

CONTRACT WORK

Defense companies provide an avenue for job-hunting veterans



SCOTT MCGILL

Lockheed Martin volunteers pose at Equest, a therapeutic horsemanship center in Dallas that works with veterans. Supporting U.S. veterans in transition is a top priority for the company.

By Ann C. Logue

IN FISCAL YEAR 2015, the Department of Defense awarded contracts worth \$202.3 billion through Oct. 22 to civilian companies working on 1.5 million different projects providing everything from fixed-wing aircraft to parking facilities. Those expenditures created jobs for people all over the country — and more than a few of those workers were veterans.

The largest of the defense contractors is Lockheed Martin Corporation, which hires a good number of veterans, said Teri Matzkin, the company's manager of strategic sourcing and military relations. Between 34 percent and 39 percent of the company's external hires in each of the last five years have been veterans.

"They come in with an understanding of our customer and our mission," she said. And as an added advantage, former military

personnel have often worked with the company's products during their service, so they understand how the equipment works better than anyone.

Holding a defense contractor job isn't quite like serving in the military, but it can be a bit closer to military life than a similar job that deals only with civilian clients. For instance, military experience may translate directly to a defense contractor in a way that it wouldn't with a civilians-only job. This makes it easier for a service member who has technical or operational experience with a particular piece of equipment to approach its manufacturer for a job after leaving the service.

Orion International of Cary, N.C., is a recruiting firm that works with veterans. Many of the employers that the company represents are defense contractors, and Mike Starich, the company's CEO, a Marine Corps veteran and former Marine recruiter,

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said these jobs are often a good fit for veterans.

"If you go from active duty to a defense contractor position, it's usually a smooth transition," he said.

Starich said contractors have a particular demand right now for people who have security clearances and understand information technology, but those in mechanical military occupations can find work, too. Matzkin noted that veterans often also have good "soft" skills because of military leadership training, teamwork and

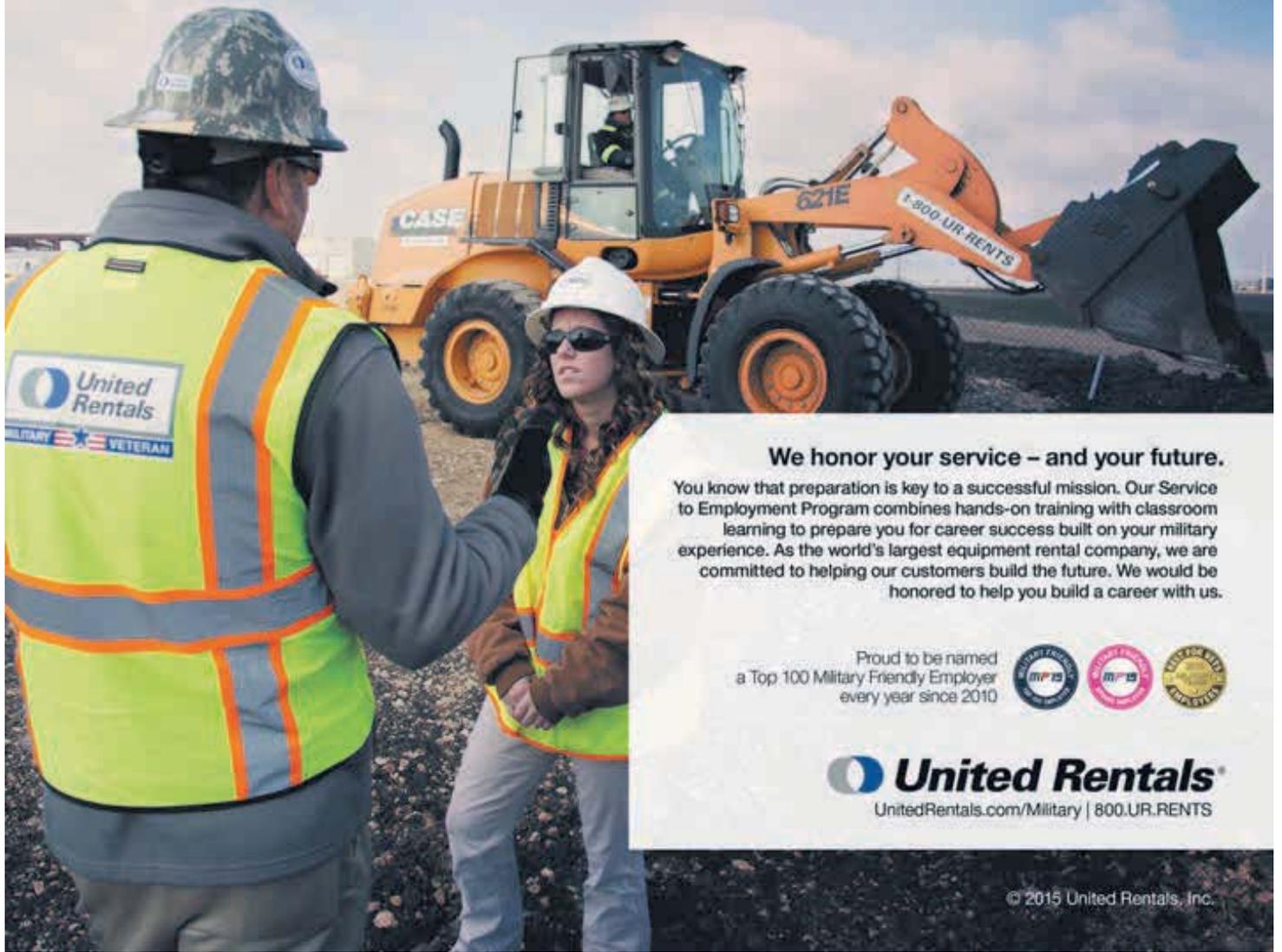
experience working under pressure.

Still, some find that a civilian job creates a less tight-knit community than the military, without the element of mission. Matzkin noted that veterans accepting management positions are sometimes thrown off by such variables as virtual workplaces and flexible hours — widely accepted in the civilian world but completely unlike the way things work in the military.

Other veterans, however, are thrilled

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Vearl Williams, a senior partner at Orion International, prepares candidates at Fort Hood in Texas for job interviews.

about the opportunities these policies create.

Some jobs can be found through recruiters or at job fairs, but others can be uncovered through networking in the target industry or community. One organization that focuses on the industry is the Charleston Defense Contractors Association, which represents 250 companies with defense contracts in the Charleston, S.C., area.

"By the nature of our membership, a lot of our members end up hiring veterans," said Beth Robertson, a CDCA board member and owner of Liberty Business Associates LLC, a provider of systems engineering and related services. "We love to hire veterans. They're very well-suited to what we do."

The presence of an active defense industry in an area such as Charleston indicates that contractor jobs are available in many regions, not only in the traditional contractor hotbed of Washington, D.C. Although most contractors are located near major military installations, they can be found almost

everywhere, so service members who are leaving the military may want to ask about those possibilities during transition.

"Many of the companies that have a presence in Charleston have a presence in other places as well," Robertson said.

The CDCA doesn't have a job fair or placement program, but it offers a quarterly luncheon, an annual conference and volunteer opportunities that a job hunter can use to meet prospective employers and learn more about the job opportunities available.

"Our board of directors is comprised strictly of volunteers," said Josh Hatter, CDCA vice president. "We welcome people to volunteer."

Networking is a key way to find jobs, but it is only one step — and

perhaps one taken too much to heart by veterans — in the process. Matzkin said that no matter how a veteran finds out about a job opening, he or she still has to fill out an online job application, something those new to the civilian workforce and who believe strongly in networking don't

Contractors have a particular demand right now for people who have security clearances and understand information technology, but those with mechanical experience can find good work as well.



Lockheed Martin employees meet with job-seeking veterans at a recent military career fair in Baltimore. The company's military relations managers meet with more than 10,000 transitioning military personnel and veterans each year.

understand is a requirement. Government contractors must report on a variety of specific criteria, and the application form is how this information is collected. If there's no application, there's no job offer, no matter who in the firm recommends the potential hire. Lockheed Martin and companies of similar size are too large to allow for loopholes, and many smaller firms can't accommodate them, either.

"Everybody these days has to apply through the website," Matzkin said.

Another key consideration is the vagaries of the contracting cycle, which is on a different rhythm not only from military work, but from many civilian jobs as well.

"Jobs are stable only for the life of the contract," Starich said. If the employer loses the contract, then everyone who worked on it may be let go. That's standard in the industry, he said.

In addition, the contract cycle means that service members may not be able to line up a job six months in advance, before they transition to the civilian world.

Contractors won't hire until they know there is work that the government will pay for.

"We especially look for people who will be available in the next 30 to 60 days," Matzkin said; the company doesn't want to hire people until it can incorporate them into project plans. A service member who starts looking for a job far in advance of the discharge date may be frustrated, she said, "but the wait is standard."

And, while plenty of civilian companies need information technology expertise, the demand for test pilots and weapons engineers outside of defense contracting is limited. Starich said veterans should consider a range of employers. Most of Orion International's veteran placements are outside of the defense industry.

Still, he said, the defense industry is a great option for many of the veterans he works with.

"Almost any hard skill gained on active duty can be applied to contracting," he said. ●

