



Retired twelfth Sgt. Maj. of the Army Jack L. Tilley speaks during the 59th Ordnance Brigade Noncommissioned Officer Induction Ceremony Feb. 29, 2016, at Lee Theater, Fort Lee, Virginia. (U.S. Army photo by Terrace Bell)

NCO to CEO

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*"You can easily judge the character of a man by how he treats those who can do nothing for him."
—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*

When one thinks of “vetrepreneurs,” successful examples such as former Army ranger Matthew Griffin, the co-inventor of combat flip-flops, may come to mind. However, officers are not the only veterans creating companies. Army noncommissioned officers are leading in the business sector as well.

Twelfth Sgt. Maj. of the Army Jack L. Tilley

Retired Sgt. Maj. of the Army Jack L. Tilley is the founder of multiple organizations that honor, serve,

and support veterans, military service members, and their families through partnerships with military-focused organizations.¹

“Veterans perform with the same high degree of diligence and commitment they displayed in uniform,” Tilley said. “They take great pride in their work and the dignity that comes from having a meaningful job and providing for their families.”²

According to retired Sgt. Maj. Johnny Myers, one of Tilley’s committee members, NCOs provide camara-

derie and dependability to NCO-founded companies by maintaining discipline, ensuring property accountability, training subordinates, executing the mission, and ensuring the well-being of employees and their families.³

Sgt. 1st Class Ron Adams, Communications

After serving 24 years in the Army communications field, retired Sgt. 1st Class Ron Adams decided to purchase a franchise company that provides cabinet and wood floor renewal service.⁴

One of the qualities Adams attributes to his success is adaptability. The constant changes in the military taught him to adapt quickly, even as a civilian, and he encourages Soldiers to maintain the same mentality.⁵

Adams' additional advice to Soldiers is to remember their military occupational specialty is not the only thing they can do.

"Make sure you keep an open mind as far as what the next step will be," he said. "Because maybe you will step outside of your comfort zone and find something that you really love."⁶

While enlisted, Adams conducted a lot of planning, learned how to delegate tasks, and managed Soldiers with discipline issues, similar to the responsibilities of civilian business owners. When he opened his business in 2014, he felt his NCO experience had prepared him well.

Sgt. Andrew Wayne Couch, Infantry

As the CEO of a mobile application and software development company, former Sgt. Andrew Wayne Couch still utilizes the observation and problem-solving skills he learned in the Army. He said his experience as an NCO, and the opportunity to attend the Warrior Leader Course, helped him as a vetpreneur.

"What I came to learn in several advanced entrepreneurship sessions was helpful for the field I am working in, but in no way breeds advanced leaders with real-world experience like the Army does," Couch recalled. "That was around the time I knew I finally had an advantage and began to fall back on my NCO training and apply it as a team leader."⁷

According to Couch, the transition from NCO to CEO felt similar to rank promotion. He also noted many aspects of the business world, such as the application process for the entrepreneur sessions, felt similar to an E-4 readying a promotion board packet.

He suggests NCOs take online social media classes, brainstorm/receive feedback from "battle buddies," and attend shows or local networking events to pitch their ideas.⁸

Command Sgt. Maj. Daniel K. Elder

While he was a staff sergeant stationed in Fort Knox, Kentucky, retired Command Sgt. Maj. Daniel K. Elder

created a resume writing service and military-themed website for NCOs, which became the award-winning Battle Command Knowledge System NCO Net.⁹ In 2014, he formed a digital company focused on digital products and services.

To jumpstart his businesses, Elder attended conferences, sought mentors, and used federal, state, and community-based services. He advises NCOs to check the landscape, surround themselves with good people, and build a team of veterans whose business styles can help find a niche market or service to offer.

"Know your weaknesses and overcome them by getting better, or bring on some talent," he said, mentioning his mantra: "Seize opportunity."¹⁰ "When you see it, jump on it. You are not going to get the 'how-to' from the Small Business Administration on that. You need to be resourceful. That is what we do as NCOs and military families. We make stuff happen."¹¹

Staff Sgt. Larry Broughton

Former Staff Sergeant Larry Broughton, U.S. Army Special Forces, is the CEO and founder of a series of hotels and several programs which offer learning opportunities and in-depth mentoring for entrepreneurs.

Broughton said the transition from NCO to CEO was difficult, so he entered a mastermind program and sought the advice of more experienced business owners.¹²

Initially, he did not understand how valuable his NCO experiences were in the business world, so he turned away from them. However, he eventually realized his success came from his enlisted service.

"There is a huge leadership gap in business and, frankly, every segment of society that I think vets ought to be stepping into."¹³ Broughton said.

"As an NCO in the Special Forces, I learned about the importance, efficacy, and efficiency of high-performing teams, and making sure each team member uses their strengths. These are vital for hard-charging entrepreneurs too."¹⁴

He advises NCOs to embrace a continual spirit of learning and to see failures as learning opportunities. "Remember," Broughton said, "Tenacity eats talent for lunch." In other words, the road to success is littered with talented people who lack determination.¹⁵

Historical NCO to CEO Examples

Below are historical examples of successful and failed vetpreneurs whose connection to the business world may be a surprise.

Sgt. Maj. Edgar Allan Poe

The well-known poet and author, Edgar Allan Poe, enlisted in the Army on May 26, 1827. On January 1, 1829, only nineteen months into his enlistment and ten

days after his promotion to the highest enlisted rank of that time, Poe was promoted to regimental sergeant major.¹⁷

For the majority of his life, Poe aspired to start a journal. Unfortunately, this did not happen until after his death. He was, however, the owner of Broadway Journal, a newspaper company founded in 1844, which subsequently failed and closed in 1846.¹⁸

Staff Sgt. Malcolm Stevenson Forbes Sr.

Staff Sgt. Malcolm Stevenson Forbes Sr. was the son of Bertie Charles Forbes, founder of a well-known magazine company. His military career began in World War II as a private in the heavy machine gun section, 334th Infantry, 84th Infantry Division. His awards include the Bronze Star and Purple Heart.¹⁹

In 1954, Forbes became the CEO of a magazine company bearing his name and remained so until his death in 1990, at which time his son, Malcolm “Steve” Forbes Jr., took over. Considered one of the most famous names in the world of business, the elder Forbes developed the organization into a Fortune 500 company.²⁰

Conclusion

From franchises to multimillion-dollar corporations, NCOs are creating and leading companies that support fellow Soldiers. Their influence does not end outside of the Army. On the contrary, they continue to impact Soldiers and the Army as successful businesspersons in the civilian world. ■

Notes

1. Sgt. Maj. of the Army Jack L. Tilley. Interview with the author. December 04, 2017.

2. Tilley. Interview with the author.

3. Sgt. Maj. Johnny Meyers. Interview with the author. December 04, 2017.

4. Sgt. First Class Ron Adams, interview with Scott Fussell, The Command Your Business Podcast, podcast audio, April 22, 2014, <http://commandyourbusiness.com/2014/04/22/episode-36-ron-adams-from-u-s-army-drill-sergeant-to-franchise-owner/>.

5. Adams, podcast

6. Adams, podcast.

7. Sgt. Andrew Wayne Couch. Interview with the author. November 29, 2017.

8. Couch. Interview with the author.

9. Command Sgt. Maj. Dan K. Elder. Interview with the author. December 04, 2017.

10. Elder. Interview with the author.

11. Elder. Interview with the author

12. Larry Broughton. Interview with the author, December 07, 2017; Larry Broughton, interview with Scott Fussell, The

Command Your Business Podcast, podcast audio, May 03, 2016, <http://commandyourbusiness.com/2016/05/03/episode-96-larry-broughton-army-special-forces-running-hotel-empire/>.

13. Broughton, podcast,

14. Broughton. Interview with the author.

15. Broughton. Interview with the author.

16. Jeffrey Meyers, Edgar Allan Poe: His Life and Legacy (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 32.

17. “Chain of Command,” Michigan State University Civil War Leadership website, 15 April 2015, accessed 27 December 2017, <http://civil-war-officers.leadr.msu.edu/2015/04/15/chain-of-command-2/>; and Meyers, 37.

18. Dawn B. Sova, Edgar Allan Poe A to Z: The Essential Reference to His Life and Work (New York: Checkmark Books, 2001), 34.

19. “Famous Veterans: Malcolm Forbes,” Military.com website, accessed 29 November 2017, <http://www.military.com/veteran-jobs/career-advice/military-transition/famous-veteran-malcolm-forbes.html>

20. “Famous Veterans: Malcolm Forbes,” [Military.com](http://www.military.com).



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