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From Boots to Suits: Inside USAA's Career Program for Soldiers

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When **U.S. Army** Captain Joe Parker hit the ground in Mosul, Iraq, his leadership skills immediately were put to the test. An Iraqi soldier suspected of killing two members of the U.S. Army had been captured and put in custody. Parker and his team were responsible for setting up a military court and coordinating a team of Judge Advocate General officers to provide feedback.

Quick thinking and swift action have never been a problem for Parker, who served as a military advisor to the Iraqis and completed two tours there.

What did challenge him, though, was the transition from the military world to the private sector. In 2011 Parker left the battlefield to take part in **USAA's** Junior Military Officer Career Development Program. Today, he is a claims service manager in the company's property and casualty department.

Even armed with an MBA, though, Parker often encountered virtual landmines while navigating the corporate world during his USAA training.

"The business world is different because it is much less mapped out," says Parker. "I had to spend quite some time learning the titles, organizational structure, and complexity that comprise corporate bureaucracy. You can step on a lot of toes if you are not careful."

Operation business suit

In 2009, USAA created the Junior Military Officer Career Development Program to help soldiers like Parker transition from the combat field to corporate America. (Click [here](#) to see photos.)

It's a crash course in business in which participants spend 100 days learning the ropes of various USAA departments ranging from banking to property and casualty and finance advice. After their department tours, participants are offered a permanent position in an area that matches their skillsets.

Sixty one officers have completed the program since its inception. With such a huge customer base, USAA's customer service and cutting-edge products are only as good as the leaders inspiring the company's teams. And it's no secret that former military lieutenants and captains are

accustomed to taking charge.

“Instead of having another meeting about it, they’ll say ‘No, let’s do it now,’ ” says Doc Holaday, Senior Leadership Development Advisor for the JMO Program. “They have a sense of urgency. They were put into positions where they have to figure out things quickly,” he adds, “sometimes under fire.”

Behind the JMO

The key behind the JMO program is the blending of corporate training and hands-on experience.

Air Force Captain Albert Chapman began the JMO program last year and became a business integration analyst at USAA’s Human Resources Department this year.

Chapman says the program gave him a deeper insight into the business world and fine-tuned his strengths, especially those ingrained in him during his military service. For Parker, the program helped improve his presentation skills by using mentoring and studying/analyzing video recordings of his presentations.

“Before, I presented well in a military style — just the facts, and that’s it,” he says. “Now I have a more collaborative communication style.”

Staffing agencies for USAA promote the JMO program via Internet job sites. So far, requests for 20 officers have been made for the fall class of 2013. In September, the deserving men and women will begin a tour they’ll never forget.

This article was first published in the Military City USA special publication. JENNY HALPIN is a San Antonio freelance writer.