LIFE AFTER MILITARY SERVICE

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As I walked out of the International arrivals section at Sydney Airport in February 2008, I wasn’t your average tourist returning home from an overseas trip. The image of my beautiful wife in a green flowing summer dress with her blue eyes and blonde hair standing among the crowd still brings tears to my eyes. Her embrace made me shake to the point I was overcome with emotion; a place in my mind I had held off limits for so long.

It was only days earlier that I had been ‘outside the wire’ in what was, at the time, one of the most dangerous places on earth.

My role as a mechanic within Australia’s elite Special Operations Command in Afghanistan was responsible for the mechanical integrity of patrols consisting of Motorbikes, Land Rovers, Bushmasters and a lone Uni-Mog (the Mother Ship). The stress of that role was not something I allowed to impact my life until some seven years after walking through that arrival gate into my wife’s arms.

I served for 10 years in the Australian regular Army, joining as an 18 year-old who had completed VCE at one of Melbourne’s elite Boys Grammar Schools. Choosing a trade over university I qualified as a Heavy Diesel Mechanic by 2001 and began my posting cycles and extraordinary life as a proud Australian Soldier. By 25, I had happily married my high school sweet heart and already bought my first home. By 26, I had lived in three States and one territory, and represented the Australian Army as a Catafalque Commander at Sandakan in Borneo, on Anzac Day.

I had led Army Sections through gruelling jungle warfare training in Rainforests in Queensland and South East Asia, learning and training continuously as I completed my trade and promotion course.

By the age of 27, I was proudly serving in Australia’s Special Operations Command. I spent my 28th Birthday in Afghanistan and by that time I was mature beyond my years - having experienced life in a way that by default packs the best and worst of humanity into a few short years.

I vividly remember the morning I decided to hand in my discharge papers, I was completely satisfied with what I had achieved and I knew it was time to move on.

My first job interview was a disaster. I was so nervous I felt sick. I was anxious, short of breath and I doubted myself. The HR Manager immediately sensed I was ‘in over my head’ and instead of making the experience one of regret, she proceeded to coach and guide me on how to better represent myself next time around. Her unsolicited guidance and support was something I could not have been more grateful for and still remember well.

The second time around I knew how to align my skills more appropriately to the corporate world I was hoping to enter. I knew I was capable of managing small teams, I knew I could adapt to any environment and I delivered well under pressure – whether that was in a uniform or a suit.

My time in Afghanistan had taught me that knowledge and purpose are critical to success in your chosen field, so I chose a field that I knew well and an occupation that gave me purpose – Defence Industry.

Six months into my new role the cracks started to show. The glaring difference between ‘me’ and ‘them’ was becoming more evident and it was my responsibility to do something to bridge that gap. I knew it was important to form a bond with my colleagues, I was essentially in ‘their’
world and I felt like an outsider. I knew I had to open up.

I had hidden my Service in Afghanistan from my colleagues, the people who trusted me to lead them and this was my failing. In the Army, we knew each other intimately. We knew everything about one another and were connected beyond just work colleagues. It was that bond that overcame challenges in the most difficult of circumstances borne from a respect for one another that is as close as family.

So, I gathered everyone together; my Company Director, HR Manager, my team and administration staff and I opened up. A position I was fearful of, yet an action that would go on to define my career. I was asked questions like ‘How can you be here? How do you go from that to this?’

Transition from Defence for every individual is different. We all have a unique story, a reason for discharging our Service to Australia, Queen or God. The majority of the 6000 who discharge on average each year make the decision for reasons similar to my own. A small number, roughly 1200 are medically discharged, carrying injuries or illness no worse than those in our standard civilian work places. Then there are those, perhaps less than 100 each year, who are discharged with injury or illness which will restrict or prevent them from creating meaningful careers post Service. Support for those members is adequately provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Ex-Services Organisation Community.

My role today as Executive Director and Founder of Ironside Recruitment, Australia’s Leading Recruitment Agency for veterans, allows me to guide the nations journey and thought process when it comes to hiring veterans. Bringing these individuals into their workforce is in fact good strategy not charity. Another critical aspect of my role remains to guide our veterans through their development as they embark on their changed lives out of Service.

By the pure nature of Military Service, defined by process and taught by numbers, a CV developed for a Veteran who served in 2008 may read exactly the same as a CV developed for a veteran who served in 2018. However, their experiences, cultural awareness, leadership style, drive and expectations may be completely different. We need to steer away from simply transferring one trained skill to another for the sake of clarity on a CV.

So how do we embrace, capture and harness the skills, qualities, values and trainability of our veterans to support their new beginning? How do we translate what it means to serve and how that meaning can deliver strategic advantage to an organisation? The answer is not simply a CV.

Ultimately, we are talking about two pieces of paper that is expected to describe an individual who, if nothing else, was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for the protection of our way of life. Two pieces of paper that our veterans are expected to pay for on discharge of their Service to our country, for the privilege of securing a job opportunity. Two pieces of paper that may be reviewed by an individual who is more concerned with their monthly targets than the strategic intent of their employer and often those very same two pieces of paper are written for the benefit of industry not the veteran.

The answer doesn’t lie with Defence doing more. The level of transition support provided now to our veterans, compared to 2008 is significantly improved. Our Defence Force should be held accountable to raise, train and sustain a fighting force able to defend our freedoms and way of life. Whilst duty of care dictates services are provided through Transition Centres and forums, it is not and should not be their priority.

The answer is in partnerships. Partnerships created by specialist agencies, for-profit businesses achieving commercially gained revenue only by delivering an outcome to their clients. Ironside Recruitment is proof there is a need for this specialist model.

Ironside Recruitment has been delivering new civilian careers for veterans for 7 years now based on that exact theory. Our partnerships allow me and my staff (all ex-Service ourselves) to inform decision-makers, hiring staff and recruiters inside large and small business as to the skills, qualities, values and trainability of our veterans.

We mitigate the value of those two pieces of paper and in doing so, we influence hiring strategy based on human interaction and capability not written text. After all, we are simply connecting humans based on sound strategy, knowledge and purpose.