

A new generation of Veterans in the United States

Presented by Wes O'Donnell

Executive Director of the USS Silversides Museum

Dawn Johnson invited Wes O'Donnell, recently appointed Executive Director of the USS Silversides Submarine to the podium. Wes is a veteran of the US Army and US Airforce, serving a total of 10 years. He is a spokesman for Veterans and has been delivering speeches about the advantages of hiring veterans to organizations across the country. Today we are fortunate to have him with us.

There is a new generation of veterans in America. They've been labeled the Post 9/11 Veterans or the Iraq & Afghanistan Veterans, but I prefer the term Modern Veteran. These men and women are smart; smarter than every generation that's come before. They're technologically savvy because most of them are Generation-X or Millennials. In addition, they've been in direct contact with some of the most technologically advanced equipment that a 21st century democracy can provide.

I believe that in the next two decades, Modern Veterans are going to be responsible for one of the largest economic booms in U.S. history. As a byproduct of their military service, veterans have the stomach to take risks, the ability to deal with ambiguity, composure and creativity under extreme pressure and an unparalleled focus on TEAM as the way to win a fight. These men and women are the best-kept secret in business and why your competitors are hiring veterans as fast as they can.

Before we explore why Modern Veterans are right for business, I'd like to share some of the myths and misconceptions that some companies have approached me with, as well as one big false narrative that needs to be destroyed once and for all.

1. Veteran Suicide and the Number 22

In May of 2016, I wrote an article entitled "[Veteran Suicide: The False Narrative of the Number '22'](#)." In that article, I explain that there is a single number that many people commonly associate with Modern Veterans: That number is 22, as in 22 veterans commit suicide daily in the United States. In 2015 and 2016, this number spread like wildfire through social media and saw the creation of perhaps two dozen non-profits with the number 22 in their name.

There are two major issues with the number 22. The first is that the number is likely much, much higher. That number is based on a Veteran's Affairs report from 2012 using data collected from only 21 states, representing only 40% of the U.S. population. And states like California and Texas, states that have massive veteran communities, don't report veteran suicides to the VA. As you can clearly deduce, we should be using the number 22 as a bare minimum or starting point.

More surprising, however, is the revelation that only 1 Modern Veteran takes their own life daily (which is still one too many). The entire generation that has been implicated in the number 22, Modern Veterans, is NOT the group that is committing suicide. Per the report, the clear majority of veteran suicides are committed by Vietnam-Era veterans.

When the media reports falsely on this, two things happen: First, Vietnam-Era veterans are not getting the support and outreach that they clearly need. Second, having such a big, inaccurate number attached

to the younger generation of veterans perpetuates a destructive stereotype. It sends the false message that Modern Veterans are somehow broken and unable to compete for meaningful employment in the civilian world.

The number 22 is a great starting point to raise awareness about veteran suicide, but let's make sure that we report it accurately so that we may, in the process, honor our nation's heroes.

2. Thank You for Your Service

In November of 2016, I wrote an article entitled "[Why Saying 'Thank You for Your Service' Offends Some Veterans](#)". To date, the article has been read almost 300,000 times and I have received approximately 500 pieces of hate mail from angry people who couldn't accept that some veterans roll their eyes when you say "Thank you for your service".

While researching that article, I interviewed close to 100 Modern Veterans from various branches of service, and 97 of them said the same thing: they feel uneasy when someone says *that* phrase. But why? Part of the reason, they said, is that literally everyone says it. So much so, in fact, that to many veterans it has become an empty platitude. Another part of the reason is that, ultimately, as veterans, we don't feel like we did anything special. We got paid to do a job, performed that job honorably and even got a free college education out of the deal!

When I give this speech to CEOs and hiring managers across the country, I get a perfectly legitimate question from the crowd: "Okay, what's the alternative? What should we say?"

How about asking me what I did? What was my job in the military? Take a deeper interest in my sacrifices. If you run into a vet that doesn't want to talk about it, ask what he or she is doing now. Are they going to school? Where do they work now that they are out?

Help destroy the anonymity that many vets feel. Let's face it, unlike the 'Total War' of World War II, America hasn't been a nation at war, even though soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines are fighting on foreign soil at this very moment. Back home, people are still going to the mall, there's no rationing. Some service members return after a 12 month deployment only to find out that the country has moved on without them, and catching up with society can be a challenge.

As for genuinely showing your gratitude, I personally like "Thanks for volunteering". It says that you acknowledge that we have an all-volunteer force and that an individual made a commitment and made sacrifices on your behalf.

3. MYTH: Veterans are Foul-Mouthed and Noisy

This is simply not true. Veterans possess something called a 'military-bearing' which is, strictly defined, a posture, gestures and behaviors that are consistent with standards expected of U.S. service members. Military bearing includes presenting a professional appearance, being courteous, projecting enthusiasm and confidence and having a positive outlook.

I served in an infantry unit, the 327th Infantry Regiment of the 101st Airborne Division. Sure we were foul-mouthed and noisy on deployment or among ourselves, but we took pride on exuding a professional outward appearance at all times. Veterans carry this with them when they leave the service and enter the civilian world.

4. MYTH: The Military Doesn't Teach Transferrable Skills

Yet another misconception that assumes that somehow operating in a military environment is vastly different than operating in a business setting. A number of organizations have developed a Military Skills Translator that allows employers and veterans both to find positions that are similar to what they did while on active duty.

For the purposes of this article, as an example, I just visited [Military.com's translator](#) which asks what branch of service (I put in Air Force) and Military Job Title (I put in 2A551, my Air Force AFSC, equivalent to a Military Occupational Specialty code) and clicked 'Search'.

Immediately, the system matches what I did in the Air Force to a number of similar civilian-equivalent jobs: Quality Control at Amazon, Facilities Manager at Aramark, and Maintenance Supervisor at Randstad Engineering, just to name the top three and there are over 50 on the list.

5. MYTH: All Veterans Serve in Combat

By the numbers, according to the [Defense Manpower Data Center](#) there are close to 1.4 million people serving right now in the U.S. Armed Forces. That means that only 0.4 percent of the U.S. population is active duty military. Of that percentage, a staggeringly small percentage actually see combat. The U.S. military isn't just made up of front-line combat troops and cooks to keep them fed. There is a massive support structure in place; the so-called 'tail-to-tooth' ratio.

Military historian [Joseph Bond](#) states that this 'tail-to-tooth' ratio has changed a great deal from previous generations because the 'tail' acts as force multipliers - communications allows for coordination and precise devastating supporting indirect fire at the point of contact. Medical provides a level of assurance to soldiers and returns experienced fighters back to battlefield. Logistics keeps a steady supply of fuel, ammo, food, and water to all concerned. Take any of these things away, and the point of the spear becomes much less effective - maybe inoperable.

The probability that your veteran candidate served in a combat role is slim, however, even if he or she did, that shouldn't be a disqualifier. As Americans, we've had remarkable success at reintegrating our warriors back into society: The Greatest Generation came home from saving the world and created the Baby Boomers as well as the economic prosperity of the 1950s. The economy overall grew by 37% during the 1950s. At the end of the decade, the median American family had 30% more purchasing power than at the beginning. This was all done by the men who stormed Omaha Beach or flew sorties over Okinawa. A combat veteran shouldn't be stigmatized. He or she should be honored.

It is my position that veterans are more likely to achieve success in life due to a number of exclusive traits and skills that they possess as a byproduct of their military service.

As of this writing, President Barrack Obama is the 44th President of the United States. However, there have only been 43 men that have held the position, thanks to Grover Cleveland serving two non-consecutive terms. Out of 43 presidents, how many were veterans? When I give this speech, I take guesses from the audience and the closest answer wins a prize; usually a stuffed bear in a military uniform that I toss to the winner.

The answer is that the majority of U.S. presidents have been veterans, 26 out of 43. I would even go so far as to say that if you're a veteran, you have a higher likelihood of being elected Commander-in-Chief.

Some of our best presidents have been veterans: Ronald Reagan, John Kennedy, Theodore Roosevelt, Abraham Lincoln, and of course our first president, George Washington.

As mentioned above, success minded veterans are also largely responsible for the massive economic boom of the 1950s. In 1945, the GI Bill helped veterans returning from WW2 earn college degrees, train for vocations, support young families, purchase homes and farms and start their own businesses. My own grandfather, who was an ace fighter pilot for the Marine Corps in the Pacific came home and opened a dry cleaner business in Dallas Texas.

Also, veterans were and are 50% more active in their communities and civic associations. In the 50s and 60s, many veterans joined the civil rights movement to expand equal rights for future generations. If we're not all equal, they thought, then what the hell were we fighting for?

Buy why? What qualities do veterans possess exclusively as a byproduct of their military service? What makes a veteran or military member much more likely to achieve success in life and business?

1. Leadership at Every Level

At age 19, I was put in charge of \$6 million of government equipment. I had colleagues in their 20s who were appointed interim governors of entire towns in the Middle East. There is no better anvil on the planet to forge a 21st century leader. Building world class leaders is what we do, it's in our DNA.

From a private in the U.S. Army infantry to a four-star general or General of the Army (reserved for wartime), every level has the responsibility and the expectation of leadership.

I recently spoke at the U.S. Air Force Academy about veteran empowerment; after all, many of the cadets would one day be veterans themselves, but more importantly, they would one day be leading airmen who would be veterans at some point. During my trip to Colorado Springs, I had the privilege of sitting in on one of my fellow speaker's talks about leadership. The speaker's name was [Simon Sinek](#) and the topic, Leaders Eat Last.

I don't want to steal Simon's thunder, but it struck me how his philosophy of leadership coincided with the leadership found inside the U.S. military. The message? Great leaders sacrifice their own comfort—even their own survival—for the good of those in their care.

If you are looking for a candidate that is mission focused and doesn't need a lot of hand-holding, a natural leader to help you achieve your business goals, a military veteran is your best choice.

2. Composure and Creativity Under Extreme Pressure

The [Air Force Times](#) recently reported on [a story](#) where an F-16 Fighting Falcon, performing ops against the Islamic State, suffered a fuel malfunction where the pilot could only sustain 500lbs of fuel at any given moment. 500lbs of fuel in a Falcon gets you about 25 minutes of flight time before you must declare an emergency. The pilot was going to have to eject over ISIS controlled territory.

In my mind, there are very few things that scare an Air Force F-16 fighter pilot. One of those things must be ejecting over ISIS controlled territory.

What happened next? The savvy crew of a KC-135 Stratotanker, basically a flying gas tank, stepped up to lend a hand. The KC-135 escorted the Falcon all the way back to base, while refueling him every 15

minutes. Aerial refueling is already an endeavor filled with risk; a task that takes concentration and calm under dangerous, nerve-racking conditions.

This is the very definition of composure and creativity under extreme pressure. And there are hundreds of examples of this happening daily around the U.S. military. In society, as entrepreneurs in particular, I've seen veterans go well beyond the stress point at which a sane person would break under the pressure. Your veteran candidate brings this composure with her into the civilian world.

3. Integrity Always

In a world where integrity is a scarce commodity, many veterans operate at a higher level in all interactions. Is every veteran a saint? Of course not. Just like any social group, we have our screw-ups; our individuals that joined for the wrong reasons. Any group is going to have its individuals that don't reflect the best qualities of the group.

But by and large, I've seen veterans operate with integrity, and you can trust them to make the right decision, even when no one is looking.

A colleague of mine and Marine Corps veteran, worked, until recently, at a large medical company. As the head of quality control, he discovered a defect in a medical device that screws into children's skulls to keep their head steady as a doctor is performing brain surgery, or removing a tumor. He brought this defect to the attention of his CEO and the response was astounding: Do nothing. The CEO stated that it would cost millions of dollars to recall and the chance for failure was lower than average. The CEO then stated that he must sign a non-disclosure agreement so that the Food and Drug Administration, the federal agency that approves medical devices, wouldn't be notified.

The former-Marine quit his job immediately. In my personal dealings with veterans in business, I've seen men and women who operate out of a clear sense of right and wrong and service before self. If integrity is important to you and aligns with your business goals, the veteran candidate is your best choice.

4. Habitual Goal Orientation

Goals are crucial little things, especially in the U.S. military. A goal must require you to take action, not reaction. And as countless American achievements prove, from taking our independence from the Crown to landing an American on the moon, massive action gets massive results. People who serve in the U.S. military equate competence, task orientation and a positive attitude as essential to achieving military goals.

In the same vein, veterans bring to the table something known as the AAR (After-Action-Review) in the Army and known as the Debrief in the Air Force. Simply put, the AAR is a cycle of continuous improvement, where soldiers review the previous mission; what went right? What went wrong? How can we improve performance on the next mission? Then, lessons learned are implemented to improve future performance. After the next mission, the whole cycle starts again.

Recognizing that this military system of AAR and debrief has value in the civilian business world, former Air Force F-15 fighter pilot James D. Murphy wrote a book entitled ["Flawless Execution"](#) that describes in detail how companies can use this very process.

Veterans from any branch are already exposed to this process as part of their jobs in the military. They then bring this mindset of continuous improvement with them into your business.

5. Diversity and Inclusion in Action

In 1965, a black U.S. Army soldier named Milton Olive III was on patrol with his squad in Vietnam. They made contact with the enemy and the Viet Cong retreated into the jungle. Private Olive's squad gave chase and during the pursuit, a Viet Cong soldier turned and threw a grenade that landed in the middle of the Americans. Private Olive nonchalantly raised his hand and said "I got it", grabbed the grenade, tucked it into his chest and then laid down on it.

Private Olive was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor, and was the first African-American Medal of Honor recipient of the Vietnam War. In jumping on that grenade, he saved the lives of his squad, both black men and white men. In doing so, he showed us all how we ought to live. For more on Milton Olive III, [see my video here](#).

In my 10 years in the active duty military, racism was scarce; so much so that when I left the military in 2007, I thought racism was dead. My naivety can be explained because, as a service member, my life often relied on the person next to me regardless of gender, religion or ethnicity. I have no doubt that racism exists in the military; I just didn't see it in my decade in the service.

Our nation has been called a melting pot because of the many nationalities and ethnicities that make up this great nation. But melting pot implies that everything becomes homogeneous, the same color and consistency. I prefer to think of America as a pizza, where separate ingredients are unique and distinct, but contribute to a delicious whole.

America is powerful because of its diversity, and the military is a cross-section of American society. Different people bring a wealth of different experiences and backgrounds that make it easier for us to adapt to a world that is changing faster than some nations can adapt. Service members know, perhaps better than anyone, that mission accomplishment doesn't care about race, religion or gender.

Okay, I want to hire a Modern Veteran. Where do I start?

First of all, understand that the best candidate isn't always a military veteran. Naturally, you should be looking out for the best interests of your company and the specific needs of the position. Resist the urge to just 'hire a vet' so that you can check off your politically correct box. Doing so sets the stage for turnover and does a disservice to both your company and the veteran candidate.

I've seen that many hiring managers don't hire veterans because they believe some of the myths listed above. In addition, some managers are intimidated by someone who has had more training and responsibility as a leader than they have.

According to Tim Sackett SPHR, at Fistfuloftalent.com, most hiring managers can't comprehend what really goes on in the military, but they understand the college experience, so they hire what they know. "When given the choice between the fresh young grad out of college, or the military vet who just spent years defending our country, they'll choose the college kid, almost always."

Try this: Bring someone in who actually served in the military or is actively serving. Have the leadership at your company ask questions; destroy all the stereotypes associated with veterans. Tackle your own

biases. When the smoke clears, you'll have a better understanding of this amazing human resource at your disposal.

As if you needed more convincing, there is a fiscal benefit to hiring veterans as well. The Work Opportunity Tax Credit, known as the WOTC, reduces an employer's cost of doing business, requires little paperwork, and applying for WOTC is simple. WOTC can reduce an employer's federal income tax liability by as much as \$9,600 per veteran hired. There is no limit on the number of individuals an employer can hire to qualify to claim the tax credit.

For more details on these credits, see the [PATH Act – WOTC Interim Instructions](#) on the Department of Labor website. Further information can be found in [IRS Notice 2016-22](#).

You can begin your veteran-candidate search at a number of places. A few options are: [Orion International](#), [Hire Heroes USA](#) and [Military.com](#), but perhaps the best place to start is a university. Jennifer Renee Pluta, assistant director of veteran and military families for Syracuse University says that "Employers who wish to create or strengthen their veteran recruiting pipeline should look to colleges and universities. This could be with existing institutions or [they could] seek new relationships with colleges and universities that strongly support veterans."

[American Military University](#) is where I would start my search.

Ultimately, Modern Veterans are a business resource that will make your company more competitive. There is a long-term impact at play here: If the veteran unemployment rate is high, this might impact future military recruiting efforts for people that want to join the military, but are worried that they won't be able to get a job after their service. There is a patriotic angle too in that a veteran new-hire can warm up the typically cold business of HR. It's a hire that you can definitely feel good about. What better way to say 'thank you for your service' than to offer a veteran a job.