



# MILITARY TRAINING FOR CIVILIAN CAREERS (OR: HOW TO GAIN PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE WHILE SERVING YOUR COUNTRY)

The inaugural *Occupational Outlook Handbook* provided career guidance for veterans of the U.S. Armed Forces. Harking back to those origins, this article highlights the career value of military service.

by C. Hall Dillon

**M**en and women serve in the U.S. Armed Forces for a variety of reasons. Some consider military service a matter of family tradition or patriotic duty. Others want to further their education or see the world. Still others seek the kind of character-building challenges that the armed services offer.

For many people, military service provides all of these things, and more: Another draw for prospective servicemembers is the chance to gain hands-on experience. The military trains people for numerous occupations that have civilian counterparts, such as air traffic controller, plumber, and paramedic. It may help their job search later, too. In August 2005, the unemployment rate for veterans (3.9 percent) was slightly lower than the unemployment rate for the labor force as a whole (4.6 percent), according to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

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*C. Hall Dillon wrote this article while working as an economist in the Office of Occupational Statistics and Employment Projections, BLS.*

But joining the armed services is a serious commitment. Signing a contract obliges service for a specified number of years—and, unlike other employers, the U.S. Armed Forces offer no option to walk away before that contractual period ends. And there's always the possibility of combat.

In other words, this high-quality training comes with some pretty strong strings attached.

If you're considering military enlistment as a career-training strategy, this article is for you. It begins with a section describing some of the training opportunities in the U.S. Armed Forces. The next section provides information on decisions related to joining, followed by a section describing life in the armed services. Finally, there are sources of additional information.

## Career prep, military style

The military trains you to be technically proficient in whatever occupation you are assigned. But you'll also learn teamwork, perseverance, leadership, and other skills widely applicable in the civilian workforce. In fact, some employers looking for workers with specific qualifications, such as security clearances, often seek out former military personnel.

Most armed-services jobs have a direct civilian counterpart. If you learn how to repair and maintain vehicles, for example, you might later use these skills as a mechanic in the civilian world. If you're trained to

cook for a battalion, you could be well on your way to becoming a chef. And if you learn to maintain military computer systems, you might find civilian work as a computer specialist.

In the military, you'll earn career credentials. You'll also have a chance to further your education while you serve—and afterward.

## Occupational specialties

Enlisted personnel fill more than four-fifths of the military jobs available. Officers, who are not the focus of this article, fill the remaining portion in jobs like nurse, pilot, and lawyer. (For more information about officer training programs, including Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) and military schools, see the "Learn more" section at the end of the article.)

The military has more than 140 occupational specialties, most of which relate to civilian jobs. Not all of these are available in every branch of the military. Your preferences will be considered, but the specialty you are assigned will depend on your aptitude and the needs of the armed services at the time you enlist.

The following are some examples of military occupational specialties.

**Aviation.** Workers in aviation, including air traffic controllers, air crew, and mechanics, often get their start in the armed services. Most people earn licenses from the Federal Aviation Administration as part of their training—and those are licenses that they can later use as civilians.

**Combat operations.** Enlisted servicemembers in combat operations have jobs that are among the most specific to the military: infantry, armored vehicle operation, artillery and missile crew, and Special Forces. Although these specialties do not relate closely to civilian occupations, they teach skills that civilian employers value. Among the skills servicemembers learn are how to lead others, how to operate complex equipment, and how to perform under pressure.

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*Petroleum supply specialists, who connect fuel hoses to vehicles, may be able to transfer their military skills to civilian jobs with oil refineries, pipeline companies, or airports.*



*Maintaining equipment inventories and repair schedules requires that servicemembers learn and follow specific recordkeeping procedures.*

**Computers.** Servicemembers in computer specialties learn to set up and troubleshoot computer networks and systems for the military. They also learn computer security: protecting computer systems from natural disasters and defending them from hackers and other threats. And some specialists earn widely accepted certifications. Computer specialists in the armed services are often prepared for civilian jobs as computer network and systems administrators, computer support technicians, and computer programmers.

**Construction.** To raise buildings and construct barricades and other structures, the military trains construction specialists. These servicemembers perform a range of tasks, including carpentry, plumbing, and masonry. They also train as cabinetmakers and surveying technicians. Some complete registered apprenticeships to become journeyworkers.

**Food services.** Fortunately for hungry service personnel, the military trains food service specialists to order, inspect, prepare, and serve healthy food. These specialists learn about many topics, including cooking methods, food storage, and, of course, cleanup. The skills are transferable to civilian jobs in restaurants, bakeries, hospitals, and other facilities that have their own food preparation services.

**Healthcare.** Healthcare practitioners and technicians of all types receive training in the military. Some do laboratory tests or provide dental care, for example, and others assist physical therapists or work as x-ray or other types of technicians. Still others perform tasks similar to those of paramedics and give medical care in emergencies and in the absence of doctors. Many healthcare workers learn more than one occupation. All are either partially or fully trained for civilian healthcare jobs.

**Law enforcement.** Many servicemembers train in police, security, and investigative jobs. Like civilian police, they learn tasks such as collecting evidence, interviewing witnesses, and performing riot control. Servicemembers in this specialty are prepared for civilian jobs as police officers, security guards, and intelligence analysts.

**Maintenance.** In the armed services, people learn to fix all types of equipment. Automotive and heavy equipment repairers, for example, learn to fix cars and trucks,



and they might also maintain tanks and bulldozers. Because of this wide-ranging experience, servicemembers trained in maintenance may qualify for complex civilian repair jobs.

**Manufacturing and power plant operation.** The military trains machinists, who create metal parts; welders; tool and die makers; and other manufacturing workers. And because the armed services need power for their bases and ships, they also train power plant electricians and power plant operators—who might later work in civilian power plants or as boiler operators.

**Media and the arts.** Training in media and the arts available to servicemembers includes graphic arts, broadcasting, and photography. The military's audio and broadcast technicians, for example, help to produce movies, television shows, and radio programs. The skills gained in these military jobs relate to civilian opportunities as commercial artists, musicians, and photojournalists, among others.

## The military student

Perhaps you've heard that the military will pay for your college education, either in whole or in part, while you're serving and after—even retroactively. That's true; many of the same educational benefits that are available for veterans are offered to active-duty servicemembers and reservists. But you'll need to sort through the facts to learn how to become eligible.

Regardless of whether you go to college, however, you receive training and education while you serve.

**Class time for all.** If you join the military, you'll spend at least some time in a classroom. The subjects



*The United Services Military Apprenticeship Program allows some servicemembers to complete civilian apprenticeship requirements.*

**College options.** You might be able to turn your military training into a college degree. For example, the U.S. Air Force runs its own community college, where servicemembers can earn an associate degree; the Navy's Program for Afloat College Education provides instruction for sailors at sea.

Attending a local civilian college or university might be another option. And the proliferation of online instruction and distance learning has broadened the possibilities for servicemembers stationed

you take will depend on your occupational specialty. For example, quartermasters and boat operators receive instruction in navigational mathematics. Finance specialists learn bookkeeping and basic accounting. Pharmacy technicians are taught biology, chemistry, and the names and uses of medications.

This classroom instruction, plus on-the-job training, qualifies you for licenses, certifications, and college credit—all of which will be useful when you return to the civilian world as a jobseeker. Servicemembers in healthcare and aviation occupations, for example, often earn licenses required in civilian jobs, although they might need additional training.

The military provides formal training in some technical occupations, including those in construction, manufacturing, and repair. Servicemembers who successfully complete registered apprenticeship programs earn a journeyworker certificate, recognized by civilian employers nationwide.

Also, armed-services class time and training are recognized by some professional associations as a way to qualify for occupational certifications. Each military branch offers servicemembers information about turning armed-services training into private certifications.

Classroom training could continue throughout your military career, as you gain expertise in your occupation or train for others. And your specialty might require new skills, such as speaking a foreign language, to prepare for a mission.

all over the world.

You might be able to get college credit without taking additional courses, based on your armed-services experience. Some servicemembers take equivalency exams to get college credit for what they've learned on the job. Others receive credit based on recommendations from the American Council on Education, an organization that certifies qualified training as equivalent to college coursework.

Other education benefits for active-duty servicemembers include tuition assistance, scholarships, loans, and grants for vocational and college training during or after service.

In addition, each military branch offers its own education benefits for career development. If it's important to you to get an education while you're in the service, be sure to compare programs when choosing a branch for enlistment.

## Choosing and joining a branch

Deciding to pursue career training in the U.S. Armed Forces is the first of many steps to becoming a soldier, airman, sailor, Marine, or Coast Guardsman. There is also the decision about which branch to join. The armed services' five branches have a lot in common, but each has its own purpose. You'll need to learn what distinguishes each branch and whether it provides the kinds of opportunities you seek.

Do your research, take a few tests, and you might be ready to sign on the duty-bound line.

## Doing your homework

To learn about the armed services and the types of jobs they offer, get input from several sources. Study written material, watch video presentations, and talk to recruiters, family, and friends. Then, analyze the facts you've gathered to make an informed decision.

A good starting point is to look at each branch of service separately. Knowing more about what each does can help you to narrow your occupational focus.

**Branches.** The Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps fall under the U.S. Department of Defense. They provide the military forces needed to conduct or deter war and protect the Nation's security. The Coast Guard is part of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and has a primarily domestic role in enforcing maritime law and safety.

The Army is the largest of the five branches, with about 488,000 officers and enlisted soldiers on active duty. These personnel defend U.S. land and interests through ground-based operations in dozens of countries.

The Air Force, originally created as a ground-support corps of the Army, has roughly 347,000 active-duty personnel. They defend the Nation from the air and from space, operating and controlling aircraft, satellites, and missiles.

The role of the Navy is to maintain freedom of the seas. In addition to enabling trade and travel for the United States and its allies, a strong navy can use the oceans during times of conflict. About 342,000 active-duty Navy personnel serve on ships, submarines, aircraft, and bases around the world.

The Marine Corps, part of the Department of the Navy, is the only branch of the armed services with air-, land-, and sea-based expeditionary fighting capabilities. Marines, who number around 178,000 on active duty, are trained to deploy quickly into situations ranging from peacekeeping to combat; they also guard U.S. embassies worldwide.

During peacetime, the Coast Guard focuses on maritime rescue, safety, law enforcement, and border control. In times of conflict, the President—the Commander in Chief—can transfer all or some of the 38,000 active-duty members of the Coast Guard to the Department of the Navy.

Remember, there is some overlap between the branches' functions. The Air Force might seem an obvious choice for jobs related to airplanes, for example, but all five branches have aircraft-related occupations. Thoroughly investigate your options if you want to train for a particular job.

**Research.** Military recruitment information exists in many forms: posters and brochures, Web-based videos and written materials, and radio and television spots. But information also comes from talking with other people,



To ensure maritime safety, the Coast Guard routinely patrols U.S. waterways.

including current and former military personnel and recruiters for each of the branches.

Some information for making comparisons is easy to find. For example, each branch provides details about its education benefits and eligibility requirements. You can compare those details to help you decide which branch to join—or not join.

When evaluating the materials you read, see, or hear, however, keep in mind that their purpose is to promote the armed services. You might find the occupational profiles for one branch appealing, but don't be too quick to disregard the other branches in the beginning.

A major part of your decisionmaking process should involve talking to others. Current and former service-members can tell you about their active-duty job, which is especially helpful if it's the type of work you'd like to do. But remember that each person's military experience, positive or negative, is filtered through a different prism.

This advice can also come from recruiters, whose job is to tell you about the military in general and their branches in particular. Get the facts you need by asking specific questions about the occupational options in each branch, especially if you have a certain job in mind. Recruiters can also provide information about details such as signing bonuses, length of basic training, specifics about leave and medical care, conditions of living

quarters, and details of education benefits.

For balance, talk to more than one recruiter from each branch. Be informed enough to ask specifically about topics, such as options for joining the Reserves, that the recruiter might not mention otherwise. And trust your instincts. Be wary of any recruiter who you feel avoids directly responding to your questions.

The flipside to asking questions, of course, is listening to the answers. Consider bringing along a friend or family member to sit in on the session with you. Afterward, you can compare notes. Be aware, though, that the recruiter might ask personal questions. Make sure you don't mind that the person accompanying you will hear your answers to those questions.

## Signing up

So, you've settled on the kind of job you're most interested in and the branch of service you want to join. Now all you need to do is to put the two together and sign a contract, right? Not exactly.

The U.S. Armed Forces first need to evaluate your readiness to enter the military, your work interests, and your skills in math, verbal, science, and technical subjects. Then, they compare that information with their personnel needs to determine what job you'll be trained to do. The type of occupational specialty you get may depend on the length of your enlistment and the availability of jobs.

**Prequalifying.** When you meet with a recruiter, he or she probably will ask you a few questions to make sure you qualify for military service. Prospective servicemembers usually must meet the following requirements:

- U.S. citizenship or permanent residency;
- High school diploma or equivalent;
- Good health and drug free;
- Between the ages of 17 and 35; and
- Committed no felonies.

In addition, each branch may have specific requirements for job specialties.

Next, your interests and abilities will be assessed. Many students take the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB), offered at thousands of high schools nationwide, during their junior or senior year. This test is designed to help students identify their career-related aptitudes.



*Armed-services vocational tests determine prospective members' skills and interests, helping to place them in jobs that match the military's needs.*

*All members of the military, including those whose job duties are ceremonial, learn teamwork, leadership, and other skills that civilian employers value.*

If you haven't already taken the ASVAB or need to take it again, you'll take a short version of it for prequalification purposes. Later, you'll take the complete version. Your score will be used to determine whether you qualify for armed-services enlistment—and, if so, in what kind of job.

**Visiting a MEPS.** Meeting the basic requirements means you'll visit a Military Entrance Processing Station (MEPS). The MEPS is a joint-service organization run by the U.S. Department of Defense. Military applicants complete the ASVAB (if needed), medical tests, paperwork, and other procedures before taking the oath of enlistment.

The ASVAB, as mentioned previously, measures aptitude in a broad range of career fields. Your score will largely determine which occupations you qualify for. Subject areas tested include word knowledge, arithmetic reasoning, general science, mechanical comprehension, and electronics information. Each branch of the military establishes a minimum ASVAB score for enlistees, and each branch has rules about retaking it.

The medical exam includes height and weight measurements, hearing and vision tests, muscle group and joint maneuvers, and other exams. You also will be asked to complete a medical-history questionnaire.

If you meet the requirements for the branch of service you've selected, you'll learn about job opportunities. You might discover that the occupation you had hoped to train for does not have any available slots—and that one you have little interest in pursuing is wide open. What are your options?

Under the Delayed Entry Program, you might be able to wait until the job you want becomes available. But delayed entry isn't a given. If you really want to join the military, be prepared to train for an occupation you might never have considered. Incentives, usually in the form of enlistment bonuses, may be offered to those willing to accept assignment in hard-to-fill jobs.

Until you sign a service contract, though, you can still walk away. Once you sign a contract, you're obligated for at least 8 years of service—either active or reserve, but an obligation nonetheless—and you can't leave, even if you don't like it. So be sure you under-



stand the terms of that commitment before you make it.

Your final steps in enlisting include an interview, fingerprinting for a background check, and taking an oath. Congratulations! You've just bought yourself a ticket to basic training.

## Life in the military

Basic training provides a transition from civilian life to military life. And the military truly is a way of life: Seven days a week, 24 hours a day, servicemembers put the needs of the U.S. Armed Forces ahead of their own. Deployment is always a possibility, too, although many servicemembers never work in conflict areas.

The armed services do provide something in return, however. From salary and allowances to healthcare coverage and recreational facilities, military benefits extend beyond those offered in most 9-to-5 jobs.

### Begin with basic

Each of the branches has its own basic training program. These programs vary in length, from 6 weeks of Air Force basic to 13 weeks of Marine Corps boot camp. But all are intended to be rigorous combinations of physical, classroom, and field training.

The goal of basic training is to get you into top shape physically, mentally, and emotionally. You'll run, do sit-ups and push-ups, and complete other physical training; learn subjects such as military history, rules of conduct, and first aid; and adjust to a life of regimented activity.

Inherent in the fitness, knowledge, and understanding you gain is the method used to teach them: In basic training, you internalize the ability to follow orders and respect rank. The armed services' capacity to function depends on it.

You will get a haircut. You will be on the go from sunrise (or before) to long past sundown. You will practice many drills and stand in many, many lines. You will be given strict orders about what to do—and how to do it. And you will succeed, if for no other reason than there is no other option.

Few people enjoy their time in basic training while they are going through it. But in looking back, many people credit it with giving them a sense of confidence they never had before. They not only met new challenges daily but overcame them.

## Service life

After completing basic training, you may move on to another type of training. But at some point, you'll finally train for the occupation that will be your military job. These training programs vary among the branches and last from a few weeks to more than a year. But service-members become experts in their fields.

Where you are trained often depends on what you are training for. Similarly, your job may determine where you are stationed. Food and other living accommodations are provided on military installations, whether on a ship or on a base in the United States or abroad.

Your military life will be much more structured than your civilian one. The armed services dictate every aspect of your life, including grooming, leisure, and discipline. Even during the time you spend on shore and off



*Every branch of the military has its own basic training program that includes many hours of learning and practicing drills.*

*High-quality career training is one of many benefits that attracts men and women to military service.*

base, you must follow certain rules—or face consequences. These vary from demotions for minor infractions to courts-martial, or military trials, for major ones.

Hours and working conditions differ by branch and by assignment, but a 40-hour military workweek often includes nights and weekends. Furthermore, you are always on call, even in your off-duty hours.

This rigorous training, adherence to rules, and constant readiness prepare servicemembers for the ultimate duty: defending our Nation's interests in military missions. Armed-services training is structured to be the best preparation possible for facing challenges, even dangerous ones.

In every situation, there will be time for you to relax. Recreational activities available to servicemembers include swimming, weightlifting, basketball, tennis, and many other sports. Other facilities on installations include libraries, chapels, and movie theaters.

You can spend your spare time reading; taking college courses; watching television; listening to music, which sometimes includes free concerts performed especially for military personnel; and participating in many of the same activities you enjoyed in civilian life.

And when you are able to leave the ship or base, you'll have a chance to explore your surrounding community. Enjoy your time sightseeing, scuba diving, skiing, or discovering other activities your stationed locality offers.

## Pay and other benefits

One of the most obvious monetary benefits you'll receive is basic pay, a salary based on your rank and time in service. As of April 2007, enlisted servicemembers receive between about \$1,204 and \$6,382 per month.

On top of this base pay, you might receive special pay for hardship duty. You'll also get allowances for specific expenses related to your service, such as buying and maintaining uniforms.

Some benefits in the military are similar to, but often more generous than, those offered in the civilian work-



force. These include paid vacation, access to healthcare and life insurance, education benefits, and a pension in retirement. Eligibility for retirement requires 20 years of service.

Other benefits are unique to the armed services. Many of these benefits extend to family members; examples include free legal assistance, counseling, and information about life issues, such as buying auto insurance. Servicemembers sometimes receive discounts, such as for train travel.

Some benefits are available only to veterans. These include programs for discounts on hotel stays, travel fares, and entertainment. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs provides many forms of assistance, including access to healthcare, prescription drugs, and guaranteed loans for home purchases.

## Learn more

As mentioned previously, choosing a military occupation and branch requires research. You'll find books and other resources about careers in the armed services at your local library.

One of the resources you may find at the library is the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*. The *Handbook's* description of job opportunities in the U.S. Armed Forces includes general information about military careers. This information is also available online at [www.bls.gov/oco/ocos249.htm](http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos249.htm).

Your library probably also has the White Pages and the Yellow Pages for your local calling area. You can check either book to find a recruiter nearby. Look in the blue pages for U.S. Government listings; recruiting offices for each branch of service are listed alphabetically.

The U.S. Department of Labor provides information online that can help you research armed-services jobs. For example, you can get an idea of how military occupations match their civilian counterparts by visiting America's Career InfoNet; its Military to Civilian Occupation Translator is available at [www.acinet.org/moc](http://www.acinet.org/moc). And to learn about how to find military career-planning, training, and job-search resources at local One-Stop Career Centers, visit

[www.careeronestop.org/militarytransition](http://www.careeronestop.org/militarytransition).

Of course, the U.S. Department of Defense also has information that can assist you. For general information about military careers, call toll-free, 1 (866) VIEW-NOW (843-9669). Or visit online at [www.careersinthemilitary.com](http://www.careersinthemilitary.com) or [www.todaymilitary.com](http://www.todaymilitary.com).

Serving in the U.S. Armed Forces doesn't have to be a steppingstone to a civilian career; for many people, the military *is* a career. And because military personnel are eligible for retirement after 20 years of service, it is not uncommon for armed-services retirees to move into a civilian career later. Advancement opportunities exist for both officers and enlisted personnel.

The enlistment process discussed in this article isn't the only way to join the U.S. Armed Forces. People can join the Air National Guard and Army National Guard, for example, which serve dual Federal and State roles and have units in the States, the District of Columbia, and U.S. territories. To learn more about the National Guard, contact:

National Guard Bureau  
1411 Jefferson Davis Hwy.  
Arlington, VA 22202-3231  
[www.ngb.army.mil](http://www.ngb.army.mil)

You can also prepare for the military by attending a secondary or postsecondary school that has a military program, including a limited number of State- and privately run military schools for high school, vocational, and college students. For more information, contact the Association of Military Colleges and Schools of the United States through its executive director:

Dr. Rudolph H. Ehrenberg, Jr.  
3604 Glenbrook Rd.  
Fairfax, VA 22031-3211  
(703) 272-8406  
[www.amcsus.org](http://www.amcsus.org)

By earning a bachelor's or graduate degree, people can join the military as officers rather than as enlisted personnel. Officers have higher rank and more privileges than enlisted servicemembers, and their jobs involve more managerial and professional responsibilities.

The Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) offers elective courses to teach college students to become military officers. Some scholarships are available. Air Force, Army, and Naval ROTC programs are offered on college and university campuses nationwide; you must individually contact those that interest you.

For information about Air Force ROTC, including which schools offer programs, contact:

AFROTC Admissions  
551 E. Maxwell Blvd.  
Maxwell AFB, AL 36112-5917  
Toll-free: 1 (866) 423-7682

[www.afrotc.com/colleges/detLocator.php](http://www.afrotc.com/colleges/detLocator.php)

For information about the Army ROTC program, call toll-free, 1 (800) USA-ROTC (872-7682), or visit online at [www.goarmy.com/rotc](http://www.goarmy.com/rotc).

For information about Naval ROTC, including schools that offer programs, call toll-free, 1 (800) NAV-ROTC (628-7682), or visit online at [www.nrotc.navy.mil/colleges.cfm](http://www.nrotc.navy.mil/colleges.cfm).

The Federal Government's five Armed Forces Service Academies train their students to serve as officers upon graduation. All educational expenses are paid in exchange for an 8-year service commitment. Graduates of the U.S. Naval Academy are commissioned in either the Navy or the Marine Corps. The Merchant Marine Academy is not part of the U.S. Department of Defense. For more information, contact the academies in which you are interested:

U.S. Air Force Academy  
ATTN: Public Affairs Officer  
2304 Cadet Dr., Suite 3100  
U.S. Air Force Academy, CO 80840-5016  
(719) 333-1110  
[www.usafa.af.mil](http://www.usafa.af.mil)

U.S. Coast Guard Academy  
ATTN: Public Affairs Officer  
31 Mohegan Ave.  
New London, CT 06320-8103  
Toll-free: 1 (800) 883-USCG (8724)  
[www.cga.edu](http://www.cga.edu)

U.S. Military Academy  
USMA Admissions  
Bldg. 606  
West Point, NY 10996  
Toll-free: 1 (800) 497-6468  
[www.usma.edu](http://www.usma.edu)

U.S. Merchant Marine Academy  
ATTN: Public Affairs Officer  
300 Steamboat Rd.  
Kings Point, NY 11024  
Toll-free: 1 (866) 546-4778  
[www.usmma.edu](http://www.usmma.edu)



U.S. Naval Academy  
USNA Admissions  
Annapolis, MD 21402-5000  
Toll-free: 1 (888) 249-7707  
[www.usna.edu](http://www.usna.edu)

*U.S. Armed Forces training prepares servicemembers for many kinds of challenges, including representing our Nation's interests in military missions.*

