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Don't Panic, Soldier

Starting over is hard, but this time you have what it takes to succeed even further, as your possibilities are endless and now in your control. I know what you might be thinking because I was in your boots at one point. You've made the decision that you want to get out of the military while you're still young. With this decision made, suddenly you've got questions that need an answer: What will I do? Where will I go? How will I support myself? It might seem like the military is our only life support, although we want nothing more than to "get out." It may even seem like you won't be able to adapt to life outside the military, and the thought alone is intimidating. Planning now can help make your transition out of the military a successful one.

So, there I was: spending the last year of my Navy career in Norfolk, Virginia. During this year, I made the decision it was time to call it quits. Although I did have the best times of my life, and made friends I now consider family, I was unhappy with my job and the fact that I had almost no control over my life. It was time for change. With my decision made, the thought of what comes after became real. I hated the fact I was leaving my friends and moving to a city I hadn't lived in for over 5 years. I felt like the Navy was all I knew at that point; the idea of starting over was haunting. But still, plans were to be made if I was going to make a change like this. I sat down one day and thought hard about what I wanted to do when I got out. I concluded it was time to get an education, so I applied at San Antonio College months ahead of the day I had scheduled to return home. As you probably know --with our benefits as veterans-- the GI

Bill will cover our cost of school as well as give you a housing allowance. Basically, going to school can become your full-time job if you can support it. That was my plan. I saved up as much money as I needed for an emergency fund, and I made plans on moving in with my dad. The weight of all my problems had been taken off my back. Finally, the day arrived. Saying goodbye to my best friends was one of the hardest things about leaving, but the drive back home was easy, as I knew there was a plan for what came next. Here I am today in my first semester of college and loving it.

Now meet Diego. He joined the military with motivation at age 20, and was stationed overseas in Japan for five years. Diego loved his job in the Navy, being an Engine mechanic. He worked his hardest to gain rank and become the most qualified sailor there was. Wearing his uniform made him feel like he had purpose to himself and to his country. Unexpectedly, though, he became a father and husband two years into his time in Japan. After not seeing his wife and son for over a year, he felt his purpose had changed; he was now devoted to being there for them, so he decided just like you and I to separate after his time was up. From then on, he started preparing himself to return home to his family. Saving up as much money as he can, he would constantly turn down invitations to go out from his friends. But they understood. About a year out from his separation date, Diego purchased a house in Atlanta, where his wife was from, so he had a place to call home when he was to get out. Getting off his last plane back to the United States, Diego was greeted by his wife and child. He hugged them both and had no doubts in his mind about making the decision to leave the military. All the preparation he made for his new life was worth it.

Kassandra was the best electrician I knew, for her ability to troubleshoot any piece of equipment was something like a sixth sense to her. Everything she learned about being an

electrician she learned in the navy, and she was damn good at it. Although she excelled at her job, she hated life in the military. Being ordered what to wear, what to think and what to do wasn't something she could see herself doing every day. Also, the uncertain work hours did not make up for the pay, which she felt was unfair. A year shy from the end of her contract, she decided she would no longer take it, and she would take her skill set and work ethic elsewhere. What would I do? Became her next biggest question. Cassandra never liked school, so going to college was off the table for her. After all, she had joined the military so she wouldn't have to go to college after high school. She decided to stick to what she was best at, and found multiple jobs outside the navy that needed people with experience such as hers. Cassandra also began to work on her resume every single day from then on. Mastering and tailoring her resume, she began to apply to multiple jobs in her field until she finally received an offer from something she might be interested in: aircraft electrician, with on the job training. The job was near where her mom lived, which is where she had planned on staying once she got out. I still remember how excited she was when she told me about the job offer she had received and how perfectly things lined up for her, as she was scared she would be jobless for a while. All her hard work helped her walk out of her time in the military into a good job.

Making the decision to leave the military is a major lifestyle change. After all, you spent months in boot camp getting accustomed to life in the military. Even though the experience and pride we get from serving can change and build who we are for the better, we must prepare ourselves for the time we decide to hang up our boots. Whether you decide to pursue an education, or go straight into the workforce, it is never too early to plan for "separation." As these stories have each made clear, planning now is what will help your transition into the outside world a much smoother one.