



life after the military

making the emotional transition

By Kim Zachman

When David Ponsell was preparing for retirement from the Army, he was worried about making the adjustment to civilian life.

"For 22 years, I was so comfortable. I had a job, a paycheck, benefits and a purpose," he recalled. "I worried that I would never find another job, but more importantly, that I would never find another purpose."

Ponsell's anxiety is common among retiring service members. While the process of retirement can be stressful for everyone, regardless of their profession, military personnel have the additional burden of settling into civilian life.

Unlike older retirees, most military retirees are in the prime of their life with families to support. Few are able to retire to a life of leisure. Most of them need to work but have no experience in the private sector.

"People that entered the military out of high school may have never written a résumé, done an interview or had to look for a job before," stated Cindy Polzin, transition employment supervisor for the Fleet and Family Support Center in Norfolk, Va. "The military is very structured and very predictable. Civilian work is very different and requires an adjustment."

Ponsell's transition to a civilian career was difficult because he realized he had to start over.

"In the military, you're given a status by virtue of rank," he said. "It was a new experience for me having to define myself in other people's eyes before they accepted me."

In her book, *Retire Smart, Retire Happy: Finding Your True Path in Life*, Dr. Nancy K. Schlossberg wrote, "It is difficult, uncomfortable, even depressing to know who you were but not know who you are."

Professional athletes have similar retirement experiences because they also have a high commitment to their career and retire at a relatively early age. In a study done at the University of Western Australia, researchers found that individuals who had maintained an exclusive athletic identity were more vulnerable to career transition difficulties than athletes with less exclusive identities.

"It is obvious that the greater a person's work commitment, the greater the loss when that role disappears," Schlossberg wrote.

Retired from the Army National Guard, Forrest Parker has seen many examples of soldiers with exclusive identities.

"There were some guys so wound up in their professional military role that they neglected their personal lives," he said. "I've seen Guardsmen retire and die a year later because they weren't prepared with other interests."

Parker, on the other hand, balanced his life with military and personal activities. When he retired after 32 years of service, he was ready to work part-time as a home inspector and to enjoy his woodworking hobby.

Having definite plans can help ease the transition. Rosemary Mariner planned to enter the academic world after her retirement from the Navy. Her final assignment with the Joint Chiefs of Staff included many of the responsibilities and tasks that she would be doing later as a private consultant and instructor. While her professional identity remained fairly intact, caring for her toddler daughter full time was very challenging.

"I was used to a certain position and status, but my 2-year-old daughter didn't respect my status at all," she recalled. "It made me appreciate the women's movement all over again."

In addition to feeling a loss of status, service members may also experience a loss of companionship when they leave the military.

"Work furnishes a sense of place and membership in a valued community," Schlossberg wrote. "This sense of place and belonging in turn provides individuals with feelings of worth."

Recovering that sense of membership might be why so many service members find jobs that are associated with the military. When Mel Schaller retired from the Air Force after 22 years, he did so willingly.

"I didn't want to move my family again," he recalled. "I knew it was time."

Even though he was mentally prepared to become a civilian, he worried about missing his co-workers. Seven months after his retirement, Schaller found a position with a defense contractor in the same division as his last military assignment.

"I'm doing the same job. I work with the same people. I just don't have to wear a uniform or go TDY anymore," he said enthusiastically.

To him, he has the best of both worlds.

But not everyone is able to find such a perfect post-retirement job. For those who don't, there may be a stressful and lengthy adjustment period. To make the transition smoother, Polzin strongly recommends the Transition Assistance Program and other employment counseling programs offered by the military.

"Take the time and take advantage of the services

offered," she said. "The more time spent in preparation is highly correlated with reduced stress and a quicker transition time."

If spouses are seeking ways to help with the transition, Polzin recommends that they stay as active as possible in the retirement process, including attending the seminars with the service member.

"We highly encourage spouses to attend TAP," Polzin said. "The Navy recognizes that it's the family going through retirement and not just the service member."

Ponsell's wife, Elisa, had very mixed emotions about David's retirement. While she was relieved that they wouldn't have to move for the 14th time, she was nervous about leaving the military. She had spent her whole life associated with Army; first as an Army brat, then as an active-duty soldier for four years, then as a spouse for 21 years.

"Then I realized that we still had ID cards, could shop at the commissary and be involved with retiree activities," she said. "We weren't getting out, just entering a new phase."

Elisa's positive attitude helped ease the stress of a major life change. David viewed retirement as an opportunity for personal growth.

"I lost identity but quickly realized that being a soldier was not all that I was," he said. "I gained a wider perspective of self." ✪

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