

# As Wars End, Young Veterans Return to Scant Jobs

By **SHAILA DEWAN**

COLUMBUS, Ohio — In Afghanistan, Cpl. Clayton Rhoden earned about \$2,500 a month jumping into helicopters to chase down [improvised explosive devices](#) or check out suspected bomb factories.

Now he lives with his parents, sells his blood plasma for \$80 a week and works what extra duty he can get for his Marine Corps Reserve unit.

Corporal Rhoden, who is 25, gawky and polite with a passion for soldiering, is one of the legions of veterans who served in combat yet have a harder time finding work than other people their age, a situation that officials say will grow worse as the United States completes its pullout of Iraq and as, by a White House estimate, a million new veterans join the work force over the next five years.

Veterans' joblessness is concentrated among the young and those still serving in the National Guard or Reserve. The unemployment rate for veterans aged 20 to 24 has averaged 30 percent this year, more than double that of others the same age, though the rate for older veterans closely matches that of civilians. Reservists like Corporal Rhoden have a bleak outlook as well.

In July 2010, their unemployment rate was 21 percent, compared with 12 percent for other vets.

“There’s been an upsurge in young people going into the military and not staying for a full 20-year career,” said Jane Oates, the assistant secretary for employment and training at the Labor Department, which has worked to improve the three-day transition assistance program for outgoing soldiers and enlisted companies like Facebook to reach them. “I think transitions have been difficult, with too few jobs out there and lack of clarity about what the employer wants.”

The employment gap cannot be explained by a simple factor like lack of a college degree — despite their discipline and training, young veterans fare worse in the job market than their peers without degrees.

Employers and veterans seem to view each other as alien species. Managers, few of whom have military experience themselves, may fear the aftereffects of combat or losing reservists to another deployment. They may have difficulty understanding how military accomplishments translate to the civilian world.

Young veterans, whose work history may consist entirely of military service, often need to learn basics like what to wear to a job interview. More important, many say, they are overwhelmed by the transition from combat to civilian life.

“It’s shell shock for a lot of them, going from such a structured lifestyle to a lifestyle that’s got so many variables,” said Daniel Hutchison, 29, who uses his own combat disability check to finance a shoestring transition assistance group, Ohio Combat Veterans. “They’re dealing with all the emotional things they went through, and they feel like they’re alone.”

The Obama administration has championed veterans’ maturity, management skills and even their promptness. Employers have jumped on the bandwagon, and large companies like JPMorgan Chase and Verizon have signed a pledge to hire a total of 100,000 veterans by 2020. More than 220,000 veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan are out of work.

Over a decade of war, the requirement that companies restore reservists to their old jobs has placed a heavy burden on businesses, said Ted Daywalt, who runs [VetJobs.com](http://VetJobs.com) in Georgia. “Nearly 65 to 70 percent of employers will not now hire National Guard and Reserve,” he said. “They can’t run their business with someone being taken away for 12 months.”

Though employers typically ask about military service and status on job applications, it is illegal to discriminate based on that information.

Corporal Rhoden said his reserve duties had interfered with one job to the point that he quit. “I’ve tried restaurants, shipping facilities, construction, snow removal businesses, landscaping — pretty much anything that you don’t need a college degree to do,” he said.

Veterans have been coached to write résumés that emphasize leadership skills instead of “the killing or capture of 350 Al-Qaeda associates,” raising some skepticism.

“I’m not necessarily convinced that they have great marketable skills,” said Rachel Feldstein, the associate director of New Directions, which offers drug rehabilitation, job training and other services to veterans in San Diego. “If you train someone to be a sniper, those are not necessarily skills that are transferable.”

Young veterans face stiff competition for the jobs that fit them best, like policing. In Columbus, Dustin Szarell, 30, said he was passed over for work in the Akron Fire Department and as a juvenile corrections officer in favor of candidates who had experience in those fields.

The Obama administration has stepped up hiring of veterans, adding more than 85,000 to the government payroll since the 2008 fiscal year. On Saturday, President Obama praised returning veterans and said “it is time to enlist our veterans and all our people in the work of rebuilding America.” The administration is trying to shape a “career-ready military” whose medics and electricians can more easily attain the licenses they need to work as civilians. As of October, the G.I. Bill that pays for college can also be used for vocational training or apprenticeships.

But many young vets are still working through the aftermath of combat.

In interviews, some veterans said employers overestimated these problems. “They have this misconception that we’re all struggling from P.T.S.D. in its most severe form, we’re all going to rage out,” said Sgt. Kobby Nyen, 25, a Marine reservist and student. “Even a Marine with P.T.S.D. has discipline.”

But others acknowledged that coping was an issue. “I don’t know who in their right mind would want to hire me when I got back from Afghanistan, because I was a disaster,” said Jeff Mancino, 24, who is now studying to become a psychologist. “I was 22 and I had to go to rehab — what kind of 22-year-old does that?”

Often, the veterans Mr. Hutchison of [Ohio Combat Veterans](#) sees need much more than a job. Recently, he traveled 50 miles to Logan, Ohio, to meet Ethan Tomblin-Brooks, 24, who lives in a shell of a camper in his parents' driveway and gets construction work about once a week.

Mr. Tomblin-Brooks, who was injured in Iraq, said he had registered with the Veterans Affairs department but had not heard back. Army psychologists first diagnosed P.T.S.D., then bipolar disorder, but Mr. Tomblin-Brooks said he had no money for treatment, and no transportation.

Mr. Hutchison said he would help him get medical benefits, then tried to gently explain how little work is available in construction. Mr. Tomblin-Brooks, who has a G.E.D., was at a loss to suggest another prospect.

If he could, he said, he would rejoin the Army. "I kind of like being told what to do," he said. "It makes it a little easier than figuring it out on your own."