



Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program

*For Those Who Serve and Those Who Support*SM

VOCATIONAL CAREER TRAINING¹

The following article provides awareness of a vocational training program that is available for Service Members. The program is an example of a major corporation providing educational opportunities for Service Members outside of the typical education system.

¹ <http://www.thenewstribune.com/2013/11/04/2872208/jblms-microsoft-academy-trains.html>; Last Updated November 2013

The News Tribune

By ADAM ASHTON

Staff writer November 4, 2013

JBLM's Microsoft Academy Trains Troops for
Civilian Life and Promises Work in Tech



Spc. Jason Cross (left) is one of the first students in the Microsoft Software Engineer Academy at Joint Base Lewis-McChord. Chad Zhu of Saint Martin's University is leading the four-month course.

ADAM ASHTON — Staff writer

Spc. Jason Cross is spending his final weeks in the Army learning something new to set himself up for life outside the Armed Forces.

The infantryman is part of a Microsoft-sponsored pilot project at Joint Base Lewis-McChord that helps military service members earn certificates to become software engineers.

Better yet, it guarantees them work at Microsoft or one of its contractors once they complete the program.

"This is an awesome opportunity," said Cross, 37, a University Place resident who did not know what he wanted to do for a career once he made up his mind to leave the Army after his deployment to Afghanistan last year with a Lewis-McChord Stryker brigade.

Cross and about two dozen other service members belong to the first batch of soon-to-be graduates from the Microsoft Software and Services Academy. [The company announced today that it intends to expand the effort to military installations in California and Texas.](#) More locations could follow.

The veterans get a smooth transition to life after the military, while Microsoft stocks up its talent pool with former troops who know how to work through complicated challenges.

"We've seen for many years that veterans are self-disciplined," said Microsoft Vice President and General Counsel Brad Smith. "They drive for results. They're very passionate about what they do. They're great problem solvers and there's no doubt in our minds that veterans make great employees."

At Lewis-McChord, the academy folds into several increasingly sophisticated programs aimed at helping veterans leaving a downsizing military gain a foothold in the private sector.

Over the last 12 months, 8,500 troops left the military out of Lewis-McChord. Base officials expect similar numbers over the next few years as the Army carries out a plan to shed some 80,000 active-duty soldiers from its Iraq War peak. About 35 percent of troops separating from the military at Lewis-McChord likely will settle in the Evergreen State.

The transition programs picked up steam after Congress passed Washington Democrat Sen. Patty Murray's Veterans Opportunity to Work (VOW) Act in 2011. It provides tax credits for companies that hire veterans and requires troops leaving the military to attend classes on making a transition to civilian living.

From there, the base has been hosting ever-larger job fairs, reaching out to state agencies and orchestrating tours of colleges and businesses for separating troops.

The VOW Act "was a paradigm shift," said Robin Baker, Lewis-McChord's transitions services manager.

Today, the unemployment rate for all veterans is 6.5 percent, lower than the national average of 7.2 percent. Recent veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan era have a higher unemployment rate at 10.1 percent.

Troops leaving the military face a basic challenge explaining how their service translates to civilian work experience. Former Army Capt. Palmer Batt hit that wall last spring after his third combat tour in five years as a staff officer in a Texas-based armor battalion.

He said he went "door to door" in San Francisco looking for work after his homecoming, but felt he was getting a cold shoulder because businesses did not understand how his experience would help them.

Meanwhile, Batt looked around at his ambitious peers from his upbringing in Marin County and saw them thriving after college.

"When you started looking for job, you felt like you were being penalized for serving," said Batt, 27, a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.

He went to a job fair in Washington, D.C. last summer where he planned to pitch himself as a project manager for construction companies. He struck up a casual conversation near an Xbox display without thinking he'd ever work for Microsoft. They took him aside and gave him a few tests.

They liked his potential and offered him a job almost right away.

"That was the most stress reducing moment of my life," Batt said.

Batt, now a Seattle resident, dropped by the Lewis-McChord class last week to reach out to the students. They're a professional network for each other now, he said.

"These guys up here are going to have a seamless transition," said Lewis-McChord education services specialist Tim Bomke, who helped organize the software academy.

Lewis-McChord offers two training programs similar to the Microsoft program. One guarantees work for pipe fitters; the other helps troops who are interested in heating and air conditioning.

In each case, the military allows troops to treat the classes as their day job. They go on post every day in civilian clothes and learn their new trade from civilian instructors.

What's been missing has been an avenue for soldiers interested in technology to get on a career track for white collar work.

The Microsoft academy is taught by instructors from Saint Martins University in Lacey. Microsoft contractor Launch Consulting administers the program and expects to hire some of its graduates.

"This seemed like it was right up my alley," said Sgt. Chad Townes, 25, of Olympia.

He's a military intelligence soldier who served on two deployments to southern Afghanistan with a Lewis-McChord Stryker brigade.

He knew he had a proclivity for technical work on his first tour in 2009-10 when his commander ordered him to assemble a system that would bring live video feeds into their headquarters. It was complicated because the system had to communicate with the Army's secure networks.

He had five days to do it, and no past experience with the system. He got it working.

Townes came home from his second tour with the 2nd Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division last fall and felt uncertain about whether he wanted to stay in the Army.

He loved his job, he said, but wanted to test the waters. He attended a job fair and came away feeling uninspired.

"There's nothing really solid" committing an employer to a soldier, he said.

Something clicked when he learned about the Microsoft program. He knew it was time to make a new life outside the service.

"I was ready to put all my eggs in one basket," he said.