

Military OneSource Podcast — Transition Assistance Program

Transition Program

Episode transcript

Intro voiceover:

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.

Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast, I'm Bruce Moody. Getting out of the military is a challenging life change that's true for the service member and it's life changing for each member of the family. Our guest today knows this well. LaKeith Manson retired as an Air Force master sergeant. We'll hear his story. And then we'll bring in John Randolph and he's with the Department of Defense Military-Civilian Transition Office. This is the office that brings you to the Transition Assistance Program.

First, LaKeith Manson, welcome to the podcast.

LaKeith Manson:

Hey. Thanks, Bruce. I'm glad to be here.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah, we're really glad to have you with us today. We want to hear you tell your story of being in the military, getting out and becoming a civilian. So when did you join the military? What were you doing in the Air Force?

LaKeith Manson:

I joined the Air Force in October of '99, so I've been around for a while. I actually had the privilege to do four different career fields in my time. I did maintenance for roughly my first six years as aerospace ground equipment. The following four was as a military training leader at Sheppard Air Force Base. The next 10 was as a special air missions flight attendant here at Joint Base Andrews, part of the 89th Airlift Wing. And I finished out my career as the Joint Base Andrews Honor Guard program manager.

Bruce Moody:

Okay. So you're managing the Honor Guard program. And at that point, you're leaving the military. It's a combination of you making plans and then life happening. So walk us through that. What was your plan, and what ultimately ended up happening?

LaKeith Manson:

So I'll tell you, Bruce, as with life, nothing ever goes according to plan because my plan wasn't to get out of the military. I was actually trying to extend a year. And at the time, the higher tenure was in place, and we applied for a waiver. It didn't get approved. So, me getting out was very unexpected. I knew it was a possibility, but life really got thrown into a bit of turmoil because from the time that the waiver denial came back to me actually separating from the Air Force, it was about four months to get my life together.

Bruce Moody:

Four months. Do you recall a first step? What was the thought? What was the conversation that you were having at home?

LaKeith Manson:

Absolute panic. It was confusion, what to do, what happens now? When I found out that the waiver was denied, I didn't even know where to turn. So luckily, my Military Family Readiness Center was right there to pick me up. The team at JBA is absolutely amazing. That was the very first thing I did after talking to my wife was I went in there and I was like, "Team, I have no clue where to start." And it's crazy to be able to help everybody else throughout your time in the military, but now you get to a point where you need help and you don't initially know where to turn. But luckily they were there to say, "I got you."

Bruce Moody:

So when they say they've got you, does that mean the Transition Assistance Program, is that part of what they're offering?

LaKeith Manson:

That's exactly what they were offering. So right off the bat, they said, "Hey, we need to get you set up for TAP, get you in here so that we can try to make this transition as smooth as possible." But you know with four months, it's kind of hard to say anything is going to be smooth. But when I tell you that they made it tremendously bearable and smooth, I don't think I'd be in the space that I am without them.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah. We're going to get into why four months is a really compressed time when you're trying to use something like the Transition Assistance Program. But as you're going into the program, did you have an idea of the career field that you wanted to go into? Did

you have a sense of the job market and some of the challenges that lay between you and a career that you wanted?

LaKeith Manson:

So I honestly didn't know the career that I wanted. The only thing that I knew was that I wanted to continue to work with people in whatever capacity that was continuing to use a lot of the skill sets that the military gave me with, whether it's program management or customer service, or something of that nature. I just wanted to be able to be an asset to whatever company that I became a part of. But like I said, at the time I didn't really know what avenue that was going to be. And luckily, that's kind of where TAP came into play helping me, whether it was, "Hey, we have the Department of Labor track if you want to go back GS, or these are your options when it comes to if you're going to go contracting. But either way, you're going to have to have a resume built and different things and LinkedIn." There was so many things going on, so much information that helped me to get in the right frame of mind to get ready for this transition.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah. What you've just described in one sentence is the entire process of launching a career. So how did they break that down for you? How did they help you tackle each of the individual challenges?

LaKeith Manson:

Some installations have virtual, some have in-person, but being able to go through the TAP class you know over the course of this week and breaking down each bit of information as to what to expect, whether it's things that you need to do for out processing within the military, getting ready for that next phase of life, making sure that you have a mentor that's going to be there with you to kind of help you through the transitional process. It's a lot of information. It is definitely a lot of information. I think that's what was tough for me initially was there was so much information that was all good information. It was trying to pick which one was more applicable at the time for me.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah, a lot of people that we talked to described TAP as a firehose. And I suppose it would be, especially if you're going in four months out from your retirement date or your separation date. Do you have any stories to share regarding the transition process? Were there any breakthrough moments, ups, downs, anything you want to share with us?

LaKeith Manson:

Some of the ups and downs was going from being this person that was needed as a senior NCO, as a big "A" airman to transitioning to a space of now you're kind of off in the lost in the gray and going into something that it is a first time for everybody. Whether you're the lowest ranking airman at a separating or the highest ranking officer

that's retiring, retirement or separation, a lot of times, is a first for many people. So the playing field is level and you don't know what you don't know. So for me, it was like I've done all of these great things in the Air Force, but now I have to get out and start all over again. Where do I start?

It was honestly nerve-wracking. It was terrifying. It was, how do I quantify and how do I sell my skill sets to be an asset to whatever corporation that I go to? Whether that is, like I said, government service or going corporate like I am now. Those were the tough parts, but the amazing thing about TAP is that throughout the process, each day, I became more confident in my skills and my ability that I was going to be okay. That even though I'm four months away from retiring, that I'm going to be okay. That was honestly the first time that I felt in the process of my waiver being denied to me actually retiring, that everything is going to be fine.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah. The whole everything is going to be fine moment is not to be dismissed. This is huge. LaKeith, you and I were talking earlier as we were preparing for this interview because I'm a retired Navy chief and for a lot of us, we joined the military. We walked into a recruiting office and we joined the military. And for the process of getting out of the military and launching a new career, for a lot of us, it's the first time we've really had to put together a resume, really had to prepare for a job search and interviews and that whole thing. It's almost as if we're going for our first real job. So let me ask you now, looking back, what are the sort of lessons that you would want to pass along to people who are still in uniform and are some time away from separating from the military?

LaKeith Manson:

What I will say is that I wish I could have done TAP twice. That is one thing that I highly recommend for anybody, to the commanders that are going to listen to this, for the senior enlisted leaders that are going to listen to this, make this a priority for your members because life happens, right? Anything could happen at any given moment where your plans change to where your time in the uniform gets cut short or you say it's time to move on to a new chapter. I feel like sometimes we do our members a disservice by not forcing them to take care of themselves because we're so focused on completing our mission. Definitely take the time to take TAP twice. It is a lot of information, and it will help you the second time to break down what information specifically you're going to need. Because like you mentioned, Bruce, it is definitely a firehose of information.

In addition to that, take the time to take care of yourself, making sure that you are investing in TAP and take it seriously. Be awake, be engaged, be involved, ask questions. It is so much information out there and some of it you're going to have to dig through to get to the diamond that you need, but I promise you, when you do, you'll be so much better for it. I don't think that I would be in the position that I am now with this amazing company I was lucky enough to get hired on to.

Bruce Moody:

So what are you doing now?

LaKeith Manson:

I am currently the corporate program manager for Advisory Technical Consultants, a veteran-owned business here based out of DC. And 80% to 85% of my team is all prior military. So from all branches, Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines we're all represented coming together to take care of the NCR in a consulting company.

Bruce Moody:

Fantastic. When did you start that job?

LaKeith Manson:

I started this job on Dec. 4, so I was officially retired 1 Nov. and I started working on 4 Dec.

Bruce Moody:

Wow. This is a fast-moving time for you.

LaKeith Manson:

It is. But I was looking forward to essentially using my leave that I had for the last two months. It kind of gave me some time to take a break and decompress and process everything that was happening and get ready to move on to the next phase of my life. I don't believe in sitting still because so much passes you by. When I had the opportunity to take the break, I took it. And when I had the opportunity to start working again, I took that also.

Bruce Moody:

Fantastic. I think this Transition Assistance Program is something we should spend a little bit more time on. Let's bring in John Randolph. John is with the Department of Defense Military-Civilian Transition Office.

John, it's great to have you on the podcast.

John Randolph:

Great. Thanks so much for having me, Bruce.

Bruce Moody:

In light of our conversation with LaKeith, his separation, his retirement from the military, let's talk about the program itself. Kind of give us an overview, a purpose, the goal of the Transition Assistance Program.

John Randolph:

The Transition Assistance Program, or commonly referred to as TAP, falls under the DOD's Military-Civilian Transition Office. Although there are actually seven federal

agencies to include the DOD that provide governance over this program. So as one might expect, the Department of Labor and the VA participate, but we also have the Small Business Administration, the Office of Personnel Management, the Department of Education and the Department of Homeland Security to ensure the Coast Guard has a voice all participate in this governance. And together, we support around 200,000 transitioning service members yearly at over 200 locations worldwide. The purpose of the program is to promote, advance and instill a culture of career-ready service members. I spoke about the high-level governments, but really it's the individual military services that execute the program. And really, it's a commander's program. So the commander, the command support team are integral in this process in assisting each service member in achieving their goals.

Bruce Moody:

Can you explain to me, when you talk about TAP being a commander's program, what does that mean?

John Randolph:

Sure. Each commander is responsible for managing those underneath their command and the requirements of their mission, so allotting that time for those individuals to have the time to participate in the TAP program as they begin to transition and look towards that next stage of life.

Bruce Moody:

Got it. Got it. So making time for service members to get into this program.

John, the TAP program continues to evolve. How is it evolving? What are some of the new changes and features to the program?

John Randolph:

TAP is a congressionally mandated program and the most recent changes occurred during the 2019 NDA. So those who have transitioned before this likely received a completely different experience in curriculum than today's service members are receiving. This legislation overhauled TAP, it ensures that service members can receive the most comprehensive guidance and it ensures that they're more prepared than ever before for their transition. Highlights include individual counseling and self-assessment, allowing individuals to identify skills, interests and values that align them with career paths. There are three core days led by the DOD, VA and DOL, and that leads us into the two-day track. And again, the two-day tracks are another addition recently that service members can elect. There are four of them; employment, vocation, education and entrepreneurship that provide additional guidance in each of those areas. Individuals can take one of these, they can take multiple or they could take one more than once as they explore different options post service.

Bruce Moody:

So what you're describing is, I would call a lot. I mean it's really setting people up for a whole new chapter in their lives. As we heard from our conversation with LaKeith, it's a lot. A lot of people really describe TAP as a firehose of information.

How can people best navigate TAP so that they don't walk away feeling like it's a firehose?

John Randolph:

The strength of TAP is to personalize the experience, which we believe leads to more effective and satisfying career transitions. However, with this personalized approach means that there's a lot of information that is provided, whether you're a retiring Navy chief, such as yourself, or a separating first term Airman. And again, this goes across every MOS and AFSC as well. So there's a lot of information provided to meet those various needs, goals and situations that we find our service members in. So again, this starts upfront with individual counseling and self-assessment to identify individual needs early in the process, and then a transition plan is set. For all transitions, it takes two things; effort and time. So service members, we encourage start TAP early, no later than 365 days before the anticipated date of separation or two years prior to those that are retiring. This ensures that individuals can really maximize that year or two years processing, revisiting the information they are learning during this transition period. Recognize that we also make the curriculum available. This can be found at tapevents.mil.

So follow-on resources are accessible 24/7, 365 days a year, both pre and post-transition experiences. And again, what we're looking for is the ability to provide the space necessary for these individuals to explore, research opportunities, identify skills, what are my interests? Start building your network, planning for financial needs. Really, there's a lot that goes into it. So by starting early, individuals, military families gain that time to evaluate their current situation against where they want to be post-separation. And they can make an informed decision.

What skills do I have to get a certain type of job? What does that job pay and the location that I want to move to? Will this pay be sufficient for the lifestyle that I intend on living? We see individuals who actually start the separation process only to reevaluate their initial decision when they have the information in front of them. We hear it all the time, "I thought I was ready, but I decided to stay until I finished this degree." Or, "We took a look at our financial plan and decided now just wasn't the best time for our growing family to separate." The TAP curriculum provides those resources to make those informed decisions and ensure that each individual is prepared for the next step in their journey, no matter what path they choose.

Bruce Moody:

And then taking the course early enough allows you to put the things that you learn in TAP into action so that by the time you are actually departing service, you're good to go.

John Randolph:

That's exactly right. Now recognize, as in LaKeith's case, due to the nature of the military, there will always be short-notice separations. We hear waivers denied, medical discharges, other areas where the timing doesn't allow that individual to get the full year or two years prior to transition. And so in these cases where the service member may have additional needs as they approach their separation date and don't feel that they have the resources in place to assist them during this transition, the Transition Assistance Program actually provides warm handovers between that individual and partners who can assist and provide support in those areas. An example of this may be connecting an individual with the Department of Labor's American Job Center in their chosen location should they need additional career support.

Bruce Moody:

So John, let's focus on the job because that's paramount. That is probably foremost on people's minds when they're looking to separate and retire from the military. We know that TAP has job placements, career counseling services.

How are these helping service members to find meaningful employment after they leave the military?

John Randolph:

There's multiple opportunities throughout TAP that support the path to employment. From day one, there's a course led by the DOD on identifying what military skills you have, translating them to the civilian workplace. The Department of Labor runs an employment fundamentals course that provides information on finding employment, conducting research, developing a resume, preparing for an interview and then again, recognize transitioning service members can elect the employment two-day track to get even more in-depth information about using technology for employment, networking and so much more.

Bruce Moody:

Are there financial education components available to help service members manage their finances effectively during this transition period?

John Randolph:

Absolutely. There's an entire afternoon within the DOD Transition Day that takes a deeper look at financial readiness, specifically as it relates to transitioning service members. You look at financial goals, taxes, income, expenses, and this all points the member towards completing a criteria-based financial plan should a service member need. There are also additional resources provided so when questions inevitably pop up along the way, they have someone to turn to for support.

Bruce Moody:

Now TAP has networking opportunities, connections with potential employers or organizations. How does this work? How is TAP using these networking opportunities to help get veterans hired?

John Randolph:

We receive constant emails about employers looking to hire our veterans. I spoke earlier about the shared governance of the transition program and the Department of Labor VETS program, that's an acronym, Veterans Employment and Training Service does a great job of connecting transitioning service members and veterans with meaningful careers, resources and expertise. So whether you're an employer or service member or veteran, if you visit dol.gov/agencies/vets, you can get connected within that community. Also, recognize that TAP shares information on the DOD SkillBridge program, which allows service members to take advantage of opportunities working in the civilian industry during their last six months of transition, which bridges or enhances their military skills while still being compensated with their active-duty pay and benefits. The network of DOD-authorized SkillBridge providers is another avenue leading to a high probability of veteran employment shared within the TAP space. Transitioning veterans can find more information on skillbridge.osd.mil.

Bruce Moody:

Well, great to have both of you on the podcast today. John Randolph is with the Department of Defense Military-Civilian Transition Office. We appreciate you being with us today.

John Randolph:

Thanks so much, Bruce.

Bruce Moody:

And LaKeith Manson, great to have you with us. Thank you for your service. All the best with the next chapter of your life, your family's life. Thank you for joining us today.

LaKeith Manson:

Thanks for the opportunity, Bruce. It's truly been amazing to kind of share my story and hopefully help fellow transitioning vets.

Bruce Moody:

Absolutely. We appreciate you being with us today. We want to remind you that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department and we always value hearing from you. We have a link in the program notes. Send us a comment, a question, maybe an idea for a future episode, and be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcasts because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life and beyond. I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.