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In Chambers

He earned 2 Navy Crosses, a rare feat

By John Flynn Rooney
Law Bulletin staff writer

J. Patrick Donovan presides over U.S. Social Security Administration disability cases from around the country in a “virtual courtroom” in downtown Chicago.

Donovan conducts the proceedings while at his bench in front of three large computer screens that are linked to computers in other locales. He has conducted video hearings in the Chicago area and the Midwest for about three years.

Presiding over video hearings took getting used to, Donovan said.

“But with the advances in electronic databases, and electronic transmission equipment, audio and visual, it’s crystal clear,” he said.

Donovan moved about two months ago from an Orland Park hearing office to the downtown location. His new office does not offer a hint of Donovan’s military experience.

Donovan, 68, is a highly-decorated retired U.S. Marine Corps major who served in Vietnam.

Donovan was a member of the “Purple Foxes,” a Marine helicopter squadron. He also served as that unit’s legal officer.

Donovan flew helicopters on missions and rescued seriously wounded Marines during fierce firefights, including at night. During one such mission, Donovan suffered wounds in the cheek and leg from fragments of grenades and mortar rounds but maneuvered the damaged helicopter to the nearest medical facility.

Donovan racked up more than 1,200 hours of flying time and participated in more than 700 combat missions. He was honorably discharged from the Marines Corps Reserves in 1986.

For his actions during the war, Donovan twice received the Navy Cross, the highest award from the Navy, and the Purple Heart along with many other awards and medals for valor.

“It’s really pretty unheard-of to get two” Navy Crosses, said Chicago lawyer Joseph N. Hosteny III, a retired Navy lieutenant.

Donovan was inducted as a member of The Golden Eagles, also known as The Early and Pioneer Naval Aviators Association. That association comprises 200 active members, including NASA astronauts Neil A. Armstrong and James A. Lovell Jr.

“That’s really stellar company,” said Hosteny,

continued...



Chris Bernacchi

J. Patrick Donovan

Administrative law judge
Social Security Administration

Appointed: 2005

Career highlights: City of Chicago Department of Law, chief assistant corporation counsel, Regulatory and Aviation Litigation Division, 1999-05; sole practitioner, 1996-98, 1986-87; principal, Donovan & Olsen, 1988-95; associate, McKenna, Storer, Rowe, White & Farrug, 1978-86; associate, Kralovec, Marquard, Sweeney & Doyle, 1976-78

Age: 68

Law school: University of San Diego School of Law, 1976

Interests: Supporting veterans and active duty Marines, spending time with family

a longtime Donovan friend and partner with Niro, Scavone, Haller & Niro in Chicago.

Donovan was born and raised in the town of Waxahachie, Texas. His father, Joseph B. Donovan, a Marine veteran from World War I, was a salesman.

When Donovan and his three younger brothers were children, their father had them march around the house when the "Don McNeill's Breakfast Club" radio program featured a march.

"He and my mother ... taught me the basic values that led me to want to serve my country," Donovan said.

The elder Donovan died when his oldest son was 9. So the children's mother, Ursula Ratchford Donovan, raised them on a teacher's income.

Donovan graduated with a degree in English literature from the University of Dallas in May 1966. The following month, he enlisted in the Marine Corps.

Shortly before heading to Quantico, Va., for Officer Candidate School, Donovan visited a friend from college in Chicago.

During that visit, Donovan met his wife, Eileen "Beba" Donovan. The couple married in 1968 and are the parents of five adult children, four sons and a daughter, Marine Corps Capt. Eileen C. Donovan. Currently serving overseas, she pilots the same type of helicopter her father did. The couple also has seven grandchildren.

In 1969, Donovan returned to the U.S. and served as a squadron pilot in California. Following his release from active duty, Donovan began law school and earned his juris doctor from the University of San Diego Law School in 1976, the same year he was admitted to the Illinois bar.

Donovan's first job as a lawyer was with the Chicago law firm of Kralovec, Sweeney, Marquard & Doyle, where he performed insurance defense work, including aviation products liability defense.

John C. Doyle Jr., a now-retired name partner of the firm, recalled that Donovan's strengths as a lawyer were his determination and his focus.

"He had a great presence when in a courtroom or at a deposition," Doyle said. "He sort of commanded respect."

Donovan stands 6 feet 4 and speaks with a slight Texas drawl.

Donovan's next job was with the Chicago law firm of McKenna, Storer, Row, White & Farrug.

In 1986, Donovan branched out on his own and later formed partnerships. He defended aviation clients in state and federal courts throughout the nation.

In 1999, Donovan joined the City of Chicago Law Department as chief assistant corporation counsel in the Regulatory and Aviation Litigation Division.

"It was an opportunity to do work involving O'Hare Airport and Midway Airport," Donovan said, adding that he handled issues related to the renovation of Midway Airport and environmental matters at O'Hare Airport.

Mara S. Georges, Chicago's corporation counsel, said Donovan came to the office with impressive legal credentials and tremendous military credentials.

Georges added that Donovan is humble and "very unassuming. But someone who is obviously a tremendous patriot."

Donovan had applied to become an administrative law judge several years before his selection.

In June 2005, Donovan was appointed to the bench and decided disability claims based out of the Social Security Administration's hearing office in Orland Park.

Jan L. Kodner, a Chicago lawyer who has handled matters before Donovan, said the judge is fair and respectful to claimants.

"He was prepared, patient, understood the issues and did not have an agenda," Kodner said.

Chief Judge Denise McDuffie Martin, who oversees the Orland Park hearing office, said Donovan was "very well loved and respected here."

"He ran a tight courtroom," Martin added. "He was fair and honest, yet he just portrays himself in such a manner even the claimants felt comfortable in his presence."

Donovan no longer flies. But he did have a chance to try his pilot skills last year while using a helicopter flight simulator during a visit with his daughter at a Marine Corps Air Station in California.

"In terms of actually using my pilot skills, that's the last time I put them to the test and I'm happy to say they're still there," Donovan said.