



Zack Totans

Taking the Next Step as a Student Veteran Helping Other Student Veterans

A Q&A with Zack Totans, Fellow, The Green Zone Network

CI: Please tell us about your background and what led you to your current work with other veterans.

A: I served in the U.S. Army just over four and a half years as an infantryman and was assigned to the 2nd Battalion 35th Infantry Regiment 25th Infantry Division in Schofield Barracks, Hawaii from February 2006 to March 2010. I deployed to Iraq twice during that span of time for a total of 26 months in theater and exited the military with the rank of Sergeant.

I began working with student veterans in October 2010 when a position opened up for Department of Veterans Affairs work-study at the school that I was attending, Truckee Meadows Community College (TMCC). The job was very rewarding and I loved working with and helping other veterans. I continued working in that position until October 2014 when I became the Veterans Coordinator for TMCC where I am still working with veterans every day.

When I received my Associates Degree in 2012, I moved on to the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR). At the beginning of my second semester at UNR I took over as president of Wolf Pack Veterans, which is a local student veteran organization and chapter of Student Veterans of America (SVA). Through my position as president of Wolf Pack Veterans and my job at TMCC, I have worked with countless veterans from all branches on a daily basis.

CI: Were there specific challenges you experienced, or saw fellow veterans experience, in returning to civilian life, education, and employment? What did you find to be the most significant barriers? How did you decide what to do next?

A: The hardest obstacle that I seemed to find for returning veterans, including myself, was readjusting to civilian life. Coming home, especially after more than two years of combat, was somewhat of a culture

shock. It took a while for me to get comfortable in my surroundings and get settled back into a normal life again. The best thing to do is take everything one step at a time and try your best to keep yourself on the correct path.

It is very important to remember that each veteran's experience while they were in the military is different. Some veterans come back home pretty much the same person as they were when they left and others can be vastly different. Each veteran deals with the change in their own way. The most important thing is that if they need any help or assistance, they seek it out instead of going at it alone when they do not have to.

CI: What was it like to attend college as a veteran? Were there activities or groups you participated in that were particularly beneficial to you as a student veteran?

I began college immediately after I was discharged from the military. I left the military in March 2010 and began classes in May 2010. I was very nervous at first because I had been out of school for so long and wasn't sure what to expect. Once I realized that I was capable of handling the curriculum I was fine. I actually found that the combination of my military experience and older age made me a much better student than I was previously. I had much more dedication and patience with my classes and the coursework that accompanied them.

One of the greatest benefits that student veterans should utilize is student veteran clubs or organizations that are located at most schools. The time that I spent as president and member of UNR's Student Veterans of America chapter proved to be very valuable as a resource to assist in my overall success as a student. If the school that the veteran is attending

does not have such an organization, the student veteran should take the initiative and start one up themselves. It is a relatively easy process to do – the student can just contact Student Veterans of America to find out how to get started.

CI: Please tell us about your experience in the veterans' peer-to-peer mentoring program that is part of Nevada's Green Zone initiative. What made you decide to participate in the program? Which aspects of the program have been most valuable to you?

A: What makes the Green Zone peer-to-peer program so useful is that in most cases, it is veterans mentoring other veterans. It can be extremely valuable for returning veterans to have someone who has been in your shoes and gone through what you have gone through be there to help you. Being able to help other veterans is the main reason that I wanted to get involved with the Green Zone Network. Many returning veterans have struggles particularly in the job market where they need additional guidance, training, and job preparation and the Green Zone Network is playing a big role in breaching the gap.

CI: You recently served on the Student Veteran Advisory Council for Nevada Governor Brian Sandoval. Can you tell us about that experience and any outcomes that the Council achieved?

A: Serving on Governor Sandoval's Student Veteran Advisory Council was a great experience. The main focus of the council was to identify areas that could be improved upon for student veterans attending colleges in Nevada. We looked at everything from early registration for veterans to a statewide streamlining of the Department of Veterans Affairs certifying process. Each proposal was documented and presented as a recommendation for implementation by the state of Nevada.

This process was encouraging in that along with the other student veteran members on the council, I actually witnessed the state of Nevada actively seeking ways to make the state one of the most veteran-friendly environments in the country. The Student Veteran Advisory council and the Green Zone Network are essentially providing a blueprint on how to effectively and actively assist veteran populations of all generations on a statewide level.

CI: Please tell us about your new role as the Veterans Resource Center Coordinator at Truckee Meadows Community College. What services does the Center provide and in what ways does it support veterans returning to school? What are your goals in your new position?

A: As the Veterans Resource Coordinator at Truckee Meadows Community College it is my job to develop

and evaluate the services that are being administered to the increasing population of student veterans at TMCC. The veteran resource center provides assistance with information and the application of VA education benefits, academic resources such as tutoring referrals and other related materials, and community resources such as student veteran groups and external veteran related organizations like Disabled American Veterans and the Reno Veteran Center. My main goal is to provide each student veteran with the tools and opportunities needed to succeed academically and get them on the path to future success.

CI: What advice would you give to returning service members who want to enroll in school or are seeking employment?

A: The best advice that I could give would be from my own experience, and that is to begin school or new career as soon as possible. Keep the momentum that you have when exiting the military and go after whatever goal that you set for yourself. If it is school, do some background research and make sure that you are selecting the correct college and major for your interests, and also make sure that you understand how your VA education benefits work. If you do not know any of these things, just start contacting the schools that you are interested in and see what kind of assistance they can offer you as a student veteran. The same goes with a job search, the more information that you have on a prospective employer the better. It would also be a good idea to contact any job preparation programs in your area to help you compile a good resume and prepare you for job interviews.

CI: In your opinion, how can communities, educators, elected officials, and/or employers best recognize and support veterans as they return to civilian life?

A: Veteran specific programs can have a huge and positive impact on veterans when applied properly. Initiatives such as the Green Zone Network are a great start for a state or institution to assist veterans with outreach, employment opportunities, and educational resources. The most crucial thing to understand is that a veteran cannot be helped without the support of the community and its resources. Those who are interested in veterans' success should get involved with programs or institutions in your local area. If you are an employer, you can give the greatest gift to a veteran: a job. **CI**

Green Zone Network:
www.greenzonenetwork.org

Student Veterans of America:
www.studentveterans.org