Fighting for Work

Like veterans all over the country, a former U.S. Coast Guard rescue swimmer struggles to find employment.

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In 2000, two weeks after the birth of his oldest daughter, U.S. Coast Guard rescue swimmer Carl Prinner was rear-ended in Englewood by a drunk driver who was bending down to light a cigarette. Prinner, then 21, was on leave; he had recently completed training at the Coast Guard Academy in Connecticut and had been assigned to Air Station Clearwater.

The accident caused herniations and nerve damage, and Prinner was no longer eligible for rescue swimming. He returned to the Coast Guard’s “A” School in Elizabeth City, N.C., where he was trained as an avionics technician. “That way I could stay as an airdale [a flying technician] out of Clearwater,” he says. “I thought I would still be able to do that.” But the high-altitude air pressure, the way the aircrafts bounced and vibrated—it was all too much for Prinner’s injuries. After each flight he would return home in significant pain, until eventually the flight surgeon grounded him. “I enjoyed the heck out of what I did,” he says, “and everyone I knew on that station was like a family, but I wasn’t fit to fly anymore.”

When Prinner left the Coast Guard at the end of his two-year term and started searching for civilian work, it was like being thrown into the deep end of a pool. “In the service, you’re molded into going about things a certain way,” he says. “A two-day discharge class to reintegrate with the civilian world just isn’t enough.” Other people his age were completing their bachelor’s degrees and getting licensed as professionals, qualifications required by most employers in the current job market, but Prinner only had his military experience—and that experience is difficult to quantify on a resumé.

Prinner is not alone. As of October, according to the Department of Labor, the unemployment rate for post-9/11 veterans was 9.7 percent, compared to the overall average of 7.8 percent. Sarasota and Manatee counties are home to an estimated 100,000 veterans, according to the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity. Like Prinner, many of those veterans struggle to show employers that their military discipline and teamwork ethic are valuable assets—even without a college education.
A recent legislative initiative, the Veterans Job Corps Act, sought to increase the training and hiring of veterans as police officers, firefighters and national parks employees. The estimated $1 billion cost, though, was difficult for Congress to accept—especially in an election year. In September, by a margin of two votes, the bill stalled in the Senate.

“Collateral Damage,” a 2011 report co-sponsored by the Gulf Coast Community Foundation, the Miami Foundation and the Community Foundation in Jacksonville, stated that 61 percent of employers admitted to not understanding how military experience translates into job qualifications; meanwhile, three-quarters of surveyed veterans expressed difficulty translating military skills into civilian terms.

Prinner eventually was able to land an electrical job at Rollsecure Shutters in Naples. Before long, though, 2008 ushered in the recession. “Business didn’t just slow down,” says Prinner, “it came to a grinding halt.” He was the next-to-the-last technician to be fired, leaving only the company’s master electrician.

At that time, Prinner and his wife were raising their eight-year-old daughter and six-year-old twin girls, and jobs were scarce. He put in applications all over town. “I tried hunting
for avionics jobs, but so many places want you to have at least an A.A. degree,” he says, “and there aren’t many trade industry jobs on this coast. It’s sales, service, retirement.” The one callback he did receive was for a customer service position at Blockbuster in North Port. It was a last-ditch effort, barely above minimum wage, but it was better than nothing.

Just over a month after taking the job, he was promoted to assistant manager. Prinner’s wife was also working, at a nearby Publix grocery store, and since the couple could not afford daycare, they organized their schedules around each other. Many times Prinner had to drop the kids off at Publix as his wife’s shift ended so he could get to work in time. “Here’s the kicker,” he says: “I made less money at Blockbuster than I would have if I filed for unemployment.”

The decline of Blockbuster is a familiar story. In 2011, the North Port store manager called on a Saturday and told Prinner what he had just found out: They were closing the store in seven days. “I had a week’s notice that I had a week’s worth of pay left coming,” says Prinner. As he prepared for another round of job searching, Prinner realized that something needed to change. “After 2008, you need a degree just to get your foot in the door,” he says, “so I decided to go back to school.”
With financial aid under the U.S. government’s G.I. Bill, Prinner, now 33 and with four kids, enrolled in fall 2011 for classes at State College of Florida in Venice, where he is majoring in criminal justice. He found a work-study job at the Veterans Services office on campus, where he assists other vets who have returned to school. There, he discovered a community of former and current military service members with bonds reminiscent of the sense of family Prinner felt in the Coast Guard. “Veterans like to talk to veterans,” he says. “As soon as we meet we start telling our stories, and it’s already like we’ve known each other for a long time.” The vets meet to study together, stay updated on each other’s lives and lean on each other for support.

Prinner is finding that his experiences—the sense of disorientation after leaving the service, the struggle to find work and adapt to civilian life, the bureaucratic challenges in seeking aid for school—are not unique.

When military budgets are tight, for example, reservists are often not called up for their weekend training; but without the minimum number of service hours, those reservists are not able to access funds for school. Or if classes are full, many veterans struggle to meet the full-time student status required for funding. “It should be so much easier for
veterans to have access to that money to go to school,” says Prinner, who receives a monthly stipend under the G.I. Bill for his tuition and books.

But resources are available to veterans—if they know where to look. Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America created NewGIBill.org to help vets calculate their available benefits and navigate the obstacles in attaining those benefits. Many colleges and universities offer programs and mentors for vets returning to school, similar to the assistance Prinner now gives at State College of Florida (SCF has been named a “Military Friendly School” for three years by G.I. Jobs magazine). Prinner and the rest of the small Veterans Services staff are a valuable asset to SCF’s 400-plus student vets. He answers questions about financial aid requirements, paperwork and class schedules. If he doesn’t know the answer, he calls someone who does.

Since returning to school, Prinner has maintained a 4.0 grade point average and will finish his associate’s degree this spring. Eventually he hopes to land a job with one of the Department of Homeland Security’s Florida offices. “It’d probably be a desk job,” he says with a sigh, admitting that he can still get teary-eyed when he sees Coast Guard planes fly over. “But I look forward to knocking on those same doors I knocked on years ago and saying, ‘Is the door open now? Can I come in now?’”