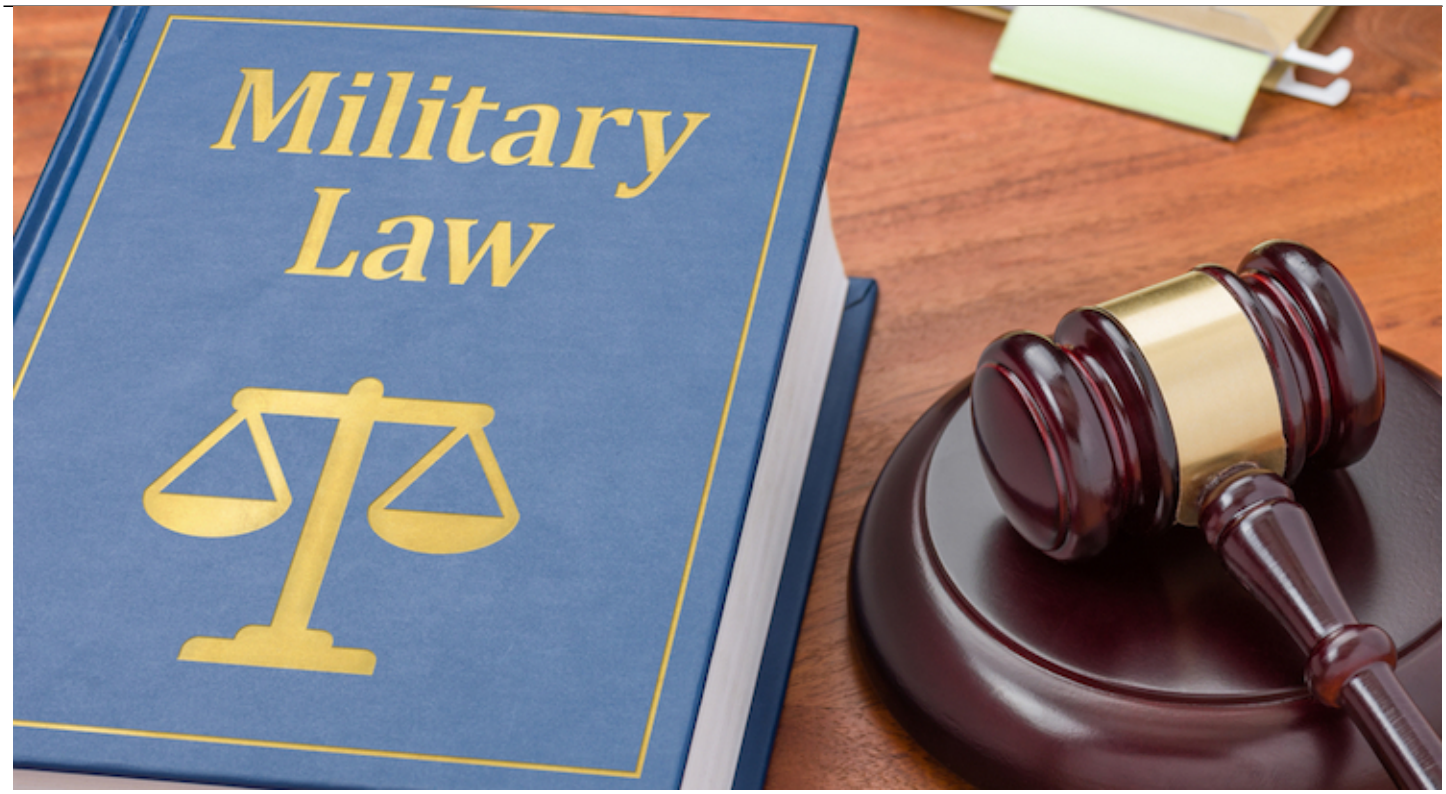


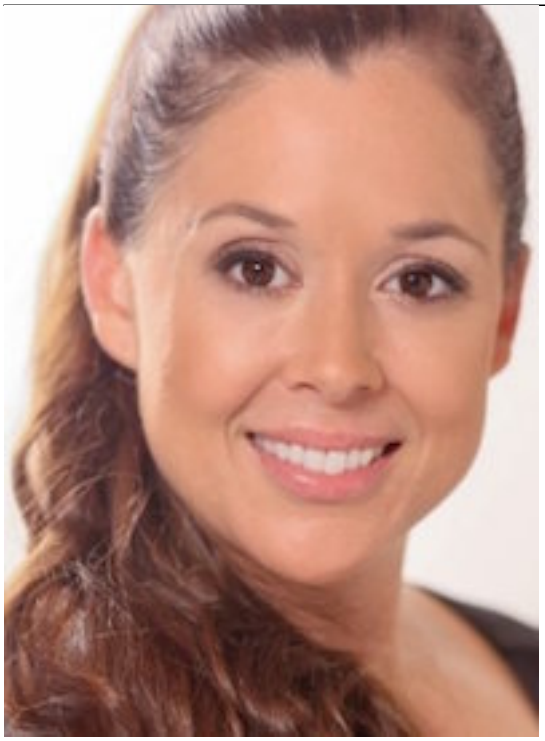
Becoming a Honey Badger: Navy JAG Claire Huffstetler's Path to Leadership

Career Development



Claire Huffstetler, lieutenant commander in the US Navy Judge Advocate General's Corps (JAG), had an unlikely beginning to her military service. She didn't come from military family — her parents are teachers. She is slim, somewhat soft-spoken, and a former college cheerleader. With her brother's encouragement, however, she also joined her campus ROTC program. This grueling training required extra classes, physical conditioning, and another uniform.

"Though being a member of both ROTC and the cheerleading squad may seem unexpected, I think that they have more in common than most people realize," Huffstetler says. "They both require unit cohesion, working with a team, staying in line, and structure," she explained.



Entering military service after college was natural for Huffstetler. “Since high school, I have been proudly wearing uniforms. It is my identity. It is deeply ingrained in everything I do and love,” she says. Although she is proud of her military experience, Huffstetler acknowledges that she faced gender inequity on her path to success. What helped her overcome this inequity? According to Huffstetler, it was her “Honey Badger Don’t Care” attitude.

No, that isn’t a military term. “Honey Badger Don’t Care” is a viral video (warning: video contains obscene language) that first appeared on YouTube in 2011. The video features commentary by an enthusiastic, sarcastic narrator, dubbed over pre-existing National Geographic footage of “the crazy honey badger.” The narrator, lampooning typical nature documentaries, points out the animal’s “I don’t care” attitude.

The video brought the honey badger to public attention, but Huffstetler has identified with this animal since the beginning of her career. Nothing scares a honey badger. Honey badgers eat king cobras and demolish rival animals. If a honey badger is attacked by a venomous animal, the damage is only temporary. The honey badger just gets up again and continues down its original path.

Huffstetler identifies with the honey badger because of her relentless persistence, her willingness to be on the front lines, and her refusal to back down from a fight. These traits helped her succeed on an unlikely path, despite experiencing gender inequity.

Honey badger doesn't have time for stereotypes

In 2002, Huffstetler was commissioned as a naval officer, and served as a surface warrior officer

(SWO) in a variety of operational roles until 2007. She was one of only four women on board. Although she was an unlikely candidate, it was her dream job and she was thrilled to fulfill it. As a gunnery officer, she was in charge of all weaponry and ammunition, as well as a team of 25 men who maintained and discharged the weapons.

Being a gunnery officer also historically meant that she was supposed to lead visit board search and seizure (VBSS). This position included the responsibility to board potential warships to enforce UN sanctions. As this was right before the second invasion of Baghdad, the job was, of course, no joke. The duties included boarding hostile warships in tactical gear, conducting searches, and dealing with individuals who could be terrorists.

Huffstetler was thrilled with this responsibility. For her, this job was “the definition of being on the tip of the spear and having impact.” She wanted to be on the front lines and involved in the fullest VBSS officer capacity. But one of the men on board suggested that she should consider staying behind and let someone “bigger and more masculine” handle the VBSS officer duties. He suggested that instead of taking on her responsibilities as a gunnery officer, she should just “do admin stuff.”

Huffstetler was shocked. In that moment, she says, “It felt like the earth just stopped moving.” Huffstetler had never experienced this level of gender inequity before. “I had heard about it and read about it, but it was the first time someone told me that I could not do something because I am a female,” she says. “I was in shock. I could not believe that after working so hard, this would happened to me.” In this very intense moment, Huffstetler asked herself: if honey badgers don’t care, why should I?

She decided to continue being the persistent, front-line fighter she identified as. Following normal military decorum, she told the officer, "This sounds like something *Navy Times* would want to hear about.” In typical honey badger fashion, Huffstetler refused to back down. Later, with the support of other senior staff, she fought to be included in normal VBSS officer duties.

“I realized that no one can take away my duties. I wanted to fight and that is why I boarded this ship,” she says. “In fact, fighting was part of my duties. That is why I joined the military — to make decisions on the ground and in the water. I am not here just writing paperwork. I am here to wear tactical gear and be the head of the spear.” Eventually, Huffstetler’s duties were restored. And just like her inspiration, the honey badger, she continued on her path.

Honey badger leadership

Huffstetler also appreciates how her JAG career gives her new opportunities to serve. “I look at my JAG duties as an expansion of achieving public trust. My job is to make sure that we make good decisions that we are proud of,” she says. She also explains that being a JAG officer means she’s always on her toes.

“On any given day, I can practice every area of law. And for me, it is a breathtaking proposition. You are never bored here. There is no day where I think, oh, I have done this before,” she says. “And all my work could have policy implications. So I am highly invested and dedicated.” In her new role, Huffstetler has broad influence, but is still on the front lines as a persistent advocate. “I am still on the head of the spear,” she explains. “And that is important to me.”

Now more senior in rank, Huffstetler says that fewer people question her fitness to serve because of her gender. “I am glad to have experienced that in the past,” she says. “I now understand what it is

like to be told you can't do something.” This experience has informed her view on leadership. “These biases exist whether we mean them or not. They have a huge impact on numerous lives, and we need to be mindful of bias when we make leadership decisions,” Huffstetler explains. She also adds, “Everyone, especially senior leaders, needs to watch for this.”

In some ways, Huffstetler has abandoned her “Honey Badger Don’t Care” attitude. Now this honey badger *does* care — she cares deeply about fighting for her clients and continuing to serve her country. Huffstetler, however, still turns to the honey badger when times get tough. “While I no longer feel like I have to fight everyone, I also don’t want to be complacent,” she says. “I know I have a little honey badger inside of me that I can let loose to protect myself, my clients, and those around me.”

That little bit of honey badger is enough to keep her fighting past any obstacle in her way. Any advocate seeking to influence change can be inspired by Huffstetler’s refined “Honey Badger” approach. By staying fearless, persistent, and on the frontlines, you too can recover after any setback and continue demolishing injustice.

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She has authored numerous books, including Get on Board: Earning Your Ticket to a Corporate Board Seat, Fundamentals of Smart Contract Security and Blockchain Value: Transforming Business Models, Society, and Communities. She is working on her next books: Visual IQ for Lawyers (ABA 2024), The Rise of Product Lawyers: An Analytical Framework to Systematically Advise Your Clients Throughout the Product Lifecycle (Globe Law and Business 2024), and Legal Operations in the Age of AI and Data (Globe Law and Business 2024).

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