

## 40 Under 40

### John Comerford

Dowd Bennett LLP, attorney

**College:** U.S. Naval Academy, bachelor's in English; Georgetown University, J.D.



It was nearly a decade ago when John Comerford was on a U.S. Navy reconnaissance plane that collided with a Chinese jet and was forced to land in China. Comerford and the crew were held for 11 days. By comparison, taking on a legal battle against the state of Missouri and winning was hardly nerve rattling.

Last summer Comerford sued the state when it tried to eliminate three administrative law judges by cutting their budgets.

It was a bonus when the court awarded nearly \$40,000 in attorneys fees, something Ed Dowd Jr., who hired Comerford at the 11-attorney Dowd Bennett firm, said he had not expected.

Comerford tried the case by himself, including cross examining Missouri's director of the Department of Labor and Industrial Relations.

"John's a natural leader and is on his way to becoming a lead chair on the firm's cases," Dowd said.

Comerford, 35, was one of the youngest members of the Missouri Veterans Commission when former Missouri Gov. Matt Blunt appointed him in 2008. Comerford became chairman of the commission last year.

Comerford's commitment to veterans comes following his seven and a half years as an officer in the U.S. Navy, where he served as a naval aviation officer. His service drew worldwide attention in April 2001 after the plane in which he was second in command had its run-in with a Chinese jet over the

South China Sea. Before making an emergency landing, Comerford jettisoned sensitive papers and technology from the aircraft.

"I stood on the hatch with crew members holding my parachute to keep me from being sucked out," he said. "We threw out everything classified, and smashed equipment, including small computers, throwing it all out the door while we were still over the ocean and losing altitude," he said.

After the crew's release, Comerford was among those making the rounds of talk shows — The Tonight Show, Nightline, Larry King Live. Comerford returned to the air that November to fly reconnaissance missions over Afghanistan, locating and calling in air strikes on Taliban positions. He later served in the White House as deputy director of the President's Emergency Operations Center.

Comerford said he always knew he wanted to go to law school, and he headed to Georgetown University Law Center after his military service. He served as a summer associate at Bryan Cave, where he met Dowd and Jim Bennett in the months before they opened their specialty litigation firm in 2006.

— Rick Desloge