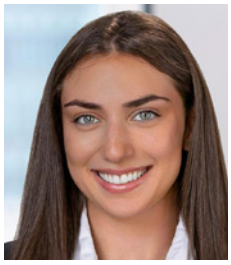
Rhode Island Women Lawyers: Past, Present, & Future

Inspired by Roger Williams University School of Law's annual *Women in Robes* event and its The First Women project, this series celebrates the women who have shaped Rhode Island's legal profession, highlights those making an impact today, and shares their experiences, perspectives, and contributions to the law.



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Nora Tyer-Witek

A Profile of Leadership, Dedication, and Service

Nora Tyer-Witek serves as Clerk of Court for the United States District Court for the District of Rhode Island, which she describes as "the best job in the world." Responsible for managing the Court's day-to-day administration and operations, Tyer-Witek is only the second woman to hold this critical position at the Rhode Island federal district court in nearly a century. She has skillfully and effectively led the Clerk's Office since 2017. Tyer-Witek's path to the federal district court, however, was unique, as it followed a 20-year career as a Marine Corps officer, an experience that greatly influenced her approach and leadership style as Clerk of Court.

"Once a Marine, Always a Marine"

Military service, specifically service in the Marine Corps, has been an integral part of Tyer-Witek's life. Her father was a Motor Transport officer and Battalion Commander in the Marines. He retired after working in the Pentagon in 1974, the year Nora was born. Tyer-Witek fondly remembers her father's office in their family home adorned with his Marine Corps memorabilia and overhearing him trade stories and barbs with his Marine buddies—memories that left a lasting positive impression on her. Tyer-Witek sought that special bond and camaraderie that her father and his fellow veterans shared. At the age of 15, Tyer-Witek wrote a letter to a recruiter asking how she could join the Marines. The recruiter wrote back to her, advising that she should stay in school and call him when she graduated (the letter proudly hangs on Tyer-Witek's office wall to this day). Tyer-Witek heeded the recruiter's advice, graduated *magna cum laude* from Loyola University Chicago, and was selected for Marine Corps Officer Candidate School in Quantico, Virginia.

Following her commission as an officer and additional training, Tyer-Witek's first duty assignment taught her a valuable lesson about the difference between micromanagement and responsible oversight. She was in charge of a platoon of Marines and a fleet of trucks, vehicles, and equipment as a Motor Transport officer—the same billet that had been held by her father. Tyer-Witek's senior enlisted Marines (Staff Non-Commissioned Officers) were five to 10 years older than she was and had at least 10 to 20 years of experience compared with her one year as a junior officer. It was a difficult situation, and she wanted to build trust and credibility with her Marines by not micromanaging them. One day, her unit was assigned to relocate a large convoy of trucks from a base in El Toro, California, to Miramar (near San Diego). Tyer-Witek was briefed on the plan the night before: at 4:00 a.m., her Marines would be transported to El Toro by bus to drive the trucks south to Miramar on one of the busiest highways in the country. She wanted to convey trust, so she came to work the next morning at the normal time of 7:30 a.m. However, when Tyer-Witek arrived at her office in the motor pool, there was a terse note from her Commanding Officer on her desk that said, "It's 3:00 a.m. I was here, where were you?"

Tyer-Witek's heart immediately sank, and she was convinced that she would be fired. She went to see her Commanding Officer, who explained the importance of presence and leadership. She swore never to make that mistake again, and to this day, whenever there is a high-stakes event at the courthouse, Tyer-Witek is physically on site to lend support and make sure the evolution is successful—not to micromanage, but to build the kind of trust and teamwork that unites and guides a high-performing organization.

While still on active duty, Tyer-Witek made the bold decision to enroll in law school to become a judge advocate. Following her bar admission and graduation from the Naval Justice School in Newport, Rhode Island, she practiced military law in Japan, Washington D.C., and Hawaii, and deployed as a Deputy Staff Judge Advocate in support of Operation Unified Response and Iraqi Freedom.

Tyer-Witek's final duty assignment was to return to the Naval Justice School, where she served in critical leadership roles as Executive Officer and Commanding Officer of the school. Colonel Donald Riley, USMC, who is the current Commanding Officer of the Naval Justice School, notes, "Nora Tyer-Witek left an indelible mark here at the Naval Justice School (NJS). NJS produces all the legal personnel—both lawyers and paralegals—for the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard in addition to training all Navy leaders on the finer points of military law. Her leadership and administrative qualities were clear from the start as she organized the staff and ensured the school was able to train and graduate hundreds of students per year for service in the Fleet. Her abilities were so noteworthy that she was selected as the first Marine in the nearly 70-year history of NJS to serve as the Acting Commanding Officer, a role normally reserved for a much more senior officer. Since retiring, Ms. Tyer-Witek has remained actively engaged and influential with the NJS team through her participation as an officer in the Naval Justice School Foundation."

A New Challenge

As her military career came to a close after two decades on active duty, Tyer-Witek knew she wanted to continue serving her community in some capacity and remain in Rhode Island, where she and her family had established roots. So, she reached out to her vast Marine network and spoke with veterans who were generous with their time, experience, and advice. Among her contacts was a former Marine who worked as a Clerk in Colorado and sent her a job posting for the open Clerk of Court position in Rhode Island, an opportunity that Tyer-Witek attributes to a combination of "timing, luck, and divine intervention" that aligned with her interests and the

organizational skills she had honed as a Marine Corps officer.

She applied for the position, went through a rigorous vetting process, and was hired as Clerk of Court in 2017. Tyer-Witek's first goal was to initiate change to the internal workplace to make the federal court in Rhode Island a place where litigants wanted to practice. A self-described student of humanity, Tyer-Witek applied her military training and experience in decentralized command and control to empower and trust Court staff to make decisions at every level in business practices, processes, and their own work lives. In Tyer-Witek's view, "Trusting people to manage their lives while getting their work done has incredible and almost instant impact on morale. This was the foundation for the culture of psychological safety and innovation that I'm most proud of." Reflecting on the past nine years as Clerk of Court, Tyer-Witek points to this culture change that she, the Court staff, and the district court judges were able to cultivate as one of their greatest accomplishments.

Tyer-Witek likens federal judges to Marine Corps generals: "They have incredibly difficult and lonely jobs; they need good people around them who will tell them the truth so that they can make really difficult decisions." She cherished her role as a trusted advisor to decision-makers in the Marine Corps and draws upon those experiences when providing honest assessments and feedback to judges as Clerk of Court. The lessons she learned in the Marines—"what do you know, who needs to know, and did you tell them?" and "bad news only gets worse with age"—continue to guide her as she oversees the Court's administrative operations. Tyer-Witek notes that there are 94 district courts in the United States and "each one has its own personality." She proudly describes the District Court for the District of Rhode Island as "mission-driven, customer-focused, and collaborative," qualities that she herself exemplifies.

Final Reflections

As November marks both the 251st anniversary of the founding of the Marine Corps and the month in which the country honors its veterans, it is fitting that Nora Tyer-Witek's exemplary military and public service be recognized and celebrated. Chief Judge John McConnell, United States District Court for the District of Rhode Island, sums it up best: "Nora's strength comes from the diversity of her background and her commitment to the values of effective and efficient administration of justice, and equality under the law. In each of Nora's roles as a lawyer, mother, Marine officer, and now Clerk of our Court she lives the values of inclusiveness, transparency, justice, collegiality, and respect—and of course Semper Fidelis." ◊

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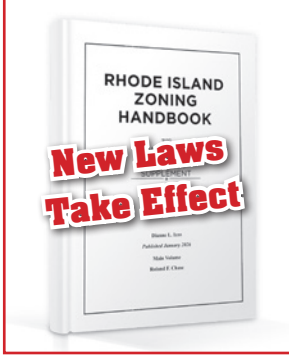
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