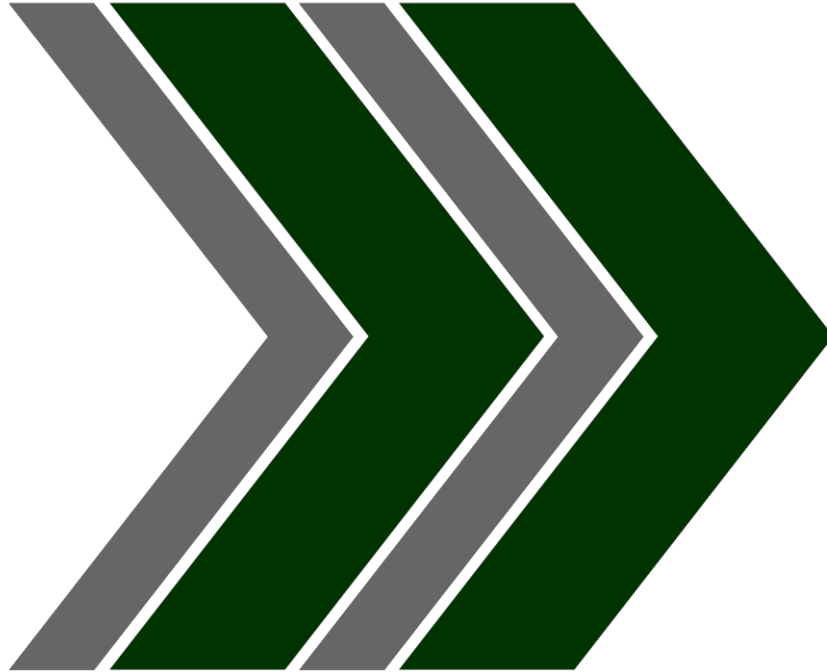


**A GUIDE FOR VETERANS APPLYING  
TO MBA PROGRAMS**



**SERVICE TO SCHOOL**

**MISSION - HELP EVERY MILITARY VETERAN  
TRANSITIONING TO SCHOOL WIN ADMISSION TO  
THE VERY BEST GRADUATE OR  
UNDERGRADUATE INSTITUTION POSSIBLE.**

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## **SECTION 1: ABOUT SERVICE 2 SCHOOL**

Life in the military is challenging, but transitioning after service can be the toughest challenge of all. We help make the transition smoother by providing **free advice** on the application process.

**Our mission is to help every military veteran transitioning to school win admission to the very best graduate or undergraduate institution possible.** To win you must **TRAIN**, so we provide:

Test prep recommendations

Resume assistance

Application and essay review

Interview prep

Network assistance

Here are a few schools we have helped veterans win admission into:

- Notre Dame's Mendoza College of Business
- Harvard Business School
- The Wharton School
- Columbia's Graduate School of Business
- MIT's Sloan School of Management
- NYU's Stern School of Business
- Temple's Fox School of Business
- The Kellogg School of Management
- Stanford's Graduate School of Business
- Texas A&M University's Mays Business School
- Law school: Yale, Stanford, Vanderbilt, and Harvard

**Service to School's Leadership: Augusto Giacoman,  
Chad Burgess, Khalil Tawil, Tim Hsia**

## **SECTION 2: GMAT PREPARATION**

While admissions officers stress that the entire application is important, it is often said that GPA and standardized test score are the most heavily weighed factors in an application. Besides their GPA, the only quantitative measure of an applicant's past performance is their GMAT score.

### The Importance of the Test

Some State and highly ranked private schools place heavy emphasis on standardized test scores. However, schools at the highest and lowest ends of the ranking spectrum probably place slightly less emphasis on test scores. The highest ranked schools are less concerned about test scores because they have so many applicants with strong marks that they can accept several with lower scores and still report to ranking agencies that entrants to their schools have high marks. Also, high ranking schools usually are not competing with other schools for applicants because of their prestige. On the lower end of the spectrum, some for-profit institutions do not require test scores. Many advertise this in order to appeal to applicants who are either frustrated by standardized tests or who feel that preparing for such tests is a fruitless undertaking.

That being said, practically 95% of all schools require applicants to report their scores and ultimately place a great amount of weight on the applicant's score. This may seem unfair given that the test score is only reflective of performance over several hours. However, many schools place great weight on test scores because: a) they believe that hard work, preparation, and repeated practice on the test is indicative of traits they want in their incoming class; b) a test is a standardized and quantitative ability to differentiate applicants; c) a test allows schools to better gauge the academic abilities of an applicant who has a low GPA or who has been out of school for a long time. This last reason is why test scores can be quite important for transitioning veterans. Transitioning service-members often have been out of school for several years. Hence, it is crucial for veterans to ensure that their test score represents their true abilities.

## ***How to Beat the Test***

### 1) Test Prep Company or Not

Test prep companies such as Princeton Review and Kaplan offer structured environments that are ideal for military applicants out of school for several years. Test prep companies are thorough because they cover every aspect of the test. Some companies such as Princeton Review are known for covering the basics, while other test companies like Manhattan GMAT are known for their detailed instruction on even the most arcane and rarely tested material. More than just test coverage and analysis, the test prep companies aid military applicants because they provide a structured setting. Hence, we usually recommend that veterans take a prep course. While the majority of the classes offered are in a structured classroom setting, some test prep companies offer self-paced online instruction. Also of note: many test prep companies offer a military discount.

The downside to preparing with a test prep company is that some prep companies provide material that is too basic or moves too slowly over topics that an applicant already understands. Moreover, some transitioning veterans who are still serving simply do not have the time to take these classes. For those who are busy with work, two good options are online classes or self-study.

With self-study, students can move at their own pace, focus on weaknesses in a certain area, and forego paying for a test prep class. However, we are generally skeptical of self-study because it is difficult to keep disciplined for several months without getting distracted. Also, score improvement guarantees offered by many test prep companies are another compelling reason for vets to use a test prep company. Should you decide to take the individual study path, you still should rely on the test prep material provided by prep companies provide.

### 2) Simulate test conditions and eliminate areas of weakness

Whether you decide to self-study or enroll in a test prep company, it is very important that one balance studying with test taking. Taking numerous tests without focusing on weaknesses is poor management of time. However, practicing on sample problems to hone overall ability can lead to a false

security as doing so eliminates the “time stress/crunch” of test-taking under simulated test conditions. The military stresses rehearsals and battle drills. Battle drills are analogous to simulated test taking and sample problems. A transitioning veteran needs to do both in order to succeed. Because it is so important to simulate actual test conditions, it is also imperative to find and study questions that have been used in previous exams. While test prep companies often provide their own questions, the best questions are those previously administered by the standardized test prep companies.

Save yourself money by not taking the test if you have not yet simulated test conditions or worked through multiple problem sets. A test score will not improve just because you have taken the actual test multiple times. However, your score will improve if you are diligently studying and preparing.

### 3) Prepare as early as possible; use backward planning

Beware of not allocating enough time to study for the test. Ideally, you will begin to study at least a year prior to your application. . The best possible scenario is that one has prepared for six months and takes the real test. Hopefully, the test taker is satisfied with the score but realizes that one can do even better. The applicant continues to study and six months after taking the first test, one gets the score of one’s dreams. Although one and done would be ideal, it is often not practical. Hence, one should not wait to take the test just days prior to an application is due. Oftentimes this is not feasible because many tests do not report official scores until weeks after the test has been administered.

### 4) Set Goals

With everything in life, setting goals helps one focus on the mission. Create a list of the schools you want to gain admittance into, and see what they report as their median test score for their latest incoming class. That is the score you should aim to get. Applying to schools is a numbers game. Schools want applicants who have a proven track record and who can handle the rigorous curriculum which students will encounter while they are attending the school. Aim to score either above or at the median test score that schools report. Ideally, one’s test score is not handicapping one’s ability to gain admittance into a certain school.

### 5) Take time to rest and refit.

One can only take time to rest if one has planned accordingly. That's why it is really important that one allots plenty of time for test preparation. If one has several months to prepare, one can take breaks in order to avoid test fatigue. Plus, the brain needs to recover after a hard workout (test preparation). When taking a test, bring along a healthy snack that will help sustain your body through several hours of test taking. Taking a four hour test can be a mentally and physically draining exercise. Bring whatever snacks you prefer, however, make sure you also use these snacks during your mock tests. You don't want to bring a snack you've never had before and then have an unexpected physical reaction. Taking a break can also help avoid straining relationship. Test preparation can be stressful to one's immediate family, as often it can feel like one test will determine one's fate. Taking breaks and adding fun activities between intense study sessions will help one break away from the gravitas of test preparation.

#### 6) Leverage online content

There are many great websites that provide strategy and helpful hints on how to "defeat" a test. These sites also are great places to share "war stories" about how one did or how one is feeling. However, don't waste too much time on these websites. Some advice given at these websites should be taken with a grain of salt. While websites geared towards a test or graduate school can be fun and entertaining, they can also include misleading statements.

## ***Suggested Courses & Materials***

### 1) Suggested Courses (Online and Classroom)

- Manhattan GMAT
- Knewton
- Kaplan

### 2) Suggested Materials

- Official Guides from GMAC – They offer Official GMAT Guides and smaller Verbal and Quantitative review guides
- Manhattan GMAT – They offer an eight book set that breaks down all the concepts covered on the GMAT as well as several Computer Adaptive Tests (CATs)
- Practice exams offered by GMAC

## ***Helpful Links***

### 1) How to Evaluate Your Practice Tests

<http://www.manhattangmat.com/blog/index.php/2011/05/23/evaluating-your-practice-tests/>

2) Discounted Online Courses through GMAT Club – You can find all the courses listed above at this website.

<http://gmatclub.com/marketplace/courses.xhtml?fl=menu>



## **SECTION 3: APPLICATION PREPARATION**

### *Resume*

In the military, resumes were worn on your chest, recorded in your DD214, and, for a few folks, plastered all over your truck's rear windshield. In the civilian world, though, no one hands out ribbons or medals, and human resource departments (Civilian S1's) don't carry a file that lists every school or certificate you've ever earned (nor do they lose it after every PCS).

It is critical, then, as a transitioning veteran to spend time honing your resume. The purpose of your resume is to communicate your experience and relevant skills to the applicable audience. That audience could be your target school or your target employer. Ultimately, a good resume gets your foot in the door, meaning, if you get an interview, the school or employer is interested in your personal background and potential because of the information which was listed on your resume. With our help, you can polish your resume until it shines, but here are some helpful hints to start:

#### 1) Choose a Format

We provide the formats we think are best on this site, but there are a multitude of formats that are acceptable. Typically, a resume comes in one of three formats. Most are chronological, they start in the present and work back 10-15 years. An alternate format is functional, listing skills you have that are applicable to the school or job you are applying to. Finally, there are hybrid models that combine both.

#### 2) Keep it to One Page

Unless you have recently finished your tour as Secretary of Defense, one page is all you need to have. This helps you edit down your achievements to the most impactful events you can. While being voted President of your summer camp between the 11th and 12th grade is impressive, it can probably be left off. However, don't be shy about your achievements! Service members come from a team-oriented environment where the group's achievement is more important than individual success. You should include awards received and the reason you received them. Also, it is easier for someone to advise you to take something off your resume than for them to suggest you add some information. You are the only person who knows all of your accomplishments. Don't sell yourself short. An additional benefit of a one-page resume is that it

makes your resume easier to read, hand off, and carry around.

### 3) Keep it Achievement Oriented

As a squad leader you were probably responsible for several soldiers and many thousands of dollars of equipment. You were also responsible for taking soldiers right out of boot camp and ensuring they were ready to go to war. These responsibilities are impressive, but rather than create a bullet like “Responsible for health and welfare of nine soldiers and \$10 K worth of equipment,” you should turn that into an achievement focused bullet such as “Trained, certified combat readiness, and ensured welfare of nine soldiers capable of mission execution anywhere in the world, increasing training readiness by 20%.” Evaluation reports are a great source for those who are creating or editing their resume. Don’t forget to include achievements listed in your most recent evaluation report.

### 4) Start with Verbs

All of your resume bullets should start with different verbs. I heard of a story about an HR specialist who would take a sheet of paper and cover up the entire resume except for the first word of every sentence. If he wasn’t impressed with the verbs he would throw it away and the applicant would not receive an interview. So what types of verbs are exciting? Coordinated, Led, Resourced, Synchronized, Managed, Leveraged, Spearheaded, Negotiated, Collaborated, Communicated . . . these verbs pack a punch and help your resume to do the same. Also, always use a different verb to begin your bullets. While managed, led, and supervised are similar, a squad leader leads a squad, manages two team leaders, and supervises the construction of a foxhole.

### 5) Tailor Your Resume

This is less important for schools, but critical when it comes to job applications and something to keep in mind when crafting your resume. Since the purpose of your resume is to highlight your experience and skills and the goal is to get you an interview, make sure that it is customized to the institution or employer you are applying to. For example, marketing firms prize the ability to communicate well, so make sure that your resume emphasizes your ability in this area. Financial firms want folks that are analytical, again, adjust your resume to show them that you can analyze the types of things that they will want you to analyze. The key is to do your

research on what skills are needed in your area, and then change your resume to stress those key traits.

A resume is a living, breathing document. Thus, you should try to update your resume periodically. With attention and practice it can become a work of art that lands you the interview to the school of your dreams.

## *Essays*

If you are at a party where nine out of ten people are smart but also full of themselves, would you rather hang out with the arrogant smart person or with the ten percent of partygoers who are nice and approachable?

I raise this hypothetical because this question is one that admissions officers encounter. Many schools get inundated with applicants who have incredible test scores and GPAs. However, the admissions office is not about simply admitting individuals who have a large prefrontal cortex. Rather admissions officers are often just as concerned about the potential and personality of the applicant. Numerous studies have shown that emotional intelligence can be a better predictor of success than simply raw intelligence.

The admissions essay is the one chance the applicant has to describe themselves and show how the person behind the uniform. The letters of recommendation allows admissions officers to view the applicant from the outside in whereas the essays enable the admissions office to understand the applicant and to view how the individual thinks and feels. The personal essays form the basis of the applicant's software that the admissions office plays on their hardware. This piece of software enables the reviewer to experience and understand the program and to see whether the software is entertaining, driven, or smart.

Every aspect of the application is important: letters of recommendation, resume, standardized test score, past academic performance, and essays. Schools use the resume, standardized test score, and past academic performance to gauge ability. The resume and transcript describe you quantitatively whereas the essay allows the applicant to describe themselves qualitatively: to discuss past experiences, goals, and who they are as a person. For military applicants, the essay is extremely important because it provides the applicant a chance to shatter stereotypes that people associate with those in the military. Moreover, a good essay helps an applicant to show that they are more than just an "egghead" and that they are an interesting person who one would like to talk to at a party, hangout with, employ, and want as a leader. It enables the military applicant to display his or her intangibles or soft skills.

### *Tips for Writing a Good Essay:*

#### 1) Content

We feel foolish for mentioning this but we nonetheless feel compelled to remind applicants that when writing their essays, they need to remember to answer the prompt (i.e. get to the point or BLUF). If the prompt says what are your short and long term goals, then your first few sentences should probably start with: “My short term goal is . . . My long term goal is . . .”

Occasionally you will be asked a question that asks you to discuss a setback. Again, it is important that one describe a setback but when faced with this type of question it is also important to address how one dealt with the setback. Always first answer the question, and then seek to answer any second or third order issues that the prompt addresses.

Tell an honest and truthful story. Two parts to this advice, the first is obvious-do not embellish your story. Yes, as veterans we have –crazy, but true, stories to tell. Don’t be afraid to relate these crazy stories. The second part of the advice is to tell a good story. Your essay should not be a restatement of your resume. It is a chance to describe yourself beyond your past accomplishments and test scores. Provide a history of who you are and tell this personal story by providing a narrative. Avoid having your essays read like encyclopedia entries. Try to have your essays read like a classic short story: a combination of intrigue, humor, suspense, and thoughtful reflection. People like to read narratives/stories as opposed to reports.

Describe rather than state. For example, instead of writing that you are a “hard worker” you should describe how you spent countless hours patrolling with your soldiers and how you often staying up late to check up on your soldiers who were pulling guard in the middle of the night.

The best essays are those that work together to provide a comprehensive overview of who you are as a person. Select certain events that highlight pivotal moments in your life and discuss how these incidents impacted you. Think about the essays before you start writing. Generate 2-3 responses for each prompt. Outline your responses, and generate 2-3 responses for each prompt/question. Then select the response that provides the most interesting or gripping life narrative.

Try to ensure that not only do your essays embody who you are as a person but also that the essays are synchronized with your resume and applicant background. We highly recommend that applicants have their essays augment (i.e. provide greater details to points in) their resume.

## 2) Grammar

Your writing should be succinct, fast paced, and easy to read. Avoid passive sentences unless you deliberately intend to use a passive sentence for stylistic reasons. Proofread your essays for misspellings, grammatical errors, and for redundancy.

The best way to avoid grammatical errors is to conduct several edits. We profess that we are not the best editors of our own work. Therefore, when we write, we often write the first draft, sleep, and then review the draft. This process lets us remain fresh and open minded when reviewing our first draft. After editing our own drafts several times we let friends and family review with a fresh set of eyes and perspective to the tone and content of our essays. After they have given some feedback, we incorporate their advice, and then review the essays a few more times before submitting the final draft.

The writing process is time consuming. Start early, outline, and continuously seek feedback on essay improvement.

## 3) Style

Use powerful openers. At a party one is unlikely to engage someone in a conversation if it takes the person ten minutes to discuss something interesting. Similarly, in an essay a powerful opener can capture the attention of the reader.

While writing about your military career can be interesting, sometimes the best essays are those that shatter stereotypes. Thus, a good essay can be more than just about a deployment. Instead, a military applicant might want to consider writing about hobbies or interests that are unrelated to the military. Discussing these hobbies their intersection with a future career or occupation can render a powerful essay.

Everyone has a unique writing style. However, seek to have your writing be accessible. The best essays are those with a clear voice, structure, and overall theme. Avoid long sentences and paragraphs. Long sentences can be visually unappealing and also difficult to comprehend.

## ***Letters of Recommendation***

If there is a single aspect of the application process you have the least control over, it is the Letter(s) of Recommendation. This is where it's up to the people you've interacted with throughout your professional career to make you shine in a positive light. All you can do is guide them. Therefore it's critical to choose the right recommenders and make the process as easy as possible for them.

The Stanford GSB's Admissions website says it best. When choosing recommenders, *“Choose individuals who know you well, and who will take the time to write thorough, detailed letters with specific anecdotes and examples. The strongest references will demonstrate your leadership potential and personal qualities. We are impressed by what the letter says and how it reads, not by the title of the person who writes it.”*

Personally, I chose individuals who'd consistently expressed an interest in my success and personal well-being – people who'd encouraged me to develop as an individual and leader, not just as a career Army officer. In case you do not know already, securing a generic LoR from your Division Commander is not nearly as impressive as, say, a letter from your Company Commander, who watched you lead soldiers and nurtured your development as an officer. I ended up asking my former Detachment Commander (from my time as an XO), a former Budget Division Chief (a Lieutenant Colonel and senior supervisor I'd maintained a good relationship with), the President of our local West Point Society (whom I serve alongside as a board member), my former boss (2-Star Deputy CoS whom I'd been an XO for), and a fellow Captain whom I'd worked for while working on the General's staff (for my GSB application peer recommendation). I thought these individuals could offer different aspects of my leadership and professional life – from a more traditional, tactical role (XO) to my extracurricular involvement with my alma mater. If you have the luxury to bring in a diverse mix (i.e. did you coordinate any long-term projects through with ACS and have an administrator you can reach out to for a LoR?) of recommenders, I would do so. Admissions officers are looking for diversity, even among military applicants, but you'll ultimately have to use your best judgment.

I approached my recommenders using a three-phase approach by making initial contact, presenting them with my “game plan,” and following up. After making initial contact with my recommenders via e-mail or telephone call and securing their support, I sent each recommender a tailored Microsoft Word document that included my reasons for attending business school, a copy of my resume, a timeline for submission, and a summary of my

accomplishments (think event/general date) while working for/with them. I may have gone overboard here, but chances are your recommenders are busy – and it’s been a while since you worked for them – so it’s a good idea to jog their memories and make coming up with anecdotes as easy as possible. Don’t be afraid to follow up regularly with your recommenders, since they should be held accountable for the commitment they made to you. It’s your responsibility to talk with them honestly about your future aspirations and communicate just how important your applications are to you.

Being stationed overseas, it was a little difficult to follow up with some of my recommenders. I set their deadlines well before Round 1 deadlines (in early September) and all of my recommenders – except one – missed my deadlines by at least a few days. In the end though, all my letters of recommendations were received by mid-September, leaving ample time for me focus on the rest of my applications prior to submission. Again, start early and set early deadlines, at least a week in advance of your Round deadline. You don’t want to be frantically calling your recommenders the day before the application cutoff.

I strongly believe that my letters of recommendation were critical in helping me gain admission into a couple of top programs. Virtually across the board, this year’s MBA applicants face shorter essays (for example, HBS cut down its application from five essays to two, 400-word essays and Stanford GSB set a 1500 word limit). One can logically assume that more weight is placed on other facets of the application, including letters of recommendation and the interview.



## **SECTION 4: AFTER ACTION REVIEWS OF SUCCESSFUL APPLICANTS**

*Kim Jung, Harvard Business School, 2015*

*You can't do it alone. You must do it alone.* These are the titles of two separate chapters in Bill Murphy Jr.'s *The Intelligent Entrepreneur*, which tells the story of three MBA graduates' entrepreneurial adventures. These seemingly contradictory phrases highlight two important similarities between the MBA application process and entrepreneurship:

*You must rely on others.* If you think that gaining admission into a top-tier MBA program is something you can accomplish alone – simply by acing the GMAT and spending hours upon hours on your essays – you're in for a surprise. Everything from letters of recommendation to essay revision and interview prep requires leveraging others' experiences and support. With that said...

*You must rely on yourself.* Stellar letters of recommendation and polished essays will only get you so far. No one will spend hours studying for and take the GMAT for you. Additionally, writing and rewriting essays, managing letters of recommendation, taking additional coursework if needed, and preparing for interviews requires unwavering dedication. The MBA application process is a test of desire and perseverance. However, trust me and the long line of individuals who has gained admission into a top program: receiving an offer of admission from one of your dream schools is worth the effort. If you're committed to attending an MBA program, shoot for the best programs you have a chance at – and go all in.

Below, I'll focus on the former aspect of MBA applications and offer my reflections on the support I received from others throughout my admissions process. I'll begin with a broad overview of the help I received from Service to School and then delve into the topics of school selection and letters of recommendation – two areas where I was glad to have spent some extra time and effort.

### ***Service to School***

I was introduced to Tim Hsia and Gus Giacomani, co-founders of Service to School, by a friend of mine who was finishing his Cornell S.C. Johnson School MBA program as an exchange student in Korea. He encouraged me to reach out to Tim and Gus via the Service to School website in its earlier stages. Tim

and Gus were incredibly responsive and provided me immense help with the following aspects of the application process:

*Resume.* Tim and Gus provided me a template to use, along with a number of sample resumes, and took a look at my draft resume. Based on their feedback, I learned that focusing on actions and results rather than roles and responsibilities is essential to preparing a successful MBA application resume. Reaching out to school ambassadors. Tim and Gus suggested the following advice: speak (via phone call, Skype chat, or e-mail) with a current student in order to get a feel for each school. I felt I could literally “fit in” with each school that I researched and experienced no red flags. However, reaching out to current students and alumni is an incredibly useful means of gaining real-life perspectives and tips at navigating the application process – and can provide valuable essay/interview fodder.

*Essays.* I asked Tim and Gus both to look over my essays for two of my top choice schools. They provided incredibly honest and straight-forward feedback. Probably the most useful feedback I received was to be more direct and specific into my career goals. Apparently being vague about career goals is a common mistake among many MBA applicants – not just military veterans. With that said, when approaching career goals essays, I’d look to narrow down a “target” industry, function, and geographic location. Don’t worry about being held to these objectives down the road – admissions committees are simply looking for well thought out, realistic goals.

*Interview preparation.* I conducted a mock HBS telephone interview with Gus, who kept the interview right at 30 minutes. Gus offered me two great pieces of advice: 1) be more “punchy” and really focus to answer behavior questions using the STAR (Situation, Task, Action, Results) method and 2) don’t be afraid to showcase your passion. These schools want you to be energetic and excited about your dreams. The earlier on in an interview you’re able to “tap into” things you’re passionate about, the better. As a general piece of advice, I would conduct mock interviews with friends and family using questions from ClearAdmit’s interview wiki. I also purchased the Harbus Interview Guide to prepare for my HBS interview.

Overall, the guidance and support I received from Tim and Gus was fantastic. They were incredibly knowledgeable and reliable resources and undoubtedly helped me gain admission into two of my top choice programs. As a result, I stand by as a school ambassador and will gladly talk with any prospective military applicants about the MBA application process. As I noted earlier, the application journey should not be trod alone. Now, onto the topics of selecting schools and managing letters of recommendation.

## **School Selection – Which Schools and When to Apply?**

When choosing which schools to apply to, I focused on schools with high job placement, global brand recognition, and desirable geographic locations. As a transitioning military officer with no previous business experience hoping to transition into consulting, I looked for programs with high placement in the management consulting field. You really can't go wrong with any of the top 20 MBA programs as far as job placement goes. However, global brand recognition was an important factor for me, since I am open to the idea of working abroad at some point in my career and understand the benefits of having an accessible, global network. Also, I wanted to apply to at least one school in New York due to the strength of the veterans' network there.

I began by checking out a number of schools' websites in order to get a grasp of the culture, curriculum, teaching style, and general "feel" of each program. Prior to finalizing my list of schools to apply to, I also reached out to current students at each of the schools to assess "fit" and to confirm or deny any impressions I had about the school – a tip I received from Gus Giacomani. Each of the school ambassadors I spoke with was more than helpful to share his experiences and, as I mentioned earlier, I easily felt I could "fit" into every program I explored. However, I've spoken to numerous other applicants where this was not the case, as they definitely felt preference for specific programs based on students/alumni they'd spoken with.

I ultimately chose to apply to four schools, all in Round 1 (with the exception of Columbia Business School, which has rolling admissions): Harvard Business School, the Stanford Graduate School of Business, the Wharton School's MBA Program, and Columbia Business School. Needless to say, these were all "reach" schools and I would have been happy with acceptance into any one of them.

When selecting schools to apply to, I encourage a prospective applicant to look at the schools' class profiles and see how he or she stacks up. If an applicant is well below the median GPA and GMAT, there's still a chance for the applicant to leverage their leadership experiences to gain an edge on the competition. However, this would still be the exception, not the norm. Therefore, if you fall well below your dream schools' stats and are set on attending business school, I'd encourage you to apply to one or two safety schools. When selecting a safety school, however, ask yourself: If this were the only school I got into, would I still leave active duty and sacrifice two years of income to attend this program? If the answer is not a resounding "yes," I would not apply to that program. In my case, I planned to apply to a few other top schools (Chicago Booth, MIT Sloan, Berkeley Haas, and Kellogg) in Round 2 in case nothing panned out in Round 1.

If feasible, I strongly encourage applicants to apply in Round 1 rather than the later rounds. Sound familiar? This is a general piece of advice that admissions officers often throw around. Round 1 is typically less competitive than Round 2 and, I believe, applying early shows the admissions committees that an applicant has adequately planned for and committed to the process. In my case, I had taken the GMAT by April of the year I planned to apply, leaving ample time for the remainder of the application process. If you still have ample time to prepare for (next year's) application season, you owe it to yourself to plan ahead, take the GMAT or GRE early, and give yourself the best chance of admission.

### **Letters of Recommendation – An Exercise in Project Management**

If there's one aspect of the application process you have the least amount of control over, it's the Letters of Recommendation. This is where it's up to the people you've interacted with throughout your professional career to make you shine in a positive light. All you can do is guide them. Therefore it's critical to choose the right recommenders and make the process as easy as possible for them.

The Stanford GSB's Admissions website says it best. When choosing recommenders, *“Choose individuals who know you well, and who will take the time to write thorough, detailed letters with specific anecdotes and examples. The strongest references will demonstrate your leadership potential and personal qualities. We are impressed by what the letter says and how it reads, not by the title of the person who writes it.”*

Personally, I chose individuals who'd consistently expressed an interest in my success and personal well-being – people who'd encouraged me to develop as an individual and leader, not just as a career Army officer. In case you do not know already, securing a generic LoR from your Division Commander is not nearly as impressive as, say, a letter from your Company Commander, who watched you lead soldiers and nurtured your development as an officer. I ended up asking my former Detachment Commander (from my time as an XO), a former Budget Division Chief (a Lieutenant Colonel and senior supervisor I'd maintained a good relationship with), the President of our local West Point Society (whom I serve alongside as a board member), my former boss (2-Star Deputy CoS whom I'd been an XO for), and a fellow Captain whom I'd worked for while working on the General's staff (for my GSB application peer recommendation). I thought these individuals could offer different aspects of my leadership and professional life – from a more traditional, tactical role (XO) to my extracurricular involvement with my alma mater. If you have the luxury to bring in a diverse mix (i.e. did you coordinate any long-term projects through with ACS and have an administrator you can

reach out to for a LoR?) of recommenders, I would do so. Admissions officers are looking for diversity, even among military applicants, but you'll ultimately have to use your best judgment.

I approached my recommenders using a three-phase approach by making initial contact, presenting them with my "game plan," and following up. After making initial contact with my recommenders via e-mail or telephone call and securing their support, I sent each recommender a tailored Microsoft Word document that included my reasons for attending business school, a copy of my resume, a timeline for submission, and a summary of my accomplishments (think event/general date) while working for/with them. I may have gone overboard here, but chances are your recommenders are busy – and it's been a while since you worked for them – so it's a good idea to jog their memories and make coming up with anecdotes as easy as possible. Don't be afraid to follow up regularly with your recommenders, since they should be held accountable for the commitment they made to you. It's your responsibility to talk with them honestly about your future aspirations and communicate just how important your applications are to you.

Being stationed overseas, it was a little difficult to follow up with some of my recommenders. I set their deadlines well before Round 1 deadlines (in early September) and all of my recommenders – except one – missed my deadlines by at least a few days. In the end though, all my letters of recommendations were received by mid-September, leaving ample time for me focus on the rest of my applications prior to submission. Again, start early and set early deadlines, at least a week in advance of your Round deadline. You don't want to be frantically calling your recommenders the day before the application cutoff.

I strongly believe that my letters of recommendation were critical in helping me gain admission into a couple of top programs. Virtually across the board, this year's MBA applicants face shorter essays (for example, HBS cut down its application from five essays to two, 400-word essays and Stanford GSB set a 1500 word limit). One can logically assume that more weight is placed on other facets of the application, including letters of recommendation and the interview.

## **Closing Thoughts**

The MBA application process requires tremendous personal dedication and sacrifice – studying for and taking the GMAT, researching schools, taking additional coursework as needed, writing essays, and preparing interviews all require hours of effort. Making the commitment and knocking out the GMAT

is step one. In addition to putting in hours in the aforementioned activities, however, the most successful applicants are not afraid to reach out to help from others. I'm sure this continues to be the case throughout school, in the business world and beyond.

In closing, if you're set on pursuing an MBA, I would recommend that you start the application process as early as possible, reach out to others as needed and, when the time comes, pay it forward.

## ***Tom Pae, Columbia Business School 2014***

Applying to business school can be as much fun as doing a reading & writing assignment for your Battalion Commander. It's time consuming, never convenient, and always done at the last minute. However, there are ways to make the process less burdensome if done right. The entire process took me over a year and half in three different locations (Iraq, home station in Germany, and my second home station in the US). Now, the application doesn't require international travel but it is not something that can be whipped out overnight. For those who love to procrastinate: Godspeed and good luck. A business school application is completely different than any other grad school application; each school requires a different set of essays, recommendation questions, and research. Needless to say, don't procrastinate and commit fully to this process. If all possible, resist the urge to use Ctrl+P and Ctrl+V! I've decided to do an After Action Review on my application (in good 'ol issue-discussion-recommendation format).

### ***Issue: Phase 1 (standardize test)... then Phase 2 (application)***

**Discussion:** Ever try to write a Paragraph III (execution) of an OPORD without writing Paragraph I (situation). What! You have?... Ouch. Yeah, that's what it feels like writing a business school application while trying to study for the GMAT or GRE. You don't want to write essays for a school while simultaneously figuring out if you're even competitive enough for that school. I had a buddy of mine who was planning to apply to Harvard RD1 prior to taking his GMAT. He spent countless hours on his essays. His rationale was RD1 applicants get priority for admissions before the other Rounds so he had to submit the application in early. The GMAT was just an afterthought in his mind since last year Harvard admitted someone with a low 500 GMAT score. This excuse was probably the worst way to rationalize why the importance of studying for the GMAT comes between playing two hours of Modern Warfare 3 and watching Entourage reruns.

**Recommendation:** The GMAT is an albatross, but conquer it first before focusing completely on your essays. Expect to take the test two, three, or even four times. Remember, schools just want your best score and you can't take the test back to back since the GMAC requires at least 30 days before taking the test again. Based off this information, look at your timeline and see when your application is due for the round you're applying to. I don't care what schools say about test scores... they are important. Not only in terms of assessing your performance in graduate school and school rankings, but also important to a lot of employers such as those who work in the financial services or in consulting (the two areas where most military vets go, post

MBA). So just get the GMAT over with and conquer this early. You'll thank yourself in so many ways. Once the test score burden is off your shoulder, you can clear your mind and write the appropriate essays.

Give yourself about three to four months or so to study for the GMAT (some might need more). Do it on block leave and take a course if you can. It's fairly different than the ACT or SAT since it's an adaptive test that gets harder each time you answer a question correct. So no matter who takes it (a former First Captain or 'the Goat')—it is equally difficult. Don't let your previous standardized test score indicate how you'll do either. I've talked to people who barely broke 1100 on their SATs and scored above a 720 on the GMAT and I've met people who scored 1400+ on their SATs and couldn't break 650. There are a ton of military applicants who score above a 700 on the GMAT. This might shock those Type-A officers who feel like they are the "smartest guy they know". So, unless you want to handicap your position, score high enough to separate yourself from the other military applicants since undoubtedly, you'll be compared against them.

Courses that I recommend: Manhattan GMAT—This course explains each math concept rather than just cool tricks to beat the system. You can't fail if you know the mechanics behind the problems. The course is expensive but there's a cheaper online version that would fit anyone's schedule. The course is six-weeks long but you have an ungodly amount of homework to accomplish so give yourself another month to finish up on that. Another great course is MasterGMAT which provides all their information and studying online. This is great for the person who doesn't want to rely on textbooks. Plus, MasterGMAT is an adaptive course so if you're weak on one area, it will focus on that area until you're proficient. Either way, both courses take a while to complete and you'll most likely focus your entire time on getting the GMAT score you want. Bottomline, get this over with before you cross over the Phase II (the application).

### **Issue: School Fit and School IQ**

**Discussion:** Want to avoid the 'Kiss of Death' ding? Then don't write about how you want to be a part of Columbia's Cohorts when they call their group's Clusters. Or avoid talking about how great Kellogg's finance program is over others (they can smell a Booth essay a mile way). Or even worse, spell Kellogg with only one G. Show the admission's committee that you've done your research and that it's THEIR school that you really, *really* want to go to. You can do this by showing them how much inside knowledge you know about the school.



**Recommendation:** Show business school X your school IQ; clearly let them know you've done your due diligence in getting to really understand their school and that you're not just pasting other essays together. Showing the school your love for them requires more than just simple internet research. You'll most likely have to visit the campus to gain this type of knowledge. For instance, I remember visiting Georgetown and seeing that their students used some weird Nintendo-Wii remote control to vote on topics in class. I wrote down this unique observation and was planning to reference it either in an essay or in an interview. I read something on NYU Stern's 'Opportunity' newspaper about how it is frustrating to get into the bathrooms during Beer Blast since you had to open the door with an access key. This is great knowledge to write an essay (Essay Three can discuss how you'll develop a new type of Beer Blast Door). It shows you've done the research and you're well in tune with student campus activity to include manipulating an inside joke towards your advantage.

Another smart technique that shows you know about "X" Business school is to use "X" Business school's resume format. Every application requires a resume. Take the extra hour or so to redevelop your common resume to fit the school's standard. You can easily acquire the school's resume format by contacting the veteran club at that respective school or just doing a Google search. Something this simple shows you've done your research and that you're malleable towards their standards. During my last business school interview, the first thing the interviewer said was, "Thank you for putting it in the 'X' school's format. It makes it a lot easier for me to read." I can't definitively say that's why I got accepted after the interview, but the little things count.

### **Issue: Future Goals Essay (in areas other than IB or Consulting)**

**Discussion:** What I've noticed time and time again is that most military members are attracted towards investment banking or consulting. Why? Who knows... could be the high pay, the prestige, abundance in networking, or because "what else would a military guy with an MBA would do?" Either way, for those who don't want to go into those fields, how do you convince business schools that you need an MBA? More importantly, how do you convince those schools that you know enough about that specific industry to land a job there?

**Recommendation:** Your first step: LinkedIn. It's the quintessential online networking tool you will use in our media driven world. It also helped me immensely by allowing me to access various individuals in different careers for advice. For instance, I knew I had to clearly state where I wanted to go in my career for my long term/short term goals essays. I wanted to work in

industry “X”, however I did not know enough about industry X to write anything substantial. This is where LinkedIn came into the picture. I did a few searches within my groups and found individuals who are currently working in “X” industry. Almost all were very helpful and responded immediately when I reached out to them for advice and inside knowledge. Most often then not, they always had information that benefited some aspect of my application, especially if that individual earned an MBA. Each person also referred me to someone else I could talk to... which continued to build my network and provided additional information to craft a well thought out “Why career X and why an MBA would help me get into career X essay”.

### **Issue: The other 95% of the Application**

**Discussion:** GMAT, check. Essays, double check. Time to submit and watch those interview invites populate your inbox, right? Not so fast **Recondo**. You’re forgetting that the application requires more than your creative writing skills and your test scores. There’s that other 95% of the application you forgot about. When schools say they use a holistic process, they emphasize this by making you fill in about twelve pages of responses, each with it’s own mini-essay type question. I understand that the emphasis on Business School applications are essays and test scores, but don’t neglect the other important stuff in the application. At a recent career fair, I talked to a Wharton admissions representative who stated that she can tell if an application was crafted haphazardly or last minute just by looking at how the application was prepared overall. Translation: It’s easy for us to ding someone when they didn’t put in the time and effort with everything else.

**Recommendation:** Each application is usually broken down into several parts. Take about 10 to 15 minutes each day to work on a small portion of the application. Or force yourself to complete a specific part of the application before the end of the week. For instance, tell yourself that you will complete the “biographic data” portion of the application by Friday night. After that, try to complete the “Career History” portion of the application by next Friday, and so forth. Setting clear benchmarks and breaking down the application within its parts are helpful methods to consume the overall application without rushing to failure.

Also, when you get into the “discuss your job role and function” portion, please, for the love of God, DON’T copy and paste your job description from your OER. Not only will the wording be beyond esoteric, the description wouldn’t jump out to anyone even if they understood what a “Battalion AS3” means. Use your previous reviews as an outline, however translate it and describe your key accomplishments in normal speech. Helpful hint: If your

civilian friend (or parent) can understand your application, than you're on the right track.

### **Issue: Career Progression**

**Discussion:** Career progression is in reference to a specific part of the application where you list all your previous jobs up until your current position. Admissions officers want to see that there's a natural upward progression in ones' career. It shows motivation and indicates that the individual will create their own self-fulfilling prophecy (*if you're successful enough to get into a top business school, than you're likely to succeed without it...however since you're getting one anyways, might as well be from our school so we can take credit for your success*). Either way, career progression reaffirms an applicant's competitiveness and shows that the individual has done his or her best to achieve at the next highest level.

Most military officers have held about three or four positions and increased in rank by two pay grades by the time their military commitment is complete. However, since rank and positions are rarely understood by anyone outside the military, it's hard to show upward mobility. Just remember, if your civilian friends or even your parents have a hard time understanding how a lieutenant outranks a master sergeant, expect the same from admission's officers.

**Recommendation:** Don't assume everyone understands rank or positions. Show that your position as an executive officer was a promotion from your job as a platoon leader (literally, say this in the application). Help them understand the amount of responsibility and work you had as an assistant S3 operations officer, helping to plan the training cycle in preparation for a 12-month deployment overseas. Your job as the S4 Supply Officer was more than just ordering equipment; you had to analyze and optimize the supply chain and procurement operations for over 600+ personnel within the unit. Constantly play up your role and show that each job or rank required additional time, commitment, and resources. I know the Army ostensibly places tactical maneuver guys ahead of staff peers, but don't let that be a discriminating factor when you apply to graduate school. Remember, you're showing the admission's committee your ability to rise within the ranks and reconfirm your past supervisors view that you're the unit's rock star (even if you were only on staff).

### **Issue: Recommendations**

**Discussion:** I've received a great "Army" recommendation before, one that writes about my potential in positions of increased responsibility and how I

can take command any day now and yadda yadda yadda... you know the rest. They make you sound like you can walk on water but they're really just filled with superfluous words without a personal touch to it. But that's how a military recommendation is suppose to read. Your recommenders need to understand that a good business school recommendation is not written in the same manner as a good "military recommendation". Unfortunately, a recommendation is out of your control, right? Wrong.

**Recommendation:** Personally, aside from the essay and GMAT, this is probably one of the most important parts of the application so plan this strategically. 1) Don't write your own recommendation. Not only can they depict your writing style, I'm sure it borders on the ethical side of the house too. If you need to write something to jog their memory, write a detailed "support form". 2) Tell your recommender what schools you're applying to. Give them a write up of each school and discuss the unique personality that each school has. Using this information, your recommender can provide a stronger justification for the school you're applying to. For instance, I gave my recommender a write up of how collegial and inclusive Kellogg is compared to others. My recommender then decided to emphasize my teamwork abilities over all other characteristics he could have written about. 3) Provide unique, specific events that your recommender can write about. This includes times when you failed or made a mistake but rebounded from it. These stories humanize your recommendation and will make it stand apart from others. Detail and personal anecdotes are absolutely necessary for great recommendations to stick out; eliminate superfluous words and hone in on certain situations where the leadership personally recognized your efforts (note: It doesn't have to be a great time as a combat leader! I say again, you don't need to have a Silver Star moment for recommenders to write about). Specific events also show that your recommender really understands you and can vouch for your talents. 4) Don't fall into the trap and think that a one-star General has more clout than a Major. This is absolutely false especially if a high ranking officer barely remembers your name, let alone what you've done in his or her eye as a leader.

Finally, keep in touch with those people whom you want to receive a recommendation from. Facebook has made this a bit easier for you to occasionally drop in and post a birthday message or provide a status update. I know how awkward it can be to come out of the blue and ask a person to write you a stellar recommendation two or three years after your last interaction. So do what you can to keep the amber glowing in terms of your relationship. One technique, especially if they don't have facebook, is to send a status update on what unit you're with or sending them a cool article via e-mail. Say something like, "Sir/Ma'am, I thought you might like this article. Remember when we

faced the same situation back in Afghanistan/Iraq. Thought you might enjoy the read. Hope all is well.”

Remember, every applicant has unique attributes so take all this information with a grain of salt. Nothing I write is set in stone for any school, but with the amount of research and mind numbing strategy I’ve dedicated myself to, I think I have some insight that can lead to success. What else would explain how I got in

## ***Martin Peters, Harvard Business School 2014***

### ***GMAT (GRE)***

The first step towards getting into any business school is taking the GMAT (or as I later learned, the GRE suffices). My change of command date for my first command was originally in May 2010. I planned to take the GMAT in late April 2010 because I knew my first months of command would be hectic. My change of command date was pushed to the left and I took command in early April 2010. Thus, I ended up skipping my GMAT appointment (and forfeiting my registration fee of \$250 because I did not cancel it seven full days prior to the appointment) because of work commitments (my prediction was true – I was insanely busy throughout my entire command).

#### LESSON:

- **Officers need to take the GMAT as early as possible** prior to command while keeping in mind the 5 year validity of scores. This will allow you to:
  - 1) **Take the exam closer your undergraduate education** (less material you have forgotten)
  - 2) **Assess where to improve, allow time to improve, and retake the test** if necessary
  - 3) **Give you a back-up plan**, lending credence to the phrase “a bird in hand is better than two in the bush,” especially if later events overcome your ability to take it a second time.

As expected, company command absorbed the great majority of my work and personal time. Taking the GMAT became a lower priority to training, planning, and other duties. When my unit received deployment orders to Baghdad, Iraq for July 2011 it reprioritized taking GMAT. I scheduled another appointment but did not prioritize studying because of work demands. The week prior to the test I took leave in order to study. My commander granted me two days, Tuesday and Wednesday.

I went to the library and conducted a cram session using GMAT preparation books I got from the local library. I am thankful I did, because it is **REMARKABLE** how much math you will forget. Embarrassed, **I actually**

**forgot how to do long division**, but it all quickly came back. The **benefits of studying are obvious**: 1) it refreshes your memory on lost subjects and common mistakes, 2) it develops an understanding of how the test is conducted and its format, and 3) it gives you confidence.

LESSON:

- **Develop a study plan and stick to it.** It takes discipline!
- **If you want to save money, go to the library** and look at the available study books available before deciding whether to purchase study guides from [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com). I found the library had sufficient material, and while I purchased some guides off Amazon, in hindsight I could have saved \$100 (although \$100 is a small price to pay for GMAT improvement).
- **The Army will reimburse you for one test.** You can choose the GRE (\$160), or the GMAT (\$250). All it requires is the official scores (received in the mail three weeks after the test), your CAC card, and a form available at the Education Center. Within a week, the \$250 was direct deposited into my checking account.

After completing the test, the proctor printed out my score. **I received a 640.** While not dismayed, I was not happy with the result. Given the amount of time I had been out of school (7 years) and the time I studied (2 days) I accepted the score stoically, but I knew I had to get a better score if I wanted to increase my chances of getting into a top school. From various friends at Harvard, Stanford, Wharton, online forums, a Cameron-Brooks headhunter, the business school websites referencing their median scores, everyone and everything said I needed a 700 or above.

Taking this to heart, I decided to take the GMAT again – but my unit was deploying in early July 2011. Mid-June to July 2011 would be block leave (I had already purchased tickets to Nicaragua from mid-June until July) and the chain of command said we would be deploying within 72 hours of returning from leave. I tried to reschedule the GMAT before block leave, but could not because that would conflict Graduate Management Admissions Council's (GMAC) 31 days between exams rule. This left me with several options:

Option 1: **Shift my flight** to Nicaragua to the right, take the test at Fort Hood, and spend a shorter time in Nicaragua.

Option 2: **Not take the test**

Option 3: **Take the test in Nicaragua.**

I did not shift my flights because I wanted to maximize the time my time in Nicaragua. Not taking the test again was not an option (or so I thought). I decided to take the test in Nicaragua. The only test location in Nicaragua was UCA (Universidad Centro Americana) in Managua, Nicaragua. I scheduled the test within the first week of vacation so I coordinated it into our trip plans between coming back from Grenada and flying to the Corn Islands.

I conducted a reconnaissance of the site on the morning of the exam (I had an afternoon exam). This was essential because knowing limited Spanish, it took me a while asking various people for help and having students and officials leading me to various buildings before an administrator understood what I was trying to do.

She took me to the building and told me it would be open 15 minutes before my appointment time. I returned to the hotel and in the afternoon I returned to the testing building. After a couple of difficult math problems, my rhythm, momentum, and morale were broken. This was compounded by an extremely loud air conditioning, a sticky keyboard, and an ancient computer. Melodramatically, I reasoned I could be dead in 6 months by an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) (even though by this time in the Iraq War it was an extremely small chance) and I should spend time with my wife, and that I could take the GMAT at Camp Victory when I was in Iraq (which did not happen). I **left the test early and incomplete** – not the wisest thing and I do not recommend it if you can avoid it.

#### LESSON:

- **Take the GMAT early.** Take it well before a deployment allowing you time to take it a second time.
- **Be aware of the fine print.** You have to wait 31 days between exams and can only take it five times within a calendar year. This may impact your scheduling.
- **Don't take the GMAT on vacation.** Vacation is your time to relax. While I did study in Grenada, it was frustrating sitting at a café studying math problems when there was so much going on.
- If you take the GMAT in a foreign country – definitely **conduct a recon of the site the day prior**, or morning of. This is more important if you don't speak the national tongue.
- **Ear plugs work wonders.**

A post-script to my GMAT adventures was that I took the GRE to apply for an Army fellowship. I did much better percentile wise on the GRE than on the GMAT. While in Iraq, I was discussing my application with a family friend



who was on the Darden military admissions committee. She gave me the advice that a 640 was very low and my chances of getting in b school would be tough. I was dismayed because I figured the rest of my application would bolster my “low” GMAT score – this broke this notion. Following this, I came upon this website. I also learned various business schools were accepting the GRE. I looked it up and found Darden, Wharton, Harvard, and MIT accepted GRE scores. Like a Phoenix coming out of the ashes, my hopes were resurrected and when I told the family friend about my GRE scores she told me those were well within the range they looked for.

#### LESSON:

- **Research which schools of take the GRE.** You may be able to save yourself an unnecessary test.
- I am not an admissions committee member so I do not know how they view someone turning in only GMAT, only GRE, or both scores. But if one of your tests is lacking (like my GMAT), and another is good (like my GRE) I reason it **could not harm to turn in both.**
- I was unable to take the GMAT again at Camp Victory while in Iraq because the Signal University located there closed down as part of the draw down after we were there for two weeks (ignoring the fact I was at a base 50 miles south of Baghdad). **My GRE was my saving grace. Plan for Murphy’s Law.**

#### *Applying while deployed*

With my GMAT complete, the rest of the application could be completed while deployed. I applied to only four schools after talking with friends, reading forums, and pouring over school websites in order to find the best fit:

- 1) Harvard because of the brand and reputation, location, the Case Method, the general management focus, and all of my friends there said the equivalent of “it was [or is] the best time of my life,”
- 2) Wharton because of brand name and reputation, the ability to choose majors, and proximity to Virginia – I have fond memories of Philadelphia (and UPenn) from Army-Navy games
- 3) MIT because of brand name and reputation, and location

4) Darden because of reputation, its proximity to my family and friends, affordability – the GI Bill would pay for the entire tuition, the Case Method, and location (Charlottesville is an awesome city)

The applications were relatively straight forward with the main parts consisting of 1) administrative data (filling in GMAT/GRE scores, academic history, parent's information) 2) letters of recommendation 3) essays and 4) resume. The majority of applications were due in October 2011 with the schools announcing results in December 2011 thru January 2012.

### **Letters of Recommendation**

For my letters of recommendation I asked my old Battalion Commander from my first assignment. I choose him because he could highlight one of the more “academic” and business-related jobs I have held – a battalion civil military operations officer while deployed to Afghanistan.

My second recommender was my current Battalion Commander – he could comment on my command time as a Headquarters and Headquarters Company commander in garrison and in Iraq.

My third recommender, for the schools requiring one, was my Battalion Commander during my first company command. I performed well and he would be able to describe my performance in garrison leading a company through the Army transformation process. I did not choose a recommender from my West Point days because I failed to keep in touch with any of my old professors.

I had kept in touch with all of my former (and current) bosses so they were not surprised when I asked them for a recommendation. I sent them my college transcript, all of my evaluation reports, and a letter of intent with a brief description of the aspects I was hoping they could touch on (it is terribly cliché but I was trying to mold the “Marty Peters” brand that I was presenting to the schools). All of the letters of recommendation are completed electronically with each school's application program.

### **LESSON:**

- Choose your recommenders carefully in order assist the “brand” you are trying to present to the business school. Pick ones who know you well and can comment on various aspects of your career and on you as an

individual. During interviews, schools drew questions from my recommendations.

- Keep in touch with old professors to give yourself recommendation options.
- Tell your recommenders as early as possible. All of mine are very busy Army officers in command of hundreds and, in one case, thousands of troops.
- Send polite reminders via email and phone (as necessary). One of my recommenders did not submit a recommendation until two hours before the deadline – I was stressing heavily until he emailed me saying it was complete.
- Identify a secondary recommender and ask them if they would be willing to fulfill the role. Ask your recommenders to complete their forms a week before the deadline. If they do not/you are unable to make contact with them shift the recommender to your secondary one. You do not want to have an incomplete application because a recommender was unable to write one for you.

## **Essays**

At West Point I took the prep course for cadets selected to apply for the Rhodes, Marshall, and Mitchell scholarships. While I did not earn a scholarship, I grew from the application process in understanding how to write personal essays. This assisted me greatly in writing my business school applications.

For the essays, I brainstormed ideas. Given my background (older (29), unique Army experiences, deployments, more direct leadership experience) I did not have any trouble finding ideas to answer the prompts. I wrote my essays during my free time. The motivation to write the essays was not hard to find since after-work activities were limited. On completion and after initial edits, I sent my essays to 1) Tim Hsia (Stanford Business School and friend from USMA) 2) Andrew Hitchings (Harvard Business School and friend from USMA) 3) my father and 4) my wife. They all provided me very good feedback. I did not make any major changes with my essays, but all helped me with the flow, better wording, and making my writing clearer.

LESSON (nothing shocking here):

- Brainstorm for ideas.
- Make your essays personal. If you do not feel embarrassed about showing them to people they are probably not personal enough.

- Send your essays to people in business school, or alumni. They can give you a good assessment.
- Send your essay to someone who has no experience with the military! They will ask the questions that need to be asked if you are writing an essay with a military subject.

## **Resume**

For my resume, I relied on the same group of people who assisted me with the essay. My father focused on grammar, while Andrew helped me with the format and how to “de-militarize” my resume to make it readable to civilians. He sent me the format he used and I modeled mine off of his.

### **LESSON:**

- Write in a manner that a civilian can understand – easier said than done. Civilians do not have an understanding of a battalion, an IED, or PTSD. Deliberately write in clear, simple terms.
- Ask alumni or current students for an example resume – it will save you time and make your efforts more efficient.

## **Submission**

The applications were easy to prioritize based on due dates. I turned in the majority of my applications 1-3 days in advance. Submitting early was a relief because all I had to do afterward was wait.

### **LESSON:**

- Check to ensure if your schools offer military discounts or if they waive the fee for military personnel. MIT and Darden both did. It saved me several hundred dollars.

## **Interviews**

With the applications submitted, I was absorbed once more into commanding a company while deployed. Gradually, the interview invites came in. I received interviews to all of the schools I applied to. I immediately called and emailed the schools to explain my deployment situation. The schools were very flexible with me. In the end, I was able to video teleconference using Skype, and all the schools were willing to conduct the interviews via phone if necessary (for those at more remote and rustic locations in Afghanistan).

Darden conducted a video-teleconference, Harvard conducted a video-teleconference, Wharton conducted a phone interview, and MIT was going to be a phone interview. My primary concern was bandwidth. The government non-classified network did not support Skype, the internet available for purchase by Soldiers was too slow to video Skype, and the MWR computers only supported voice Skyping. Fortunately, a Soldier in my company knew I was searching for fast internet and he said he had a connection that could support video Skype – I did not ask questions. I used his computer for my Darden and Harvard interviews.

To prepare for the interviews I conducted a very realistic Skype interview with my classmate and veteran ambassador Jamal Eason. He was incredible in helping me prepare and giving me frank and honest feedback. I also went to [www.clearadmit.com](http://www.clearadmit.com) and compiled a list of possible questions; I then went through answering them in a large word document. While many were not even asked, the process helped me organize my thoughts. There are also several questions I prepared for because they are very likely to be asked (not all inclusive):

- Is there anything you want us to know that your application did not say?
- Do you have any questions? (HAVE SOME PREPARED!!!!)
- Take us through your resume.
- Why X school?
- What will you bring to your classmates?
- What are your concerns?

In addition, I had an interview for the Army fellowship I applied for and it also acted as a mock interview. It helped me to organize my thoughts and prep me for the business school interviews.

The Harvard and Darden video teleconference videos went well. In hindsight there were things I could have improved on each, but when I closed the Skype session I did not have a feeling of “bombing” the interviews.

The Wharton interview was over phone; I thought it went terribly. My Wharton interview was the VERY last day of Round 1 interviews and while I drank two cups of coffee in order to keep my energy level up (time difference made it evening in Iraq), the interviewer was dead tired. I felt sorry for him because I know he had probably conducted hundreds of interviews in the past month and I was most likely one of his last ones. The Wharton interview was prompt, my answer, directly into the next prompt (with no reference to my previous answer), my answer, directly into next prompt, my answer. It was so

impersonal, unlike the Harvard and Darden interviews which were very friendly and conversational.

#### LESSON:

- I recommend scheduling your interviews early for your round. At a minimum, it should help you avoid a burned out interviewer.
- Map your answers to certain “give me” questions that are likely.
- Be yourself.

#### **Acceptance**

In late December 2011, I received offers of admission from HBS, Wharton, and Darden. MIT offered me an invite to interview in January, and since I considered HBS my top choice I wrote them a thank you letter and declined the interview. After considering all options for a couple weeks, I accepted HBS's offer of admission and declined Wharton and Darden's offers. I believe my success in getting into the schools was based on my strong academic resume from West Point, strong military record with emphasis on leadership, and deliberate, thorough planning aside from the GMAT debacle.

I turned in my Unqualified Resignation packet on 1 February 2012. My chain of command, while disappointed, was supportive and there were no offers of incentives to stay in (such as allowing me to go to HBS and remain in the Army) from Infantry Branch. I am planning on taking an Army IG Course at Fort Belvoir for three weeks, then take my National Guard job, clear Fort Hood, begin terminal leave mid-June, move the family to Boston, throw everything in storage, and go traveling in Central America or Africa for 50 days. Good luck to all the veterans out there applying!

## ***Wharton as a Couple by Amy Daschle 2014***

The other day I told my husband, “now is the best time ever to be a veteran.” There is an incredible focus on providing incentives for companies to hire veterans and widespread support for transitioning veterans to pursue advanced schooling. I believe this is the case because of the amazing example veterans who have joined the private sector before us have set by bravely pursuing challenging career opportunities. They have proven that their unique skills in the military do in fact help a company’s bottom line. Their successes and ability to flex, adapt, and perform is why NOW is the greatest time ever to be a veteran. Thanks to them I am writing this blog as my husband and I (both U.S. Army vets) prepare to join the Wharton MBA Class of 2014.

I chose a slightly different path than many veterans (like my husband) who transition out of service and begin an MBA program. I went through a recruiting firm nearly 18 months ago and I took a role in Sales and Marketing at PepsiCo. During this time I also chose to serve in the Army Reserve and took command of a drill sergeant training unit. When I decided to apply to business school, I had two very different experiences in two very different industries to discuss. This point of view was of course very different from my husband who is transitioning out of the Army after nearly eight years. He, like most military applicants, views business school as the opportunity to build fundamental business skills and transition to a different industry. As I applied to business school, the challenge for me was tying together my military and civilian experiences and explaining why I needed an MBA. After all, I already had a managerial role in a corporation so why would I need to spend \$100K+ on tuition (plus lost income for two years) to get another managerial role two years later?

For those in my position, I believe it is critical to explain why an MBA will help propel your career forward and it is also important to explain what you will bring to the classroom having had both military and corporate experiences. I focused on explaining to the admissions committee how I had found ways to apply the leadership skills I developed overseas to my role in the corporate world. I did this through my essays and interview, by providing vignettes of leadership concepts I honed in the military and portrayed how I had to flex and adapt so that I could leverage these skills in a corporate setting. I believe that focusing on tangible scenarios where my overseas experiences helped guide me through challenging corporate situations helped shape my application’s focus.

The other important element to highlight for veterans coming from a corporate role is to share how you still lack fundamental business skills such as accounting, strategy, marketing, etc. While the past 18 months at PepsiCo have taught me a lot, I still do not have nearly as much exposure to the business world and different industries which I feel is necessary to propel my career forward. It is like jumping into the military without having had any formal military training through an ROTC, OCS, or Academy type of program or graduating from high school and going straight to Iraq having never gone to any sort of military school for new recruits. While taking steps like starting a business reading list and taking classes certainly helped me in my role, I explained in my application how it still was not enough for me to grow and perform at the level I wanted.

As for applying as a couple, I asked a few Wharton admissions reps how “couples” applying to the same program are treated. Many business schools have a block you can check off if you have a significant other also applying, but I was told quite frankly that both applicants must get into the program on their own merit. I know of another dual military couple who both got into top business schools, but I think the same goes for them and any others applying as a couple: make your application stand out in your own unique way. The application process is grueling but taking the time to know yourself, know what you want to do, and find ways to market yourself will go a long way. The key is having the courage to apply and put yourself out there. The worst thing that can happen is that they say “no” and you will learn a lot about yourself through the process. Best of luck!



## **SECTION 5: Miscellaneous Good to Know Information from S2S's Blog**

### ***Top Mistakes Veterans Make***

After several years of working with veterans trying to win admission, I've seen a few common themes emerge across applications. Here, I highlight some of the typical mistakes veterans make. Ultimately, I have found that many vets do not allow themselves enough time to put together their best admissions packet, they do not have a clear vision of their future, and they do not communicate effectively. The root cause of each of these mistakes is easily recognizable and, for the most part, easily remedied.

#### **1) Applications are too rushed**

Veterans do not give themselves enough time. When they decide to leave the service, most active duty soldiers and officers have been promoted a few times and have a very important and demanding duty position. It is very difficult to manage both the grueling applications process and demands of leading soldiers or planning operations. Even more difficult, many veterans find themselves trying to apply to schools from Iraq or Afghanistan or trying to apply right after returning from such a deployment.

In balancing these demands, transitioning veterans find themselves on very tight timelines and try to mitigate their situation by working on applications for an hour a night or on weekends. This can work, but any snag, such as a low test score, can wreak havoc on an admissions packet. Further, veterans are often competing against folks who treat school applications as a full time job.

***The Solution:*** Preferably, a veteran can steer their career into a less demanding job such as being an ROTC instructor or working as an active component supporting the Army Reserve. Since such jobs are often difficult to get, and the operational tempo of many active units do not allow for such planning, the best solution is to plan alternatives:

- **Cast a wide net for schools** – if a veteran is determined to leave the service, then they need to make sure to apply to more than just one or two top schools.
- **Plan for testing snags** – Of course veterans always ace standardized tests, right? But if they do not, vets need to make sure to plan for

multiple takings of any standardized tests and for the ability to take an online or in person test taking class (like Kaplan)

- **War-game worst case scenarios** – If the worst happens, a veteran should still have a plan. There are other options to school such as Teach for America, going into industry, or just staying in the service another year. In the unlikely event a veteran does not win admission – they should know what route they can take to make themselves more competitive for the next cycle

## 2) Future goals are a little fuzzy

As a boy I clearly remember wanting to be a ninja. I was an analytical 8 year old, so I assumed that once I came of age I would go to a ninja academy for training, learn how to back-flip, then go off on ninja-activities. Then I read a comic book that shattered my vision. In the story a far more immature 8 year old was asked what he wanted to be when he grew up. The 8 year old replied with enthusiasm “A cowboy-ninja!” I dismissively thought “How ludicrous!” Then, insight descended, and I realized my own dream of ninjahood was equally as silly.

Similarly, veterans do not always have the most realistic career goals. Their vision of the future is unclear and often reveals a lack of understanding of what a degree can do for them. It is perfectly fine if a veteran wants to be a non-profit governmental consultant making millions but they must do some research.

**The Solution:** Vets should look at the companies that are doing what they want to do, look at the people at those companies, and look at how those employees got there. Also, veterans should think about their skills and talents and what motivates them. Find a fit between skill, talent, motivation, and the real world job market and nothing will stand in a vet’s way.

## 3) Veterans cannot find their voice

What makes a veteran a strong candidate? Military MBA lists a few good reasons [here](#), but I think it boils down to leadership and life experience. No one else at business school (or law school or undergraduate study) is going to have the leadership, maturity, teamwork skills, or general get-the-mission-accomplished attitude of our veterans. Unfortunately, veterans do not always know what they bring to the table, and, even with they do, they do not know how to tell their story.

**The Solution:** Veterans should be introspective about what they have accomplished and how that translates to their future endeavors. In other words:

- **Avoid jargon** – This is simple but still important. Not everyone knows what an IED is, but roadside bomb or enemy explosive are synonyms that are easier for civilians to understand. Further, not everyone knows the difference between a lieutenant, captain, or major. If a veteran is a lieutenant doing a major’s job, then that veteran must explain they are working at a level much higher than normally expected.
- **Develop a value proposition** – Veterans should think about the value they bring to the table and try to develop a brief statement that encapsulates the thought. For example, “As a veteran I can bring proven leadership and a unique ability to solve problems in adverse conditions to xyz school.” Thinking of a succinct, encapsulating value statement will help vets tell their story more powerfully.
- **Be proud of accomplishments** – As the writer Paulo Coelho has said, “Modesty is the ultimate manifestation of pride.” Veterans lead teams that accomplish great things, and they need to take credit for it. While it is admirable to be humble, in an application a veteran needs to upfront about what they have done and how strong a candidate they are.

Our veterans have proven themselves to be leaders that can handle the toughest challenges war can bring. Now, facing the new and in some ways more daunting challenge of transitioning to civilian life they should think about how to avoid the common mistakes of not allowing enough time, not making solid long term goals, and **not telling their story.**

## ***Thank You Emails***

Thank you emails are important! Recently, the Managing Editor of Business Insider wrote that the biggest mistake job applicants made was not sending [Thank You emails](#). The same thing can be said for business school applicants. When applying to schools, you should send thank you emails to just about everyone you interact with – students, professors, and definitely admissions officers. Here are a few tips on writing a great thank you email:

### ***1) Timing***

When sending your thank you email, do not send right after you meet or wait for days. While there is some flexibility around this, I generally recommend 18-24 hours after the meeting occurs. If you send a thank you email right after your meeting, you risk looking like you just want to get the email over and done with. But if you wait too long, then you risk looking like you forgot or are not organized.

### ***2) Content***

Your thank you email should be memorable while also expressing your gratitude and interest. Showing your gratitude is straight forward – just say “thank you!” but being memorable can be tricky. I usually try to recall a specific aspect of the conversation where I felt a connection with the person or where I felt genuine interest in what they had to say. For a business school interview thank you email, I might write something on how I appreciated an answer to a question: “I really appreciated your insight on Professor Z’s Valuation Course,” or something that came up in the course of conversation: “I enjoyed our discussion about veterans at [insert school here] and I was fascinated on your take on why vets were successful.”

I also recommend saving your thank you emails. To save time, you can sometimes use the same general format to send to multiple people – just make a few personal touches and you are done. Be careful though – make sure you do not send the exact same email to people from the same school. People will talk to each other about you as a candidate and if they see the same email it will make it seem like you are not making a strong effort.

### ***3) Spelling & Grammar***

This goes without saying, but double check your emails! Make sure you have spelled names correctly and have no “their, there” or “two, too” mix ups. For

best results, run that spell check and read the email aloud to yourself a few times before sending.

## ***Interviewing***

So, tell me a little bit about yourself...

Well, uh, I like playing video games, drinking beer, and lifting weights. Not necessarily in that order [Buzzer Sound].

One of the first questions you'll have to answer in your admissions interviews will sound something like "tell me about yourself" or "walk me through your resume." They both mean the same thing – give the interviewer a rundown of the past 5 years or so in, oh, a couple minutes. This might seem a little overwhelming, but with a some organization you can condense your college and working life into an attention grabbing (and short) speech.

### **1) Segment your life**

Break up the past 20-odd years into distinct periods of time. I segmented my time mostly by position, so it was West Point, 1<sup>st</sup> Deployment/Platoon Leader Time, 2<sup>nd</sup> Deployment/Executive Officer time, and Squadron Chief of Operations. Choose segments that are meaningful to you and that make sense in terms of your personal timeline.

### **2) Craft a one sentence description of your segment and determine key lessons**

For each of your segments, describe them in a sentence that a middle schooler could understand. For an executive officer in an infantry company, the description could sound something like "As an Executive Officer, I was responsible for three things: 1) Making sure \$160mm in equipment was ready to go to war, 2) Making sure 160 soldiers were ready to go to war, and 3) Be personally prepared to act as second in command of an infantry company".

Next, think about the most important thing you learned in that position. As a Platoon Leader, for example, you probably learned about the importance of communication. Of course, you probably learned a lot of things, but try to pick 2-3 key takeaways. Use these key takeaways to highlight important and transferrable skills that you have. Make the takeaways applicable to the program you are applying to. Leadership and communication are great, but so are problem solving, analytical ability, and management.

### **3) Create a transition**

Link each of your segments with a transition statement. For example, if you have a Platoon Leader segment and an Executive Officer segment, the transition statement would be something like “After my strong performance as a Platoon Leader, I was selected to become second in command of a company and took a position as an Executive Officer .”

You should explain the transition, but also portray the move in as positive a light as you can. Remember, 90% of people will have ZERO experience with the military. You need to explain that you are being promoted to positions of increasing responsibility. While we do not necessarily call the move from Platoon Leader to Executive Officer a “promotion” in the military, it is one.

#### **4) Pull it together and cap it with a value statement**

We now have all the elements of the masterpiece: distinct segments, descriptions, key lessons, and transitions. Can you guess the next step? Pull all the pieces together and **start painting**. Start with the first segment, briefly describe your role and what key lessons you learned, then transition to the next segment and repeat.

For example: “As a platoon leader I was responsible for accomplishing our infantry mission while looking out for the health and welfare of 40 soldiers. From my time in this position, both in Iraq and back home, I learned the importance of taking care of people who work for you. By making sure my soldiers were healthy and motivated, I ensured the success of my platoon as we conducted hundreds of patrols and decreased insurgent attacks in our area. After my strong performance as a platoon leader, I was selected to become second in command of a company and took a position as an executive officer.”

Finally, we still need a conclusion. A strong conclusion will help set you apart from other candidates and put an **exclamation point** on the interview. One of the best ways to conclude your resume overview is with a value statement. That is, what unique value are you bringing to your target school. For example, to highlight leadership you could say “After 5 years in the Army, I’ve had intense experiences, at home and in combat, that have helped me understand how to mobilize people from diverse backgrounds towards a common goal. I feel I can bring this perspective of leadership to XYZ university and build strong relationships with my classmates and future employers.”

Lastly, practice, practice, practice. Practice out loud, not just in your head (everything sounds good in there). A good rule of thumb is to have a couple

versions of your resume overview (one minute and two minute), that way you can read your interviewer and cut the overview short if they appear disinterested. Remember, the most important part of any interview is to try and establish a genuine connection with your interviewer. Good luck and when you hear “tell me about yourself” in your next interview, know what it really means.



## SECTION 6: EXAMPLE TRANSITION TIMELINE

Category	Action	Jan (-1)	Feb (-1)	Mar (-1)	Apr (-1)	May (-1)	Jun (-1)	Jul (-1)	Aug (-1)	Sep (-1)	Oct (-1)	Nov (-1)	Dec (-1)	Jan (0)	Feb (0)	Mar (0)	Apr (0)	May (0)	Jun (0)	Jul (0)	Aug (0)	Sep (0)
Initial S2S Support	Sign Up for S2S support			+																		
	Assign Ambassador Buddy			+																		
GMAT	Begin GMAT Study																					
	Take GMAT					+																
	Continue GMAT Study																					
	Take Final GMAT							+														
Application Prep	Select Target Schools																					
	Visit Target Schools																					
	Schools Release Essays								+													
	Turn in Drafts to S2S								+													
	S2S Returns Drafts									+												
	Turn in 2nd Drafts to S2S										+											
	S2S Returns Drafts											+										
Send Recommender Guidance									+													
Final Essays, Resume, LOR's Complete										+												
D Day	Submit Applications																					
Interviews	Receive Interview Invitations																					
	Conduct Mock Interview 1 w/ S2S													+								
	Purchase proper interview attire																					
	Conduct Mock Interview 2 w/ S2S																					
Conduct Actual Interviews																						
University Decision	Acceptance - Congrats!																					
	Denial - Coordinate w/ S2S for contingency																					
Transition Prep	G.I. Bill																					
	Yellow Ribbon																					
	Financial Aid																					
	Insurance																					
	Find Housing																					
	ETS																					
Execute Move																						
Begin School	Help Other Veterans Apply																					