give.”

“In the Army, you’re worried about the Soldiers in your unit and your mission,” Rubio said. “It’s very narrow for an NCO because this is your world that you take care of. You don’t worry about the big picture. Well, members of Congress worry about the big picture. So, I had to learn that I was there to figure out how things affect the state, how things affect Congress, how things affect the Army.”

Fellows get hands-on experience with how the nation’s laws are made. Boettcher, for example, worked the phones last month to line up 75 co-sponsors for a Senate bill Hutchison proposed that would pay Soldiers, Army civilians and contractors if



the government had shut down. While ultimately unneeded, the process was illuminating, Boettcher said.

“I enjoy the idea of being right in the middle of all this legislation that’s being created,” he said. “Even though my role in the process is miniscule, it’s still going on around me. If I hand in a resolution to the cloakroom, there are 30 senators around me. These are the leaders of our country, who are making all our laws. These are the people who handle the trillions of dollars in our nation’s budget. So, it’s kind of exciting being in the middle of that.”

Whatever political leanings a fellow might have when entering the program must be left at the door.

“It’s pretty easy to stay above politics,” Boettcher said. “I’ve had zero issues with it. The Army’s fellows are split pretty evenly between the House and

In her office, Madeleine Bordallo, Guam’s delegate to the U.S. House of Representatives, shows Sgt. Maj. Tammy Coon (left), a liaison in the House Liaison Division, combat boots she once received as a gift.



Above: Sgt. Maj. of the Army Raymond F. Chandler III and his legislative assistant, Master Sgt. Barbara Rubio, meet with Sen. Mark Udall of Colorado in his office in the Hart Senate Office Building. Rubio previously served in Udall's office as his Army fellow.

Right: Chandler testifies before the Senate Armed Services Committee's personnel subcommittee on April 13. Rubio, who helped Chandler prepare for his testimony, sits behind him.

Senate, and also between Republicans and Democrats. But, we all do the job the same. We give our professional, honest opinion, but we don't get too involved in politics. We are told to put our political views aside while here, and I think everyone's professional enough to do that."

"We have to remain neutral," Rubio said. "It's like when you're writing a note to a member of Congress. You don't say, 'Congratulations on your re-election,' because that means you're happy he won versus his opponent. Instead, you say, 'I look forward to continually working with you.' You see how that's neutral? You learn that in this job."

As politically charged as the atmosphere on Capitol Hill may appear in the news, the reality is much less polemic, Boettcher said.

"The way a bill becomes a law isn't necessarily the way you learned in school; a lot of things happen behind the scenes that aren't covered in textbooks. One of the biggest surprises is the amount of bipartisanship and compromise that happens off-camera. You might think that Republicans and Democrats don't get along so well because that's the way they're portrayed in the news. But in reality, they have to come to some sort of compromise; otherwise the government would come to a standstill."

The fellows' time on Capitol Hill has left a



lasting impression on the members of Congress they serve. Udall, during a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on March 3, praised the program in general and Rubio, his former fellow, specifically.

"I had the great privilege of having [her] serve for a year in my office in the first year of the NCO fellowship. It was phenomenal. And, I want to just underline the importance of that approach."

Sen. Saxby Chambliss of Georgia reiterated the fellowship program's value during the same hearing.

"I had just been blessed, going back to my days in the House, with outstanding young men and

women serving in my office. And, it's been a privilege to have a chance to dialogue with those folks, one on one, about what is really happening out there. ... They're just such an asset."

A LIAISON TO ALL MEMBERS

While the first NCOs were beginning work as fellows within the senators' staffs, NCOs were also joining the two Army liaison offices, which interact with the entire membership of the House and Senate.

Sgt. Maj. Olivia Warner, who works in the Senate Liaison Division, said she uses the leadership, communication and interpersonal skills she's developed throughout her career to tell the Army's story on Capitol Hill. The qualities needed to be an outstanding NCO are the same qualities that make for an outstanding legislative liaison, she said.

"What I learned during this assignment is that it's largely about the relationships you make. Capitol Hill is a great place to work, and you establish lasting relationships with the members of Congress and their staffs. NCOs on the Hill have instant credibility because of their rank and experience. That says a lot about the respect that NCOs have rightfully earned."

Sgt. Maj. Tammy Coon, who works in the House Liaison Division, has more than 60 members of the House with whom she is the liaison, representing an area that spans from Guam to the Pacific Northwest. She also coordinates visits to and queries regarding Walter Reed Army Medical Center for all House representatives.

"It is amazing to me the relationships that form when members of Congress visit wounded warriors," Coon said. "The members keep in touch and want to be provided with updates. Numerous members have made repeat visits because they truly want to see how people are progressing and the welfare of their loved ones. They truly care about the Army family."

Explaining the lesser-known facets of Army life to members of Congress and their staff members is her greatest reward, Warner said.

"When I was selected to work on the Hill, expectations were for me to interact with Congress and tell the Army story from an NCO's perspective.



That meant I needed to highlight the rigors of serving and also the sacrifices that our families make. These are the things you don't normally see on television," Warner said.

Coon and Warner also coordinate visits by congressional and staff delegations to installations at home and abroad. But having experienced such visits themselves as Soldiers, they know the visits are not always understood as well as they should be.

"When a presidential delegation goes out, everybody says, 'It's good to have him here,'" Coon said. "But, when a congressional delegation goes out, I don't think most Soldiers understand what that means. We are not trained to understand the significance of their roles."

On the other hand, members of Congress glean much about Soldiers's service when they travel, Warner said.

Prior to departing for an event, Chandler discusses his April 13 testimony with Sgt. Maj. Olivia Warner, currently an Army liaison in the Senate Liaison Division. Warner will become Chandler's legislative assistant this summer.



“I’m not concerned if you’re Democrat or Republican. I’m concerned about what is being done to take care of Soldiers.”



★ THE PROGRAM ★

An NCO interested in becoming a congressional fellow should have a bachelor's degree, combat deployment experience, a stellar record of service and superlative interpersonal skills. According to MILPER Message 11-043, those applying for the next class will follow this general timeline:

SPRING & SUMMER 2011: Applications are accepted for the next class of fellows, who will work during the first session of the 113th Congress. NCOs must be sergeants major or command sergeants major with at least four years remaining until separating from the Army.

NOVEMBER 2011: Fellows are announced. Up to 25 are selected by the Army, with up to two slots reserved for senior NCOs.

MAY–DECEMBER 2012: New participants begin an orientation course that teaches Army headquarters operations and the Army's position on various issues. Fellows also complete courses at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., toward a master's degree in legislative affairs. Two-thirds of the students in the rigorous program are congressional staffers, allowing Army fellows a unique opportunity to network with people they will be working with on Capitol Hill.

JANUARY 2013: Fellows begin their experience on Capitol Hill, working in the office of a member of Congress. Fellows are typically given responsibility for drafting legislation, writing speeches, briefing members and preparing members for congressional hearings.

SPRING & SUMMER 2013: Fellows complete their study at GWU by taking comprehensive exams.

DECEMBER 2013: Fellows conclude their fellowships on Capitol Hill.

2014 & 2015: Fellows are assigned to a two-year utilization position in the Washington area, putting to use the in-depth knowledge of the legislative process they acquired.

For more information, visit the Army Congressional Fellowship program's website at <http://ocll.hqda.pentagon.mil/confellowship.aspx>.

“It’s awesome to see members talking to Soldiers who’ve been wounded in combat, and the Soldiers are able to tell their own story. You hear them saying, ‘I hit an IED and was injured, but I still want to go back to the fight,’ and the member is like, ‘Wow. Really?’ ‘Yes, I want to go back to the fight. I want to go back and serve with my team,’ or ‘I want to go back and take care of my Soldiers.’ That’s something you can only experience from being boots-on-the-ground — actually sitting in a room with a wounded warrior telling his or her story.”

As the first NCOs in their offices, both sergeants major relish providing a special perspective on behalf of their counterparts throughout the Army.

“What the NCO really brings to the table is the boots-on-the-ground reality,” Warner said. “Because, you’re out there with the Soldiers wearing that equipment, wearing that uniform, using that equipment. Does it work or doesn’t it work? PowerPoints can’t tell you that. So, when members visit deployed environments and installations, they get to see the equip-

ment they’ve championed being used. It’s a different reality from being briefed in an office.”

Like their counterparts in the fellowship program, the House and Senate liaisons say they remain politically neutral. “You are a Soldier first. We have no political affiliation,” Coon said.

“I’m not concerned if you’re Democrat or Republican,” Warner added. “I’m concerned about what is being done to take care of Soldiers, family members and the Army. Everything else, I’m nonpartisan. It’s about the interaction you have and how you tell the Army’s story.”

PREPPING THE SMA

After fellows complete a year of working in a congressional office, they are typically placed in other divisions of the Office of the Chief Legislative Liaison to put their new expertise to work for the Army. One prominent role is becoming a legislative assistant to one of the five senior leaders of the Army — the secretary of the Army, undersecretary, chief of staff, vice chief and sergeant major of the Army.

After Rubio’s stint in Udall’s office, she became the first enlisted legislative assistant in the SMA’s office, a job previously held by a civilian.

“Basically, anything that deals with Congress, I’m his go-to person,” Rubio said. “It’s no different than any other senior leader who has a travel coordinator or a scheduler. If it’s writing a note, making a telephone call, making sure the person on the other end is available at that time for a phone call, an office call or preparing for a hearing — the whole gamut of anything to do with Congress, that’s my job.”

When Sgt. Maj. of the Army Raymond F. Chandler III began his tenure in March, the House and Senate committees dealing with the Army called him to testify regarding the quality-of-life issues affecting Soldiers. To prepare him for the hearings, Rubio had to anticipate what the committee members might ask.

“When someone is called to testify before Congress, my job is to predict what questions those members will ask the sergeant major. I contact the Army staff to get information on the topics I think will be asked and provide that information to the SMA so he can incorporate it when he answers a question, if he’s asked. The hardest work is this preparation. You don’t always know what Congress’ concerns are, and the SMA wants to provide Congress with current and accurate information. It’s a prediction game.”

Warner will take over for Rubio this summer, and Rubio is already waxing nostalgic.

“For me, I always go back to a colonel who once told me I needed to come into the program for the right reason — ‘You’re here to learn and to take that knowledge back to the Army.’ So, I really look at it as you are here to learn, and then to educate the rest of the force. Every member the SMA meets, he



“We are there to help Congress understand how NCOs actually are the backbone of the Army.”



is educating them about the Army. Likewise, when I meet Soldiers, I want to educate and teach them about Congress and what I’ve seen.”

Indeed, all those among the first contingent of NCOs to work on Capitol Hill hope their leadership will inspire others to follow in their footsteps.

“NCOs on the Hill are a must; this should be an aspiration for NCOs. The whole opportunity has been an eye-opener for me,” Coon said.

“We are there to help Congress understand how NCOs actually are the backbone of the Army,” Martin added.

“This is a unique and awesome experience,” Warner said. “It’s unique because it’s the first time the Army has allowed NCOs into the program. It’s

awesome because you get to see from a different perspective, looking at the big picture from the congressional perspective. So, when you go back down to an operational unit, you’ll have a different perspective. You’ll be able to understand the congressional process, including inquiries, the budget process and the oversight function of Congress — it’s just an enlightening experience.”

“That’s what I’ve learned from this program: Across the Army, NCOs are capable of a lot,” Rubio said. “We need to keep opening the doors and bring somebody through with us, behind us.” 🇺🇸

To contact Michael L. Lewis, email michael.lewis73@us.army.mil.

Rubio, Boettcher, Sgt. Maj. Scott Martin and Warner walk outside the East Front of the Capitol building.

