



Boot Camp to Boardroom: Making a Success of Leaving the Military

By Antoine Tirard and Claire Lyell

“It seems as if violence is everywhere, but it’s really on the run.... yet, historically, we’ve never had it this peaceful”. A recent Huffington Post began in this way, explaining how the number of violent deaths per capita globally has declined dramatically over the past decades, countering what most of us experience, when we see yet another tragic massacre or coup d’état filling our screen with images. Despite this encouraging assertion, it has not yet been possible to eliminate armies and national service, and thus the need to recruit bright sparks into the military. But are we managing what happens when these brilliant minds are leaving the battlefield? This article aims to explore, via the story of five former military men and women, exactly what the transition feels like,

with more or less support, and seeks lessons in making it more effective and manageable from both sides.

We start with Devendra Yadav, who was one of three brothers in an Indian “army family”. He grew up with a sense of duty, tradition, and says he just made the “logical shift” at sixteen, to the military academy, from which he would graduate with flying colours. His career thrived, and Devendra rapidly progressed, through military career, combat role and peacekeeping missions with the UN, in Africa. This early exposure to other geographies would prove to be significant later, and certainly set off a spark of interest for worlds other than the military one. In 2004, as a young Colonel, Devendra was asked to raise a new unit, which he now compares to a start-up business with venture capital funding! He was



given the command, and went straight into intense combat operations, feeling he was a father-figure to his troops, responsible for anything and everything.

A Bridge Too Far

On successful completion of command, increasing specialisation in project management, huge logistical challenges and more, Devendra realised he had a sense for business, in addition to his other talents, and the questions started to float around. Was he being challenged sufficiently in his army role? Was there more to discover, learn and develop outside? Should he stay or go? Most of his colleagues stayed on, beyond the obligatory 20 years, as it is comfortable to do so, but Devendra decided to make the leap of faith in 2007, despite having a wife and small son. For him, the critical question was: “when was the last time you did something for the first time?” When he did not find an answer, he knew it was time to move on.

The few courses that Devendra was able to benefit from on leaving the army were well-intentioned, but more focused on a transition into retirement rather than on a renaissance as a business leader, so he found himself rather on his own. He was conscious of needing to acquire skills, and decided to take the GMAT, to assess his abilities to go into further business education. He was aware of MBA’s, and felt confident about how to progress.

With a fine score in hand, Devendra felt confident, and was eventually offered a place to take an MBA at Boston University. But in the meantime he was also offered a “great break”. He became head of projects in India for an

infrastructure company, and rode out the 2008 crash over the following few years, developing some early management experience and hands on expertise in handling major infrastructure projects in India. And yet the MBA was still calling him, and just before his GMAT score fell invalid in 2012, he chose to embark on a dual MBA programme from Tsinghua and INSEAD. It was a special course, and he describes this as the “best decision I ever took”. Finding himself in a totally different platform and peer group, as well as being forced to question himself on all fronts, having been permanently in command for almost the whole of the previous ten years, was a stimulating situation, and he took it in his stride. He told us “the higher you go in the army, the lonelier you get, whereas I now have a magnificent network of supportive buddies just a phone call away.” Although he was much older than the rest of the students, he felt rejuvenated by the experience, and moved confidently on to greater promotions and more senior roles as a result.



**Devendra
Yadav**

The military strengths that set Devendra apart from others in his current role, as CEO of a French multinational, are based on the unique package of analysis, quick solutions and implementation. He sees this as a unique viewpoint, in which one can see the loopholes of implementation, but has no fear of advancing. “We are not scared of the outcome”. In talking about business plans, Devendra states that a lot of optimism is built in, whereas in the military world, the “everything could go wrong” attitude makes him conscious of being willing to accept the setbacks. It is “losing money versus losing lives and limbs, and resilience is built into our thought process.”

While financial and client service understanding is lacking, typically, on arrival in the civilian world, Devendra believes the rest of his “superior” skills taught him to overcome the

gaps quickly and humbly. He was very conscious of what he did not know, and sought to find out. The MBA classroom was the right platform for him to find the common platform for talk and deriving benefits. He is now a very happy and successful CEO, who is clear about the mix that has facilitated his success, and lucid about the barriers that face so many who do not have such a simple transition. For Colonel Devendra, “active combat roles may be over, but as a corporate warrior, he continues seeking and surmounting new challenges”.



Ton de Graaf had a very different story, with a transition that was painful and confusing, despite great success in his military life as a Platoon Leader in the Royal Dutch Military Police, involved in NATO security issues, and as a Captain in the Air Force. He had joined up as an 18 year old, as part of the obligatory national service imposed on young Dutch men at the time, but pursued a medium term engagement, in the hope of better understanding leadership. On the fall of the German wall, he found himself relocated to the Netherlands, and was clear he did not wish to proceed as a career soldier, deciding to become a civilian once more.

Ton just handed in his gear, and went, letter of gratitude from the Queen in hand, to find a new life, in a town that he picked for its comfort and proximity to those that counted for him, but with little idea of what he would be doing. 150 application letters later, he was pretty clear that most companies were not keen on hiring former officers. Indeed, he had not been invited to a single interview. The rejection reasons were all about “lots of impressive leadership experience, but no business

acumen”. Realising at this point that the void needed to be filled, Ton signed up for university, studying Organisation and Labour Psychology. He also started volunteering with a crisis hotline, similar to the Samaritans, learning non-judgemental listening. Both the study and the empathic listening would later be critical in building his success as a coach, but for now, he needed work in a real company.

Courage Under Fire

On arrival in his first executive leadership role as “head of change” in a large construction company, Ton discovered the real reason he had been hired: it was announced that the company was to undergo a massive restructuring, and he was to take charge of it. He used his military experience to “keep his cool” and to be first in, last out, on the work floor all day every day, with “the men”. Things got tough, but he held his ground, as he had learnt, and gained a great deal of respect. Throughout, he consulted with colleagues, sought opinion sincerely, and tried to figure out inclusive solutions. This was noticed, and rewarded richly, not only with further and rapid promotions, but also with the sense that the change he had led had been as painless as possible, thanks to his work.



Ton
De Graaf

In the next few years, Ton became clear that his calling was as a coach. He had, in fact, been functioning as team, individual and organisational coach in his corporate roles (and even before), and that had excited and fulfilled him. He trained, and started practising, building on his very contrasting contextual experiences to create a practice of empathy, leading to solutions.

Ton’s wisdom from the military includes the notion that you must “walk your talk” and be a leader who can be trusted. This goes through to his profession today as a coach, in which

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without trust, he would have no clients. He also believes that showing people you care about them, whether in combat, or while you are giving them bad news about redundancy, is crucial. Either way, their life is “in my hands”. He also talks about “going the extra mile” and never giving up, his mantras in both military and subsequent lives.

Fearlessness is the final quality he believes the military built in him: “I have been an executive coach for over a decade now, and the one thing I notice time and again is that most people are afraid. Afraid to be judged, afraid to give or receive feedback, to ask for help, or to lose their job. Apparently this is the system we have built for ourselves.” As a coach, he can help this fearful majority through the worst challenges, and to focus on the good and important stuff. He sees that generally, bosses remain bosses and do things in a bossy manner. “That’s not leadership, that’s just a lazy and unprofessional attempt to fool others that you are a leader”.

As a coach with a big influence on many companies at board level, Ton crusades for more recruitment of former military staff. He believes companies should challenge their assumptions about the military, looking for the positive and constructive aspects of an individual’s experience. Business skills and knowledge can easily be taught, while character cannot, and that makes all the difference in this world.

Character is something that Priya Panjkar was endowed with in buckets when she was born. From another military family in India, she played on tanks and was surrounded “by olive green” while she was growing up.

Moving house to a new, generally small, location every two years made Priya flexible and easily able to fit in to new situations, make a diversity of new friends, and to appreciate each new place for what it was, regardless of the perceived hardship. During her years of high

school, she was fascinated by the possibility of joining the army, but at the time, the only route “in” for a woman was by being a doctor, and she was too impatient for that type of study.



Having negotiated herself away from an Economics degree into hotel studies, Priya found herself beginning a career at Marriott, but she was enticed away by the news that there was one opening in the lady officer’s special entry scheme that required a hotel management graduate! Her boss at the time encouraged her to attend the selection tests, and she was successful. The gruelling training made her doubt her choice several times, but she found strength, adapting and drawing inspiration from others. Her difference was both a hindrance and hardly noticeable. On several occasions, with her short hair, newly skinny frame, and darkly tanned skin, she was stopped at the ladies’ toilets, and directed elsewhere! Her parents despaired, swinging from laughing at her appearance, to begging her to return home.

A Few Good Men

The first posting to Leh, the remote outpost in the Himalayas was lonely, isolating and more. She was not only the youngest, at 21, but also the only female. The next youngest person there was a 45 year old Lieutenant Colonel! This meant she “got to do a lot”. While this stretch was a great pleasure in that it developed unexploited talent, she did find it difficult to get the “men” to accept her. Taking advice from her father, she showed them tangible strengths, such as running faster than them, and used the prowess, with a mix of feminine empathy and

supportiveness, to weave relationships of trust and confidence. She was also very strict - never using violent language, but giving physical punishment when appropriate. Definitely not “a softie”.



Priya
Panjekar

The time in the mountains allowed Priya the opportunity not only to learn to ski, but to be selected for the Lady Officer’s Skiing team, in preparation for the winter Olympics. Unfortunately, she broke a rib, and did not finally compete, but the honour was important, nevertheless. The attainment of elite sporting status, added to her will to excel in all aspects of her military career, aided Priya when she decided to leave the Army after the five years she had planned. She attended IIM, a top business school, on a highly selective programme for exiting officers. During this course, she realised how substantial her knowledge gaps were, and read fervently, in addition to mastering data, analysis, and so on. Job offers flowed, logically enough in the HR area, and she spent an initial couple of years at Prudential, and at another corporation, before getting back in touch with her old boss from Marriott, who immediately invited her to return.

Priya says that HR in hotels is different from more sophisticated sectors: grass roots activities, basic level staff and hectically unpredictable – very similar to the army. She has managed to excel by building strong relationships, ensuring continuous learning, and is shortly going to be given an opportunity to move to operations, in preparation for a General Manager role one day. She sees that her company rewards interest and initiative: “They take a chance on you, and you run with it”. The strongest wisdom Priya has covers her whole career: “It all boils down to how you treat people. My father was full of humility and took care of his people. That is what I tried in the

Army, and what I do now. You mentor others, so that you are free to develop yourself. Success breeds success.”

She sometimes wonders whether she should have stayed fifteen years in the Army, or whether she should have taken an MBA. This pondering points to a desire to work overseas that is not yet satisfied, though at her speed of development, it should come soon. Priya knows that investing time and efforts in herself has paid off, and recommends that other exiting officers “leave their high horse behind”, focusing on reading and building information. “The more you know, the more you can engage in interesting conversations, wherever you are.”

Path of Glory

Tom Butler certainly received his education in institutions known for being the best, building his academic capacities before deciding to join the British Army. Having been in the military cadet corps at school, and undertaken obligations while at Cambridge University, Tom decided to follow his instincts on graduation, and not allow himself to be distracted to a corporate career, for which he was not yet ready. He “did not like the idea of spending his twenties behind a desk”, and sought the military alternative, a more outdoors life, as well as adventure and a chance to travel. He got this, and more.



Life as the commander of a unit of Gurkha Engineers in the New Territories of Hong Kong, before this regiment disappeared, was a series of substantial and fun challenges for Tom. He was soon to be married, and managed to balance his working life with his future wife’s,

The resilience he had developed in the Army was of great value, beyond his ability to manage a team under considerable levels of stress.

which was no mean feat, thousands of kilometres from their home. He felt inspired by the need to lead by example, having always enjoyed staying physically as well as mentally fit, using self-discipline as his devise. As a British subject by birth, with early life spent in Southern Africa, and a British schooling, Tom was already adept at handling linguistic and cultural differences. Clearly, the experience of commanding a number of Nepali soldiers while based in a Hong Kong that was shortly to be “returned” to China was a stretch of those skills, but a significant one in contributing to his abilities on leaving the forces.

When the Berlin wall came down in 1989, the UK government started to talk about “peace dividends” and cutting the Army’s budget. This led to extremely low morale, so much so that some training had to be curtailed. This was the point at which Tom decided to leave, knowing that he would feel increasingly frustrated at the situation, and that he had much to offer the corporate world, especially in terms of teamwork and man management, planning and executing projects, as well as self-discipline. At the time, there was very little support offered to a departing officer, and he took the risk on alone, as he resigned his commission before lining up a corporate alternative.

It was hard for Tom to accept that few, if any, companies he applied to would recognise his five years’ experience, and so he was forced to apply for graduate entry level jobs. He recognises that he might have avoided this fate if he had known more about networking, and how to use that to work his way into a higher level job, where his experience could be recognised. He may also have undersold himself. In the end, he joined Schlumberger, and while it was a “blue chip” company, he had entered at the same level as the fresh graduates with whom he joined the “boot camp”.

It was not difficult for Tom to succeed at Schlumberger, as he had so much more team and management experience than his peers. Less than 75% of those who had joined the boot camp actually passed the training, and Tom found that the resilience that he had developed in the Army was of great value, beyond his engineering skills, and ability to manage a team under considerable levels of stress. He told us that he “once worked for 36 hours straight without sleep, and the Army was good training for that!” Subsequent years have included the rite of passage through a business school MBA, so as to obtain an easier access to high level roles. This led to senior roles at the International Finance Corporation, and most recently as President and CEO of the International Council on Mining and Metals.



**Tom
Butler**

Tom has strong views on how things can be improved for those transitioning from a military to corporate life, while recognising that many companies and militaries are now taking proactive positions on the subject. He cites Goldman Sachs as innovators, as they run an interesting “internship” programme for veterans, which allows them some time to find a fit. He also recognises that if he had been leaving the Army today, rather than twenty years ago, he would have received much more support.

As for the initiatives that the individual can take, Tom talks much of networking and not underestimating your skills. Military life tends to encourage a humble attitude, in the best commanders, and this can be too prominent once a change is under way, hindering the kind of self-belief required to penetrate the bastions of corporate life. Building and nourishing a network of varied friends, contacts and acquaintances will be useful at any time, and should be encouraged.

George McDaniel is someone whose life is now dedicated to ensuring that this sort of transition be easily made by the individuals concerned, and valuable to the corporations who may welcome them to their world. He started a military career young, with, as he himself admits, the “clichéd” desire to get more experience and travel. He was looking for something that would offer him personal and professional challenges, while also providing a long term career and stability.

Behind Enemy Lines

He had a long and distinguished career in the Marine Corps, in which he saw action in some of the most intense battles of the late 20th century, as well as supporting and training his Marines who fought in the many intense battles in Iraq and Afghanistan during the last decade. His service and experiences include Intelligence, HR, Operations Management, training and talent development of all kinds, and George has become devoted to ensuring the best possible transition for former military staff into their new corporate lives. He has now founded Veteran Coaching LLC, in which he provides career transition coaching to veterans and employers of veterans alike.



Like many others, he decided to make his own exit once he had reached the pinnacle of success in his particular areas of expertise. With little left to develop, he was moved to retire and look for further challenges in the corporate world. Having planned and anticipated this transition, certainly aided by his experience in the HR and talent development field while “inside”, George did work hard on networking and gathering

6 Highly Desirable And Distinctive Transferable Skills From The Military

1. **Fearlessness** – “losing money versus life and limbs”
2. **Resilience** – “you can never feel as bad as when you lose a comrade, so it is easy to get back up and recover from the failure of a project or initiative”
3. **Character** – “it is easy to train up business skills, but impossible to train up character”
4. **Self-discipline** – “I survived remote, isolating and exhausting postings, by reminding myself of the value for my nation of this hardship”
5. **Cool** – “I managed this situation, by keeping my cool - just like I had in the midst of heavy combat”
6. **Caring** – “it is all ultimately about how you treat your people - and humility and empathy count above all”

information before he left the Marines, and although he did not actually have a career lined up before he exited, he had planned ahead financially, in order to be able to support himself during the transition. His take on the attitudes he encountered while seeking his next role is that he experienced reactions based on familiarity with the value of military experience, as well as total ignorance on this front. He believes that the key is to be able to tell and sell your story in terms that a potential employer will understand. It may be significant here that George left the military only in the last year, while our other subjects have been out a while. Times are changing, for sure.

In his work as a coach, consultant, speaker and veteran expert, George now advises corporations and individuals on how to maximise the positive impact of not only the transition, but also the future value that can be added to a corporation by integrating former military staff. His work is sometimes discreet, and other times highly visible.

He is notably working with the Macy’s Corporation in their Military Executive Development Program, allowing those privileged to be involved to develop understanding and complementary expertise,



**George
McDaniel**

so as to be able to contribute at a strategic level to the future value of the company. He believes that mentorship and continuous learning are the keys to future success, and recommends that every company have at least one person in their HR team that can not only understand the value of welcoming former military staff, but also be able to support and facilitate the necessary transition with empathy and vision.

It is comforting to see that steps are being taken both within companies and by consulting organisations to make more positive value out of this kind of transition. It is reassuring equally to know that military organisations worldwide are beginning to see the value of helping the “leavers” gently out, even if this seems still to be somewhat slow. What is more interesting, however, is that there is still such a way to go in terms of leveraging all this extraordinary and unusual talent, and that when this is achieved, more and more remarkable individuals will be contributing in their own way to the future success of a greater number of organisations.

Antoine Tirard is a talent management advisor and the founder of NexTalent. He is the former head of talent management of Novartis and LVMH. **Claire Lyell** is the founder of Culture Pearl and an expert in written communication across borders and languages.

7 Do's and Don'ts for the Former Military Officer

Do

- Prepare and educate yourself all through life - knowing that leaving military life is inevitable
- Network and connect with all kinds of people, learn something from anyone you meet
- Travel - explore the world via different angles and cultivate your cross-cultural sensitivities
- Leave the negative sides of military life behind
- Recognise that you have certain skills and attributes others will never have (decorations, etc.)
- Identify quickly what you need to learn for transition, and acquire it even more quickly
- Learn to tell your story in a resonant and relevant way

Don't

- Underestimate your skills and their transferability
- Come and tell your new colleagues about everything they are doing wrong!
- Wait for promotion - no more batch promotions!
- Expect the others to understand all you have done in the past
- Negotiate too hard on offers - just get started
- Focus too much on yourself - see things from the point of view of your potential employer
- Hesitate to ask for help, whether from friends, family, experts, coaches...

7 Do's and Don'ts for companies looking to recruit former military staff

Do

- Find the right person for the right job - if they have operations experience, put them in Ops!
- Value the leadership track record they have, however young they are
- Empower the new recruit to close the gaps in his or her knowledge – quickly!
- Take advantage of loyalty – this is innate
- Be flexible in the first few months: it can be a difficult transition
- Challenge your assumptions about the military when recruiting
- Remember business skills can be easily taught, while character cannot

Don't

- Be impatient about knowledge acquisition - a former officer learns faster than a fresh graduate
- Worry about losing them - turnover of ex-military staff is low
- Worry about focus and discipline
- Expect to lose them – leaders with military backgrounds have longer tenure
- Be surprised by excellence – a Korn/Ferry study showed that veteran CEO's deliver higher returns
- Hold back on giving opportunities to lead : men, projects, and so on
- Hesitate to support with education and stretch projects – complexity is high in business