



# warriors <sup>1</sup>to workforce

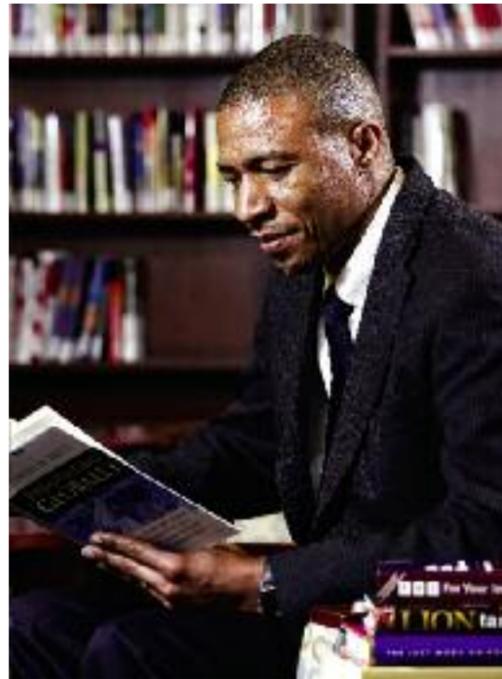
Veterans Program in Frederick Puts Nation's  
Severely Wounded Vets on a New Career Path

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by james eppard  
photography by erick gibson

**A**lex Guerriero tried in vain to remember the name of the river in Iraq that was the objective of his 132nd mission. Then he concedes, “My mind wants to forget it.” The 25-year-old New Jersey native was a team leader in a light infantry battalion of the U.S. Marines in Iraq in late 2008 when he got orders to run what would be his last official mission—to provide cover for a tanker delivering fuel to U.S. patrol ships on the river.

As always and without hesitation, when someone said to Guerriero, “G, we need you to



Veterans like Wallace Edmonson, who spent 20 years in the U.S. Army, are finding new challenges in the training and internship opportunities of the Warrior to Workforce program.



drive,” he responded with a gung-ho, “Alright, let’s go.” It was a similar call of duty that moved him to enlist in the Marine Corps straight out



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 Wounded while serving in Iraq with the Marine Corps, Alex Guerriero left active duty in 2009, in search of a new beginning. “I didn’t know what to do,” he says.

of high school in 2005, nearly four years after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. “We could see the towers burning from my high school,” he says.

The mission succeeded, but on the return trip, a 200-pound bomb detonated under Guerriero’s armored vehicle. The explosive shock was felt miles away, but amazingly there were no fatalities. Guerriero and his team were trapped in their vehicle, the doors welded shut by the blast. They were rescued only after improvising and launching flares to call a nearby platoon. The next day, Guerriero left the hospital sore but otherwise feeling fine. He wasn’t.

“All that just came and flooded back,” he says. “The (thoughts of), why am I alive? How did that happen? I wish that truck was my coffin. I was just a mess ... And then I got out and got worse.”

### Lost and Found

Each year about 160,000 soldiers leave active duty. In 2009, Guerriero was one of them. He enrolled in college back home in New Jersey, but had trouble focusing while his team was still deployed in harm’s way. He lost his job, his apartment, his car and almost his girlfriend, who was expecting their first child.

“I was just lost,” he says. “I didn’t know what to do. I wasn’t going to turn for help, you know? I’m better than that. At least, that’s what I thought.”

He did eventually reach out to the non-profit Wounded Warrior Project, which directed him to a new program of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs that hopes to train and then employ severely wounded veterans in the VA’s massive and highly technical contracting and procurement program. The Warriors to Workforce Internship Program, launched last December at the VA’s Acquisition Academy in Frederick, is a three-year curriculum designed to turn highly motivated wounded veterans into career contract specialists who will help manage the VA’s \$20 billion in annual contract spending. The program is modeled largely on the VA’s three-year-old Acquisition Internship School, where the mission is to develop a new cadre of contracting experts to serve the VA’s

fast-growing constituency, the result of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“Because many of the warriors who are coming back are wounded, we wanted to give them a career opportunity in the VA and in federal government,” says Lisa Doyle, chancellor of the Acquisition Academy and one of its chief designers. Doyle played a central role in crafting the school’s curriculum, as well as the 80,000-square-foot facility, which looks more like a high-tech web start-up than government-issue bricks and mortar. She designed the school to centralize and standardize training for all of the VA’s 40,000 staff who buy the goods and services that support veterans. The Warriors to Workforce program, which has 23 interns in its inaugural class this spring—including seven Purple Heart and two Bronze Star recipients—is a natural extension of that mission, Doyle says.

“Many of the warriors intended to be in service for 20 years and then retire,” Doyle says. “That was cut short and now they have to figure out what’s next. This gives them not just a job, but a career path of what’s next.”

### A Challenging New Mission

For Billie Wesseling, 36, who joined the Army out of high school in 1994 and deployed 10 years later to Iraq while her two kids were still toddlers, the opportunity to seize a potentially rewarding career path was the chance of a lifetime. After leaving the Army where she was a generator mechanic, she spent five years toiling as a civil servant, seeing little advancement for all her hard work. In the Warriors to Workforce Internship Program, she and her cohorts, as they are called, all begin as entry-level VA employees. The expectation is that they will emerge from the program in three years with at least 24 hours of business college credits, valuable professional certifications, a clear career path and a salary nearer the upper strata of the federal pay scale.

“I knew from being in federal service that it was a good opportunity,” says Wesseling, the only woman in the class. “Very rarely do you go up the ladder that you go up in this academy.”

That’s not to say that it’s easy. Far from it.

“This program isn’t meant for everyone,” says Doyle. “You really have to have a desire to be in the business world. You really need to be ready to go to college and study business and be



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The only woman in the inaugural class of the Warrior to Workforce Internship Program and a U.S. Army veteran, Billie Wesseling realizes the program is offering her a tremendous opportunity to forge a new career path.

interested in serving in that field when you graduate—awarding contracts, negotiating contracts, managing a significant workload. But really what it ends up being is veterans serving veterans. So that’s pretty cool.”

Interns spend four mornings a week in business classes taught on-site by Mount St. Mary’s University professors. The classes are compressed and last eight weeks in order to provide the interns 24 hours of class credits in their first year. The second and third years will be spent primarily on job rotations and



Special on-site laboratories and a vocational rehabilitation specialist helps wounded veterans with both their mental and emotional skills.

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certification courses. All the while, the interns are expected to carry out their workload as full-fledged VA employees while learning the ropes.

For most of the interns, this is their first exposure to college-level classes and office culture. And in many cases, it’s very different from the work they’re used to doing.

“It takes a little adjusting being in a classroom all day long versus being outside or

being able to go and do things at different offices,” says Wesseling, who moved with her four children from Louisiana to Charlestown last Thanksgiving to join the program. “It takes a lot of mental adjustment when you first get in to tune yourself around it.”

### Unit Cohesion

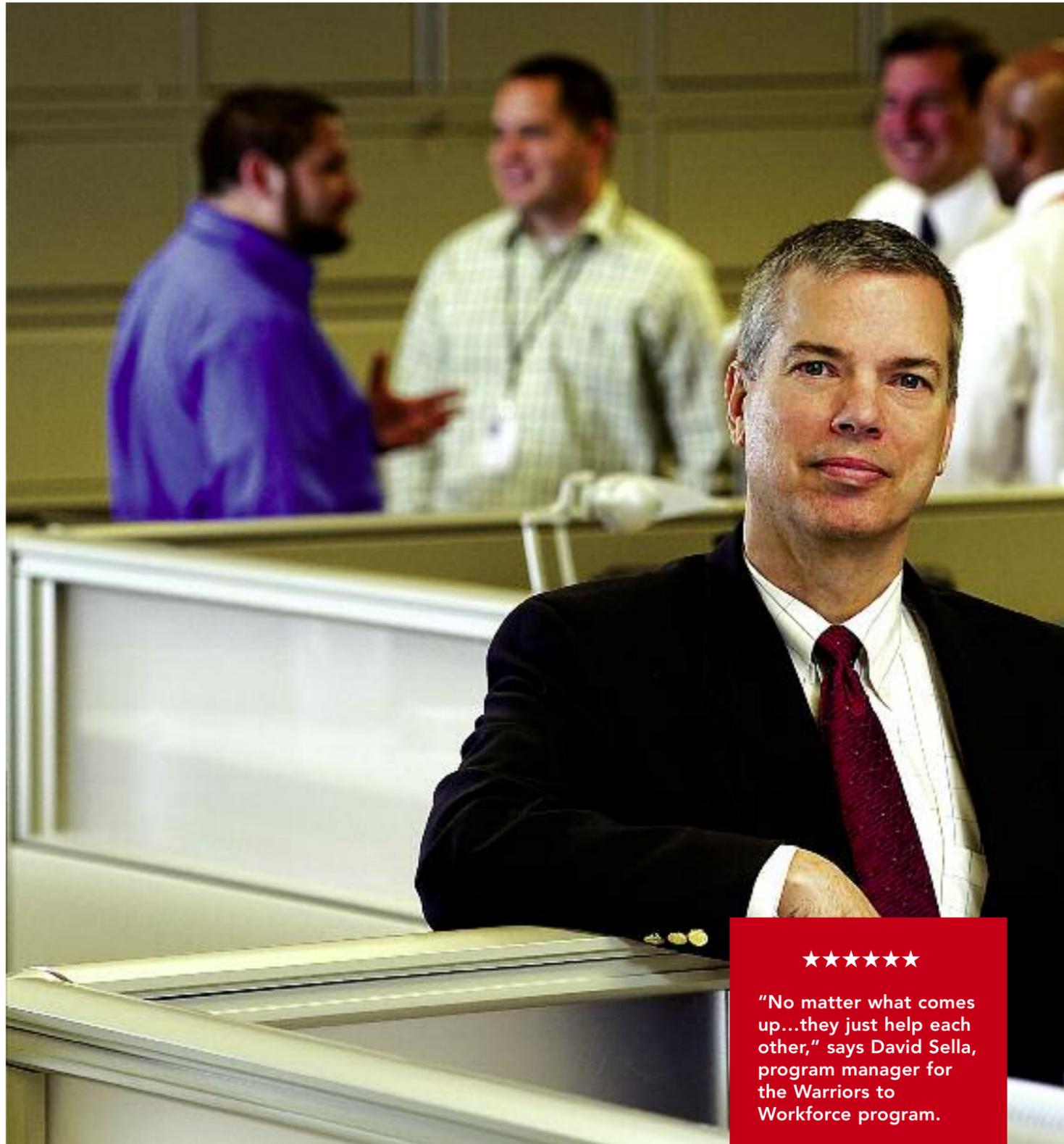
The Warriors program is designed to smooth that transition. Everything from the color palates, furnishings and state-of-the-art technology in the Acquisition Academy is tailored to promote learning. But beyond all the high-tech classrooms, natural light and green technology, particular attention is paid to ensuring the special needs of wounded veterans are met.

“We’re dealing with both their visible and invisible wounds,” says Doyle, adding that the average disability percentage for the group—as measured by a VA calculus—is 64 percent.

“ This ain’t going to be smooth because it’s the first time, but the main thing is we’re learning from it. They’re doing a great job taking care of us. ”

A full-time vocational performance psychologist works individually with all of the interns on mental and emotional skills, as well as study habits. Two on-site laboratories include “alpha chambers,” where interns learn to monitor and control their breathing in anxious situations.

“They are transitioning from the battlefield to the workforce and we recognize that,” Doyle says. “And luckily, because we’re the VA, we



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“No matter what comes up...they just help each other,” says David Sella, program manager for the Warriors to Workforce program.

have the ability to get them the help that they need to make that transition as successful as we can.”

That they train as a group in close quarters toward a common goal is by design. In his remarks in January at the Warriors to Workforce ribbon-cutting, VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki offered some advice to the new interns. “Help each other,” he said.

Wesseling echoed those sentiments four months into the program. “If anybody falls behind, we’re a pretty good team,” she says. “We always pick them up, keep charging along, keeping everybody at the same level.”

David Sella, the program manager for Warriors to Workforce, says the camaraderie extends well beyond the classroom.

“They are stronger for helping each other,” Sella says. “They do understand where they’re coming from. So no matter what comes up, whether it’s somebody’s having a problem with their car to somebody’s having a problem medically, they just help each other.”

“The challenge,” adds Doyle, “is no one really understands—I certainly don’t—what they’ve been through, what they’ve seen. And it’s good that they’re around each other and that they do understand each other. That’s one of the reasons veterans make such good candidates and employees—because they come from a background of loyalty, dedication, teamwork, decisiveness. They’re taught leadership skills.”

### “A Life Changing Experience”

The course costs \$97,489 per participant, according to the VA. The Acquisition Academy’s most recent budget was \$75 million.

For Wallace Edmondson, 40, who spent 20 years in the Army, serving most recently in Afghanistan in 2008, the internship opportunity came last fall as he was counting his limited options back home in Tennessee. He could continue laying floorboards in his church and aggravating injuries he sustained overseas, or he could begin anew. Like most of his classmates, picking the latter required some level of sacrifice, since his wife is still in school and they would be apart. Then again, sacrifice isn’t new to this group.

“I think we’re making history doing this because we’re setting the foundation for the next guys,” says Edmondson. “This ain’t going to be smooth because it’s the first time, but the



The dedication and desire of the veterans participating in the Warriors to Workforce Internship Program is infectious and motivates all those involved, says Acquisition Internship School Vice Chancellor Joanne Choy.



main thing is we’re learning from it. They’re doing a great job taking care of us.”

In many cases, like Guerriero’s, the program was like a bolt out of the blue, offering a lifeline at just the right time. But perhaps the most rewarded lot thus far has been Veterans Affairs staff and the Mount St. Mary’s professors.

“I think what struck me was how many of the staff want to help in some way,” says Joanne Choy, vice chancellor for the Acquisition Internship School. “It’s taking our day-to-day jobs and making them more meaningful for all of us.”



VA Acquisition Academy Chancellor Lisa Doyle says one of the reasons veterans make such good candidates and employees is because their military training instilled in them valuable leadership skills.

William Forgang, dean of the Mount St. Mary’s Bolte School of Business, says his instructors enjoy teaching students who are so excited and motivated to learn. He says the program also comports nicely with the mission of the Catholic university. “This program is really a life-changing experience for them, and we like being a part of it,” he says.

Warriors to Workforce hopes to expand its curriculum to program management, another highly sought-after skillset in federal circles and beyond. The program also hopes to ramp up to meet the obvious demand. Mount St. Mary’s, for its part, is more than doubling the number of teachers in the program to 10 by the end of summer.

“So it isn’t about just watching these folks get through the three years, and of course, we’re doing that and learning from it and making improvements as a result,” says Doyle. “But we’re scaling it. We want to offer it to more wounded veterans and be able to serve more veterans.”

### New Beginnings

On the weekend before the program started on Dec. 5, Guerriero arrived in Frederick with a U-Haul containing all his belongings, along with his girlfriend and his 7-month-old daughter. Sella, the program manager, had helped him find an apartment and Guerriero rented it sight-unseen. He now lives 10 minutes away from the Academy and can walk home to visit his daughter at lunch.

“I love it,” he says. “I wake up every morning excited to be alive, to go to work, to see my daughter. I love using my mind. I love being able to use my brain rather than my body.”

“Everybody here just brings something unique to the table,” he continues. “That’s what I can’t wait for, when we start working in groups and see what everybody has to offer. Because even though we’re all different, we’re all the same.”

For more information on the Warriors to Workforce Internship Program, visit [www.acquisitionacademy.va.gov/AcquisitionAcademy/schools/internship/warriorToWorkforce.asp](http://www.acquisitionacademy.va.gov/AcquisitionAcademy/schools/internship/warriorToWorkforce.asp)