***Rules for Surviving as a CGO Judge Advocate!***

Though Col Thompson and Col Catron are a few years past their CGO glory days, we do hazily remember what we did right, what more often we did wrong, and what we know now that we wish we had known back then. What follows is us putting our heads together, and soliciting input from some of our colleagues, to give you the benefit of what wisdom we are able to remember. These Rules are generally divided into three categories – (A) the tactical level, go-do/to-do directive Rules that leave little ambiguity on how to execute; (B) the more overarching, allowing creativity in implementation, Rules; and (C) the bigger-picture, but more ambiguous for day-to-day execution, Rules. Honestly, these categories are fluid.

NOTE: The Rules are not and cannot be ranked by importance, as that will be an individual-to-individual determination which no two CGOs (or colonels) will agree on; but we had to number them for reference somehow and thus that is all the numbers are for--reference not relative importance.

**TACTICAL (DIRECTIVE) LEVEL**

**Rule #1: Never introduce yourself as “My name is Capt Smith.”** Captain is your rank, not your name.

**Rule #2: Keep a work or leadership journal.** Write down every lesson on leadership, tips, quotes, or philosophies that you hear. This will help you develop your leadership style and philosophy.

**Rule #3: Always walk to your superior’s left side when outside, even if they don’t “care,” and remind younger officers and enlisted members to walk on your left.** Set the example. Officership matters.

**Rule #4: Always stand up when your SJA and DSJA (and really everyone who outranks you, including by position) walks into your office.** No exceptions. People will model your professionalism.

**Rule #5: Always keep a spare set of clothes in your office.** EVERYONE forgets their OCP socks from time to time and it never hurts to have a business casual set of clothes ready to go as well.

**Rule #6: Steal a couple minutes with your boss every morning for a priorities discussion.** Tell them what yours are for the day … no good boss will turn away more information or an opportunity to re-prioritize/mentor.

**Rule #7: Occasionally check-in with the SJA or DSJA 30 minutes before you leave for the day.** Say this: “Boss, I’m headed out shortly, we got X done today, plan to tackle Y tomorrow, but is there anything you need before I head out?” It will build confidence and trust with leadership.

**Rule #8: Positive reinforcement works.** Make sure you highlight the wins and steps towards progress with your CGOs and paralegals. When the team does really well, buy donuts or pizza (yes, leadership does cost money).

**Rule #9: Don’t leave work with unread emails.** You don’t have to respond to them all, just check that you’re not missing something important that day. You don’t know what you don’t know and knowing what you do not know will allow you to set priorities for the next day.

**Rule #10: Set a calendar reminder to check CNS.** Sure you might not be able to go to every TDY you want, but by presenting the boss with a plan, you might be able to finagle a cool training opportunity.

**Rule #11: Always keep your AF Bio (and WebPDI) updated and accurate.** This can often be your only touch point with HHQ personnel who need to fill a tasking quickly or are considering assignments—a dated picture, incomplete duty history, grammar and spelling errors will undermine your credibility and potentially cost you an opportunity to excel.

**Rule #12: Don’t get cute with your email signature block.** It’s “V/r Capt Smith” then a signature block including duty title, location, and contact info, followed by an attorney-client/CUI notice. Do not include emojis, or quotes, or anything else. And also include your contact information, not just your “V/r Capt Smith” in your automatic reply-emails signature block.

**Rule #13: Own one civilian business “casual” outfit.** (gents: sports coat, tie, slacks, decent shoes; women: jacket, blouse, slacks/skirt, decent shoes). When you’re invited to a community event, or the Wing Commander’s holiday party, better to be ready to dress professionally.

**Rule #14: See a piece of trash, don’t walk by it, pick it up.** Little things matter, sometimes tiny things matter, this seems like a tiny one but anyone seeing you doing this (Airman, colleague, senior leader) will form an opinion about you from such a little act.

**Rule #15: Set an “out of office” automatic reply in Outlook when you won’t be reachable, and provide a good alternate contact, with phone number and email address.**

**Rule #16: Always have a “this is me” elevator speech ready for when you are asked “tell me a little bit about yourself.”** Senior leaders will use this question to learn a little bit about you, yes, but also as a test to judge your ability to communicate confidently on a subject you should have confidence … yourself.

**Rule #17: Learn how to prepare a RTS [Ready-to-Send] email for your boss.** Called different things, a RTS email is one you draft for your boss to send to say the Wing Commander. You attach it to an email to your boss as an attachment, and when the boss opens it all they have to do is edit the contents as necessary and then hit send. Avoids cutting-and-pasting and shows how tech-savvy you are.

**Rule #18: Always bring a notebook to a meeting.** This tells the person (most likely your superiors) that you’re ready to work and pay attention.

**Rule #19: The Lombardi Rule: If you are 5 minutes early for a military meeting you are 10 minutes late.** Besides demonstrating your enthusiasm, being there for this pre-meeting time allows you time to chat with colleagues and often superiors.

**Rule #20: Check your body language.** Besides nodding your head to support the speaker, when you’re in a staff meeting, presentation, or other gathering, be a statue--you’re not slumped, checking your phone, staring into space, or making faces. Yes, making faces. Oftentimes you don’t know you have that confused look on your face. But your boss does.

**Rule #21: Always use a “BLUF” (bottom line up front) in any e-mail or document.** Time is precious so don’t hide the answer!

**Rule #22: A quick but heartfelt congratulations email when promotion lists come out (promotion and school) will always be appreciated, even if the recipient does not know you well.** We are all part of the JAGC team/family, recognizing the successes demonstrates your dedication to all our team members; and it’s a small JAGC, likely someday you’ll get to know or work for someone you took a couple minutes to congratulate years earlier. Plus if the recipient does not know you they’ll probably Roster stalk your bio to see who you are so check Rule #11.

**Rule #23: Keep weekly and monthly bullets of your work.** Focus on impact, not sheer volume.

**Rule #24: Always be professional in an email response to your superiors--don’t drop your “sirs/ma’ams.”** Even if it’s been three pages of correspondence, always maintain military professionalism. “Got it” or “Copy” is not a suitable response--it’s “Got it, sir/Lt Col X,” “Copy ma’am/Lt Col A, on it,” or something like that.

**Rule #25: Roster stalk someone you don’t know before you call to chat with them or email them on an issue.** Learning something about their background can help break the ice or even stop you from saying something stupid.

**Rule #26: Never cut and paste your legal reviews from others (or even your old ones).** DAFI’s and rules change, and let’s be honest you can’t guarantee the quality of the prior review.

**Rule #27: Always provide a recommendation (COA).** Just telling commanders what they can/can’t do isn’t useful. “Command-driven legal advice” means showing the client how they can succeed. Along these lines, provide more than one COA or options, or at least discuss other options, as commanders don’t like to feel like they are being directed to do something. Same applies to your SJA.

**Rule #28: Make sure the office calendar has everyone’s birthdays (and especially your team).** If your office doesn’t do this for the team, and they really should be, you take the lead to do it or take the lead in doing something to commemorate the birthdays.

**Rule #29: As you walk out the building at 1700 and retreat is playing, or you’re sitting in your car, don’t stay inside because it’s more convenient.** Step outside and pay your respects. I guarantee it will set an example for others to follow (that’s what happened to me-Col Catron).

**Rule #30: Memorize the oath!** If you’re charged with giving an oath of office, don’t read it! [Oh, unless if it’s the trial counsel certification oath … that thing is horrible.]

**Rule #31: Never refuse a cookie by saying: “I have to get ready for my PT test next month.”** You should always be ready. While you may prepare a bit to do your best, others will lose respect for you if you indicate you have to get ready.

**Rule #32: Be dressed in your full uniform at least 10 minutes before the required duty start time and be ready to start work on time.**

**Rule #33: If you change into your uniform in your office, leave the door closed and don’t open the door until you are fully dressed, boots fully laced and tied, and blouses on.** If permitted to take off your blouse in your personal office during the duty day, put it back on and zip it up fully before you cross the threshold of your door or walk around the office.

**Rule #34: No profanity in the workplace** … to the best of your f\*+@#!g ability. It is unprofessional and demonstrates that you cannot handle stress or adversity.

**Rule #35: Eat lunch with or get some coffee with the other captains in your office at least every other week, if not weekly.** Calendar it. Getting to know each other better will go a long way towards making life better in the office/increasing cohesion.

**Rule #36: Join the local CGOC and network among your fellow CGOs.** Your job/life does not end at the office. And get to know other CGOs around the base. Learn what they do, their career path, what motivates them to be good leaders – it will all pay dividends professionally and socially.

**Rule #37: Know what PROJO means. And then take opportunities to be one for the Wing,** whether Air Force Ball or CFC or similar opportunity. Yes, you have the time and the effort pays dividends by Wing leadership knowing your name and hopefully having seen your successful execution of the project.

**Rule #38: Organize an office morale event.** Your leadership will greatly appreciate the effort and you’ll build team cohesion – and you get to pick the fun! And if your team has an idea, support them and attend.

**Rule #39: Learn your Wing’s mission, why your installation exists and how it supports the overall mission of the Air Force** … before preparing for TJAG’s visit. Get the current version from the CAG.

**Rule #40: Ask your LOS to teach you these things about the paralegals: how they are trained (what are the “Levels,” how does a paralegal level up, what is Training Business Area (TBA)), what’s important for their promotion, and how to lead them.**

**Rule #41: If you send an email to a large number of individuals which includes superiors, rank order them both in the TO: and CC: blocks.**

**Rule #42: If you are sent an invitation to an event in Teams or Outlook or just by email, especially by superior officers, answer quickly (Accept, Decline, or Tentative).** If you can’t attend, doesn’t hurt to tell them why.

**Rule #43: OCPs [and other uniforms] aren’t one size fits all, and sometimes no size will fit you just right so think about getting whatever doesn’t fit tailored so it does.** And it is worth the few dollars/Euros to have your pant legs fitted with elastic—it’s a great time saver from blousing your pants in the morning. Seconds matter!

**Rule #44: Check your uniform on 1 January and 1 June.** If your OCPs or Blues are faded, buy a new pair. If they look wrinkled, spend the time to straighten them out (should check this one more regularly). Be honest, you look at others and trust me…they’re looking at you.

**Rule #45: Buy thank-you and congratulation cards (even better with your letterhead).** Use them to send notes of congratulations or just thanks to people in and out of your office. You cannot imagine the impact of a handwritten note [just ask your grandma].

**Rule #46: Don’t leave random binders in your office.** “Binder continuity” is becoming a thing of the past (not to be mistaken with general section continuity = VERY important). If you haven’t opened a binder in years, do your successor a favor, and scrap them.

**OPERATIONAL (LESS DIRECTIVE BUT IMPORTANT) LEVEL**

**Rule #47: Set three goals for your section – and work to achieve them!** There’s no success without planning – so where do you want to go? Don’t let the daily grind prevent you from having a broader perspective—think operationally and strategically, rise above the daily grind, and maybe doing so will make the daily grind easier.

**Rule #48: Embrace the “wow!” factor.** Similar to “bloom where you’re planted” (Rule #64) this Rule is about learning to plan for success. Think of it this way, if TJAG is in your office and asks you for three things you are most proud of in your section, and you answer “customer service,” you need to get to work.

**Rule #49: Watch your social media habits.** It’s great you’re sharing what you had for breakfast. But keep it professional. Don’t “friend” subordinates in your office until that relationship has ended. And don’t delve into sex, religion, or politics, just don’t.

**Rule #50: When you meet a retiree, look them in the eyes and thank them for their service.**

**Rule #51: Learn to write OPR bullets.** You should take control over your OPR. No one, except maybe Col BT and Col Catron, care more about your career than you do. While most SJAs will draft the OPR for you, you need to track your success and learn to draft strong OPR bullets. It will help you and others as you progress. And remember, nobody cares about “JAG stuff” – learn to quantify and qualify your work as it relates to the Wing’s mission success. So you completed 700 NJPs in an afternoon, that doesn’t mean much to the non-JAGs sitting on your promotion panel! What processes did you improve, how did you help command be successful, and what impact did you have?

**Rule #52: Look for your own success.** Yes, a good SJA will show you the way, but be proactive and energetic; join the local bar association, network, find ways to carve your own successful path -- the more you look, the more opportunities will present themselves. Find multiple mentors to help this process.

**Rule #53: You don’t have to always re-create the wheel** (though you should always make sure the “wheel” works like it’s supposed to). Tag your JASOC network, especially if you don’t have many other captains in your office. Chances are a handful of them are dealing with similar issues that you are (legal assistance, civil law, courts, etc.). Set up a text or Teams chat … and ask those challenging questions.

**Rule #54: Always research the answer before you ask for help.** Never hurts to provide citations to what you have already found when asking for help to show you have made the effort.

**Rule #55: Learn the bosses’ writing style.** Does the boss like two spaces after a period or one; Oxford comma or not; does passive voice set them off [Col BT, yes]. Ask your boss if they have a personal style guide. And start your own personal style guide so your subordinates know how to mirror your writing style. The fewer the “corrections” your boss makes to a product, even style choices, the better your reputation for good work.

**Rule #56: Never “wing it” or shoot from the hip.** If you don’t know the answer, just say you don’t know and you’ll get back with them. Commanders expect this. Just say “that’s a great question, let me get back to you.” Remember the importance of reputation … it just takes one wrong “winging it” to do lasting damage to yours.

**Rule #57: If everything is “hot,” nothing gets done; if everything is important, nothing is important.** Ask your boss for clarification on project priorities and learn to master the art of “task prioritization.” Each day (and evening), prioritize your taskers and always ask for help if needed. This will pay massive dividends.

**Rule #58: NEVER send an email when you’re upset.** It NEVER goes as intended. Draft it and go home for the night. If you’re still angry and the email makes sense the next day, send it. My money is you won’t. And don’t put an address in the TO: block until you are absolutely ready to send, that next day. Also remember the Golden Rule: someone will always misinterpret your tone or intent in an email … so be careful.

**Rule #59: Do not get into the habit of taking your laptop home.** Yes, there are exceptions but “just checking emails” at 2100 hours or “tying up loose ends” is a slippery slope. You need down time, spend it with family and friends. Similarly, it doesn’t “impress” if you’re sending late night emails (unless necessary). In fact, as an SJA, it’s usually a sign of concern!

**Rule #60: Know your audience when communicating with commanders.** Chances are your 5-page civil law opinion can be reduced to just a page; most are just looking for a thumbs up or down. Save the detailed legal analysis for third-party reviewers or when you need to justify tough decisions. Provide command-driven legal advice, not JAG-driven.

**Rule #61: When you’ve got a legal issue you’re helping a commander with, offer to go over to the commander/CCF’s office to discuss** (especially if you haven’t met or worked with them before). They’ll appreciate the effort and you can use it as an opportunity to learn about what their unit does (and you might even score a cool impromptu tour).

**Rule #62: Invest in relationships—and don’t burn bridges.** Both within the office and across the base. Although, at the moment, you may feel like it is too much time to spend as the work piles up, that investment will pay you back when you need it most

**Rule #63: Have a professional, working relationship with your ADC and SVC.** No, the ADC is not “out to make you look bad,” they are merely zealously advocating for their clients. It’s not personal so don’t make it about you – and you might be there one day. You will ALWAYS come out ahead with a good relationship. At the very least, remember your reputation.

**STRATEGIC (BIG-PICTURE) LEVEL**

**Rule #64: Bloom where you are planted; nothing is given, everything is earned.** Doesn’t matter what you think you should be doing, crush the job you have. Period.

**Rule #65: Never miss an opportunity to excel (O2E).** Even the smallest tasks and projects will help cement your reputation as a hard worker and good performer.

**Rule #66: Be decisive and timely.** Perfection is the enemy of progress. Make the decision and remember, the 80% solution 100% of the time is better for commanders than the 100% solution only 80% of the time.

**Rule #67: Be yourself.** Easy, right? Don’t try to be what others think you should be, be comfortable in your own skin, but still find ways to improve yourself. Being introspective is a good thing at every stage of your JAGC career.

**Rule #68: Don’t forget your paralegals!** Give them credit in public, motivate with energy, and listen to what they tell you.

**Rule #69: Your reputation began the first day you stepped onto Maxwell AFB.** Don’t screw that up.

**Rule: #70: Own your mistakes.** You will make them, take responsibility, learn from them, and move on.

**Rule #71: Take all the blame. Pass along all the credit.** Cover your team when mistakes happen and be sure to recognize other’s successes and efforts. Your team WILL see this – the good and the bad.

**Rule #72: Don’t like the morale in the office? Then look in the mirror and work to improve it.** While leadership will set the tone and culture, the “CGO mafia” will run the fun.

**Rule #73: Always ask the “why” before committing to a course of action.** Just because something is legally permissible for our clients does not mean it makes the most sense.

**Rule #74: You will never be a successful military lawyer from behind your desk.**

**Rule #75: Don’t be afraid of “No.”** Ask for things, because if the answer is “no” most times you’re no worse off, but if the answer is “yes” you may get to do some really cool things in your career.

**Rule #76: Speak truth to power.** If something’s wrong in the office or isn’t working, don’t be afraid to speak up – respectfully. The good leaders will listen to you, and even if they don’t, you’ll never regret standing up for what you think is right.

**Rule #77:** **Don’t just “check the box.”** You’ll get a lot of lessons about being a good leader and taking care of people by asking how they’re doing. But actually take the time to listen and get to know the people you work with.

**Rule #78: Your office is not overworked or undermanned.** There, I said it. Yes, surges happen but if you portray an attitude of “woe is me” or use this excuse for poor performance morale will tank and your office will suck.

**Rule #79: If you ask, “Hey, how was your weekend?” expect a response. And listen.** People will know if you’re talking past them.

**Rule #80: You can respectfully disagree up your chain of command, but you need to respect it.** “Complaints go up” (Saving Private Ryan). You should avoid complaining or griping to, with or in front of those you outrank about a decision the chain of command orders/directs you to execute. If your subordinates or contemporaries are complaining around or to you about the same, try to help them understand the goal or purpose behind what they are complaining about. Doing this sets a good example and demonstrates respect for your chain of command.

**Rule #81: Treat leadership as a skill (muscle) that needs to be developed (exercised)**. Reading, mentorship, study, OJT—the ability to lead can be learned, find a way to learn it.

**Rule #82: Col BT’s 5P’s of litigation success apply to life as well: Preparation Prevents Piss-Poor Performance.**

***ADDENDUM***

**[a/o 1 Dec]**

Lots of good idea keep pouring in, here are a few:

**Rule #18 [Add]:** **Additionally, carry a pocket-size notebook on your person at all times to always be ready to take notes if you run into a colleague, commander, or superior.** Green notebooks that fit in the cargo pants of OCPs are on sale at clothing sales.

**Rule #23 [Add]:** **Make sure subordinates are also keeping track of bullets.** Bullets are not only helpful for OPRs, but make award packages easier when opportunities arise to recognize your accomplishments and the accomplishments of your people.

**Rule #44 [Add]: Service Dress.** Always be prepared for a clothing malfunction. Have an extra set of ribbons, badges, buttons, nylons, lint roller, and sewing kit. Ensure it is ironed and your shoes are spotless.

**Add Rule: Use E-Publishing frequently.** Do not download a DAFI and rely solely on that downloaded copy for days, weeks, or months. DAFIs change frequently and you may be referencing outdated regulations and rules if you do not check E-Publishing for the latest version of a publication or form.

**Add Rule: Get out to Wing events such as quarterly awards, first Fridays.** These are your clients and you are forming better relationships with them sharing a few laughs over some chicken wings rather than exchanging advice on an Art 15 over email.

**Add Rule: Learn how the JAGC/officer promotion process works.** You are your best advocate and you need to know the rules and the promotion process in order to (A) ensure your boss does as well and is taking care of you and (B) to sequence your career to hit certain milestones (*e.g.,* OPRs closing out in time to meet an upcoming promotion board).