



# A *perfect* MATCH

The propane industry is playing a critical role for veterans through Vets2Techs – a program that works to place retired military personnel in the propane and oil industry.

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PHOTO BY JESSE LORD

## A new industry program helps veterans find jobs, propane retailers find employees.

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The transition from military service to civilian life can be jarring for military personnel leaving the armed forces.

These individuals go from having structure and discipline in most aspects of their life to a more loosely structured lifestyle where little things like not putting on a uniform every day can seem disorienting.

"The transition to civilian life can cause issues," says Mark Austin, U.S. Army veteran and area manager for the Mid-Atlantic region at ThompsonGas. "Going from that structured environment that you had in the military that you are so used to and then all of a sudden transitioning out and not having that was probably the most difficult thing."

Finding a job is a whole other story. Men and women retiring from military service are highly trained and skilled, and are qualified for many positions, yet finding the right career can seem like a daunting task.

For many propane companies, finding qualified employees can seem just as difficult. According to LP Gas magazine's State of the Industry survey, the greatest employee-related challenge for propane retailers is finding qualified workers to replace an aging workforce. About a quarter of those surveyed indicated employee retention as their most pressing business concern.

One industry program is hoping to solve both of these issues.

### PROGRAM LAUNCH

Gerry Brien, senior vice president at P3 Propane Safety for Boston Environmental, knew the propane industry needed employees. He also knew that many veterans needed jobs.

So, in an effort to connect veterans to propane industry jobs, Brien, along with Leo Verruso, general manager of Advanced Fuel Solutions, started Vets2Techs, a program that works to place retired military personnel in jobs in the propane and oil industry.

"The industry was having a major challenge in attracting new blood into the workforce, and at the same time I recognized that friends who were in the military were having a tough time getting jobs," Brien says. "I wanted to marry the two together – vets coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan not having jobs, and the oil and propane industry needing employees."

From his years of working in the industry, Brien knew that propane retailers were motivated to hire individuals with military experience, but even after launching Vets2Techs he wasn't sure how to connect veterans to the program. Enter Jesse Lord and Sgt. Jon Skipper. Brien, Lord and Skipper met about a year ago at a Propane Gas of New England (PGANE) meeting.

Lord, a young veteran who served in the Army and now works as an

### BRIEN KNEW THAT PROANE RETAILERS WERE MOTIVATED TO HIRE INDIVIDUALS WITH MILITARY EXPERIENCE.

account executive at A.R.M. Solutions, knew firsthand what the transition was like and was eager to help Brien promote the program to veterans.

"There are all these organizations at state and national levels about educating and attracting a younger workforce. One of the things that never came up in those conversations was veterans," Lord says. "I knew the benefit that a veteran could bring to the company. Just by luck, I ran into Gerry at a PGANE meeting and the idea of promoting to veterans was brought up."



**Lord, a U.S. Army veteran, now works as an account executive at A.R.M. Solutions and spends time promoting the Vets2Techs program to the propane industry.**



Skipper heads the Pennsylvania National Guard Employment Outreach Program, which provides veterans with job seeker workshops and résumé and employment prep, and he works with them on how to translate their military skills into employment skills. He has helped Vets2Techs reach out to veterans and says he will work to connect employers with the program.

Here's how the program works. Employers create an account and post available jobs on the Vets2Techs website (Vets2Techs.com). Veterans then use the same website to view the job postings and connect with employers.

Since joining forces last year, Brien, Lord and Skipper have been working together to promote the organization and get more veterans on board. As of Nov. 15, 2017, the program had been active for eight weeks, with 156 employers and 288 open positions. There were 102 veterans registered and 10 hires. As of mid-December, the program was active in 16 states – mostly on the Eastern Seaboard – and had begun the initial launch in Southern states.

Since its launch, the program has developed from a platform for veterans to connect with employers in the propane and oil industries to a "how to hire a veteran" program, says Brien. In the coming months and years, they hope to educate companies about the benefits – monetary and otherwise – of hiring a veteran.

According to Lord, Skipper will travel the country giving seminars to companies about tax credits, health-care savings or a recertification platform for white they might be eligible if they hire a veteran.

"Two percent of employers know how to use their benefits," Skipper says. "There's a lot of money out there to be used as far as education certifications, licenses, even instructional classes."

## A LOGICAL FIT

Military service translates naturally into work in the propane industry, as Merle Edington, Bill Mayo and Austin can attest. They know firsthand the opportunities the propane industry can provide to veterans and know what they can provide to the propane industry.

None of them actively sought positions in the propane industry, yet they all feel their military service adequately prepared them for the positions they hold within the industry. They all cite various ways in which



their experiences has helped them in their current positions.

According to Edington, a U.S. Army veteran, the military values autonomy, something he has been given as vice president of operational support at ThompsonGas.

"I was very used to having a tremendous amount of autonomy and having an overall mission to accomplish and not being told how to accomplish it," Edington says. "So this was the same kind of overall work."

Mayo, who spent 22 years in the Alabama Air National Guard and now serves as a southeastern account manager at ThompsonGas, attributes many of his management practices to his time spent in the military. He also feels the organizational flow in the military trained him how to follow a chain of command.



**Merle Edington, a U.S. Army veteran, found autonomy as the great common factor between his work in the military and the propane industry.**

Veterans are familiar with strict adherence to safety standards, something that is vastly important in the propane industry, where safety is held as one of the highest priorities.

"From a safety perspective, in the military there is a strong emphasis on safety, and in the propane business we practice safety every day," says Austin. "I always compare firearms to propane – there's no room for error."

According to Mayo, one of the important carry-overs from the military to the propane industry is an understanding of the levels of training. In the propane industry,



**IN THE PROPANE INDUSTRY, EMPLOYEES MUST BE TRAINED BEFORE PERFORMING A TASK. THE MILITARY IS THE SAME WAY.**

## **VETS2TECHS ...** AND SO MUCH MORE

While the program is called “Vets2Techs,” the title is a misnomer because the program doesn’t just place veterans in technician positions.

“Vets don’t just make good technicians. We aren’t just providing drivers and technicians,” says Jesse Lord of A.R.M. Solutions, who helps to promote the program. “These individuals are highly accredited, have great work ethic and so on. This is one of the important pieces that we are trying to push with these dealers. If there is an open position, why not post it and look for a veteran candidate?”

Many military personnel have impressive records and are qualified for a variety of positions in the propane industry. Despite the word “Techs” in the organization’s title, the group is encouraging propane retailers to post any and all jobs to the website.

Propane retailers interested in the Vets2Techs program can visit its website, [Vets2Techs.com](http://Vets2Techs.com), to register and post available positions.

employees must be trained before performing a task. The military is the same way. It can’t expect its personnel to accomplish a task until it has demonstrated achievement at a certain skill level.

Many veterans struggle with civilian life, and work in the propane industry can provide them with the structure they need to feel comfortable in their transition. When the structure of the military carries over to civilian careers, the companies benefit, says Mayo.

For example, veterans’ suitability for the propane industry includes working as part of a team; feeling comfortable wearing a uniform every day; getting up early and working late when necessary; not being limited to daily desk work; and valuing discipline and respect.

The propane industry has its own set of challenges, and the military adequately prepares men and women to deal with challenges as they arise, even in the most stressful of situations.

For Austin, this is one of the most important lessons he learned in the military that he applies to his job in the propane industry.

“Two words stand out to me that were embedded in my head in the military that carry over: adapt and overcome,” says Austin. “Obviously we have to adapt and change to the weather and overcome obstacles like trucks breaking down or customer demand. I think it helps me to carry a resolve and to stay strong for my team”. **LPG**