

## **This Veterans Day, Consider Hiring One**

I am a proud veteran of both the U.S. Marines and the U.S. Army, serving combat tours in Iraq and Kuwait. One might think serving our country in war-torn regions was among the most difficult experiences of my life. It was. But what I never expected was how difficult life would be after leaving the military. I hope that sharing my story this Veterans Day will show the importance of supporting wounded warriors in their transition to civilian careers, and to help ease the path for other veterans.

I had every intention of staying in the military until old age forced me to retire, but unfortunately I didn't have a say in the matter. It began when I was medically evacuated in July 2007 after sustaining an injury to my left wrist and forearm. After returning to the States and being treated for my physical injury, I realized that something else was wrong.

I was having trouble sleeping and often felt angry for no reason. I withdrew from those who cared about me most. Often, I would not leave my house for fear of what was beyond. These issues kept snowballing, impacting everything in my life. In the military, there's a certain level of pride associated with not showing any type of weakness, so initially I said nothing.

Ultimately, I was diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in December 2009. At that time I was medically retired and had to face a new chapter in life for which I had no preparation. I both needed and wanted to find a job to give me purpose and financial stability, but I didn't know how to take even the first steps. The effects of PTSD made the prospect of interviewing completely terrifying. I was unable to trust even my closest friends and family, let alone complete strangers. Though my wounds weren't visible, they ran deep, and they cracked the foundation of my soul.

Through the Army's Wounded Warrior Program, I met Dwayne Beason of the National Organization on Disability (NOD). Mr. Beason, himself a former Sergeant Major, is a career specialist with NOD's Wounded Warrior Careers program, which helps severely injured veterans to move forward on career paths. With Mr. Beason's assistance I was able to find a job with Fayetteville-based ServiceSource, an employment and rehabilitation organization, as a Clerk with the Directorate of Logistics at Fort Bragg.

Starting work at ServiceSource was definitely the biggest turnaround on my road to recovery. But it wasn't always easy. I would show up to work for a few days, but then no one would hear from me for the next few. I was erratic in just about every way for several months. Most employers would have cut their losses at that point.

But instead of firing me, the regional executive director at ServiceSource, called me into a meeting to discuss the situation. That's when I shared the extent of what I was going through. This wasn't easy for me to do, but the team at ServiceSource and NOD expressed a great deal of care and established a definitive support program. They saw my underlying potential, for which I'm extremely grateful.

The fact that I was working alongside other veterans, some of whom were having similar issues, also helped with my progress. Coming to work stopped being a challenge and I started to view it as a comfortable, safe environment. Thanks to the support I received, I'm proud **to say** that I was recently promoted.

Veteran's Day always had special meaning for me. Now, more so than ever. It's a time to recognize the challenges that retired military face as we transition to civilian life, and to pay tribute to those that help us along the way. I'd also suggest it's a time for employers to recommit to not only hiring veterans with disabilities, but supporting us as we reintegrate and make the transition to civilian careers. We have so much to offer. I wouldn't have made it this far without the support of NOD and ServiceSource – they're heroes in my eyes. You can be a hero, too.

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*Harry Louque is a medically retired Staff Sergeant who served combat tours in both Iraq and Kuwait as an Infantry Squad Leader and Sniper in the 82nd Airborne Division. He is currently employed as a Contract Closeout Coordinator at ServiceSource in Fayetteville, NC.*