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AFJAGS Podcast: Episode 87 SOS Student Perspective

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Guest: Captain Joseph Ludmir

An interview with Captain Joseph Ludmir on Squadron Officer School (SOS) from the student's perspective and what JAGs can expect.

[Intro music – The Air Force Song (Instrumental)]

Introduction

Major Alexxa Pritchett:

Welcome back listeners to the Air Force Judge Advocate General School podcast. I'm Major Alexxa Pritchett, and today we're continuing our focus on professional military education [PME] with a look at Squadron Officer School, or SOS, from the student perspective. SOS is a critical milestone in an Air Force officer's development designed to prepare captains to lead in complex joint and contested environments.

Today, we're shifting to the experience of a recent SOS graduate, specifically a JAG, who completed the course under the new redesign curriculum. By the end of this episode, our goal is to give you a clear picture of what SOS looks like, what JAGs can expect, and how the experience shapes officers as they return to the field.

Joining us today is Captain Joseph Ludmir, a recent SOS student, to tell us about his experience at SOS. Captain Ludmir, can you please introduce yourself and tell us about your background in the JAG Corps?

Captain Joseph Ludmir:

I'm Captain Joseph Ludmir. I joined the JAG Corps in January of 2022. I commissioned directly after law school. And my first assignment was at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam. I was very lucky, got to go to Hawaii for a couple years as an assistant staff judge advocate. And then in July of 2024, I PCSed and went to a new assignment here at Barksdale Air Force Base, Louisiana, where I have been the Area Defense Counsel (ADC).

And actually that's when I went to Squadron Officer School several months back in July to September of 2025.

SOS – The Redesigned Curriculum

Maj Pritchett:

Captain Ludmir, before you attended SOS, were you aware of the recent changes to the program?

Capt Ludmir:

Yes and no. I definitely had heard murmurs that the curriculum was being redesigned.

As you probably know, you hear telephone games of what one person tells you, what one person tells you, what one person tells you. I'd heard that they were maybe redesigning it. Whether those redesigns to the curriculum were going to happen when I was there or not, we weren't even sure at that point until we really got there and they informed us, "Yes, there's a new curriculum. Get ready, because it's going to look very different from what others have experienced."

Maj Pritchett:

Let's shift our conversation to when you arrived at SOS. What stood out to you most during your first few days there?

Capt Ludmir:

They had emphasized at the beginning, in our first all call, that they were going to emphasize a lot more interactive war gaming exercise type time rather than classroom instruction.

And I was like, "Okay, you're talking the talk, but are you going to walk the walk?" And I actually remember the first day, maybe within the first few hours, our instructors said, "You're going to meet outside, you're going to meet in this little grassy area." And it was almost like an escape room challenge.

They gave us some very basic instructions and then we had to do a 5K around Maxwell Air Force Base, while having to solve clues and solve puzzles as a team. And I thought that was really indicative. I remember standing out and thinking to myself, "Oh, this is actually going to look a lot different than just kind of the numerous hours of sitting in a lecture classroom, kind of PowerPoint by death, so to speak, is what you hear a lot of the time."

That definitely stood out as they were actually implementing changes to make it far more interactive and hands-on, I would say.

Maj Pritchett:

You just mentioned that it was very different than prior training or professional military education that you've attended. Did you have to adjust your mindset or your approach to completing SOS versus a different type of PME that you've done in the past?

Capt Ludmir:

That's a great question. I think in past PMEs, especially ones that are JAG focused, our learning takes place pretty exclusively within the classroom.

Sure, we have mock trials, but it's very classroom oriented. And in prior PMEs, there's a lot about studying, reading, memorizing the information—I would say in many ways. What's very different and the mindset and approach I had to adjust very rapidly was this isn't going to be one of those courses where you just read a book, try to memorize all the concepts, and then get the best grade you possibly can possible.

You as a JAG, I think there were two big dimensions that I had to focus on. One, I had to focus on a lot of folks who I was with have incredible experience within their own career fields, but likely have never really dealt, at least within the job setting, in working with a JAG or utilizing a JAG's advice. So that kind of brings me to the second portion, which is my approach had to rapidly shift to, "How can I, entering this space with my teammates, with my flight, use my experience, use the knowledge I have to bolster their ability to accomplish the mission?"

And that was really the biggest mindset. You had to find your place, rather than, I think in prior PME, either it was more obvious or it was a lot more just academic. So JAGs, just by virtue of having gone to law school and gone through seven, eight years of schooling, naturally know how to take tests, for example. This was very different. You had to figure out how to help your team.

A Typical Day at SOS

Maj Pritchett:

I appreciate that. Going off of that and the team environment, what did a typical day at SOS look like for you?

Capt Ludmir:

I would say there's a divided answer there. The first couple weeks were a little bit more classroom instruction and learning. But it was learning about very real world and applicable concepts that we then later used for war gaming in the second half of the course.

In the first half of the course, we would have some hours of a lot of learning, for example, about joint structure. What it looks like to work in a combatant command, for example. And how that differs from the Air Force structure within our major commands. Which directorate encompasses which type of career field for each of those within them.

You really got to learn both your place within the larger Air Force and even broader COCOM [should be CCMD] (Combatant Command) structure and where others fell in. We would also have a couple hours dedicated to... I remember we essentially would have almost like "show and tell" for your career. Folks would be doing hour long presentations to explain their career and how it impacted the mission. And then after those first couple weeks, then you got into war gaming exercises. And war gaming took place in a variety of ways. Some of it would be war game-based board games, kind of think like Risk. Where you would work with your team to understand how to appropriately strategize.

A lot of them would be what could have been real world exercises. Preparing for sorties or deployments, for example, and how your different career fields interact. So some hours of classroom time, but even in those classroom time hours there's a lot of discussion, a lot of very student-led learning, I would say there.

Maj Pritchett:

Let's talk about part one. You mentioned learning the foundational concepts to working in a joint environment. What did you find personally most challenging about that? Just given the virtue of our position as JAGs, we don't necessarily always have exposure to those sorts of environments early on in our careers.

Capt Ludmir:

Definitely, at the beginning, it was challenging because being very realistic most JAGs who are going to SOS have done, let's say somewhere between three and five years and have worked likely at a legal office and then maybe done a second legal office, maybe been an ADC, maybe been a VC (Victims' Counsel), and none of those jobs really function within either the joint structure or even the Air Force MAJCOM (Major Command) structure. Because we kind of work in our own, I don't even know how to put it. I guess the best word is JAG office, right? But we don't have an A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, A6 in our JAG office. We just have different specialties.

It definitely took time to understand. But I think it was vital because then later on, especially even in and out of the job, as a JAG in a legal office you might be advising commanders or working in an exercise that involves the entire wing or MAJCOM. And when someone tells you, "Hey, you have to go talk to someone from Intel," instead of being a deer in the headlights, you note to yourself, "Okay, I know where in the MAJCOM I can go to find someone in Intel. I know which directorate I can find that person in."

So definitely challenging at first, but you realize later on you have an “AHA moment!” of, “Wow, there’s so many pieces of this information that are going to help me when figuring out how to broadly advise commanders at all levels within the Air Force.”

War Gaming at SOS

Maj Pritchett:

You had mentioned war gaming is a big part of the latter half of SOS. Can you talk a little bit about learning that and assuming that was your first exposure to war gaming in your career?

Capt Ludmir:

The war gaming at SOS involved real world type scenarios, requiring you to make decisions in the moment and accept risk in some way working with your team.

I’ll break that down a little bit. A lot of the war gaming would look like this: you had a prompt, you had generalized instructions on what the task was, or the objective was at the very strategic level. We talk about the strategic level; you then have to implement it at the tactical or operational level.

When we would war game, you actually would get far less specific instruction than you maybe expect. And you have to accomplish this very broad objective. Let’s say it’s collecting munitions, for example. You’re assuming that role within a war game, but how you get those munitions, who you talk to to get those munitions, where you go to get those munitions, the timeline for it, are all either up in the air or information that you have to go seek out.

One of the things I think that’s very interesting from a JAG perspective, is two pieces there. One, you have to figure out on your own where to go and how to solicit that information and get the resources you need to accomplish the task at hand. Which for JAGs sometimes is not the most common because sometimes, you know, we have our MCMs right in front of us or we have a lot of other folks to just ask.

And then the second portion there is for JAGs it’s not going to be obvious even at Squadron Officer School or in war gaming, where a JAG fits in and where advice fits in, for example. You may detect an issue that even the instructors hadn’t thought about, but you as a JAG, in your own experience, recognized, “Oh yeah, I remember there’s a law, or an ethics rule about that. This is where I jump in and explain and advise.”

But no one’s going to prompt you or tell you to do that. So the war gaming was very, I think, organic. How does each career field work together to accomplish the mission without a very structured scripted solution of do step one, do step two, do step three. And we debriefed that a lot within our flights every time we had this war gaming.

Working with other Career Fields

Maj Pritchett:

You’ve mentioned your flight a little bit. For those listening, at SOS you are put into a flight. And typically for JAGs you’re the only JAG inside of that flight, among many other career fields. Captain Ludmir, can you talk about what it was like working with officers from other career fields and how that shaped your experience over the five weeks?

Capt Ludmir:

The two words I would use to describe it are refreshing and humbling. When you’re the only JAG, you can go in with two mindsets, and I think one is clearly the better mindset, right? You go in and say to yourself, “You know, I’m this lawyer I went to three years of law school. I know this information like the back of my hand, or, this doesn’t apply to me. I’m going to go work in some sort of sector of the JAG Corps where maybe I’m not working with a lot of other career fields on a day-to-day basis.”

Or, and I think this is the far better approach, you can go in and say, “I’m going to get something very meaningful out of this and I’m going to learn the other career fields and actually learn what they do, what the different type of aircraft are, what contracting does on a day-to-day basis.”

At first, I'll be honest, it was a little bit intimidating. We had a fighter pilot instructor within our flight who was wonderful. We had several other pilots, green jolly, which is like a rescue helicopter that operates partially out of Japan or some of them are based in Japan.

And you are in awe of the work they do in the day-to-day. But then you have to remind yourself, "Okay, they've never met a JAG? They don't really consult with JAGs very often." You have to explain what you do and how you benefit the mission as well. I had an amazing flight and I think part of it is that we mutually and deeply understood over the weeks as we got to learn our jobs, our personality styles, the way our work operated, how our work could sync up.

And by the end it was pretty cool because in our final couple of war gaming exercises, there were a couple hypothetical war gaming exercises out in the Pacific and there was an issue where a hypothetical airman drank alcohol underage.

And it was very nice because some of my flight mates immediately came to me and asked, "As an Area Defense Counsel, how would this operate? How would this look? How would this person's punishment work? What are the options to get them back stateside to face that punishment?" And while intimidating at first, if you go in with the right mindset, you come out knowing so much more both about other career fields and the Air Force at large.

And if you do it right, your other flight mates will really develop an understanding and a respect of how JAGs can actually improve their ability to accomplish the mission as well.

The Physical Aspects of SOS

Maj Pritchett:

Thank you for that. I recognize that we've talked a lot about the academic environment, and what that looks like for a team and how you can be successful. But I want to shift the focus a little bit to the physical element of SOS, to include being a part of a team or a flight.

Capt Ludmir, can you talk a little bit about the physical challenges that you were presented at SOS and how a JAG can best prepare for those?

Capt Ludmir:

It was pretty physically demanding, I would say. We did a 5K off the bat, as part of a team challenge where we ran around Maxwell Air Force Base accomplishing different tasks. We would be doing PT (physical training) every morning as a flight. Frequently with other flight members leading the PT, upper body workout, lower body workout. The ultimate goal was that in our final sort of war gaming challenge, which involved running around base to accomplish different tasks for a hypothetical deployed squadron, we actually ended up doing a 10k.

You're going to be doing a lot of cardio. I would definitely come already on this track, of having regularly ran, regularly doing cardio, regularly working out.

You also had an obstacle course and several team building obstacle courses that required upper body strength. So the more you can prepare, the more you help your flight out. Because frequently the way our success was determined at SOS was your team score, your flight score. Whether it was the lowest time in running, for example, or the ability to accomplish obstacles that really required lifting barrels, or pulling heavy items from one side to another while balancing.

One of the changes they had explained in Squadron Officers School was that you had to be physically, truly fit, in that we were going to be doing PT every day, both separately from the course, but also integrated within the course as well.

And I think that came very much true.

Maj Pritchett:

How did you feel about the integration of PT, which is a new initiative from the Secretary of War? How did you feel that helped your experience in a professional military education environment?

Capt Ludmir:

I loved it, honestly. Especially for JAGs where most of our day is spent either in meetings or behind a computer.

It felt really good to get out and get regular exercise within that integrated environment that we talked about. I remember even at one point I was able to lead a PT workout with our flight. We did some cardio. And it was just very motivating—to see your whole group and team doing the same workout with you and you being the one to lead it.

It was refreshing, honestly, is the best answer I can give you.

Maj Pritchett:

What would you say to a JAG who maybe isn't necessarily as comfortable or confident in their physical abilities heading to SOS, knowing that they're going to have to really engage in those kinds of activities?

Capt Ludmir:

I want to be very clear, I am not the person who gets a hundred on every single PT test ever. I think the attitude you have to go into it is obviously prepare and keep your PT up. But also understand that the core principle there is that you are a flight and a team. And we really did have a "no man left behind" attitude. Whether it was with running PT or obstacle courses, everyone's going to have their weaknesses.

Don't be afraid or don't feel like you have to go in there saying, "I have to prove that I'm the strongest person, or that I can run the fastest mile of anyone." I actually think that attitude will backfire and potentially not allow you to get the support you need or you didn't even know you needed from your team.

The idea is, "Are you putting the effort in?" And I think that's what really matters. And when you can show you're putting that effort in, the results will naturally follow and your team will be there at SOS to support you.

What Value Do JAGs Get From Attending SOS?

Maj Pritchett:

I want to take a few steps back and look holistically at the value that JAGs get out of SOS.

Can you talk a little bit about how this course has changed your view as an officer in the United States Air Force?

Capt Ludmir:

It's changed in a couple ways. I'll start with my specific job as an ADC, and then talk a little more broadly. As an ADC (or VC), you get hundreds of clients who walk through your door. And they all come with often years or decades of military experience with a squadron they're attached to. Frequently, we just see letters. OSS (operations support squadron) or MUNS (munitions squadron) or CS (communications squadron) or whatever it may be. And we don't really understand often what that entails day to day. With Squadron Officer School, the focus was on understanding your role in the broader Air Force environment while learning everyone's career fields.

I came back to this job as an ADC, and when I had clients who walked in the door and I saw, for example, that they were part of CE (civil engineering squadron), I thought about my flight mate at SOS who was CE. They explained the day-to-day, what electrical engineering would look like on base if you were in CE. And when you can understand or show that you understand the clients you're advising, that you understand their career

field, the challenges of their career field, that they work different shifts, attend specialized exercises... you build a lot more trust with the folks you're advising. Because you're showing that you understand and care about their specific background within the Air Force, and you're not just seeing them as another data point within your clientele.

So for any JAG, regardless of what level, but especially captains, SOS allowed me to have a much deeper understanding of the structure of the Air Force and connect with other officers and enlisted members about their career fields to be able to give them advice and for them to feel comfortable to trust the advice we give on a day-to-day basis.

Maj Pritchett:

Thank you. I also loved SOS mainly because I got to learn so much about the Air Force at that time. And I think that makes you a better JAG just to know, whether it's a commander you're advising or a client, to know a little bit more about who they are, what their AFSC (Air Force Specialty Code) does. And SOS is a great experience to leverage your skills but also learn so much about the Air Force.

Captain Ludmir, before we wrap up today, if you could give one piece of advice to a JAG who is preparing to head out for SOS, what would it be?

Advice from a Recent SOS Graduate

Capt Ludmir:

The biggest piece of advice I would give for any JAG going into SOS is you will get out of SOS what you put in for it. I remember the first day in the auditorium, Colonel Ayre, the SOS Commandant spoke to us. He said something to the effect of, "If you expect us to spoonfeed you or give you the information to become a better officer and eventually an FGO, that's not going to happen here. This isn't officer training school. This isn't day one where you're being yelled at to wake up at 4:30 am. You put in and you get out what you put in."

And he really emphasized that attitude is going to shape your SOS experience. I had heard all sorts of different approaches and stories about how JAGs went into SOS, and I think this connects sort of to my main piece of advice and I'm going to talk especially to the ADCs and VCs out there because a lot of the ones going to SOS hold those roles.

There are going to be many times where you feel tempted or conflicted to prioritize your work back at your job over SOS. I would encourage you to the maximum extent, don't. I get it. We all have certain things that are time sensitive or deadlines coming up. Do not make SOS a checklist item that you have to check off to become major. Put in the time to get to know your flight mates. Learn about their career fields. Go to the social events and bond with them. Form those relationships and connections because I promise you, for your career, it is going to be far more beneficial to have learned that knowledge and information than to take the extra five minutes responding to the email that wasn't actually that urgent back home. And one day when you're a deputy or SJA (Staff Judge Advocate), you can implement and execute the mission using the knowledge you gained at SOS.

So going in don't have the mindset that SOS is just a checklist item I have to check off. Or I'm just doing this because my boss told me I have to. Really go in with an open mind and be willing to engage and connect with the folks and your flight from day one. And you would be surprised what information and results you'll get out of it.

Maj Pritchett:

Captain Ludmir, thank you so much for taking the time to share your experience with us today. Listeners, that's all we have. Have a great day. We are out.

Glossary

- **A1:** Manpower and Personnel
- **A2:** Intelligence
- **A3:** Operations
- **A4:** Logistics
- **A5:** Plans and Requirements
- **A6:** Communications
- **ADC:** Area Defense Counsel
- **CCMD:** Combatant Command
- **CE:** civil engineering
- **COCOM:** combatant command (command authority)
- **CS:** communications squadron
- **FGO:** field grade officer
- **JAG:** Judge Advocate General
- **MAJCOM:** major command
- **MCM:** Manual for Courts-Martial
- **MUNS:** Munitions
- **OSS:** operations support squadron
- **PCS:** permanent change of station
- **PME:** professional military education
- **PT:** physical training
- **SOS:** Squadron Officer School
- **VC:** Victims' Counsel

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