Service, Duty, and the MBA

LEVERAGING MILITARY AND BUSINESS EXPERTISE

By JOHN CRAWFORD
Photography by WALTER CALAHAN
Many military officers have left their mark on Babson over the years, and the College, in turn, has left its mark on them, teaching skills such as problem solving and calculated risk taking. “Babson shows students how to think differently,” says Navy Cmdr. Wood.
When then Maj. Vincent Boles, MBA ’88, arrived in West Germany, the Cold War still prevailed. It was summer 1989, and more than 300,000 American soldiers and airmen stood ready in Europe.

A few months later, the Berlin Wall came down.

Suddenly, everything was in flux, from Boles’ duties with a logistics support battalion to the very mission of the Army. The Soviet Empire, the main threat facing the U.S. military for decades, was falling apart. “Things as we knew them were changing rapidly,” he says.

Boles, however, felt prepared. He had gone to Babson. The Army had sent him to the College to receive an MBA, though Boles admits he wasn’t excited at first about attending business school. What did Babson know about the Army? But the experience changed his perspective. It oriented him to the financial implications of his logistics work, and, most critical for those topsy-turvy years following the wall’s fall, prepared him for handling new challenges in a changing environment. “I was exposed to how business does things,” says Boles. “It widened my view. It widened my experience.”

Boles rose through the ranks, eventually overseeing logistics strategy for 1.1 million soldiers. He retired as a major general last year, but still keeps himself busy offering executive coaching, logistics consulting, and keynote speaking. When reflecting on his 33 years in the Army, the former two-star general’s thoughts turn to his Babson education and all the people who helped and inspired him. Life is not a solo sport, he says. “There were a lot of fingerprints all over those stars.”

A Reciprocal Relationship

Babson holds a long history with the military. Lawrence Carr, professor of management accounting, has taught many officers through the years and found them to be smart, disciplined, and confident. “They are a pleasure to have in the class,” says Carr, a veteran who served in the Navy during the Vietnam War. “They know how to get things done. They know how to make decisions.”

While officers have left their mark on the classroom, the College has left its mark on them. Combining their military skills
with newly acquired MBAs, many have worked in logistics, the vital business of procuring, maintaining, and moving materiel and personnel. Consider Lt. Gen. Kathleen Gainey, MBA ’89, a three-star general and one of the highest-ranking women in the military. She serves as director for logistics on the Joint Staff, an organization that assists the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Gainey likens logistics to oxygen; without it, a military unit won’t run very long, she says. Her duties range widely: She may examine controls for contractors in Iraq or look at how various government agencies can cooperate with the military. If catastrophe strikes—such as the Haitian earthquake—she may tackle logistics constraints, balancing long-term commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan with emergency relief.

Ask Gainey how Babson impacted her career, and she’ll talk about learning the problem solving process and about breaking down issues to search for causes and solutions. She’ll talk of how far her public speaking skills have come from the early days of a briefing and writing class, when she would clutch the podium and deliver a talk punctuated with pauses.

In her office located in the immensity of the Pentagon, Gainey

Christopher Kent
MBA candidate

The retired Marine captain served tours in Ramadi, Iraq, in 2004 and 2009. His experiences give him a perspective on the progress made in that country. “[The Iraqis] have all the opportunity in the world to succeed,” believes Kent.
still keeps a textbook and workbook from a negotiations class. “I use that course every day,” says Gainey, who deals with lots of regulations that need to be navigated. If some outdated law stands in the way of Gainey doing her job, she may go all the way to Congress to try and change it. “There’s a waiver to everything,” she says. “I see my role as a bureaucracy buster.”

Unconventional Ideas

About a quarter of a mile from the Pentagon sits the Navy Annex, where Cmdr. Andrew Wood, MBA ’03, forecasts manpower needs for the Navy. His job, which supports admirals as they present their budget requests to congressmen and senators, offers him a glance into the heart of the military-civilian relationship. “It comes down to dollars and who owns the purse strings, and then being able to prove you’re effectively managing the budget and have a ready and capable force,” Wood says.

Wood picked up many skills—creative thinking, problem solving, buy-in creation—from Babson that he now relies on in the Navy. While participating in a Management Consulting Field Experience team, he learned to construct a spider chart, which he initially used to look at brands of athletic apparel. Years later, he employed that same chart in the Navy, examining whether extending the life of an aircraft, versus building a newer plane, was worth the money over the long haul.

Babson also taught him the value of calculated risk taking and unconventional ideas. “I think that is the kind of thinking the military is accepting more and more,” Wood says. As long as officers possess the facts to back up their against-the-grain proposals, they can present hard recommendations without fear of being lambasted, which wasn’t always the case.

Wood is shipping out to Iraq in August for eight months. He’ll be stationed at the sprawling Balad Air Base, where he’ll provide support for special operations missions.

Back at Babson

Christopher Kent already spent his time in Iraq, serving two tours in the flashpoint city of Ramadi, and now has a new focus: the Babson Fast Track MBA program. Just as Wood, Gainey, Boles, and others have done, the retired Marine captain wants to
add business know-how to the intangible skills he learned during his military experience.

That experience included facing a well-trained insurgency stocked with large quantities of weapons and explosives in 2004. “[Ramadi] became a proving ground for both the insurgents and the fledging government,” Kent says. As a logistics officer for an infantry battalion, Kent was charged with supplying everything from weapons and trucks to fuel and water. Keeping the main east-west supply route open through the city became an important concern—no easy task given daily attacks from rockets, mortars, machine guns, and improvised explosive devices.

When Kent returned to Ramadi for his second tour in 2009, much had changed. Attacks had dropped dramatically, and the Marines’ main missions included shipping U.S. military equipment out of the country and teaching the local Iraqi leadership “Democracy 101.” “What we learned in fifth grade is a foreign thing to them,” Kent says.

Kent may have moved on from his life in the Marines, getting married in May and even appearing on the game show Wheel of Fortune, where he was told to keep smiling for the cameras. (“Your face starts to hurt,” says Kent.) But he carries with him his military expertise.

The armed forces develop leadership and adaptability, traits that corporate America has learned to value, and Kent believes his military experience could have landed him a job. However, he wants to start his own business, and that has brought him to Babson. The veteran, who answered the call of duty and now is heeding the call to be an entrepreneur, is in the initial stages of launching an international trading company.

“I need all the training offered by an MBA,” Kent says, “and especially a Babson MBA.”