

Why transportation companies want vets

'Tough industry' needs round-the-clock discipline and resourcefulness

BY ADAM STONE - SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

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When you hear that lonesome whistle blow ... it may be calling for you.

Major rail and trucking companies such as Union Pacific, Kansas City Southern and Con-way Freight spend significant chunks of their recruiting budgets on military veterans and exchange handshakes, résumés and tchotchkes at dozens of military career fairs every year.

In fact, transportation is one of the five hottest industries recruiting veterans right now, said Tim Isacco, vice president of sales at the military placement company Orion International. In addition to the freight and trucking stalwarts, Isacco said he expects more transportation companies to pick up their military hiring this year.

Why all the focus on veterans? Certainly there is some overlap in specific skills; these companies need technicians and logistics experts, and the military is a good place to find them.

But they also need a certain kind of person — someone who enjoys the challenge of a tough industry that goes full steam ahead, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Veterans who liked the rush of military operations tend to thrive in these jobs, said Dave Ebbrecht, executive vice president of operations at the Kansas City Southern railway company.

“People who are expecting to come out of the military and have a 9-to-5 job in more of an admin environment ... would not be a good fit for the railroad,” said Ebbrecht, a former Army captain. “It never stops.”

Who they hire

Eloy Sanchez clearly was a good fit. The former military policeman left the Army in 1996 as a specialist, joined the railroad the next year and has climbed steadily ever since. He started out in the train service — the boots on the ground that keep things moving — first as a conductor and then as a locomotive engineer. A conductor coordinates the safe movement and loading of a train; the engineer actually drives it. Railway companies provide extensive on-the-job training for both jobs.

Sanchez was promoted into a management track at KCS in 2003 and now oversees a terminal in Kansas City, Mo., directing inbound trains and building outbound trains.

“I guess it’s safe to say I went from green to gold,” he said.

Transportation companies hire throughout the ranks, said Isacco, an Army vet himself. Enlisted technicians are prized for their skills in the craft trades. Junior noncommissioned officers are sometimes

tapped, like Sanchez was, for entry-level leadership positions; senior NCOs and junior officers are much sought after to manage operations.

Kansas City Southern recruits veterans in all fields — not just transportation and logistics — for those positions. The idea that transportation companies are looking only in specific branches is erroneous, Ebbrecht said.

“Actually, the people that seem to fit in best are operations-type managers, because of the high attention to detail and the variability that exists in the day-to-day operations,” Ebbrecht said. “Whether you’re infantry, whether you’re field artillery, whether you’re aviation, quartermaster corps — doesn’t matter, the group of people who serve in the operations type of fields, where they do a lot of planning and coordination and execution, seem to work out the best.”

Six qualities they look for

The industry and the military track closely in several areas, and you’d do well to demonstrate and emphasize them in your résumé and interview.

- **Discipline and work ethic:** As in the military, the work is hard, and the conditions are not always cushy.

“The rail industry is a tough industry,” Isacco said. “You might have to be out in the railyard when it’s snowing at night, or when it’s raining at night, because the rail runs 24/7, just like the military.”

Sanchez said his military service in places such as Fort Carson, Colo., and Soto Cano Air Base, Honduras, helped harden him for working outside in the sweltering heat of a Texas summer and the biting cold of a Missouri winter.

- **Attention to detail:** “The safety of the operation requires a lot of attention to detail,” Sanchez said. As a conductor, he was constantly reviewing operating rules and train documents, checking protective equipment and attending safety briefings. Just as in the military, “a lot of pre-trip planning and inspections ... have to take place,” he said.

- **Communication:** The constant movement of stuff requires a constant movement of information, too.

“A lot of information has to be channeled between crews and also channeled up toward management through the chain of command,” Sanchez said.

That’s one reason Natasha Richardson, a former Marine Corps intelligence specialist, was able to land a job as an engineering associate at Union Pacific Railroad Co. in 2010. (The engineering degree she earned after separating in 2002 helped, too.) Richardson now helps direct the movements of 3,000 rail cars a day in the company’s San Antonio rail yard.

As intelligence specialists, “we didn’t transport goods to locations, but we definitely transported information,” she said. “I had to make sure I knew where the enemy was, what he had and how it could affect us, so that others could plan their routes.”

- **Organization:** This is an industry with a lot of moving parts — literally. The ability to plan and coordinate is key to many jobs.

“There is so much going on around you at any given time,” Richardson said. “And you still need to keep track of what has already been done, how we can get these things done, and how we can make sure they get done not just effectively but safely.”

- **Flexibility and resourcefulness:** Trains and trucks are always on the move, and the variables that affect them never stop cropping up.

Former Army Capt. Kelly King revels in that variability. As director of international rail operations support for Kansas City Southern, she deals with customer service situations and U.S. Customs and Border Protection issues (KCS’s rail lines cross the U.S.-Mexico border).

“On any given day, I can’t tell what I’m going to be doing,” she said. “It’s a great thing. I enjoy that.”

- **Leadership:** “At the bottom line, we’re all about execution to plan, and it involves a lot of human behavior. Leadership is at the base of getting all that accomplished,” Ebbrecht said.

Transportation companies that make a point of recruiting veterans understand better than some what your leadership experience entails.

“If you take a sergeant or a staff sergeant, I already know that person has managed anywhere from nine to 33 people. At a terminal our size, that speaks volumes,” said Duke Ellington, a personnel supervisor at Con-way Freight, where about 9 percent of the 21,000 employees report having military experience.

One more quality where transportation runs parallel to military service: a tight-knit culture.

“I’ve been able to get out in the field and meet conductors, engineers,” said King, who started at Kansas City Southern in December. “It’s funny, when they ask me how long I’ve been in the industry — anything less than 10 years, you’re still young.

“[They’re] kind of the equivalent of an NCO in the military. You have to learn from everybody involved.”

Jobs and pay

Bureau of Labor Statistics expects employment in most railroad transportation occupations and among truck drivers and driver/sales workers to grow 9 percent from 2008 to 2018, which would match the expected average growth rate for all occupations.

Pay in the industry can be based on hours worked or miles traveled, and also varies by seniority, job assignment and location. The median hourly wages for some occupations, as of May 2008, are below.

- Heavy truck and tractor-trailer drivers: \$17.92
- Subway and streetcar operators: \$25.59
- Railroad conductors and yardmasters: \$25.40

- Railroad brake, signal and switch operators: \$22.94
- Locomotive engineers and operators: \$22.54
- Rail transportation workers, all other: \$21.12

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Outlook Handbook 2010-2011

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