

## Military OneSource Podcast — A Marine's Journey From Service Member to Scholar

### Episode transcript

#### Intro voice-over:

Welcome to the Military OneSource Podcast. Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department with tools, information and resources to help families navigate all aspects of military life. For more information, visit [militaryonesource.mil](https://militaryonesource.mil).

#### Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody. Pursuing a degree during your off-duty hours, that's something that a lot of folks in uniform do. I certainly did when I was in the Navy. That was back then when we had typewriters on our desk, but enough about how old I am. Today we're going to talk about one of those people that you meet on any installation really at the education center. This is the person who helps service members map out their education goals. Sometimes they even help you realize your potential. To that, our other guest joining us today is a former Marine that went to one of these educational offices with questions about taking college courses, and now they're studying at Harvard. So, that's going to be the conversation that we have.

First, though, a bit of housekeeping. I just want to let you know that we encourage you to subscribe to this podcast, if it's something that you think you like. If it's something that you think somebody else might like, well please go ahead and share this podcast with them. You can let other people know that we're on all the major podcast players, including YouTube. Just go there and search for Military OneSource and there we are. Lastly, we want to hear from you. We want to hear your comments, your questions, maybe even an idea for a future episode. We have a link in the program notes, click on that, and let us know your thoughts.

Alright, let's get into today's episode. We've got two guests. We have Rubie Blue and Joey Cano joining us today. Welcome to the podcast.

#### Rubie Blue:

Thank you for having me.

#### Joey Cano:

Absolutely, Bruce. Thank you for having me.

**Bruce Moody:**

Alright. Rubie, let's just begin by getting to hear a little bit about yourself. Go ahead and please introduce yourself.

**Rubie Blue:**

Yes, I'm Rubie Blue. I work at Marine Corps Air Station Miramar as an education services officer. I started as an education counselor, and I've been at Miramar 10 years in June.

**Bruce Moody:**

Okay, so what is it that you do? How are you supporting service members?

**Rubie Blue:**

Well, education centers throughout the Marine Corps and throughout other branches — what we do is we help any service member who comes into our office and that also includes dependents, veterans, spouses, at any point of their career, and they say, "Hey, I would like to become a blank." Okay, what do you want to become and how do we get them to that point is what we work with them, in our case, primarily Marines. How do we get them to achieve their goals? We provide unbiased information and advice and help them pick a school that best fits them.

**Bruce Moody:**

That's really interesting. Thank you for saying that. There's two things that you said that I thought was really helpful. You're not just helping those in uniform; it's also family members. Also, my conversation with you today, you're serving the Marine Corps, but pretty much everything that we're describing, it could be found on every service at every installation. So, when you're helping folks, again, folks in uniform, but also spouses, family members, what sort of challenges are you helping them navigate?

**Rubie Blue:**

We're helping them pick a school that best fits them. And we are looking at the challenges that they may have currently just being as an active duty service member, whether that be financial challenges, is tuition assistance going to be an option? Are we looking at using financial aid to pay for school? Are we looking at dipping into their GI Bill? We're also looking at their workload challenges. Is it possible for them to be doing classes during their time of day that they're working? If a school only offers morning sessions and they are Marines who are working a day crew shift, then that may not be what is realistic and optimal goal for them. So, we will help them be prepared for school, help them pick a school that best fits their needs and help them see if this is a realistic goal. And if this is not a realistic goal, what can we do right now to prepare them for when it is an option for them later on?

**Bruce Moody:**

So, you have a program, and it's called the Leadership Scholar Program. It's going to lead into our conversation with Joey, just so you know. But I really would like you, Rubie, to go ahead and explain what this program is.

**Rubie Blue:**

This program is unique to the Marine Corps, and it is a special relationship that the Marine Corps has with over 40 schools. A lot of them are elite institutions or public schools that have rigorous standards as well as private schools that are not Ivy League, but they are Ivy League caliber. We do have a relationship with all the Ivy League schools. Locally, our LSP schools, Leadership Scholar Program partner schools are Cal State, San Marcos, San Diego State, UCSD, USC, University of San Diego, Point Loma Nazarene and Stanford in California and the UC system in general. We could go on and on. But it's not just California, it's throughout the whole country. I know University of Michigan and the Ohio State are another couple of schools that are part of this program.

What we do is we talk to the Marine and say, "What is your goal? What are you trying to do?" And if they say, "I really want to pursue Ivy League education," we then help the Marine pick the school that best fits what the Ivy Leagues need. And it does not mean they have to go to school in person, it could be online. It's just a matter that that school that they're going to is rigorous, has a good reputation, and it's recognized by the Ivy League as being rigorous and having a good reputation. From there on, what we do is we start making contact with the schools.

The Marine gets a package together for me. That package includes their high school transcripts, their unofficial college transcripts, a letter of recommendation from an officer in charge, somebody who could speak highly about this Marine, because this program, it's for good Marines. And it's for Marines who are separating or Marines who are looking to become an officer, so they can go enlisted to officer through a commissioning program. Or a Marine who's looking through the staff and CEO degree completion program, Staff Non-commissioned Officer Program, another program that the Marine Corps allows a Marine to fill a special billet and attend college to get the credentials they need to fill the special billet. We then connect the Marine to that school's admissions department.

Offline, I connect with the school before I do a warm handoff with the Marine. And I say, for example, Joey, "Joey is a great Marine. Here's all the cool things he has done in the Marine Corps. He's in a billet that's super demanding and a rigorous billet at that. And while he's in the Marine Corps, he's taking these classes and making himself competitive and he's also doing volunteer work," or doing this or that, whatever it is, we're painting a whole picture.

The school then replies back to me and they're very responsive and I'm very privileged to have those relationships with those schools. They say, "Okay, here's how Joey should make himself more competitive," or "Joey is competitive as it is, please have him apply."

Or "Hey, at this point he's not competitive and I don't think he will be competitive." And this didn't happen with Joey, but it has happened with other folks. At that point we say, "Okay, we're not going to pursue this school. That's not a good match for you. Let's focus on our attentions on other schools that are more realistic."

**Bruce Moody:**

So, you're really working with the colleges, the schools, you really have a connection with them, but you also have a connection with the service members. And this is really a significant leap, a really important chapter, meaningful in a person's life. What is it like for you to be working with folks and helping them to see their full potential?

**Rubie Blue:**

It's rewarding. I know everyone says that, but we are personally invested. I maintain connection with students who have long left the Marine Corps, and I check in with them. Because most of the time, they don't come in here with the idea of, "I'm going to go to Harvard," "I'm going to go to Princeton." It's just, "I want to get my basic education started." And we have the courage to ask, "Well, why don't you consider yourself Ivy League material or UC material or elite college material?" Well, it usually comes with, "Well, I just never thought that was in my realm. No one in my family or my background has that experience." The answer to that question is, "Well, why not? Why aren't you thinking about it? The worst they can do is say, no. You are worthy. You do something that most Americans don't do. You're serving in the military. You already do an extremely difficult job mentally and physically. What makes you think that you're not good enough to be with the other students who are just as good as you?"

**Bruce Moody:**

Yeah, no, this is wonderful. Rubie, thank you so much. I want you to still be a part of this conversation and jump in where you want. But Joey, I want to bring you into the conversation. And I would like you to introduce yourself by letting us know who you are, where it all began, what led you to join the Marine Corps and then what was that experience like, and take us up to the point where you start to begin taking college courses.

**Joey Cano:**

Okay, great. Thank you. My name is Joey Cano. I served in the Marine Corps for five years as an air traffic controller, and now I pursue an undergraduate degree in mathematics at Harvard College. And prior to that, the Marine Corps has always stood out to me. At least when I was first doing my research, it was known to be the best, the hardest branch. All of these ideas really got me interested and really got the challenge to be very appealing in my eyes.

And after I finished high school, I felt that I wanted to be a part of something bigger. I wanted to take a different life path than my family and I decided to enlist. And then when I enlisted, I was fortunate enough to be selected for air traffic control. Through that experience, it was a very rigorous academic experience. Air traffic control, if many people are not familiar with the job, if you are at an airport and you look at the large control tower or potentially even small buildings by the control tower, that's usually their radar facility. And we're the ones clearing planes for takeoff, making sure that they don't collide with each other, making sure that proper separation is ensured and making sure that everybody gets to their destination on time. So, that's what I was doing at 18.

And through that experience, I was able to become an honor graduate in my cohort, and that really gave me the confidence to want to pursue academics and really turn the page from my experience in high school. And when I got to the facility at Marine Corps Air Station Miramar in San Diego, California, I wanted to continue my education. And while I was working on different qualifications in the control tower and in the radar room, I was also taking classes online, or I was working with my chain of command to go in person to attend office hours. And I can't thank my chain of command enough for really being understanding of my situation and what I wanted to do.

But of course, the Marine Corps mission is really what comes first. So, understanding of that, I ensured that I got all my work done, that I maintain my fitness regimen, maintained everything that I needed to do within air traffic control to ultimately pursue my education on top of that. And through that experience, I had the same experience that Rubie was talking about. I didn't believe that a degree from an Ivy League school was really in my reach. I didn't know many people who took that path. But then when I started getting introduced to different people at these schools or other Marines who have gone through this path, I really started to consider it and really buckle down and see what I can do. And it's all played out for the best.

**Bruce Moody:**

I want to talk about you and Rubie and how you work together, but I'm really curious to get your thoughts about your academic journey. When you're taking these courses, how do you personally feel that it makes you a better Marine, a better service member?

**Joey Cano:**

Yeah, so I think there's a multitude of ways of thinking about this. Education really has a compounding effect on how effective you are as a Marine, how safe your unit is, how cohesive everybody is. For example, we have Marines who come from all different states, all different backgrounds. And when you study things like, for example, social studies or philosophy, you start to understand and see things differently through other people's eyes. And it really makes our units much more cohesive and operate a lot smoother.

And in addition to that, I didn't realize this and a lot of times when I was doing air traffic control, I realized that everything that I was doing in air traffic control translated very well into my studies in math, particularly linear algebra. And I ultimately became a better air traffic controller by understanding these patterns and using this in conjunction with my studies with the FAA. And it really made everything run more smoothly. And then when I became a radar supervisor, I can give some of my knowledge to the other Marines, the more junior Marines who are coming in, to see things differently, to operate more effectively, to operate more safely and to ultimately have our pilots execute on their missions safely and effectively.

**Bruce Moody:**

Now, Joey-

**Rubie Blue:**

I think having Joey ... So sorry. So sorry. I was saying, I think having Joey lead by example, he would bring his junior Marines in and say, "Let's make sure you're using your time effectively. Let's make sure you're not getting into trouble by having idle hands. Let's get you in school and let's prepare you for Marine Corps, but also life after the Marine Corps." Joey is just a wonderful example of doing it all and having it all.

**Joey Cano:**

I appreciate, thank you.

**Bruce Moody:**

Yeah. And Rubie, I appreciate you jumping in. This is a really interesting conversation. Rubie and Joey, maybe you can both share each your own view of what it was like to work through the Leadership Scholar Program. What was it like to discover Harvard as a viable option?

**Joey Cano:**

Rubie, you can go ahead.

**Rubie Blue:**

What I really appreciate about the Leadership Scholar Program is that it puts veterans, it puts active duty Marines, in places that you normally wouldn't find them. It also changes the perception of what a veteran and what a service member is. There are sometimes the negative stereotype that's out there that says, "Oh, people joined the military because they couldn't get into college." That is not true. We've had Marines who were accepted to the Ivy Leagues who chose to join the Marine Corps specifically because they wanted to be a part of something bigger. They also wanted that GI Bill to help pay

for their school. We've also had Marines join because they felt like they had no life experience and they wanted to be part of something where they can go to the Middle East before actually reading about it in a book. They could experience real life firsthand, including Japan and Australia, et cetera. It provides them an opportunity. But it also provides the schools an opportunity to see how the veterans and active duty service members are really great people and are really capable and smart people.

**Bruce Moody:**

So, as I said, I'm retired military, and I can tell you from my experience, we in the military, we just undersell ourselves so much. And I think there's a lot of reasons for it, and I think they're all pretty good, all well-founded. I mean, we're with a group of peers and we're all going forward and so everything seems quite normal. But the fact is that at a very, very early age, people in the military are doing and learning and thinking at a level that, frankly, most people don't. So, maybe Rubie, you can start, and I want to hear thoughts from you, from Joey, but how do you help service members realize their full potential? And how do you help service members who think that going to one college or another is out of reach or irrelevant?

**Rubie Blue:**

First of all, I believe earning their trust is huge. A reputation is very hard to build and it's easy to destroy. If my education center is not helping people and being kind and having an open mind and treating people with respect, we're not going to get that customer a relationship that we have with our service members. So, the first thing we do is make sure we are giving our service members the best that we can.

The second thing is we ask them to expect the best from themselves, but also from everyone else. You get what you put out there. So, we ask them these questions and we ask them, "Why do you think that you can't do it?" And if they give me a reason, like, "This is not something that I believe I can do," I dig a little bit deeper and say, "Okay, why do you think that? What are the barriers that you are putting on yourself?" And if they actually have legitimate reasons, "Look, I really need a quick degree because I have a family, I need a bachelor's degree and I want to be set up to move forward with my career after the Marine Corps, I want to have a job immediately after I leave the service." Okay, we'll find something that best fits them. I'm not going to push this on them if they don't want it.

But if they come to me and say, "Well, you know what? Let me start thinking about it. Let's talk about the reasons why I can do this, not why I can't." And oftentimes if they tell me something like, "Hey, I don't know if I could afford it," I explain that the GI Bill will be there and a lot of the schools will have a Yellow Ribbon Program, which will pay for the parts that the GI Bill will not pay for. And I also explain that there are a lot of schools that have veteran communities that support each other and veteran centers that are usually run by vets, and they give you resources. They provide the resources

that you didn't know that were out there. A lot of it is just not knowing what's out there and what's available.

So, we just make sure that they know that this is an option for them and it's truly a realistic option if they want to do it, and if they do the things that we ask of them. And we quickly find out if they're not going to be a good candidate. And then we provide other options for them.

**Joey Cano:**

Do you mind if I chime in?

**Bruce Moody:**

Go ahead.

**Joey Cano:**

Yeah, so back to your previous question about LSP, I really think that LSP helped a lot. Because the in-person aspect, I felt like a lot of stuff in the Marine Corps, whether it was admin or just paperwork that needed to be filed or sent off to headquarters, Marine Corps, there was a lot of hurry up and wait. And I felt like, with the LSP program, you didn't necessarily get that. You walked into the education center, you're greeted by Rubie, you're greeted by all of her staff, and you started talking immediately through something face-to-face. Is this actually feasible? If not, what paths are possible?

And after that, I think another, onto your latter question about service members realizing their potential in higher education, I think when you talk to a service member and you actually lay out a feasible route of getting into higher education and what steps you need to take, it starts to become alive to them. And that's something that I got through Rubie, LSP, other programs, like Service to School, Warrior Scholar Project. And using these all in conjunction, I really started to realize that I am capable of so much more after I get out, because everybody will get out at some point, whether you do one enlistment or you do 20 years or 20 plus. In fact, we have somebody here who was a sergeant major in Marine Infantry, and he's studying history; and he's in his 50s.

So, at the end of the day, you will get out and higher education will be here. And people like Rubie and all of these installations are really essential in ensuring that service members can provide for themselves, can ensure that they can take care of their welfare, can ensure that they have upward mobility and so much more after the fact, after their service to the nation is done.



**Bruce Moody:**

So interesting. I really appreciate the both of you today. It's been such an interesting conversation. Maybe to wrap up, what I'd like to do is ask each of you to give a piece of advice to someone who's just starting on their education journey. And Joey, let's begin with you.

**Joey Cano:**

Yeah. So, my biggest piece of advice, something that really resonated with me well, was when I was in air traffic control school in the Marines, just out of Marine Corps combat training and somebody was graduating and I was on duty, and he said, "I'm not smarter than anybody else. I really worked on my habits in air traffic control school and that's what got me through." And I really got to thinking on, okay, when I start, when I class up and it's time for me to see how I do in air traffic control school, I am really going to work on my habits. And when I did that, it slowly started to demystify and everything started to become obtainable, but it was through these small steps.

Another analogy I like to use is, when we're on a long hike, and it might be like 20 miles and at some point in the hike you're just taking one step after another and you feel like you're going to break. Everything is hurting. It's been a long day. You might've got a few hours of sleep. But every step after another, you get closer and closer to the end. And in education, you have to see it that way sometimes. Because when you look at math or you look at these different degrees, they are a lot of schooling, a lot of studies. And your previous experience in education may not have been the best, like my own. And you have to take these small incremental steps and ultimately get to your goal. And I've been there. I had to relearn fractions when I was in the Marines to end up starting math. And now I'm majoring in math at Harvard. So, it's completely feasible for you to do this. You just have to understand that taking things in small incremental steps and going at your own pace is the best way forward.

**Bruce Moody:**

Nice.

**Joey Cano:**

I apologize, that was long and drawn out.

**Bruce Moody:**

No, no, not at all. We appreciate it. That's really good advice. I'm remembered as a child, I was shown a story, and it was about a king who was going to give his castle to the person who could jump to the top of it. And of course, people were not able to do it except this young guy who figured out that he would jump onto the first step and the second step, and he just jumped from step to step to step to get to the top of the castle,

and he got the castle. So, it's good advice. And I don't mean to make light of it. It's really fundamental to see what you're doing and to break it down into its smallest parts and just focus on that next step. Rubie, we're going to give you the last word.

**Rubie Blue:**

Well, I would like to remind people that veterans especially are different people than they were when they originally joined. If they weren't a good student in high school, they're probably going to have the habits that Joey talked about to be successful now. I would say, one, it's never too early to start and it's never too late to start, but you do need to start. Think about what you have given to the Marine Corps, to the Army, to the Navy, and why don't you give that back to yourself. Invest in yourself. Take that step. Don't sit there and think about it. Just take that step and start.

**Bruce Moody:**

Excellent. I really appreciate both of you being with us today. Rubie Blue, Joey Cano, thank you so much for being on the podcast.

**Rubie Blue:**

Thank you so much.

**Joey Cano:**

Absolutely. Thank you, Bruce.

**Bruce Moody:**

Absolutely, and I want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We always like to hear from you. Click on the link in the program notes to send us a question, a comment, or an idea for a future episode. And be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcast, which includes YouTube, because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life. I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.