

# Coming Home, But to What?

## Many Vets Have the Skills, but No Place to Apply Them

Jack McGuinn, Senior Editor

### “Thank you for your service.”

We’ve all heard that one before — and have maybe spoken the words ourselves. Typically, however, we hear it during election season at political debates or town hall meetings. That’s when the candidates deign to take questions from the audience, and —uh-oh— one of the questioners happens to be in the military — perhaps just back from Iraq (oh yes, we’re still there) or Afghanistan. The soldier is interested in knowing what his (her) thankful congressman or senator plans to do about the inadequate job training, education, and treatment programs that are at minimum a cold slap in the face to returning veterans — some as yet too young to buy themselves a beer. The pol’s face tightens noticeably, but he or she always has a well-rehearsed non-answer down cold.

But think about it: beginning with Bush *père*’s Iraq invasion in 1991, the country has been in a dystopian-like state of war (Somalia, Bosnia, Iraq II, Afghanistan), with more than a generation of young (and not-so-young) Americans being killed or maimed in the process — and all of this on a voluntary basis.

And yet — except for those who were there — can anyone name one memorable battle from the last 30 years? Today’s soldiers have no claim on epic battles to rival those such as Belleau Wood to leave their mark on history (the grateful French re-named the forest “Wood of the Marine Brigade”); no D-Day; no Tuskegee Airmen; no Mt. Suribachi; no Pork Chop Hill, V-E Day, V-J Day; no “Greatest Generation” or *Band of*

*Brothers*. And certainly no ticker-tape parades.

All of which raises the question: are returning or recently discharged veterans at least receiving the training and education opportunities they deserve in return for their service? Let’s see.

To do that, we interviewed individuals who are intimately involved with veteran training and employment issues, but from differing perspectives, including: Michael J. Aroney, principal consultant, consulting & training, for Allied Reliability Group (ARG), a manufacturing consulting service with particular emphasis on training, employment consultancy, veteran transitioning and hiring practices from an employer need and perspective; Douglas Pierce, chief learning officer, DMG Mori Seiki Academy; Tom Peters, director of business operations, Symbol Training Institute; and Joe Barto III, founder and president (and former U.S. Army Major), TMG (Training Modernization Group), Inc.

Given these individuals’ experience in military affairs, at some level or another, and their recognition in the veterans community, they more than most are wired in to what is happening around the country. And they, sooner than most, became aware that government services for veteran training and hiring were lacking — but not so much in areas where you might think. Yes, we definitely need more qualified training venues and instructors. And for sure more hands-on, practical training is needed.

But what many say is now needed most of all is focus — and much better coordination between business (HR, hiring agents); trainers (technical colleges, private entities, community colleges); and the military (Veterans Administration) in publicizing and describing good jobs that are available *right now*. Because as things stand today, the unvarnished truth is that every month many good-paying jobs with a future go unfilled. These breaks in the jobs supply chain and the continued need for more training opportunities led people involved in veteran affairs to conclude that more had to be done — on both sides of the equation.

On the training side, Peters states that “Veterans are trained on and have utilized advanced technology in the military, and we at Symbol (with two locations in the Chicago suburbs) are also training on advanced technology within the manufacturing field. Thus it is a logical progression to continue the training for veterans with the transition from military technology into manufacturing technology. Our training also helps the veterans who are coming back home get into a routine to ease the adjustment from military service to civilian life.

Speaking to the fuzzy focus side of the equation, Aroney’s epiphany came five or six years ago when he attended the kick-off of the Wounded Warriors Association ([www.woundedwarriorproject.org](http://www.woundedwarriorproject.org)), sponsored by the Naval Sea Systems Command.

“The missing element is creating awareness on the military side to make the veterans aware of who is hiring and how their skills translate to the civilian sector.”

Michael J. Aroney, Allied Reliability Group



"I noticed then — and since then — that all the emphasis was on job creation by the civilian sector and educating them on the value and desirability of the veteran. This included educating the prospective employers on military occupational specialties and how they translate into desirable civilian technical and leadership skills. At that time, North American manufacturing was entering the leading edge of a craft skills crisis for technicians who could fix manufacturing equipment and keep it running. We had jobs, but needed to make the military services aware of them, and that their maintainers could move into these roles easily and quickly — *without* a college degree.

"I found the military leadership was being told that their transitioning enlist-ed service members needed college degrees to find jobs in the civilian sector. *Not true!* One can become a successful reliability engineering professional without a degree by putting to use all their military technical maintenance training and experience. That, along with the work ethic they bring and the ability to solve complex problems in a high-stress environment, makes the service member a sought after candidate."

"Our involvement in this effort was not born out of frustration with government programs," says DMG's Pierce, "but from a growing need for qualified workers — both internally and from our customers. We have a number of successful veterans as employees and had a good experience with a few veterans who applied for our initial apprentice program."

Barto says "Ninety-five percent of the government programs have to do with teaching vets how to find a job and providing resources when someone does not have a job. AME Values Vets (amevaluesveterans.com) is working on the demand side of the equation — teaching *employers* how to re-capitalize their business by hiring and retaining vets.

So what we have developing here is a triad of sorts, with each part working in support of each other, the ultimate goal being a career-based job for every vet who wants one. We have government online programs, especially the VA, tutoring vets on job searching; we have other groups tutoring busi-

"Military training certainly helps prepare veterans after they are done with the service. Veterans can walk into civilian life knowing that they are already trained on modern equipment, have a strong foundation of discipline, and are mechanically inclined."

**Tom Peters, Symbol Training Institute**



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nesses (HR, hiring agents, etc.) on how to recruit veterans, what to look for on their resume, how to project their military skills and training onto the job requirements.

All of which sounds like good, common sense. Unfortunately, something else that makes sense is a negative — i.e., trying to get these three groups on the same page is like herding cats. Some are of the opinion they all seem to mean well, but they also seem to have their own agendas; not in any sinister

way — merely in insisting on having their own way of doing things. But for Aroney, that's missing a bigger point.

"I'm not seeing lack of collaboration as an issue," Aroney says. "It's more a lack of awareness. Of the 12 companies in several different manufacturing industry verticals that I support, all are aware of the federal and state programs available to help transition veterans, and they have programs in place that utilize the programs and funding. The employers we work with get it; the missing element

is creating awareness on the military side to make the veterans aware of who is hiring and how their skills translate to the civilian sector. We are now starting to see some movement in that area by coordinating with the military service's respective Transition Assistance Programs (TAPs), sitting on panels at military-sponsored job fairs, and advertising in military journals like *Navy Times* and *Air Force Times*.

Symbol's Peters, while not addressing the awareness issue, does believe better coordination is needed.

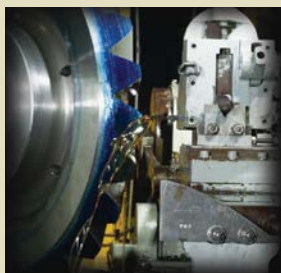
"I would have to agree with that. Within the past two years, the talk of veterans returning and the revival in manufacturing appears to be on everyone's radar. Many organizations are trying to help veterans, and not all of them have the training or expertise that Symbol has. We were a manufacturing company since 1985, and we know precisely what the manufacturing community expects from our students. Our training delivers what the industry demands."

With that said, Peters is confident that a good student-veteran graduating from Symbol can reasonably expect good things to happen.

"The starting wage for CNC machinists is in the range of \$12-\$18 per hour," Peters says. "Due to the skilled labor pandemic that is affecting the manufacturing workforce, the manufacturers are

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paying more due to the lack of supply and, as such, we have seen some of our graduates command a yearly salary with overtime and benefits that can be in the range of \$40,000-\$60,000 the first year after graduating from Symbol. These are truly livable wages."

Count Pierce in as another one looking for better communication among veterans groups.

"Yes, we do agree (on the lack of collaboration). Oftentimes the veterans are not aware of the programs, nor are there links to the actual companies that can provide job opportunities."

If this all seems rather complicated, that's because it is. In trying to dumb it down a bit, we posed the question to our participants this way: Why is hiring vets today seemingly more complicated than it was after WW II or Korea?

"I think there is not the same coordinated approach and national awareness as there was during those two conflicts," Aroney offers. "We dumped a lot of military into the private sector in a short time frame. Today, we're cycling them out and only took notice when unemployment numbers showed a disparity between vets and their civilian counterparts. Subsequently, we began spooling up awareness through various non-profit organizations to reach a tipping point—which I think we are nearing." He might have added that vets coming home after Europe, the Pacific and

Korea weren't returning to a Brave New World-type of industrial workplace with constantly evolving, sophisticated technologies that required new skillsets and remedial training as needed.

Adding credibility to veterans' claims for a fairer shot at the American Dream, General David Petraeus, former commanding general of Multi-National Forces in Iraq, has said that "After World War II, exemplary programs and support for veterans created the American middle class and helped the 'greatest genera-

tion' to become great. We owe this generation nothing less."

"Perhaps, the World War II generation had a greater sense of responsibility and work ethic, which has been fading over the past few generations," Peters observes. "Here at Symbol we are proud of our country and we are aware that the veterans are an important part of our society, and should be treated as such. Symbol's preparation of veterans for civil life is what we are proudly achieving. We

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**Joe Barto III,  
TMG Inc.**



are honored to be producing 'Made in the USA CNC Machinists.'"

ARG's Aroney — not to put words in his mouth — perhaps thinks the analogy doesn't quite hold up in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

"In the 12 manufacturing companies I work with in seven different industry verticals, we find a very old work force from the generation described by Gen. Petraeus, and a very young, entry-level workforce — and not much in between. Technical colleges and apprentice programs are making a comeback after a lull

of 20 years to fill a technician gap that will become critical in the next five to six years from the pending 'silver tsunami' — the retirement of a majority of the Baby Boomer workforce. All the more reason to emphasize process standards and automation and preventive maintenance technology."

And an equally good reason to wonder if training that veterans received in the service can translate to a promising career path in civilian life. Most say it is so.

"Military training certainly helps prepare veterans after they are done with the service," says Peters. "Veterans can walk into civilian life knowing that they are already trained on modern equipment, have a strong foundation of discipline, and are mechanically inclined. The trades are a wonderful way for them to apply these skills that they have honed serving in the military."

"Absolutely," Pierce seconds. "The military trains veterans for careers beyond soldiering. In addition to the obvious training and experience they have received — leadership, work ethic, teamwork, perseverance, integrity, etc. They also in many cases have other hands-on experiences which translate well to manufacturing — mechanical, electrical, technology skills, etc."

"One initiative which we know is supported by Congresswoman (Tammy) Duckworth, U.S. Rep. (D-IL) is to give veterans credit for some of the skills they acquired and demonstrated in the military upon their discharge. One simple example is a CDL driver's license."

TMG's Barto points to the number of learned soft skills veterans have acquired that position them ahead of their civilian peers.

"For 90% of entry level production jobs — regardless of industry — the basic military three-year experience creates the skills and abilities to make veterans best-qualified over their non-military peers. Basic training teaches how to follow instructions; how to ask questions; how to perform complex problem solving; how to work safely; plus the life experiences of moving away from home; being promoted; being deployed. Compare that experience to their peers and the best-qualified test is more than matched."

Before proceeding, the following point must be firmly established, as it figures predominantly in the remainder of the story. It is one of those things that is so simple and yet hides in plain sight. It seems that good-paying manufacturing jobs with a future go begging every day in this country. Indeed, polls indicate that employers say they are ready, willing and capitalized to hire veterans.

So where's the problem?

"Vets don't know the jobs are available," says Aroney.



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Incredibly, in this age of technically wondrous military communication, Aroney says "There's no central clearing house to provide that information (job opening) to them and let them know how they fit the bill. They will typically take the first job that comes along, not necessarily the best job for which they are qualified."

But some "help" from the military does exist, Aroney points out—if with a degree of circumspection—and a piece of information some will find disturbing.

"The military has Transition Assistance Programs (TAPs), but I find there is wide variation in the level of service and support they provide. There are also rules in place that prohibit potential employers from interfacing directly with these government agencies to hire transitioning military."

Which leads Aroney to wonder if these rules were instituted with a whiff of mendacity attached to them.

"I'm not certain, but I speculate (they are in place) to keep potential employers

from luring away candidates who otherwise might re-enlist; just a thought.

"Plus, (the military is) just not aware of the specific jobs that are available from specific employers in specific industries," he continues. "(Vets) are only prepared to transition in general terms, by job category such as sales, finance, maintenance, operations, etc. Before budget cuts, most transitioning military sought employment with government contractors; those jobs are drying up."

TAPs also work with vets in teaching them how to dress for an interview and how to write a resume in "civilianese." Yet, Aroney says, "There is still a challenge in understanding what specific jobs there are available and how to tailor the vet's training and experience into language on a resume that will be understood by a specific civilian HR specialist and hiring manager. We've also done fairly well educating the HR specialists and hiring managers on what they get and how to translate the vet's language."

As for Barto, he need point no further than his own Vet STRONG program ([www.vetstrong.us](http://www.vetstrong.us)). "We have been extremely successful in getting employ-

ers, after they are educated, to pledge to hire and retain vets."

Peters relies on word-of-mouth, knowing that Symbol is "well known in the greater Chicagoland manufacturing community. A lot of our students are working in (local) manufacturing companies. Symbol has a very tight working relationship with the manufacturing community, and the companies are waiting for our graduates to enter their workforce. At the end of the day, the manufacturers want qualified candidates (vets or no vets). However, hiring a veteran would be beneficial—especially if the company manufactures a lot of defense or military type components."

These welcome success stories aside, what is still needed is "the squeaky wheel" to disseminate veterans-only job openings—yes, a password-protected national jobs board reserved strictly for veterans—because they've earned it. We have *Monster*; we have *Careerbuilder*; why not a *Kickstarter*-seeded, national jobs board for veterans?

As we close, we compared Aroney's statement about the Army's reluctance in sharing work skills-related information



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about soon-to-be-discharged soldiers with prospective employers, and manufacturers' disinclination to open the purse strings for quality technical training, the rationale being a fear of losing newly trained employees to competitors offering higher pay. The irony could not go unremarked.

"The excuse used by manufacturers not to train for fear of losing those who received training is, in my opinion, the response of a reactive environment," says Aroney. "If those who are trained are in an environment that provides a mechanism where their work is rewarding and needs for affiliation are met, then there is no fear of employees leaving. The data shows that a satisfied employee will require at least a 20-30% increase in pay to leave a job where they are appreciated.

"A company that is afraid to spend money on training for fear the employee will leave has much bigger problems to solve."

And one last thing—if you are in the position to help a vet and you would really like to do so, here's a thought from former U.S. Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis: "If you own a business, the best way to thank a veteran is to hire one."

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## Heroes, Every One

**Alan Knight** served for five years during Operation Desert Storm as a mechanic and QA inspector for M1 Abrams tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles. He has appeared with ARG's Mike Aroney at various veteran-oriented events, as well as others. Despite his mechanic abilities, upon his discharge Knight scuffled to find work, eventually settling for work as a truck mechanic at \$6.50 an hour. We caught up with Alan and asked him a few questions.



**Gear Technology (GT): Why do you think the military has been so slow to develop a pipeline between soon-to-be-discharged soldiers and potential employers in need of skilled workers? With so many personnel on hand, you'd think they could spare people to do that.**

**Alan Knight (AK):** In my opinion, the main reason is that it is the military's job to train, and retain, skilled soldiers/marines/seamen/airmen to perform the military's mission at the highest levels. They have spent tens, or even hundreds of thousands of dollars for training and caring for each service member to maintain operational readiness, so they are less interested in preparing someone to leave. I would offer that it isn't any different than the civilian world in that respect. I know of no company that I have chosen to leave that offered me any assistance in pursuing my next job opportunity.

**GT: Does the army conduct an equivalent to the civilian "exit interview" with outgoing soldiers?**

**AK:** I had "exit" counseling that consisted of resume help from a civilian person that, looking back, had zero HR experience and likely had no outside employer experience for years as a government civilian worker.

**GT: One common thread running through all the stories over recent years about the skills gap, the greying workforce, and the training and hiring of veterans is the disconnect between the trainers, the trainees, and the employers – as if they are all working in their own vacuum chambers. I see where you tout working with Hiring America's Heroes (HAH) ([hireamericasheroes.org](http://hireamericasheroes.org)), but is that enough? What more can be done to fix this?**

**AK:** Working with HAH is a start. There are many other organizations that work with veterans and corporations as well. I think the key is getting these organizations involved at the base level as part of the transition process would be very beneficial to the service member, but getting the word out to the HR directors in the business community is perhaps even more important.

**GT: How are things working for you these days?**

**AK:** I would say very well. I have left my reliability consulting position at Allied Reliability Group and have taken a position at Mueller Company in Albertville, AL as the reliability engineer. I have already been in contact with our HR director about these veterans organizations as a way to fill the employee needs that we have right now and for the future.

J. McGuinn

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