



From combat to corporate -- and the new stigma blocking some veterans

By Bill Briggs, NBC News contributor

At job fairs this summer from Denver to Colorado Springs, retired Army sergeant Thomas Maretich always bumps into the usual suspects and an all-too-familiar gaze of frustration — as if he's staring into a mirror.

"I keep seeing the same people — mostly veterans — and I'm talking about captains, people with college degrees. They've been all over the world, have all kinds of experience. But it's just the same guys over and over," said Maretich, who in June earned a medical retirement from the Army.

"There are just a handful of jobs and thousands of veterans lined up for them. How are you supposed to get a job?" asked Maretich, a Colorado Springs resident with more than 20 years of Army experience. "Our veteran numbers are growing and jobs aren't growing fast enough to solve a real problem."
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Yet amid the listless hiring rates of a slack economy, men and women with combat experience are being purposely ignored by some employers who fear they may have the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, thus making them — in their view — risky candidates, said John E. Pickens III, executive director of VeteransPlus.

"While it's good that employers and general public understand (PTSD) issues, there may be some employers who know just enough to be reluctant, and who say: I want to hire this guy but I don't want this guy having his war experiences affect his work," Pickens said. His nonprofit has offered financial counseling to more than 150,000 current and former service members.

"Some of the folks we talk to say they feel a little bit conspicuous. Employers are even reluctant to talk to them about their military experiences," added Pickens, a former combat medic. "While eventually transitioning (into corporate jobs), their co-workers become aware that this is a veteran, and the veteran feels scrutinized to the point where it's like: 'Are you OK?'"

Through his consultations with veterans over myriad money issues, Pickens said he has learned that some have opted not to seek treatment for PTSD symptoms at Veterans Affairs hospitals exactly because "they don't want to be labeled or stigmatized" in their civilian jobs — or while trying to land one.

"It's like nobody wants to hire anybody with PTSD," Maretich said. "It's ridiculous. The whole thing got a bad name."

On his final mission in Iraq on Aug. 27, 2009 — during his fourth tour in a war zone — sergeant first class Maretich was



stationed as the gunner atop an Army vehicle. A car approached, driven by “a kid,” he recalled. After Maretich determined the vehicle was an imminent threat, he shot and killed the driver, he said. The car, loaded with an estimated 500 pounds of explosives, nonetheless detonated, causing Maretich to suffer a traumatic brain injury, sleep problems, chronic back pain and a knee that required replacement.

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He also was diagnosed with PTSD — now, he believes, an unmentioned roadblock to his hopes for a corporate job due to its attached stigma.

The irony, he added, is that his duties in Iraq — including in operational intelligence and serving as a combat advisor to Iraqi soldiers — make him an ideal contender for a stateside job.

“I don’t think there is better job training anywhere,” he said. “I’m pretty sure that if I can get an Iraqi soldier to do what we’re training him to do — in a different language and a different culture — I can handle any kind of training job in America where the people speak the same language.”

Some companies, including New York-based financial giant Citi, have recognized that service members who have weathered combat carry unique talents into the boardroom. Last year, Citi hired 700 veterans and this year the company plans to hire at least 1,000 more, said Citi spokesman David Roskin.

Courtesy of Chris Perkins

Former U.S. Marine Chris Perkins has successfully moved from the lethal streets of Iraq to the fierce ways of Wall Street.

Former U.S. Marine Chris Perkins has maneuvered from lethal hot spots in Iraq to a high-pressure job on Wall Street. He exited the Marine Corps in 2006 and immediately recognized, he said, the same talents that fuel success in Manhattan’s hard-charging financial district are not dissimilar from the skills that helped Perkins thrive while serving in Ar Ramadi, the capital of the Al Anbar Province.

“My job over there was to make very timely and accurate, quantitative decisions with the understanding of risk and risk managements,” said Perkins, now managing director and global head of OTC derivatives intermediation and clearing for Citi. He recalled one frightening moment — delivering bicycles to an Iraqi school then being pinned down by insurgent gunfire five minutes later and about one block away.

Over time, 260 Marines were wounded within his battalion of 1,000 and 16 were killed in action.

Today, Perkins is an executive with Citi but also helping other veterans ease into the corporate workforce.

“When I was able to navigate into the financial services sector, I asked: ‘Hey, you guys are traders, right? Isn’t that what you’re



doing? Aren't you making quantitative decisions all day long while understanding the risks you are taking?'

"The successful traders said, 'Yes, that's exactly we're doing.' So I was able to transfer my skills into that job," said Perkins, who later founded the Citi Military Veterans Network and played a leading role in working with fellow veterans within the financial services industry to co-found Veterans on Wall Street.

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Veterans who apply for corporate gigs should carry not a stigma, Perkins said, but a stamp of approval: they're wired to work long hours with minimal sleep, start early, complete assigned tasks — all with a certain intensity and focus that only can be sharpened by battle experience.

But maybe too many hiring managers and human resources honchos "have just seen too many 'Rambo' movies," Maretich speculated. "Maybe they think we're all going to come back and not be productive.

"Believe me, man, if I could go out there and swing a hammer, I would. I can't anymore. The one thing I can do is work in a corporate environment," he added. "And the thing is, I've been really training to do that for years.

"In the civilian world, it's not life and death. You're not working 12 hours a day 7 days a week. You're not worried whether your next decision is going to get everybody killed when they go out there. The corporate world would actually be a lot easier."