

# The Green Berets Come Home

Corporate America goes on a Special Forces hiring spree

By Willy Stern and Breck Walker

**I**n 2021, the Indianapolis Colts' season was off to a disastrous start. Straight-shooting head coach Frank Reich's team was 0-3 and riddled with injuries. At the core of Reich's coaching philosophy were growth, performance, and resiliency. Reich deeply believed that character matters. On Reich's staff was the relatively unknown Director of Team Development Brian Decker. "Deck" brought an unusual background to the NFL: 22 years in the Army, most as a Green Beret.

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From draft day through training camp and the regular season, Decker had worked behind the scenes with players and coaches to foster a team-oriented approach to overcoming adversity. The work came naturally. It was what he had embraced since he first became a Green Beret. Early in his military career, Decker had been deployed to combat



**Brian Decker, Indianapolis Colts director of team development, used his experience from some 15 years as a Green Beret to foster a team-oriented approach to overcoming adversity last season.**

zones as part of 12-man operational teams. Later, he had helped to improve the assessment and selection process that soldiers must maneuver to earn the coveted green beret. It became clear to his bosses that the modest and self-effacing

Decker had an innate understanding of what few others in the NFL possessed: how human beings can operate at maximum efficiency while at the edges of their physical limits and in highly stressful environments. The Colts won nine of their



**A U.S. Army Special Forces Soldier begins to pack his parachute after a nighttime high-altitude, high-opening jump.**





**An experienced Green Beret observes a colleague firing his weapon during routine operations downrange.**

next 12 games, just missing the playoffs.

“Deck is a thought leader in the areas of leadership, culture, and character,” observed Reich, entering his fifth year as head coach and one of the deeper thinkers in the game. “The experience and skills he developed in Special Forces has helped shape our thinking about how to build and develop our team. He provides an unconventional, people-centric approach to situations and problem-solving, which is invaluable.”

In transitioning from Green Beret to senior executive in the civilian workforce, Decker is hardly alone. A growing number of blue-chip companies are going all-in on hiring as many of them as possible. “The transitioning Green Beret community is the most extraordinary untapped labor force in the U.S. today,” said Dan Fachner, CEO of J&J Snack Foods, a \$1 billion-plus publicly traded company in New Jersey. “These Green Berets have been so good and competent that I only wish I had discovered this sooner.”

From industries as varied as investment banking, real estate development, consulting, and manufacturing, CEOs running large, complicated, and extremely valuable firms are all but backing up their trucks to Special Forces bases around the country and loading up on members. (For practical purposes, Special Forces and Green Berets refer to the same soldier.)

Why are they so keen to hire these

ex-soldiers? Todd Koetje, who oversees business development and finance at Cable ONE, the massive broadband communications provider, has a theory: “Every high-performing organization realizes its most important mission is investing in its people and developing a strong leadership bench; filling that key need is what keeps the best C-suite executives up at night.” Green Berets, explained Koetje, have earned “advanced leadership degrees as a result of their extensive, mission-driven experience.”

“Green Berets,” Koetje continued, “have a humble confidence in their ability to accomplish objectives in difficult and stressful environments, a unique drive to learn, a solution-oriented, outside-the-box problem-solving style. They are self-starters. They know how to build and motivate a high-performing team.

Perhaps most importantly, Special



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—Frank Reich, head coach of the Indianapolis Colts

Forces operators know they have to learn it before they can lead it. Self-promotion is not in their DNA.”

For years, retired Green Berets told us, companies told Green Berets they would love to hire them but couldn’t figure out how to translate their skills. Decker, the Colts executive, sent out 200 job search letters; he got three lukewarm responses. Making the job interviews even harder, Green Berets are not allowed to talk about what they do when deployed in war zones; such information is often classified under U.S. national security laws.

Despite these challenges, Green Berets are finally breaking through. Take the case of Mark Whaling, head of global securities at Canaccord Genuity, the largest independent full-service financial services firm in Canada. He said that his “biggest no-brainer ever was to bring ex-Special Forces guys onto our corporate team. They are selfless. Just being selected as a Green Beret says all you need to know about their physical and mental skill sets. Where in life do you find someone who’s the best at something and doesn’t talk about it?”

In our interviews with senior business executives and experienced Green Berets in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere, one thing became clear: The race to hire these Green Berets is on.

The number of Green Berets hired in high-level jobs in corporate America is hard to quantify. But the anecdotal evidence is clear; executives are effusive when asked about Green Berets they have hired. In all our interviews, we didn’t hear a single complaint from executives about Green Berets they had hired.

There are several reasons why Green Berets are so coveted by the private sector. First, Green Berets are modest in extremis. Second, many corporate executives prefer Green Berets to Ivy-educated MBAs since the retired warriors lack any sense of entitlement; you don’t hear them asking what the company has done for them lately. Third, Green Berets have already been assessed and found worthy in a brutal and rigorous training process that takes at least two years.

It is in the unique and hidden world of the selection and training of Green Berets where the entire process begins. The selection process exposes any weakness in a would-be Green Beret and eventually weeds out those who don’t have the right stuff.

Contrary to what may be public perception, Green Berets don’t want the first

guy who crosses the finish line on a rugged, 20-mile hike with a heavy rucksack. Strong, fit soldiers who can run far and shoot straight are a dime a dozen in today's military. Instead, Green Beret leadership wants the soldier who sees a fellow candidate struggling on the long march and offers to carry both their packs until his colleague is strong enough to hoist his own again. It grows from there. Leadership wants the soldier who can work within a team to devise strategies to achieve complex objectives across a range of skills beyond kicking down doors and killing bad guys. These could involve engineering tasks, negotiations with leaders from different cultures, logistics and supply chains, or the training of foreign soldiers with very different backgrounds than their own.

Explains a Green Beret in Syria, "Corporate America needs to understand that Special Forces have previously done 90% of the necessary evaluation."

One executive who came to that conclusion is Dave Pearson, a leader in Deloitte's digital transformation practice. He explained that Deloitte, the massive global consulting and professional services firm, has hired seven Green Berets and placed them in disciplines as varied as corporate strategy, human capital, technology, operations, and supply chains. Labeling Green Berets "professional culture agents," Pearson focuses on one transitioned Green Beret named Ben. "We brought Ben into Deloitte a few months ago, and he has already been recognized as a super high performer by leadership. Ben and the other Green Berets whom we have hired definitely have the DNA and traits we look for as the next crop of partners at Deloitte." Pearson is actively seeking to hire more transitioning Green Berets, particularly in management consulting.

So, what is it that Green Berets actually do downrange, the Army euphemism for war zones, that prepares them so well for jobs in corporate America? Interestingly, these missions often mirror business-world tasks. They are essentially trained experts in negotiations, sales, marketing, and training. But the environments in which these Green Berets accomplish these tasks are vastly more difficult and arduous than what they find in corporate America. Comparatively speaking, sitting around a boardroom table is a piece of cake. Says one ex-Green Beret, "The hardest day at my firm is nothing compared to what I saw in combat."



**GE Appliances CEO Kevin Nolan says Green Berets he brings into his company are 'able to look at a problem with fresh eyes and not be tied to the corporate way of looking at things.'**

While the vast majority of their missions are classified, we did have permission to share a few relevant stories. We spoke with a Green Beret whose 12-man team landed at the international airport in Sanaa, Yemen, to relieve a SEAL team and to train Yemeni special operations forces. They landed at night, unarmed, only to be surrounded by heavily armed hostiles in jeeps. For 36 hours, this team of Green Berets was held hostage while calmly trying to negotiate, mostly in Arabic, the terms of their own release. (All Green Berets speak one or more foreign languages.)

"There were multiple negotiations going on involving us on the tarmac, the Houthi rebel contingent on the tarmac, the Yemeni government, Houthi 'central command,' customs officials, and the SEALs commander and our captain, who were separated from us," explained the soldier. "Lines of authority were very confused, and communication

between everyone but those on the tarmac was difficult. Further, the Houthi rebels on the tarmac were undisciplined, unpredictable, high from chewing on khat or wired from drinking chai coffee, and very uncertain where they wanted this unexpected situation to end up."

Their negotiating strategy was practical, not aggressive. "We drank tea and coffee with them," said the Green Beret. "We expressed sympathy with their protests against corrupt government and engaged in conversations about our common enemy al Qaeda and whatever else came to mind. We humanized ourselves as best we could and reached out to them with great empathy." The Green Berets were released without harm.

Another Green Beret recounted a dicey incident that took place during a firefight in northern Syria. "We were dealing with a situation where there were several wounded among our partner force, somewhat overwhelming our one available medic," he explained. "I watched a weapons sergeant, at the direction of our medic, make an incision [in one injured man] and insert a chest tube. He saved that young man's life." A Green Beret, trained in weapons, and under duress, had to morph into another role completely — a surgeon.

Green Berets, who typically go to war in 12-man teams with little oversight, are comfortable operating independently while improvising under difficult circumstances. One Green Beret recalled being



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**U.S. Army Special Forces soldiers conducting a convoy at an overseas location.**

sent to Kyrgyzstan on a mission and believing that his team had the necessary papers to pass through customs in a lawless, rural location. “The border officials didn’t think our papers ‘looked official’ enough, whatever that means,” he said. “So, we came up with the idea of stamping our papers using ink and various foreign coins that we had in our pockets.”

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“We’re creative in SF downrange, even with bullets flying,” said a veteran Green Beret. “We are experts at \$20 solutions to \$1,000 problems.” Sometimes, these problems are very real. We spoke with yet another Green Beret whose team was among the first to enter the northern Syrian city of Raqqa, a former ISIS stronghold. “When we entered the city, there were no essential services,” he explained. “Our 12-member team had to get clean water from the Euphrates River to citizens with a tiny budget. We devised a plan to get water [tanks] and chlorine tablets. The sheer size of the problem was astronomical.”

Another problem loomed in Raqqa: Bread was in short supply. Speaking entirely in Arabic, the team devised and implemented a plan to get local bakeries up and running. On this mission, the Green Berets had to become instant experts in opening small businesses.

At GE Appliances in Louisville, Kentucky, CEO Kevin Nolan has a program to bring in Green Berets as interns for several months at a time to problem-solve at his multibillion-dollar company, before

returning them to the Army. Nolan said these Green Berets were “able to look at a problem with fresh eyes and not be tied to the corporate way of looking at things. They could do assessments that involved going outside the swim lanes we typically kept ourselves in.” He added that “they were especially adept at assessing our corporate culture and where it helped and at times hindered our business operations. The SF interns were also very skilled at managing their teams in ways that inspired deep thinking and collaboration on ideas.”

Nolan believes that the resumes of SF soldiers looking for civilian management jobs “are not adequate guides to a skill set and personality that is impossible to get down on paper.” He encourages other CEOs to “look behind the resume” and spend time with the Green Beret in order to “understand that Special Forces’ training and experience provides a strong foundation for a corporate management position.”

Various nonprofit groups have sprung up in recent years to assist Green Berets



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and other special operations warriors in making their way to corporate America. One of the best is the Special Operators Transition Foundation, whose CEO, Tommy Stoner, is himself a retired Green Beret with 29 years of military service. Stoner is forever preaching to corporate America that Green Berets in the private workforce are “the connective tissue in order to influence behavior and decisions.” Stoner, who was a senior banking executive as well, added that Green Berets “do not accept mediocrity. They win as a team and gain credibility by their skills and professionalism.”

Explains an Iraq-based Green Beret, “We need to be able to communicate effectively with the lowest-rank soldier in partner forces to military and government leaders in foreign governments as well as our own government; we like to say, ‘From the s\*\*\*house to the White House.’”

Craig Powell, recently retired CEO of Motus, the fast-growing workplace solutions firm, was among the first to recognize the unique skills of Green Berets. Powell describes the Green Berets as “the poets of the military, combining creative intelligence and brawn.” He was first drawn to hiring Green Berets because “they put a huge wrapper of humility around their capabilities, which only adds to their stature and effectiveness in their leadership roles.”

We caught up with a Green Beret in Iraq recently and asked what he would tell an interviewer if he ever went courting a job outside the Army. His response was revealing: “I am a person who has been tested under conditions of the most extreme stress. I am used to dealing with complex and ambiguous data where answers are far from clear, shades of gray, and still find a way to accomplish the objectives I have been given. I am in no way intimidated by that kind of situation. I have proven over and over that I am a good team member — you are not in Special Forces if you are not — and I willingly make sacrifices for the good of the team. I have a mission-first orientation, and I have dedicated a large part of my adult life to something larger than myself.”

That doesn’t fit well on a resume, but it’s proving a good match for the corporate world. ★

*Willy Stern is a journalist. Breck Walker, Ph.D., is a historian. They both serve on the board of The Legion Fund, a Nashville-based charity that supports 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne).*