



Civilian employers value the skills and discipline of vets

By ELLIOTT MINOR, The Associated Press
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FORT BENNING, Ga. - First Sgt. Glenn Van Swol, who survived two wars, numerous parachute jumps and some of the Army's most demanding training, is about to embark on what could be his scariest mission: leaving the life he's known for 22 years and finding a new career as a civilian.

A veteran of both Gulf Wars, the Somalia humanitarian mission that cost 42 U.S. lives and the dicey U.S. peacekeeping mission in Haiti, Van Swol joined about 400 other soldiers and military retirees at a recent Fort Benning job fair to help chart a return to the civilian world.

Also on hand were 42 recruiters, representing trucking companies, law-enforcement agencies, major defense contractors and universities. The event was sponsored by **Military2Civilian Job Fairs**, a subsidiary of **Bradley-Morris Inc.**, a leading military placement firm based in Kennesaw, outside Atlanta.

"It's a way to connect to what's going on," said Van Swol, 41, of White Bear Lake, Minn. "It's nice to get these outside agencies to help us out. It's a way to get our foot in the door and that's all we're looking for."

While the war in Iraq may not have universal support, at least two things were clear at the job fair.

There's plenty of help for soldiers making the transition, and they bring valuable skills, discipline and management experience to the work force.

Employers often turn to college campuses and the military for new hires.

College graduates have degrees, but may lack practical experience, while the 318,000 people leaving the military each year have experience and training, often in highly technical fields, and some have degrees.

Many also have security clearances, a plus when applying for defense industry and technology jobs.

The military, which touts job training in recruiting pitches, has numerous programs to link soldiers with jobs, and some of the leading veterans groups have formed partnerships with online career firms to provide additional help.

A Pentagon program known as "Hiring Heroes" sponsors job fairs for veterans who were disabled in Iraq and Afghanistan, and several hundred companies are providing incentives to help veterans purchase franchises and launch their own businesses.

A nonprofit group, Helmets to Hardhats, helps veterans find jobs in the construction industry.

One of the largest government initiatives is the Transition Assistance Program, a partnership of the departments of Defense, Labor, Transportation and Veterans Affairs, which hosts job fairs and three-day workshops at military bases around the world. The workshops attracted 150,000 this year, officials said.

"We are interested in making sure that veterans have a successful transition," said Gordon Burke, a Labor Department official responsible for veterans' employment and training. "Many of them have a lot to offer. The Department of Defense spends between \$12 billion and \$15 billion on training annually. We help them take the training that those dollars have bought and leverage that in the civilian workplace."

While there are no statistics on the overall success of all the programs and the job fairs, an independent evaluation of the Transition Assistance Program found that participants got jobs, on average, three weeks earlier than non-participants. Officials say some of the "Hiring Heroes" career fairs have had a success rate of 34 percent.

Shaun Bradley, CEO and president of Bradley-Morris, said the military provides excellent help with resume writing and interview preparation and his company takes it to the next level: matching military skills with the changing needs of corporate America.

"We never charge the service member a dime," said Bradley, a Naval academy graduate. "Everything we do for the service member is free.... Companies pay it."

Job fairs are popular because veterans get to meet prospective employers and ask questions. Hundreds are held each year at military installations around the world.

Many at the Fort Benning event showed up in dark, conservative suits, but Van Swol, a first sergeant in a basic training brigade, arrived from work, wearing the Army's new universal gray-green camouflage combat uniform.

He wore a Ranger tab on one sleeve, awarded to graduates of a school that pushes soldiers to the limits of their physical and mental abilities, and had a chest full of prestigious badges for infantry combat, parachuting and air-assault.

Lean and confident, Van Swol noted that he'd already been offered several jobs, including one paying \$165,000 a year in Africa, but turned them down because he wants to work closer to home and spend more time with his family.

"The military has been my family for the last 22 years," he said. "Now it's time to take care of my family."

As he browsed among the booths, he stopped to talk to Tom Murphy, general manager of Speedco, an expanding company that specializes in quick oil changes and tire services for truckers along the nation's interstates.

Murphy said his company prefers veterans because they're good managers, disciplined and "just normally good people."

"We can teach them the business," he said.

Judie Myers-Gell, a recruitment manager for the University of Rochester, said veterans are a "phenomenal resource," valued for their leadership, flexibility, teamwork and dedication.

"When you look at the number of qualified military men and women and the fact that they've served their country ... how could you not make the military part of your national recruitment effort?" she asked.

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