



5 Things Every Service Member Should Know Before Leaving the Military

SCOTT KINDER

1. Stop Trying to Translate Your Military Career. Start Translating Your Value.

One of the most common pieces of military transition advice I hear is, “You need to translate your military experience into civilian language.” That’s not wrong. But I think it misses the bigger point. You don’t need to translate your military career. **You need to translate your value.** There’s a difference.

Nobody outside the military really needs to understand exactly what your MOS did, what your unit’s mission was, what every school on your résumé means, or how impressive a particular assignment was. Those things may matter tremendously inside the military. Outside of it, however, they only matter if you can connect them to something the person sitting across from you understands and values.

The civilian employer isn’t hiring your MOS. They’re hiring you to solve a problem.

Maybe you led people. Maybe you managed millions of dollars of equipment. Maybe you planned complicated operations involving dozens of moving pieces. Maybe you coordinated across organizations, managed competing priorities, developed contingency plans, trained people, mitigated risk, worked with difficult stakeholders, or delivered results when resources were limited and the timeline sucked.

That’s your value.

The challenge is learning how to communicate it without requiring the other person to understand the military first. Instead of saying, “I was an 18C on an Operational Detachment Alpha,” I need to explain what being an 18C required me to actually do. Planning. Problem-solving. Risk management. Resource management. Leadership. Training. Coordination. Decision-making. Execution.

Those concepts travel. Your MOS frequently doesn’t.

This is also why simply removing acronyms from your résumé isn’t enough. Changing “NCOIC” to “supervisor” may make the terminology easier to understand, but it still doesn’t explain why someone should hire you.

Talk about **problems, actions, and results**. What were you responsible for? What made it difficult? What did you do about it? What changed because you were there?

And whenever possible, quantify it. How many people? How much money? How large an organization? How many projects? What timeline? What measurable improvement?

The objective isn't to make your military experience sound civilian. The objective is to make your **capability undeniable**.

You spent years developing skills that organizations desperately need. Leadership. Accountability. Planning. Adaptability. Communication. Discipline. Resourcefulness. Risk management. The ability to operate when the plan falls apart.

Don't assume employers automatically understand that. **Make them understand it.**

Your military experience is the evidence. Your job during transition is to explain the value behind it.

2. Get Credentials That Validate What You Already Know (and Learn What You Don't).

Military experience can give you extraordinary capability. Unfortunately, the civilian world doesn't always know what to do with it.

You might have spent fifteen or twenty years leading teams, managing complex operations, controlling resources, building plans, managing risk, communicating with stakeholders, and delivering outcomes under conditions far more difficult than anything you'll encounter in your next organization.

But then you enter the civilian job market and discover something frustrating. Someone wants to see letters after your name. My advice? Go get some.

Not because a certification suddenly makes you competent. And certainly not because passing an exam proves you're better than someone who hasn't.

Credentials serve another purpose during transition: **they help create a bridge between your experience and a civilian employer's understanding of that experience.**

If you've been managing projects for years, earning a legitimate project-management credential gives civilian organizations a familiar reference point. The same applies to cybersecurity, HR, logistics, finance, IT, change management, and dozens of other professional disciplines.

You're essentially giving the employer another piece of evidence that says, “Yes, the things I did in uniform apply here too.”

But there's another side to this. Don't assume military experience means you already know everything. You don't. Neither did I.

One of the biggest mistakes transitioning service members can make is **confusing experience with complete professional knowledge.**

You may have managed projects your entire career without ever formally learning project management. You may have led people for twenty years without

understanding how civilian organizations approach organizational change. You may have managed budgets without understanding corporate finance. That's okay.

Transition should involve **both validation and education. Validate the things you already know. Learn the things you don't.**

That's why I believe professional credibility should be built around three things: knowledge, experience, and skills.

Knowledge answers: *Do you understand the discipline?*

Experience answers: *Have you actually done it?*

Skills answer: *Can you apply what you know to real situations?*

The strongest transitioning professionals bring all three. So use the time before you leave wisely. Look at the career you want next. Study job descriptions. Talk to people already doing the work. Identify the credentials employers consistently recognize. Then figure out where the gaps exist between your military experience and the civilian profession you're entering.

Close those gaps deliberately.

Don't collect certifications simply because you can, or they're free. Don't chase letters just to decorate LinkedIn. Build a professional portfolio that tells a coherent story about where you're going next.

Your military career gave you experience. Now make sure the civilian world knows what that experience is worth.

3. Your DD-214 Is a Starting Point, Not Your Identity.

Leaving the military can create a strange problem that doesn't get discussed enough. For years (often decades), the military tells you exactly who you are. Your branch. Your rank. Your MOS. Your unit. Your position. Your qualifications. They're printed on your uniform.

People immediately understand where you fit. Then one day you take the uniform off. And suddenly... you're just Scott. That can be extraordinarily difficult.

There's absolutely nothing wrong with being proud of your military service. You should be. The friendships, experiences, accomplishments, sacrifices, failures, lessons, and memories from those years will always be part of your story. But here's the danger: **Don't spend the rest of your life trying to recreate the person you were in uniform.**

Your DD-214 documents where you've been. It doesn't determine where you're going.

I see too many veterans approach transition by looking exclusively through the rearview mirror. Every conversation begins with what they used to do. Their identity remains completely attached to their former rank, unit, title, or military accomplishments.

Eventually, you have to turn around and look through the windshield. The question changes from: "Who was I?" to: "Who am I becoming?" That doesn't mean abandoning your military identity. It means separating the best parts of it from the organizational structure that surrounded it.

Take the discipline. Take the standards. Take the resilience. Take the ability to work with different people. Take the willingness to accept responsibility. Take the leadership. Take the understanding that sometimes the mission has to get done whether you feel motivated or not.

Take all of that with you. But also be willing to become a beginner again.

That's hard. Especially if you leave the military after twenty years as a senior leader. You may go from being the person everyone asks for answers to being the person who has to ask basic questions.

Good. Ask them. Learn. Listen. Be curious.

Civilian organizations operate differently. The language is different. Incentives are different. Authority works differently. Leadership works differently. Communication works differently.

Don't walk into your next organization expecting it to adapt to you. **Adapt without abandoning your standards.**

Your military career should become part of your foundation, not a ceiling that limits who you can become.

You aren't starting over. You're starting again (this time with experience). That's an enormous difference.

Be proud of where you've been. But get excited about where you're going.

4. Build Your Network Before You Need Your Network.

If you're six months from leaving the military and the first thing you're doing is submitting hundreds of applications online, you're making transition way harder than it needs to be.

You need people.

I've become convinced that one of the most valuable assets anyone can build (military or civilian) is a strong professional network.

Networking doesn't mean randomly connecting with 5,000 people on LinkedIn. It means building actual relationships. Start before you need something. That's the key.

The worst time to introduce yourself to someone is when the first sentence after “Nice to meet you” is essentially, “Can you help me get a job?”

Instead, start talking to people while you're still serving. Find veterans who successfully transitioned into industries you're considering. Find project managers, executives, entrepreneurs, recruiters, consultants, operations professionals, and business owners.

Then ask questions. How did you get here? What does your job actually look like? What skills matter? What surprised you? What certifications are actually valued? What mistakes do people entering this industry make? What would you do differently if you were starting again?

Most people are remarkably willing to help someone who approaches them genuinely.

But here's something else I strongly recommend: Don't build a network consisting entirely of veterans. Veteran networks are incredibly valuable, and you should absolutely participate in them. But if your goal is to build a career in the civilian world, you also need relationships with people who have spent their careers there.

Get outside the veteran ecosystem. Learn how industries work. Learn the language. Learn what organizations actually need. And whenever possible, look for ways to provide value before asking for it.

Introduce two people. Share someone's work. Recommend a resource. Help solve a problem. Offer your expertise. Make yourself useful. That's how relationships develop.

Your network shouldn't be something you activate during unemployment. It should become something you continuously invest in throughout your career.

And don't underestimate weak connections. The person you spoke with for thirty minutes six months ago may know someone who knows someone who needs exactly what you bring to the table.

Opportunities travel through relationships.

So start now. Schedule the coffee. Send the LinkedIn message. Ask for fifteen minutes. Reconnect with someone you've lost touch with. Attend the event. Make the introduction.

Then keep doing it after you get the job. Because your network isn't just there to help you find your **first** post-military opportunity. It may help create the next ten.

5. Take Ownership of Your Transition.

If I could give a transitioning service member only one piece of advice, it might be this: **Nobody cares about your transition as much as you do.**

That isn't cynical. It's reality.

The military has transition programs. There are veteran organizations, nonprofits, recruiters, mentors, coaches, government programs, LinkedIn groups, certification programs, and countless people genuinely trying to help.

Use them. But don't confuse assistance with ownership. This is your transition. Treat it accordingly.

In fact, I think transitioning out of the military should be managed exactly like a project. Start with the outcome.

What do you actually want? Not just, "I need a job." What kind of work? Where? Doing what? At what level? In what industry? What matters to your family? What salary do you need? What lifestyle do you want? What are you unwilling to sacrifice?

Define the outcome. Then identify the gap between where you are today and where you want to be. Maybe you need education. Maybe you need certifications. Maybe your résumé sucks. Maybe you don't know anyone in the industry. Maybe your expectations about compensation are unrealistic. Maybe you need six months of financial runway. Maybe you don't actually know what you want to do.

Those aren't failures. They're requirements.

Once you understand the requirements, build the plan. Create milestones. Build your network. Develop your résumé and LinkedIn presence. Get the right credentials. Practice interviewing. Talk to people doing the work. Build financial breathing room. Research companies. Apply selectively. And manage risk.

What happens if the job hunt takes three months longer than expected? What's your alternate plan? What's your contingency? What does your family need during the transition?

Then execute.

This is where military experience should become a massive advantage. You've spent your career accomplishing missions in imperfect conditions with incomplete information, changing requirements, limited resources, difficult personalities, and timelines you probably didn't choose.

Transition isn't fundamentally different. The environment changed. The requirement didn't.

Figure out where you're trying to go and move deliberately toward it.

When something doesn't work, adjust. When someone doesn't respond, find another route. When you discover a skills gap, close it.

When your original plan becomes unrealistic, change the plan (not the objective).

Don't surrender ownership of your future to TAP, a recruiter, a résumé writer, a hiring manager, or anybody else. Accept help. Seek advice. Find mentors. Build a team around you. But remain responsible for the outcome.

You spent your military career being accountable for missions, people, equipment, resources, and results. Bring that same mindset to your transition.

This is your next mission. Own it.

Your military career prepared you for what comes next, but it does not define what comes next.

Take ownership, translate your value, build the missing skills and credentials, develop relationships, and attack your next mission with the same intentionality you brought to the last one.

