



Veterans are transitioning from combat to the classroom thanks to one apartment maintenance program in Philadelphia.

BY LAUREN BOSTON

Forward March



In an old Philadelphia classroom, 22 guys sat around sharing war stories. Some from the maintenance field, others from actual battle zones.

The men—a mix of maintenance technicians and veterans—gathered as part of a pilot Certified Apartment Maintenance Technician (CAMT) program at The Philadelphia Veterans Multi-Service & Education Center (PVMSEC). Organized by the Apartment Association of Greater Philadelphia (AAGP), the purpose of the two-week program was to provide deserving veterans with complimentary CAMT training, culminating in a job fair on the final day.

Eight of the program participants were current maintenance technicians who served as a sounding board for veterans who wanted to learn more about maintenance careers.

“It was a good experience, and nice to see the veterans asking us questions about our daily life in apartment maintenance, what our companies expect from us and our maintenance ‘war stories,’” says maintenance technician and program participant Bob Giagliardi, who works for Philadelphia’s Campus Apartments.

“In return, we’ve been asking the veterans about their actual war stories.”

On their part, the 11 veterans took advantage of an opportunity they couldn’t pass up.

“I know how to do a lot of things, but without the paper, you can’t prove it,” says Gordon Zimmitt, an Army, Navy and National Guard veteran with some prior experience in building maintenance. “This is the first time I ever got a certificate.”

New Vision for Veterans

Last April, Maureen Lambe, CAE, and Sarah Levine, NAAEI Executive Vice President and Director of Apartment Career Outreach, respectively, toured PVMSEC with AAGP Executive Director Pam Bennett, CAE, CAM.

After meeting with PVMSEC’s staff, Bennett says the center seemed like the perfect place to host a CAMT program. NAA agreed to sell the CAMT materials at cost for the pilot program, and Bennett emailed her regular course trainers to see if any were willing to teach the class free of charge.

“Everyone got back to me within days—and no one turned me down,” Bennett says.

Although many initial steps were quickly put in place, PVMSEC wouldn’t know until June whether it had received a grant to fund the rest of the program.

Fortunately, Bennett says she received a phone call a few weeks later that eased any financial concerns. New AAGP Board Member Gary Holloway, CEO of GMH Capital Partners, was interested in sponsoring an association activity. After speaking with Bennett, he enthusiastically agreed to pay for the program’s books, as well as meals for its participants.

After agreeing on a maximum class size of 25, Bennett gave PVMSEC a checklist of traits and skills several AAGP Board Members said they seek when hiring a new maintenance technician. PVMSEC agreed to screen its pool of veterans based on that criteria, also administering background checks and drug testing, to secure 14 qualified veterans.

To round out the class, Bennett also



reached out to her

AAGP membership to identify eight program candidates who worked full-time within the industry.

“It’s difficult to have a working technician off property for two full weeks, but several owners stepped up and agreed,” Bennett says.

From there, AAGP’s new Education Director, Judy Watman, stepped in to run the program. Watman contacted several apartment management companies, five of which agreed to interview the veterans on the final day of the program to fill open positions.

Street Smart

Parrin Terry was deployed in Iraq for 15 months, refueling and repairing combat vehicles. When the 28-year-old came home at the end of 2008 and left the military soon thereafter, he had a career’s worth of work still ahead of him.

He eventually got a job as a plumber with the Philadelphia Housing Authority, but was laid off in April. Unemployed and living out of his truck, Terry—like many veterans—was desperate for work.

When a fellow veteran suggested he visit PVMSEC, Terry stopped by and was encouraged to participate in the CAMT program.

“The first step in breaking the cycle of homelessness is employment,” says Kent Milliken, Director of Economic Development for PVMSEC. “Landing a job with the caring companies that are supporting this program creates a dynamic that is a “win-win” for everyone. The companies in the apartment industry get a mature, hardworking, dedicated, professional employee who they can depend on and the veterans get to work for an employer that truly cares about their needs and well-being.”

Although the veterans were properly educated for a position in apartment maintenance, many didn’t have the appropriate clothing to go on a job



CAMT

**CERTIFICATE FOR APARTMENT
MAINTENANCE TECHNICIANS** 

interview. Watman reached out to her synagogue for donations and collected a car full of suits, jackets, ties, belts, shirts and shoes for the veterans, who chose clothes to wear for their interviews.

Now dressed for the part, the veterans participated in mock interviews on the morning of the career fair.

“These are the most humble people walking this Earth, but that means that they aren’t always the best at selling themselves,” Milliken says. “Often, because they are used to being part of a team, they are apprehensive about sharing their positive skills and experiences.” With a little coaching, the interview training paid off.

Renee Martini-Calabrese, Director of HR for veteran-owned and operated Scully Company, attended the career fair with a coworker in the hopes of recruiting three maintenance technicians. She says she was very impressed with the pool of candidates.

“These students know how to follow instructions, they were trained to appreciate structure and they have a great sense of commitment, which is particularly important to my company,” Martini-Calabrese says. “They are looking for a future, and we’d love to give it to them.”

Scully Company did give a future to one candidate—Terry.

“[Terry] was amiable, articulate and engaging, and impressed us with his ability to handle emergencies and stressful situations by sharing some of the issues he had encountered while previously working for the Philadelphia Housing Authority,” says Christy Metz, Director of Sales and Marketing for Scully Company, which hosts an annual 5K charity run in support of returning veterans. “His mechanical experience in Iraq also was a good fit with the mechanical work he’d be doing as a maintenance technician with Scully.”

Terry, who now floats between two of Scully’s Glenside, Pa., communities, says he possessed the characteristics employers look for—he just needed to hone his craft.

FYI For more on NAAEI’s Military Career Fair, check out “Military Career Fair Introduces Veterans to Apartment Industry” on pg. 70 of the August issue of *units* Magazine.

From Combat to Corner Office

Many multifamily housing professionals served our country long before they served our industry.

units Magazine spoke with one such veteran, Greg Lozinak, Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer of Chicago-based Waterton Residential, about his former military experience and passion for hiring fellow servicemen.

units: How did your military background prepare you for a career in the apartment industry?

Lozinak: Three areas have transferred well from my time in the Army to my current career.

The first is leadership. My first job in the Army was as an infantry rifle platoon leader in the United States. At 22 years of age, I was responsible for an approximately 30-soldier platoon. Nowhere in corporate America can you walk into your first job and be in charge of 30 or more people.



First Lieutenant Greg Lozinak, 2nd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, pictured in 1991

Secondly, the military instilled a great amount of discipline in me. This has helped me bring a disciplined approach to the apartment industry, whether in budgeting and forecasting, day-to-day operations or analyzing market conditions.

And, finally, with regard to analyzing markets or situations, one of my last jobs in the Army was being a battle captain in a brigade tactical operations center. In that role I received situation reports from units in the field and would have to develop an assessment and corresponding course of action for that situation. This has helped me analyze apartment

markets or situations without actually having to be on the ground in that market. This makes for a more timely response.

units: What do veterans bring to the industry?

Lozinak: Leadership, discipline and process orientation. And as an Army veteran, the friendly, inter-service banter and rivalries between me and the other veterans also make my day-to-day job more fun.

units: Are most of your veteran employees older, or just out of the military?

Lozinak: It’s a mix, though it’s trending more toward those who are just out of the military. Two former service members sit right outside of my office, and we have many at the site level as well.

units: What can our industry do to support these men and women?

Lozinak: Hire them! On the surface, you might not be able to identify transferable skills required for a sales or maintenance position, but you can’t beat the leadership and discipline that they already possess. These veterans are very bright people; we can train them to do anything.

On behalf of units Magazine and National Apartment Association, we’d like to thank all of our members who have served our country, as well as those who support today’s military.

Military Man's Best Friend

Veteran James Cook's family—service dog included—moved to Hawaii to start a new life in the apartment industry.



James Cook is used to roadblocks. The former U.S. Marine served on the front lines in Afghanistan, during which time he lost four unit members, had an IED explode underneath his combat vehicle and stood patrol in an exposed area during a Taliban ambush—an act one of his unit mates called “the damned gutsiest thing I’d ever seen someone do—he saved our tails that day.”

Cook served until 2010, when he moved to San Diego and began taking college classes. Eventually, the stress of school and re-assimilating as a civilian heightened his Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and Cook was matched with a service dog.

“I received a 2-month-old German Shepherd, Ayra, who has since changed my life in the most amazing ways,” Cook says. “She has allowed me to participate in things that I had previously enjoyed, and to spend more time with my wife in public without looking over my shoulder every few minutes.”

With Ayra at his side, Cook was ready to work again. But he didn’t just want a job—he was looking for a career opportunity in an industry where lifetime advancement and employment were possible.

“While Ayra was a life-saver in helping me re-adjust to life back home, she was not as helpful as I tried to enter the working world,” Cook says. “Many of the avenues that I was interested in pursuing were now closed off to me because of her. I had sworn I would never have a desk job, but that seemed like the only option.”

However, Cook soon found that his military experience as an infantryman did not transfer well in an office environment. He says he was turned away from jobs he knew he could do in his sleep because of a lack of job experience.

Then Cook caught a break. In June he attended NAAEI’s Military Career Fair in San Diego, where Winn Military Housing offered him a position in Hawaii on the spot. When the company heard that his wife, Stephanie, would also need work, Winn offered her a job as a Leasing Agent.

“I wish you could have seen the look of shock on my face,” Cook says. “After all the let-downs and failed call-backs,

someone wanted to hire me—and my wife!”

The Cooks were thrilled with the offer, but encountered yet another challenge—Hawaii’s strict animal quarantine laws would make it impossible for James to bring his service dog, Ayra, to Hawaii for the first 120 days.

“For my son-in-law, that would be tantamount to telling someone they had to give up their wheelchair for four months—it’s a deal breaker,” says Stephanie’s father, Kurt Sullivan, Vice President of Property Management for Douglas Allred Company.

Sullivan and his family contacted everyone from Hawaii’s quarantine officials to state legislators and other apartment industry professionals who were familiar with military housing. But it wasn’t until Sullivan asked himself who he wouldn’t want to hear from if he were on the other side of the equation that he finally found the right party—Hawaii’s Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) advocacy office.

The advocacy office contacted Hawaii quarantine officials, who agreed to abide by federal ADA law and admitted Ayra without any period of quarantine.

Today, the Cooks work one mile apart from each other on the island of Oahu—James as a Resident Service Coordinator and Stephanie as a Leasing Agent at Island Palm Communities military housing. They both plan to make careers in the apartment industry.

“We are so grateful that someone took a chance on us at the job fair,” Cook says. “Coming out of the military is a hard thing to cope with and I’ve been more fortunate than most in being exposed to people who are willing to open doors for me.”

Tom Adams, Director of Property Management for Island Palm Communities, says the Cooks are the perfect addition to the company.

“Our team really enjoys Stephanie and James’ positive energy and Aloha Spirit,” says Adams, a fellow veteran who understands the stress of transitioning back into civilian life. “Ayra is very happy in her new home and is seen as another member of the team. We’re just happy to provide this family with the opportunity for a long-lasting career.” —L.B.



James and Stephanie Cook with Ayra

“Veterans are disciplined and know how to execute the tasks that are given to them—it’s what the military is known for,” says the maintenance technician. “This program was great because it gave me more insight into the industry and broadened my skills. I only wish it could be longer.”

Other companies were equally pleased with the talent. Representatives from The Bozzuto Group, a veteran-owned and operated company, sent several names forward to its Talent Acquisition Department to keep on file as future employment opportunities arise.

“I come from a military family, and am always humbled in the presence of veterans,” says Keya Epps, a Bozzuto Property Manager who attended the career fair. “During my last interview, the candidate said, ‘Do you know why you’re here today?’ I told him that I was there not because my boss called me and asked me to go, but because it’s the spirit and culture of our company. We consider it an honor to employ those who have served our country.”

Serving Those Who’ve Served

For veterans such as Zimmitt, the pilot program has given them the opportunity and drive to further their industry education.

“These are the most humble people walking this Earth, but that means that they aren’t always the best at selling themselves.”

—Kent Milliken
PVMSEC

“I couldn’t have asked for better instructors—these guys know their stuff,” says Zimmitt, who hopes to become a building superintendent. “Everything covered in this program is going to help me get to the next step, and hopefully I can do the right thing with the opportunity.”

Although Milliken says some aspects of the program need improvement—such as screening the veterans more thoroughly up-front to ensure greater success at the back-end—he believes the overall effort was a success.

“It’s rare to find a partner like AAGP who is as supportive and enthusiastic about the servicemen as we are,” he says. “These veterans may not have the experience, but they have the skill set. It’s wonderful to offer an opportunity like this to people who deserve nothing less.”

Bennett agrees, and says she hopes to host the program at least once a year.

“I have to believe there are similar organizations across the country and other affiliates that can use our model,” she says. “The industry we serve needs maintenance technicians and it’s great to fill some of those spots with deserving and talented veterans.”

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