

# A JUDGE'S GUIDE TO THE SERVICEMEMBERS CIVIL RELIEF ACT

by Mark E. Sullivan

[Mr. Sullivan is a retired Army Reserve JAG colonel, a board-certified specialist in family law and a fellow of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers who practices in Raleigh, NC. The chairman of the Military Committee of the ABA Family Law Section, Sullivan is the author of *The Military Divorce Handbook* (ABA 2006). Comments or questions should be sent to: [mark.sullivan@ncfamilylaw.com](mailto:mark.sullivan@ncfamilylaw.com).]

## INTRODUCTION

You may from time to time encounter parties to a lawsuit who are on active duty in the armed forces. This Guide highlights some of the issues related to the impact of military service on civil litigation, financial obligations, mortgages, leases, and other matters. Its specific focus is on the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act (SCRA).

Congress initially passed legislation at the start of World War II called the Soldiers' and Sailors' Civil Relief Act (SSCRA) to provide protection to those called to those in the armed forces. Enacted in 1940, the SSCRA was updated after the Gulf War in 1991 but was still largely unchanged as of 2003. The SCRA was written to clarify the language of the SSCRA, to incorporate decades of court interpretation of the SSCRA and to update the SSCRA to reflect new developments in American life since 1940. The SCRA, signed into law December 19, 2003, not only protects those on active duty; it also affords protection for Reservists and members of the National Guard (when activated under Title 10, United States Code).

The current law is found at 50 U.S.C. App. § 501 *et seq.* Courts have generally construed the SSCRA liberally to protect those in uniform, and the same should be true with the SCRA. The U.S. Supreme Court has said that the statute should be read "with an eye friendly to those who dropped their affairs to answer their country's call." *Le Maistre v. Leffers*, 333 U.S. 1, 6 (1948).

## QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

### **1. Q. What are the purposes of the SCRA?**

**A.** The Act's purposes are to enable servicemembers (SMs) to devote their entire energy to the defense needs of the Nation; and to provide for the temporary suspension of judicial and administrative proceedings and transactions that may adversely affect the civil rights of SMs during their military service. 50 U.S.C. App. § 502.

### **2. Q. Who is covered under the SCRA?**

**A.** Pursuant to 50 U.S.C. App. § 511, covered servicemembers include

>Those members of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps and Coast Guard on active duty under 10 U.S.C. 101(d)(1);

>Members of the National Guard who are called to active duty as authorized by the President or the Secretary of Defense for over 30 consecutive days under 32 U.S.C. 502(f) to respond to a national emergency declared by the President and supported by federal funds; and

>Commissioned members of the Public Health Service and the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration.

A SM is also covered for any period of time when he or she is absent from duty because of sickness, wounds, leave or other lawful cause (i.e., he is still a SM even in absent from active duty for one of the above