

Resilience: Navigating the Ebbs & Flows of Civilian Life

For most of us, finding the right job in the right location is a process. It will likely be an iterative experience. There are certain paths like law enforcement, government, or education that will offer a stable and predictable experience, but for many veterans and spouses, transition is something new. With opportunity, there is also risk. It's OK to be both excited for the next chapter and recognize the gravity of the change. Part of that is being prepared for reality and most of us don't transition into a job we are in for the next 20 years – there are ebbs and flows and those shifts will affect us and our family members:

Embracing Change as Normal Career paths in the civilian world rarely follow the linear progression we knew in the military. Job changes, industry shifts, and role adjustments are common and often lead to growth opportunities. What might feel like a setback could be setting you up for a better position down the road.

Building Financial Resilience

- Create an emergency fund
- Understand your benefits and entitlements
- Consider how to maintain health insurance between positions
- Plan for gaps in employment as you find the right fit

Maintaining Mental Resilience The skills that helped you adapt in the military – flexibility, determination, problem-solving – are valuable assets during civilian career transitions. Just as physical fitness requires consistent training, mental resilience needs regular attention and practice.

Remember that career setbacks aren't personal failures. That position you didn't get, the project that didn't succeed, or the company that wasn't the right fit – these are all normal parts of a civilian career journey. While the military often equates setbacks with failure, the civilian world views career pivots and changes as valuable experience. Don't hesitate to access mental health resources – whether through the VA, employee assistance programs, or private providers. Seeking support isn't a sign of weakness; it's a strategy for success. Many successful veterans credit their ability to navigate transition challenges to having a strong support system and professional guidance when needed.

Michigan Potatoes: Energy Bites

Ingredients:

- 1 cup rolled oats
- 1 Tablespoon chia seeds
- 1 Tablespoon ground flax
- 1 Tablespoon unsalted pumpkin seeds
- ½ cup dried cherries
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- Flesh from ½ large russet potato, cooked (about ¾ cup)
- 3 Tablespoons natural peanut butter
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- ¼ cup maple syrup

Instructions:

- In a large bowl, combine oats, chia seeds, flax, pumpkin seeds, cherries, and cinnamon.
- In a separate bowl, mash together potato, peanut butter, vanilla, and maple syrup.
- Add potato mixture to oats, and stir until fully combined
- Roll into 12 balls, and store in fridge or freezer for up to 2 weeks.

MICHIGAN
POTATOES

Beyond the Barracks: Structuring Wellness in Civilian Life



DECEMBER 2024 | ISSUE 3

Holistic Health for Transitioning Veterans: The Four Pillars



ACTIVITY



MENTAL HEALTH



RECOVERY & SLEEP



NUTRITION

Identity Shift: Finding Yourself in the Civilian Workforce

Before we leave the service, we start grappling with a change to a core element of our identity. In a sense, our job search and transition to the civilian world is beginning. Whether we realize it or not, we are shaping our transition experience and choosing who we will be as civilians well before we ETS.

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MilitaryConnected.org is a nonprofit organization improving the military-connected community's transition experience through employer education, data driven research, and access to a network of job opportunities with military-ready employers.

The Vegetus Foundation is dedicated to helping Americans improve their quality of life through education on healthy living and has published the Nutrition Health Review since 1979. Learn more at nutritionhealthreview.com



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Identity Shift: Finding Yourself in the Civilian Workforce

CONT.

Interview: Will Bardenwerper, Author



It's scary and overwhelming, but it's an opportunity that must be engaged thoughtfully and directly. Just think of your own unit; the wide variety of personalities, skill sets, and qualities. We have had to acquiesce for the team our whole careers - this is the time to take control of defining what is best for you and your family.

Be Intentional Don't get swept up in the tide of what everyone else is doing or following established norms. Sure, typical post-military career paths exist for a reason, but this is your chance to forge your own. Take the time to define what is important to you and what gives you purpose before making your next move.

Embrace Uncertainty The military trained us to plan for contingencies, but civilian transitions rarely follow a perfect plan. While we're accustomed to clear career progression paths and knowing our next set of orders, civilian paths are often more fluid. Instead of viewing uncertainty as a threat, see it as an opportunity for exploration and growth. Some of the best career paths might be ones you haven't even considered yet.

Take Time to Explore Military life often moves rapidly with compressed timelines and immediate decisions. If possible, give yourself the newfound gift of time during transition. Take advantage of opportunities to explore different industries through internships, networking events, or informational interviews. Shadow professionals in fields that interest you. The more exposure you get to different work environments and roles, the more informed your decisions will be. Your military benefits might give you a financial cushion to be more selective and intentional about your future.

Consider Your Spouse's Career Military life often requires spouses to put their careers second, adapting to frequent moves and managing the home front during deployments. This transition is an opportunity to rebalance those sacrifices. Your post-military location and career choices can create space for your spouse to pursue their professional goals too.

Maybe your spouse has been working remotely or taking classes, waiting for stability to pursue their dream job. Or perhaps they've been unable to build seniority in their field due to constant PCS moves. Take time to have honest conversations about both of your career aspirations. Consider how your choices during transition - from where you live to the hours you work - might impact their opportunities.

Question: Can you tell us about your first career after college?

Will: I graduated in 1998 and, like a lot of graduates, I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do. I ended up with a job in finance in New York, which I really enjoyed. I enjoyed life in the city and liked my job. But I was working in Midtown on September 11, 2001.

I was really inspired by the selfless service that I witnessed from the NYPD and the FDNY after those attacks, and suddenly doing Excel spreadsheets just didn't seem as meaningful or as fulfilling. So a week later, I quit with just this general desire that I wanted to serve. I didn't know at the time in what form that would be, whether it would be, you know, the FBI, the CIA, the Marines, the Army.

Question: You were an Army infantry officer and were deployed during the Anbar Awakening. You transitioned shortly after – did that deployment influence your choices post-military?

Will: My experience was determined by decisions that had been made by policymakers in DC. We lived through some tough times in Anbar. I think it at least awakened in me a desire to put myself in a position where I could help influence decisions that would impact people down the road and avoid some of the mistakes that we had witnessed and experienced.

Question: Now re-entering the government sector with the Afghanistan Commission as a successful author with "A Prisoner in His Palace" you have the opportunity to do just that.

Will: I hope so. It's a bi-lateral commission, and our role is to really study the war. Take a look at some key decisions that were made along the way, why they were made, and, most importantly, try to identify some lessons learned so that in the future, maybe we can avoid some of the missteps. It will be meaningful to produce something that will have some societal value.

Question: You have combat experience but in Iraq. Have you thought about how that will impact your perspective?

Will: I do want to approach the project with some humility. Having lived through Anbar at the time makes me see certain things in a certain way. I think I come with my own background which is helpful. But at the same time, I'd like to have some degree of humility. What leads to a lot of problems is people think they have all of the answers when none of us really do.

Question: Authorship is a unique career for a veteran, do you have any advice for other members of the military-connected community who want to pursue a-typical career fields for Vets and Spouses?

Will: Well, I don't want to sugarcoat the challenges that can sometimes come with choosing a path like this. Especially after the stability the military provides for a regular paycheck and benefits. But the intangible skills you developed in the military like perseverance and a strong work ethic mean you can do it, but it is important to understand the risks and go into the experience with your eyes wide open. There are also resources out there and veteran groups that have a presence in the entertainment space if you are looking for information or perspective.

Question: Your newest book, *Homestand: Small Town Baseball and the Fight for the Soul of America*, you detail the impact of MLB's decision to reduce the number of minor league teams. How has that impacted you?

Will: My experience researching the book was a little like my experience in the military. Maybe it's a feeling of empathy? It showed me that decisions made by powerful people in distant cities can sometimes have a profound impact on the happiness and quality of life of ordinary people far away. Obviously, not a consequential as a war zone, but it is important for the power brokers to understand how their decisions affect others. That they aren't just a number on a spreadsheet.

