Rising Star: Sheppard Mullin's Will Chuchawat

By Erica Teichert

Law360, Washington (May 08, 2014, 6:06 PM ET) -- Sheppard Mullin Richter & Hampton LLP partner Will Chuchawat has built a reputation as a dedicated mergers and acquisitions attorney in the defense industry who goes the extra mile by closing deals for companies such as Gencorp and Northrop Grumman, earning him a spot on Law360's list of top aerospace and defense attorneys under 40.

Although the 33-year-old Chuchawat had the opportunity to become an entertainment lawyer with Sheppard Mullin early on in his career, the Rising Star and self-proclaimed deal junkie has found his niche juggling eight to nine complex M&A deals at a time across the defense, healthcare and private equity spaces.

“I was this guy who liked the public markets and the deals and reading about these transactions happening,” Chuchawat told Law360. “I always thought I would be at this intersection of law and business. I decided I wanted to go do M&A.”

While his defense work takes up about one-third of his practice, he often spends that time intensely focused on meeting tight deadlines for multimillion-dollar transactions in 24/7 “war room” settings.

That was the situation he found himself in when he headed Gencorp Inc.'s legal team for its June 2013 $550 million acquisition of United Technologies Corp.'s Rocketdyne business. Chuchawat and three of his colleagues locked themselves in a New York City conference room for a week as they worked on the deal, with other attorneys in Sacramento, California, providing support.

“It was really 24/7,” Chuchawat said. “We weren't sleeping very much and we built a lot of camaraderie. It was total warfare at the time, but you can reflect back fondly on it. We got a lot accomplished in a short amount of time.”

But the deal hit a couple snags as the Federal Trade Commission opened an antitrust investigation to determine whether the Gencorp deal would create a monopoly in liquid divert and attitude control systems. But the investigation ultimately ended when the U.S. Department of Defense pulled rank, saying the merger would create a more stable supplier of LDACS technology and urging antitrust
Chuchawat had a similar high-octane experience representing Northrop Grumman Systems Corp. when it sold a $700 million IT program to HP Enterprise Services LLC, which closed in April 2011.

The program was part of an IT outsourcing contract with San Diego County where HP was the prime subcontractor, and the deal was incredibly fast paced because the county set extremely tight deadlines for the transfer. All in all, the transaction had to be completed within a month.

“[The county] imposed this timeframe to either get it sold and transferred or Northrop would have to be operating the business,” Chuchawat said. “Northrop wanted to be out of that business. If you couldn't close by that time there was no deal.”

Despite several disputes between the contractor and subcontractor, Chuchawat navigated the deal to close by San Diego County's deadline.

According to Chuchawat, his youth has been more of a disadvantage in his career than an asset, even though he attained partnership two years before other members of his class.

“I think a lot of the people who hire for legal services are probably in their 50s, 60s and above,” he said. “You come in as a 30-something-year-old partner and you're the age of some of their kids. I think that's a difficult feat to accomplish, to be able to convince folks of an older generation that you should be their counsel.”

But he credits his hard work ethic and tenacity for helping him rise through the ranks.

“I think that people who have worked with me realize I've got a good head on my shoulders,” he said. “I will run through a brick wall for them and I get the job done for them.”

--Editing by Emily Kokoll.