

# Moving from a Military Life to a Civilian Life

## Part I in a White Paper Series

### Toward Closing the Gap: Re-Entry for Women Veterans into Cybersecurity Careers

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*Closing the Gap: A DoD Conference on Re-entry for Women Veterans into Cybersecurity Careers* addresses two crucial needs: To fill the exponentially growing cybersecurity talent gap in the U.S., and to harness the potential of female U.S. veterans, as well as military spouses, to fill that gap.

In addressing these needs, the George Washington University organizers have assembled a diverse group of advisors from government, the military, academia and industry to help frame the conversation and the initiative toward meaningful action, before and during and beyond the May 25, 2021 Conference date.

“Moving from a Military Life to a Civilian Life” is the first in a series of white papers designed to summarize the available knowledge on challenges, best practices and potential solutions moving forward.

A former soldier describes the transition from military life to civilian life as follows: “One of the striking things I experienced was the lack of community. In the military, depending on time of service, everybody had a mini-van, two kids, and a dog. And we all knew that during an emergency, I could hand off my kid to the mom down the street that I didn't know and she would watch over her like it was her own until I got back. You don't have that in the civilian world. You can build it, but you don't have it out of the box.”

What are the challenges for a female veteran or military spouse in moving from a military life to a civilian life, either as a student or a member in industry? What defines each culture, and how do different women view the change, identify a path forward, and avail themselves of resources and support structures? Finally, what role should be played by supportive organizations, the military, and the government to address the challenges?

#### **Examining hallmarks of military culture compared to civilian life**

As Wertsch (1991) notes, it is “next to impossible to grow up in the warrior society without absorbing the notion that civilians are very different and sometimes incomprehensible.” Military society is governed by a rather unique set of laws, regulations, traditions and even values. “During their career, military personnel adapt to the collectivist and hierarchical society of the military culture after having little to no experience as a civilian adult or employee. Many veterans had never completed a job application prior to their first job post service” (McNamara, 2018) . It would be an overstatement to say that this is an exact and bounded military culture, as culture is not monolithic. Moreover, while each branch of the military has nuanced aspects of the culture, a set of values, and a program that introduces those values from the day a recruit enters the service, there are common features shared across the military. These include honor, courage, loyalty, integrity, commitment, peacefulness, restraint, and obedience.

Hull (2011) notes “Most of the unique facets of military life that were described almost three decades ago remain true for military families today, including (a) frequent separations and reunions; (b) regular household relocations; (c) living life under the umbrella of the “mission must come first” dictum; (d) the need for families to adapt to rigidity, regimentation and conformity; (e) early retirement from a career in comparison to civilian counterparts; (f) rumors of loss of comrades-in-arms during a mission; (g) detachment from the mainstream of nonmilitary life; (h) the security of a system that exists to meet the families' needs; (i) work that usually involves travel and adventure; (j) the social effects of rank on the family; and (k) the lack of control over pay, promotion, and other benefits.”

These aspects of military life combine a rigid, regulated life, dedicated to mission and unit, with a strong class system based on rank. Within the class system, there are actually two classes – the officer class and the enlisted class.

Contrast this regimented, highly hierarchical structure with the commonly seen collaborative models of non-military work and study environments. As explained in [Job-Hunt.org](http://Job-Hunt.org), veterans may discover that “civilian corporate structures are considerably less consistent than the military, normally including these elements: Matrix structure; more implied or “understood” rules of conduct; flexible/ambiguous roles and status; variations across teams/divisions; less defined career progression; opportunity for lateral assignments; corporate culture imposes corporate values on the organization.”

### **Challenges in making the transition to civilian life**

It is important to note that the transition from military life to that of a civilian is not the first transition. In this all-volunteer military, most service members transitioned from civilian life to the military in their late teens or early 20s. Most had never had a job interview before enlisting (McNamara, 2018). Once untethered from the military, veterans, and especially women, face a number of challenges. While everyone faces issues of transition in moving from one stage of life to another – from school to college, single life to married life, life after the death of a loved one – veterans moving through this particular life/career transition must cope, adapt, and make decisions across many areas of their lives. Moreover, this is not just a transition, but a re-entry process.

Some of the re-entry challenges relate to explaining the rhythm of their military life to civilians – the vocabulary, acronyms, the rank and grade system, the beliefs and assumptions. Re-entry may require both the soldier and her family to adapt to new structures, culture, and life roles. Perhaps the family has learned to manage without the soldier, and now that she has returned home, everyone must re-orient.

Whether in social, academic or workplace settings, female veterans may find themselves questioning their abilities, wondering how to present themselves, and rediscovering the notion of “self,” perhaps long buried within military norms, structure, and culture. Anderson and Goodman (2014) note that “for returning veterans, the focus on self as an individual requires a shift away from conformity and following commands to finding one’s way and navigating a civilian world that may now be very unfamiliar territory, all at the same time they are leaving a life that offered a built-in social network, a steady income, and sources and resources of support.”

Some women may experience or perceive dismissive behavior on the part of society and male counterparts, who may view them as “not true vets,” because they are female. Women are often denied recognition for their military accomplishments. In a [2016 Report](#) produced by the Service

Women's Action Network (SWAN), one of the top challenges listed by women veterans was respect and recognition from civilians, fellow military members, or both.

The Department of Defense, SWAN, the Veterans Health Administration, Higher Heroes USA, and other organizations have also conducted studies and released information regarding the problems women experience due to Military Sexual Trauma (MST). Shockingly, about one in three women seen in the Veterans Health Administration respond "yes" when screened for MST, which may compound problems some experience from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). DOD's Annual Report (FY 2016) suggested that about two-thirds of female service members did not report their sexual assault. Reasons given included that women wanted to forget about it and move on, did not want more people to know about it, and experienced shame or embarrassment. Growing percentages of women did not report MST because they feared reprisals from their coworkers and were concerned that their accusations would not be believed.

Among the top challenges reported by SWAN are the lack of a sense of community and financial stability. According to a 2016 study by the VA National Center on Homelessness Among Veterans, "Veteran women are more than twice as likely as non-Veteran women ...to experience homelessness. Demographic characteristics associated with risk include younger age, being unmarried, unemployment, having a 100% service-connected disability rating or being otherwise disabled, identifying as black and living in the Northeast."

Making a transition from military to civilian life is more challenging for females than males because of additional complexities that are faced by women in general: issues of equitable pay (statistics show that women are paid 77 cents on the dollar as compared to their male counterparts) work/life accommodations, and gender bias or discrimination.

Undeniably, the challenges listed above are scratching the surface of a broad array of issues. They also vary depending on a multitude of factors such as home environment; circumstances of retirement from the military; demographics such as age and ethnicity; economic situation; physical, emotional and psychological state; support structure and community.

### **Transition to academia**

We have noted that military life has a different structure and value set than civilian life and these are manifest as a veteran moves into academia. The assigned positions within the military are markedly different from student life, for example. Jones (2013) suggests that the transition themes fall into three categories: Adapting to civilian life; the role of higher education; and the need for comprehensive services. Influences related to the military culture include the hesitancy of asking for help (warriors should not need help), lack of well-defined hierarchy, and difficulty of creating the "team" with the age, marital status and family college experience differences between the veterans and "traditional college student" (PnPi, 2019).

While individual veterans may have experience and skill with technology and cybersecurity, they may lack the underlying theoretical material for these technical fields. The challenge for higher education is to identify the academic pathway that acknowledges and credits practical knowledge toward a theoretical base. Even the differences in pedagogic approach in higher education and the military add to the transition challenges. Moreover, as non-traditional students, veterans are less likely than non-veteran students to invest time outside of the classroom on activities not essential to the completion of their course (including internship and

other academic enhancements), due to parenting responsibilities, work responsibilities, or other factors. Paying for higher education adds an additional burden, as many veterans have moved so often they do not qualify for in-state tuition, and for those who remain in the reserves, deployments may interrupt their forward progress.

### **Transition to industry or government**

What challenges do veterans and spouses of service members face in making the transition to employment within industry or government agencies?

Again, moving from the military to a new way of life entails adaptation to a different culture. A 2013 study by Competitive Edge, based on a survey of 245 business and interviews within six companies, reports that transition experience to a career environment can be complicated by a number of factors: physical and psychological service-related injuries (including PTSD), the lack of an easy way to communicate one's experience and skills, and the lack of a written rule book on the prevailing unspoken corporate rules, unclear "chain of command" and pathway to advancement. "Others described missing the sense of mission and urgency within the military that resulted from knowing that the lives of others might depend on the speed and quality of one's own work."

### **Best practices for transition to academia**

Moving from the military to academia is a two way street – those moving need to be served and those accepting the students (i.e. professors) need to have the skills to address the former servicemen (Arminio, et al 2018). Jovanovic et al (2019) from Old Dominion University outline a series of best practices that have been reported in the open literature. "Strategies recommended for institutions to serve as veteran friendly include: a) enabling of transfer credits and experiential credits; b) taking a community-based approach with comprehensive programs and services for student veterans and their families which include housing, health care, employment during college; c) enabling veterans' voice to be heard through roundtables, veteran associations, etc.; d) have strong web presence easily accessible to the veterans; e) establish a specific point of contact; e) expand housing options; and f) implement tuition deferment plan to accommodate the GI Bill (Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944) payment schedules; g) provide veteran focused orientations; h) provide faculty training related to veterans. Veterans, especially female veterans, suggested that the university should provide more information in admission materials about family housing and daycare options."

### **Best practices for transition to corporate or government workforce**

There are many suggested programs for supporting the transition, which, as noted, is not a moment in time but a series of events. The Business and Professional Women's Foundation offers a list of 10 actions. The study by Competitive Edge noted best practices, including peer-support programs (affinity groups and networking groups), mentorship and in-house courses that examine the military and corporate cultures. Additional in-house courses are targeted to supervisors to enable them to translate military experience and language.

### **Summary**

The transition from military to civilian life, whether as a student or an employee, is not a linear, temporary issue, but a long term scenario and one that falls harder on women veterans. The Women Veterans in Transition research project (2007) conducted by the Business and Professional Women's Foundation (BPW), indicated that women veterans are in need of a combination of both practical and psychological supports as they transition to civilian life and re-entry to the workforce. The various challenges of returning veterans, unique to each veteran's socio-cultural background, gender, areas of diversity, and lived experience in the military, point to the need for services that address the whole person, with interventions tailored to provide strategies and support.

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