

Marines and Mentors: Planning for the Transition

By Charles N. Swope

The hallmark of our Corps' elite status as "America's Expeditionary Force in Readiness" is the ability to execute our nation's most critical operations with rapid precision. Our competence is facilitated through two preliminary pillars: viable intelligence and reconnaissance. Through mentorship, transitioning Marines are discovering that these same principles are applicable to obtaining their desired civilian lifestyle and achieving career goals.

As we continue to see the effects of a diminishing defense budget, thousands of Marines will fight to transition successfully into a civilian role. Despite being well-equipped with valuable technical

management position within a multinational organization. I went from leading operations behind enemy lines to managing an intense department of operations associates at a fulfillment center. In part, my successful transition was made possible through my mentor's generous contribution in developing and preparing me for reintegration into the civilian population.

In June 2013, I entered into my seventh year of service and faced two possible options: reenlist for another four years or pursue a career in the civilian sector. After much prayer and deliberation with my wife, we began preparing our family to start a new life. While searching the Internet for potential careers and clues on how to become successful, I ran across a powerful quote from an ancient Chinese

for the first time. Therefore, it was natural for me to see that in order to successfully land on my feet, I needed viable intelligence from a reliable source in the civilian population.

The Marine Corps generously supported my transition by providing me with free career-search material, employment counselors and a transition readiness seminar. While attending the latter, an instructor emphasized the importance of reaching out to someone who currently had the position into which you want to transition. However, having spent my entire adult life in the Marine Corps, I was having a difficult time translating my skills and identifying a career field where I could be passionately engaged. Clearly, I was in need of someone with experience to guide me in the right direction.

Successful Mentorship

Feeling uninformed, unprepared and overwhelmed, I sought help from the 501 (c) (3) nonprofit organization, American Corporate Partners. ACP is "dedicated to assisting [U.S.] veterans in their transition from the armed services to the civilian workforce." Members of the organization's advisory council include General David H. Petraeus, USA (Ret) and Gen John R. Allen, USMC (Ret). Boeing, Goldman Sachs, Disney, Harvard University and more than 50 other leading organizations are part of ACP's list of participating institutions, each of whom provide employees as mentors.

Within a week of enrolling in ACP's free mentoring program, I was paired with a top-tier executive at Boeing: Wm Thor Kissman. He offered the ability to design a structured framework tailored to my specific transition and future career goals. Using his experience as an executive at Boeing, a former CEO of a consulting firm and former U.S. Army staff sergeant, he provided significant insight into corporate America and how to achieve my objectives. Committing to a one-year mentorship, Kissman was absolutely determined to assist me in identifying the perfect civilian career and easing the transition.

We spoke on the phone regularly, at least twice a month. I filled our early conversations with a barrage of questions to which he typically would respond with a simple answer from direct experience.

Among other questions, I asked: "How



COURTESY OF CHARLES N. SWOPE

Charles "Nate" Swope, area manager of zulily.com, leads a department of operations associates at zulily's fulfillment center in Reno, Nev. Swope transitioned from 1st Reconnaissance Battalion to the civilian business sector in May 2014 with the help of his mentor Wm Thor Kissman.

and leadership abilities, many still will find their transitions to be stressful and intimidating. Through mentorships, however, Marines can develop transition plans supplemented with accurate information and execute them until settled in their next stage of life.

Do I Need a Mentor?

Earlier this year, I successfully transitioned from my role as a recon Marine with 1st Reconnaissance Battalion to a

general. In "The Art of War," Sun Tzu writes, "Thus, what enables the wise sovereign and the general to strike and conquer, and achieve things beyond the reach of ordinary men, is foreknowledge."

Having conducted numerous combat missions, I knew that a critical success factor is the accuracy of information leading up to the operation's execution. Further, I always consulted Marines from other teams and units who already had been to a particular area before inserting there



COURTESY OF CHARLES N. SWOPE

Recon Marines from “Charlie” Company, 1st Recon Bn, First Marine Division conduct operations in Sangin, Afghanistan, 2010. Sgt Charles N. Swope transitioned successfully from leading operations behind enemy lines to leading operations in a fulfillment center.

will employers perceive my combat experience?” “What does Marine reconnaissance translate into?” And, most importantly, “What can I do in the interim to improve my chances at successfully landing the career of my dreams?” To the latter, he responded, “Figure out what the career of your dreams looks like!”

One of the first things Kissman recommended to me was to conduct research and find out what I truly enjoyed doing. I loved being a recon Marine and possessed a strong background in leadership, policy and military operations, and my favorite graduate-level course was statistics. However, that information alone wasn’t nearly enough on which to base a life decision. To enhance my “self discovery,” Kissman suggested that I take a variety of tests including the StrengthsFinder 2.0 assessment which revealed my top five natural traits in order: competition, futuristic, achiever, learner and ideation.

Other sources revealed that I was classified by “extraverted thinking with introverted intuition,” or ENTJ, and suggested high-intensity careers in management, entrepreneurship, team building and business administration. Finally, we narrowed my options down to management roles in five different areas: distribution, operations, production, logistics and supply chain. The next step in the process was to start connecting with other professionals.

I quickly learned that reaching out to individuals whom you have never met is very challenging and somewhat intimidat-

ing. However, Kissman insisted that networking was an essential task in gaining the information and help I needed to achieve my goals. He introduced me to two of his close friends who are Marine veterans, Jason Frei of Boeing and Doug Hamlin of the National Rifle Association. They helped me understand the importance of networking and reaching out to organizations and professionals. With five months still left until my separation date, I experienced my first phone interview.

During the next five months, I spoke with dozens of professionals and representatives from some of the largest organizations in the nation. As I flew across the country interviewing for prestigious programs and positions, my mentor coached me before and debriefed me after each one. A few weeks before taking terminal leave, I flew to Reno, Nev., to interview for a management position at a relatively new startup.

I would be expected to lead a large team of operations associates in a very intense department within one of the organization’s fulfillment centers—a combination of all the options I was seeking. The fact that the company was still entrepreneurial and growing more than 100 percent year after year was also exciting. Further, there was a solid commitment to hiring veterans, and they already had brought several on board.

Since I knew exactly what I wanted, I could decide quickly that this organization and position would be a seamless transi-

tion. With Kissman’s valuable insight and my meticulous planning and reconnaissance, I didn’t even have to spend a moment in contemplation when I received the offer letter three days later. Today, my family and I are living happily in Reno and are ready to face life’s new challenges as civilians. Even as I continue on in civilian life, my mentor has continued to give me insight into what those challenges may be and how to overcome them.

Civilian Transition Through Mentorship

Ben Renda, director of operations and head of global scaled services at YouTube.com, stated, “Reaching out on your own and networking is absolutely crucial to developing your military-to-civilian transition plan.” While deployed to Naples, Italy, with Strike Force NATO in 2005 as a U.S. Navy officer, Renda began planning his departure from the military into the business sector. “I knew I would need an MBA [Master of Business Administration] to reach my career goals,” he said, “but I was also very interested in public policy. So, I sought the advice of a former Marine who managed to accomplish both after his transition.”

By the end of that year, Renda was dual enrolled in MBA and MPP (Master of Public Policy) programs at the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth and the Harvard University Kennedy School of Government. As Renda approached graduation, he once again reached out to other



COURTESY OF KEN BRENNAN



COURTESY OF JOE KUEPPER

Above left: Joe Kuepper, chief executive officer of GreyFall Training, transitioned from the Marine Corps in 2011 to launch his startup in Boulder, Colo. Kuepper, a student at Colorado State University and former recon Marine, says that “networking with other veterans, professionals and professors is critical to a Marine’s transition and the success of any business venture.”

Above right: Ken Brennan, direct sales closer for 1st Light Energy, dives with his mentor off the coast of La Jolla, Calif., Jan. 14, 2014. Brennan, a native of San Diego, transitioned from 1st Recon Bn earlier this year and currently is leading sales for his department in New Jersey.

veterans, eventually connecting with someone with whom he attended Navy flight school nearly 15 years prior. The former pilot helped Renda transition into Google where he currently leads a global team for YouTube. Given how successful mentorship has been for him, he finds himself “mentoring direct reports and people under them on a daily basis.”

Joe Kuepper, founder and chief executive officer of GreyFall Training, believes that “the individual who transitions on his own usually finds it to be a very difficult process.” Kuepper served with 1st Recon Bn and left the military to launch his own startup in 2011. The combat veteran and Purple Heart recipient sought advice from other veterans and professors at his university who successfully had started organizations similar to his. GreyFall Training has grown tremendously as a result of Kuepper’s ambition and supportive network of advisers.

SSgt Kyle White, EKMS manager at 1st Recon Bn, plans to transition into the civilian business sector with the help of his mentor, John Rall of Wells Fargo. “John has helped me tremendously in realizing my strengths, weaknesses and what I am truly passionate about. From his insight, I am currently identifying what I need to accomplish in order to achieve my long-term career goals.” Also paired through ACP, White and Rall meet at least once a month to discuss résumé techniques, interviewing skills, networking opportunities and his plans for reintegration.

Earlier this year, Marine veteran Ken Brennan transitioned from the Marine Corps with the help of a seasoned executive and chief financial officer of a marketing company. While stationed in Southern California, Brennan and his mentor regularly met for scuba diving off the coast

of La Jolla to discuss his military transition plan, career objectives and passions.

“Ultimately,” Brennan explained, “my mentor helped me see beyond what I did in the military and identify natural talents that I didn’t even know I had.” Brennan currently is leading sales for his organization in New Jersey and is thankful that his new lifestyle is “far more abundant and successful than I ever could have imagined.”

Benefits of Having a Protégé

The relationship between mentors and protégés is mutually beneficial. Providing advice and mentorship to transitioning Marines advances the mentors’ professional growth as well as that of their organizations. In addition to refining their coaching and leadership skills by developing inexperienced individuals, senior veterans can identify areas for improvement within their own performances and lives.

In May, I graduated from Northeastern University with an MBA following a long pursuit before, during and after combat missions in Afghanistan. Since then, I have mentored a number of other servicemembers as they achieved their educational goals in the same way I did. Aside from the personal satisfaction I receive from helping someone, I also find mentoring a great way to expand my network and motivate myself to achieve more.

In addition to a mentor’s own personal and professional development, an organization can reap the benefits of a successful mentorship as well. In the words of my mentor, Thor Kissman, “Military leadership, in the U.S. NCO [noncommissioned officer] corps, drives home the need to train and develop troops (warfighters) to become the next leaders.” Thus, providing mentorship to prospective mem-

bers of one’s own organization can impact retention and succession. By developing and retaining your own employees, you also eliminate the costs associated with relocating and training new hires.

Kissman recalled numerous times in his own career when he sought out and received guidance, perspective and assistance that helped him advance. “I feel a duty and obligation to return that knowledge to the next generation seeking to excel in their professional pursuits,” he said.

Most importantly, he emphasized the significance of contributing to the community through effective leadership that inspires others to realize their potential. “My values drive me to succeed not only in my professional life, but also with my family and my community,” he said. “The ACP-sponsored mentorship with Sergeant Swope allowed me to contribute outside of work and my family by helping a highly motivated person realize his dreams.”

ACP mentors and protégés work on a variety of different professional development topics, including career exploration, translation of military skills, résumé and interview preparation, considering education and training opportunities and job-search skills. For more information on ACP, mentorship and transitioning, visit www.acp-usa.org.

Author’s bio: Charles N. Swope is an area manager with zulily.com. He is a Marine veteran who served with 1st Recon Bn. He transitioned into the civilian sector in May 2014 and has an MBA from Northeastern University and a B.S. in management from the University of Phoenix. He also served as an infantry rifleman with 2d Bn, 8th Marines and deployed three times to Iraq and Afghanistan.

