

## **Back in Blue - The Transition from Urban Combat to Urban Policing**

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According to research conducted by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), by the end of 2003, approximately 2% (over 11,300) of all full time sworn police officers had served or were preparing to serve in support of the Global War on Terror (2009). In the nine years since, it is estimated that the number has grown to upwards of 10%, and that is not including the number of officers who left active duty military, served in combat and then pursued a second career in law enforcement (Ritchie and Curran 2006). It is reasonable to assume that this could account for an additional 10% of all full-time sworn LEO's, throughout the United States. The pending withdrawal of troops from combat zones across the globe, the commitment to downsize the active duty force in all branches, and veteran hiring initiatives, make it likely that departments across the country will see a significant increase in the number of combat veteran applicants. The following article will address some of the challenges and benefits associated with hiring combat veterans as law enforcement officers and give a few suggestions on what departments can do to ensure effective, long-term (re) integration.

### **Challenges**

Wars are no longer fought force on force, with clearly defined battle lines. Instead, modern warfare is asymmetric; there are no battle lines, enemy combatants do not wear uniforms, nor do they have age or gender restrictions. Wars are no longer being fought in the middle of the desert; instead, they are being fought door-to-door in cities such as Baghdad and Fallujah, or in the mountains and small villages of Afghanistan. For the veteran officer or veteran recruit, it can be difficult to distinguish the urban battlefield from the urban policing environment. Regrettably, this is just one of a collection of potential challenges facing veterans when they return from deployment. As a result, the question of “how” to address these concerns becomes a much more complex and salient challenge for law enforcement agencies everywhere.

With the passing of several bills and a strong advocacy, program departments across the county are being encouraged to retain and hire veteran officers. This position however puts departments in a difficult position where they must balance the needs of the department with needs of the veteran officer. Many departments struggle with how best to assess, treat, and support veteran officers who sustained physical or psychological wounds as a part of their combat tour(s). This is further complicated by the necessity to maintain compliance with both the American with Disabilities Act (ADA) and The Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act of 1994 (USERRA). These Acts specifically mandate that returning service members are re-employed in the position that they would have attained had they not been absent for military service, with their seniority, status, and pay as well as other rights and benefits determined by their seniority. USERRA also requires that “reasonable effort” be made to refresh/retrain employees in an effort to assist them in re-qualifying for employment. It remains a bit unclear with regard to what this means for invisible wounds such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which has a prevalence rate of between 11-19% for returning

veterans (Hoge et al. 2006). In 2009, the IACP (who sponsors its own veteran hiring initiative), working in conjunction with Applied Research Associates, Inc., Klein Associates Division (ARA/KAD), acknowledged, "If untreated, invisible injuries can lead to an onslaught of problems including domestic violence, alcoholism, and even suicide. Rates of each run high among veterans compared to the civilian population. In addition to PTSD, several other behavioral issues are common, such as: Attendance problems/frequent use of sick leave, difficulty passing fitness-for-duty tests, inappropriate use of force, and Domestic disturbances/violence." It's essential that these needs be addressed in an effective and timely manner so they don't create further challenges—to the veteran, the agency, and the proficient delivery of police services (Webster, 2008). Suggestions on how departments can prepare help mitigate these challenges will be discussed later in this article.

### **Benefits**

The good news is that despite the challenges, combat veterans have developed many positive skills and abilities that readily transfer to urban policing. In an IACP (2009) survey, veteran officers found several aptitudes and attributes strengthened by their combat experience such as:

- Increased patriotism, for both nation and community
- More maturity
- Increased engagement in planning and preparedness activities
- Increased physical fitness level
- Superior firearms and tactical skills
- Improved decision making abilities and enhanced leadership skills
- Enhanced skill at assessing situations and reacting under stress
- Greater willingness to involve themselves in dangerous situations
- Enhanced threat assessment
- More experience interacting with diverse groups
- Greater discipline, ethical standards, and integrity

According to the IACP, "For many departments, training non-veteran officers to acquire these same skills sets would be cost and/or time prohibitive. Veterans enter or return to their departments as team-orientated professionals with these skills learned through their military experiences (2009)." In other words, combat experience lends itself to the development of the intangibles that are simultaneously immeasurable and essential to quality policing.

### **Recommendations**

While very little research is available on the topic, all of the available literature is consistent in their recommendations 1) Departments need to take a proactive approach to address these issues, and 2) Police agencies also need to consider the effects of combat zone deployment on new recruits.

At this point, 11 years since the War in Afghanistan began, only a few agencies have actively undertaken efforts to develop comprehensive programs designed to address the reintegration/integration of veteran officer/recruits. For successful psychological reintegration to occur a good reintegration program needs to begin during the pre-deployment phase and ends only after the officer has returned to duty for an extended period of time. With that said, there are a few things the department can do to facilitate the transition, this includes:

1. Establish pre-deployment policies that includes a scheduled meeting/training with psychological services or mental health EAP providers - this provides an opportunity for the officer to identify potential areas of concern (financial, family, etc) prior to the deployment
2. Establish policies pertaining to duties while on the job prior to deployment to alleviate concerns surrounding pending court dates, ongoing cases, etc.
3. Appoint a military liaison officer (MLO) who can work with the veteran throughout the deployment process – this allows for a single point of contact that can keep the veteran officer updated on things going on at the department as well as someone who can address any questions or concerns that might arise for the veteran officer
4. Put veteran officers and their families in contact with family support programs
5. Pair returning officers with a mentor (successfully reintegrated veteran officer) to receive policy and procedure updates and training introduced while they were away.
6. Integrate veteran officer specific training into current in-service curriculum
7. Ask the officer what they would like for a homecoming celebration
8. Have command staff formally celebrate the veteran officers service
9. Establish policies that require confidential meetings with psychological services or mental health EAP providers (Webster, 2008)

## **Conclusion**

Combat changes everyone, some changes are good, and some are not. We know that an “officers’ combat experiences can affect how they use their weapons, their adherence to use-of-force policies, how they drive their police vehicles, and how they treat citizens with whom they come into contact (Webster, 2008).” History teaches us that if handled appropriately combat veterans can make exceptional police officers. Departments everywhere are going to have to take the time and energy necessary to develop comprehensive veteran (re) integration programs. To help agencies the IACP has published two guidebooks (one for leaders and one for veterans) specifically designed to point departments in the right direction, with regard to program development. They are not an all-inclusive resource or model, but they provide a solid foundation for a successful veteran specific program. The guidebooks and other promotional materials can be downloaded at the following address:

<http://www.theiacp.org/PublicationsGuides/Projects/EmployingReturningCombatVeterans/tabid/494/Default.aspx>

## References

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