



May 12, 2016

Former Marine encourages veterans to attend DoN's 2016 Veteran and Wounded Warrior Hiring Summit



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PATUXENT RIVER, MD.—It can be hard enough for veterans who voluntarily leave the military—and with it the sense of identity and purpose that came from serving their country—to transition to civilian life. For wounded warriors, who are often forced into retirement while bearing the additional burden of physical and/or emotional scars, the transition can be even tougher.

For Jessie Blanton, a logistics management specialist with the H-53 Heavy Lift Helicopters Program Office, and hundreds of other wounded warriors and veterans, working at Naval Air Systems Command (NAVAIR) has been a chance to serve in a meaningful career supporting the warfighters they once fought alongside.

More than 1,600 wounded warriors have been placed in positions at NAVAIR since its hiring program began in 2010, including 522 in fiscal year 2015 alone, which was roughly 15 percent of the command's external hires.

Noting the oft-cited figure of 22 veteran suicides each day, Blanton said it is incumbent on him and other wounded warriors who have found their way to reach out to others in need. He also encouraged veterans in search of a post-military career to consider working for DoD as a civilian, and to attend expos like the [2016 Veteran and Wounded Warrior Hiring and Support Summit](#) being hosted by the Department of the Navy in Tampa, Florida, on June 1 and 2.

The first day focuses on employers and the benefits, challenges and success stories of hiring and retaining wounded warriors and veterans. Day two is a FREE Hiring Heroes Career Fair open to veterans, wounded warriors and their spouses.

Blanton's Story

Blanton joined the Marine Corps in August 2005 and graduated from the service's fire academy before being stationed with the Chemical Biological Incident Response Force (CBIRF) at Naval Support Facility Indian Head, Maryland.

After four years with CBIRF, seeking a deployment, Blanton transferred to Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, North Carolina, in 2009, and six months later deployed to Afghanistan, where he served as a rescue technician in Helmand Province.

Blanton was injured three times during his eight-month tour, the first while fighting a massive fire when nearby gas tanks exploded and knocked him unconscious. Thereafter he suffered from disorientation and shortness of breath, and also became more anxious during missions, but Blanton said he and others dismissed his symptoms in order to keep him in the fight.

Blanton's tour ended in October 2010 when, two weeks before he was scheduled to come home, the door he was cutting off a damaged tactical truck blew off its hinges and struck him in the head. When he regained consciousness, Blanton was unable to walk without assistance, his balance and spatial awareness were thrown off because of severe damage to his vestibular system.

"I didn't know where the ground was. I couldn't put one foot in front of the other without falling down," he said. "I pretty much had to learn how to walk and talk again."

Suffering from multiple traumatic brain injuries, optical nerve damage, hearing loss and debilitating migraines, Blanton spent the next eight months hospitalized, undergoing daily tests and rehabilitation. Even after he was allowed to return home, it took nearly two more years of daily appointments and rehab before Blanton was deemed stable enough to be discharged from the Marines. About six months after his discharge, Blanton said he was finally able to walk without losing his balance, but that he was prone to nausea. It took another year before he felt well enough to work again.

"I think the biggest thing was I didn't want people to look at me funny anymore," Blanton said.

Blanton found his way to NAVAIR after attending a similar career expo near Patuxent River Naval Air Station, Maryland, in 2013, where he met Sonny Fann, the outreach coordinator for [NAVAIR's Wounded Warrior Program](#). Blanton told Fann he "just wanted to be surrounded by Marines again," but



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worried that he had nothing to offer. Fann told Blanton that he had more to offer than he realized and promised to "move heaven and earth" to get him placed at NAVAIR.

As he had for hundreds of wounded warriors at NAVAIR, Fann came through, and Blanton was placed with the Naval Acquisition Development Program for Wounded Warriors, a four-year internship designed to teach the skills needed to become a logistics manager. In January 2015, Blanton started at his current position with the H-53 Heavy Lift Helicopters Program Office.

In the past, Blanton noticed employers would become wary of him once they learned he was a wounded warrior. At NAVAIR, he found the atmosphere more welcoming than judgmental.

"No one worried about what I couldn't do. It was all about what I could do," he said.

"Being able to serve here at NAVAIR is one of the best opportunities a wounded warrior could ever ask for," said Blanton.

"If we don't deliver the best products to the warfighter, lives could be lost, and that isn't acceptable. This is something I have witnessed firsthand in combat, and it's why the job here at NAVAIR is so important. I can tell you that the work people do here has a major impact on the fleet, and it is truly an honor to be a part of such a great organization."

For more information on career opportunities at NAVAIR and the hiring summit sponsored by the Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, and co-hosted by Naval Sea Systems Command, NAVAIR and Space and Naval Warfare Systems Command, visit www.HireAVet.navy.mil.

Participants are encouraged to register at www.HireAVet.navy.mil, where they can provide their resumes to be matched with available jobs and potentially be interviewed at the event. Walk-ins are welcome.

To hear from other wounded warriors and veterans, watch this video on [NAVAIR's Wounded Warrior Program](#).