



Take Your Pick: Defense Jobs On The Rise

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Police work wasn't Robert Cooper's dream job, and it certainly didn't fall into his comfort zone, either. But Cooper also wasn't ready for a headlong plunge into sedentary cubicle work, having served 21 years in the Marine Corps.

Cooper retired from the Marines in 2001 as a first sergeant. He found a highly-desirable paramilitary culture, with plenty of opportunities for career advancement, at G4S Wackenhut in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla. The security services firm is a subsidiary of Group 4 Securicor (G4S) and protects a variety of governmental sites, in addition to commercial and industrial organizations.

His leadership skills acquired in the military eventually propelled him to operations manager in Miami, even without a degree in business management. Companies like G4S Wackenhut, which provide management training in addition to security experience, are ideal for former combat Soldiers, Cooper said.

Better yet, he's back in his comfort zone and happy about his future.

"You want to jump into something you can easily transition into from military life – something that can be used as a stepping stone," Cooper said. "While you're doing that, you can be pursuing other career opportunities, like going to school for a degree. If you go from 24/7 in military service to working someplace in an administrative office, you'll get culture shock."

Plentiful Positions, Small Job Pool

If anything, now is the time to look for jobs in defense and security – an industry that covers a wide swath of opportunities from security detail, to contract writing, to information technology, to engineering and upper management. An annual survey by ClearanceJobs.com (released in March 2008) found the defense industry is growing. Evan Lesser, co-founder and director of ClearanceJobs.com, states that his business matches those with active or current security clearances with top industry employers. Seventy-five percent of the candidates using the free service are military.

"The job pool is shrinking, and open positions are more plentiful than the number of candidates," Lesser said. "IT (Information Technology) dominates the postings, but it's also important to note there are plenty of opportunities in a huge range of positions. It's amazing how many are out there: intelligence, linguists, security experts and people with subject-matter expertise on all things military."

Defense and security companies agree that they need quality candidates to fill the expanding opportunities. As a result, veterans are highly desired. That's the case for Lockheed Martin in Bethesda, Md., the largest provider of IT services, systems integration and training to the government. Spokesman Scott Lusk notes that veterans have "knowledge of our customer set. A lot of times, they understand the end users of the programs and certainly how important those programs are." Eighty-five percent of Lockheed Martin's positions require IT and engineering skills, combined with communication and leadership abilities.

G4S Wackenhut has such high regard of veterans that it created the Custom Protection Officer® program where military's elite Special Forces, Navy SEAL and Delta Force veterans are recruited, trained and showcased as "a top protection service to clients," states Eddy Esquivel, general manager for the Miami operations. Those with a combat MOS or experience in law enforcement or corrections are also eligible.

Brian Reynolds, recruitment manager for G4S Wackenhut and a former Marine, states that 14 percent of the corporation's 50,000 employees are veterans, and in their 700 strong Miami office, 50 percent are veterans. The American Legion awarded the corporation "Veterans' Employer of the Year" for the state of Florida in 2007.

The U.S. Customs and Border Protection (also known as the U.S. Border Patrol) is also recruiting, according to spokesman Randy Renn. In 2008, the agency wants to hire more than 4,800 new border patrol agents – nearly one quarter are expected to be military.

The traditional mission of the patrol has been to prevent illegal aliens and drugs from entering the country. But since 9/11, agents have also been tasked with stopping terrorists. They patrol 24/7, using everything from ATVs, airplanes, and horses.

"Military veterans are used to working in all types of terrain and weather. Just like the Border Patrol, they are expected to be ready to deploy to any emergency at a moment's notice. It should be an easy transition from the military to the Border Patrol Agent career," Renn said.

Needed: Tech and Muscle

Whether you're in the infantry or intelligence, there's probably a job waiting for you in the defense or security industries. IT and engineering positions are the top-paying positions, and IT jobs dominate the postings according to Lesser. He adds that service members should keep their minds open when it comes to "defense."

"People usually think of defense as one type of thing," said Lesser, "but it's wide-ranging: heating and air conditioning repair, training Iraqi police officers, we even have an open job for a cook on Air Force One. Even though IT and engineering are dominant (electrical and systems engineering are the two big engineering fields), there are so many government contracts out there that require new talent."

Lesser advises that IT certifications puts you ahead of the competition. Signing up for an IT "boot camp" is a good option. These programs provide rigorous multi-week 10-hour-per-day

training. Although such boot camps aren't free, Lesser pledges the cost is worth the advantage you'll win over other job seekers.

He also advises that if you don't have a job that requires a security clearance, talk to your commanding officer. Volunteer for any job that requires a clearance.

"It takes a long time for people in the military to receive it, and we tell them to start early. Since 9/11, a lot of jobs that didn't require one now do. Past jobs are being classified as top secret. An active clearance is important," Lesser said.

Contractors are also looking for people who are well-versed in government-mandated areas, like those who know how to do certain procurement work. "There are standards that they want people to follow, so people trained and certified in those standards are in demand," Lesser said.

Employers say they can offer veterans the same type of career excitement they had in the military. The technical people hired by Lockheed will find a challenging work environment, Lusk said. "People here will work on exciting programs and projects of national significance. We're a company driven by ethical behavior and integrity, as well as a diverse workforce. People with a lot of leadership and communication skills find a good home here."

If you want to get a strong sense of what it's like to work at Lockheed Martin, you can chat online with current employees and recruiters, Lusk adds. Chat sessions are scheduled three to four times a month for former military, on an East Coast time schedule at www.lockheedmartin.com/careers.

"The online chats are fantastic. No matter where you're located, you can find someone there. You can be on there with people going through the same thing and with recruiters specifically trained to understand the roles of transitioning military," Lusk said.

Meanwhile, those with a combat or law enforcement background can literally be on the front lines. V. Gregory Mish, who served in the Marines from 1973 to 1977, is now Assistant Chief Patrol Agent for the Border Patrol in Buffalo, N.Y. This year he returned from a six-month deployment as a border patrol agent trainer in Iraq. His son, Eric, served his fourth tour there with the Marines while Gregory was there. Now that Eric has separated from the Marines, his father is trying to recruit him into the Border Patrol.

"I call it the 'Homeland Security Industry' more than defense. If you like a challenging job and want to continue serving the country and being 24/7 outdoors, this is it," Mish said. "Your office is a car, and you're out there. You may also be on a snowmobile, an ATV, a motorcycle, a horse, whatever the environment demands."

Like Cooper, Mish believes the paramilitary culture of the Border Patrol makes for an easy transition. But unlike when he got out of the Marines in the '70s (when there was a waiting list for applicants who wanted jobs) the agency is anxious for new recruits. Entry-level agents are "tip-of-the-spear and boots-on-the-ground" patrollers, according to Mish. Everyone starts out on the Southwest U.S. border, but after three or four years, they may apply for other areas of the

country, as well as for advancement. Leadership abilities, Mish notes, “become visible in our society early on,” and those who demonstrate them will easily build seniority.

Likewise, G4S Wackenhut grooms its Custom Protection Officers for upper management and senior-level positions, according to Esquivel. Cooper started in the CPO position and has moved up to management within seven years of joining the company. Cooper notes that he’s appreciated training opportunities, such as a two-month course at Quantico, “which helped me tremendously to move up in the company.”

Overall, Mish has enjoyed his 26 years in the Border Patrol. “If I didn’t like it, I wouldn’t still be here. It’s been a good run. My whole career has been in the federal government,” Mish said. “I’m trying to coach my son into it the same way. We need more people in the society who want to serve. It’s a great country we have.”

Jobs Available in Contracting and Acquisition Field

Government agencies and private companies require materials to run their daily operations effectively and efficiently. When those goods are bought and sold, there needs to be knowledgeable purchasing agents who understand all facets of government contracting and acquisitions.

Bellevue University offers online learning opportunities that assist federal employees and acquisition practitioners in developing the skills of contracting professionals. A fully accredited university, Bellevue University developed the program with support from the Federal Acquisition Institute (FAI) and the Defense Acquisition University (DAU).

The university is meeting the growing need for contracting professionals. The Army has indicated that it hopes to hire 1,300 new civilian employees over the next three years to oversee more than \$80 billion in contracts. More than 40 percent of the current contract professionals in the Army will be eligible for retirement by 2013.

The university’s programs include the Master of Science in Acquisition and Contract Management, and an MBA with a concentration in Acquisition and Contract Management. Level II Certification counts as credit toward these master’s degrees. These programs are designed to give new job candidates (and current employees) an advantage amongst their peers by elevating the knowledge, skills and abilities level of those interested in a career in government acquisitions.