

Good morning. My name is Heather Barr. I served in the Marine Corps for just over 5 years as an intelligence specialist and analyst. I deployed twice during that time, once to the middle east and once to the INDOPACOM.

I was honorably discharged from the Marine Corps in August of 2023, less than two months after returning from my last deployment. I didn't have a job or plan as to what I would do when I got out, other than that I would move back in with my mother until I did figure it out. When I moved back to South Carolina, I felt extremely alone. My family was there and would help where they could, but none of them are prior military nor could they understand the transition from both a taxing deployment and from the military lifestyle I had been living for over 5 years.

When I removed from the military community that I had been part of for so long, I lost connection to those around me. I had no idea what I was doing, what I was supposed to be doing, or how to do it. I was drowning in civilian life and didn't know how to swim. I struggled greatly with feeling as if I were at square one, right where I was when I left for the military – living with my mother with no prospects for the future.

I looked for mental health resources and counseling through the VA and went to a local VET center to get connected with a transition counselor. They then pointed me to Upstate Warrior Solutions (UWS) for help. In October of 2023, I met with Serg Mcavoy at UWS and completed the Staff Sergeant Fox screening that day. I screened at risk for suicide and agreed to participate in the Staff Sergeant Fox Program, just 60 days after transitioning out of the Marine Corps.

I was connected to resources for job searching. I was connected to someone to help with my VA disability claims, and I was informed of events and things I could go to and spend time with other veterans. I found my first job out of the military thanks to Shannon Sports at UWS and was connected with other veterans through different events, such as archery, skiing, surfing with Warriors Surf Foundation, white water rafting and many more outings. This all helped me to realize that I wasn't totally alone and there were others who had gone through, or were going through, the same or similar things as me and they too were making it through. After less than one year of participation, I completed the Staff Sergeant Fox Program in August of 2024.

I moved away from South Carolina, in July of 2024. Although I was not there to take part in events any more or use the resources available through UWS and the Staff Sergeant Fox Program, individuals from Upstate Warriors Solution have continued to reach out to me and ensure that I am doing well and am being taken care of when needed. They have shown a true care for the veteran community that I am extremely fortunate to have had when I needed it the most. I was thrown a life ring and was given connections that I will be forever grateful for.

Transitioning out of military service is a challenging and complex process for most veterans. As we shift from a structured, disciplined environment into civilian life, we often face a range of emotional, psychological, and practical difficulties. Common struggles include finding meaningful employment, adjusting to a less regimented lifestyle, and reconnecting with family and community life. Additionally, navigating benefits, healthcare systems, and translating military skills into civilian job qualifications can be overwhelming without adequate support.

These examples are common for every transitioning service member whether male or female, officer or enlisted, single or married with dependents, and no matter their service branch. They can be coupled with aggravating circumstances like finances and/or relationship issues. And unfortunately, many transitioning service members also deal with lingering mental health issues such as PTSD, anxiety, or depression, which can complicate reintegration.

These challenges highlight the importance of comprehensive transition programs and community-based support systems to help veterans adapt and thrive after service. I am one example of the success of the Staff Sergeant Fox Program and as long as the program exists, there will be others.

Thank you for your time today and thank you for taking a part in saving veteran lives.