# Transcript: IT Podcast - Ep 61 - MPS S1 Ep2 - Individual Victories with Dan Morrill, Davon Copeland, and Mike Peterson

*The following transcript is a verbatim account of the video or audio file accompanying this transcript.*

Speaker #1 (Narrator):

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Speaker #2 (Davon Copeland):

Welcome, everybody to our podcast today. My name is Davon Copeland, I'm a military SPM over at WGU. I got Dan the man Morrill, how are you doing today?

Speaker #3 (Dan Morril):

Doing good. How are you doing?

Speaker #2 (Davon Copeland):

I'm doing fantastic. The reason why I asked is because I gotthis wonderful guy with this just luxurious looking beard. His name is Mike Peterson, and he's here as our special guest today. How are you doing Mike?

Speaker #4 (Mike Peterson):

Good, Davon. Thanks for having me. Hello Dan.

Speaker #2 (Davon Copeland):

For the crowd that's listening Dan decided to bring one of his buddies, and I don't know if you guys watched the podcast from the last time. For those of you that like the visual, Dan decided to get a haircut. Turns out that the hair from the haircut went into Mike's beard.

Speaker #4 (Mike Peterson):

Exactly. Right here. Keeping me anonymous.

Speaker #3 (Dan Morril):

Now we know for sure you were in the military, Mike.

Speaker #2 (Davon Copeland):

Loving it. Cat's out of the bag so all three of us military veterans. Mike, I just want to let you know that I appreciate your service and your sacrifice.

Speaker #4 (Mike Peterson):

Thanks, Davon, same to you, and Dan as well.

Speaker #2 (Davon Copeland):

Today we're going to be talking about something that'sextremely near and dear to all of our hearts. That is the path from military to PhD. Today our guests with Dan and myself, we went the enlisted route, and Mike's an officer. Now we're covering everything. As we were talking about this and putting this thing together we wanted to make sure that we were going to talk about everything between, so the certifications that could help. We'll do a deep dive into that. Before we get started Mike, I'm going to have you introduce yourself. Pretty much just let us know who you are, where you're from, why you're here?

Speaker #4 (Mike Peterson):

For sure. Thanks, Davon. Mike Peterson, I live in Oregon. I was in the Coast Guard right out of high school I went to the Coast Guard Academy, so cake eater. I was fortunate enough my dad was enlisted in the Coast Guard. Actually, he was in the Navy for six years when I was a kid and then rolled over the Coast Guard and retired right as I rolled into the Coast Guard, so I got to serve with some of his friends. But it was an example for me. I get to move all over the place, see some amazing places. My dad did search and rescue mainly, and so I got to see some pretty amazing cases in Kodiak and Juneau, Alaska where I grew up, and then he retired out in New England. It's always interesting the Coast Guard. I did pretty well in high school and was accepted and got a bachelor's degree in mathematical and computer sciences. Back when computers didn't have hard drives or RAM, and we booted them off a floppy disk, and a Mac plus for those who are familiar. Then I was able to walk into a career I got a commission as an ensign right out of the Coast Guard Academy and drove a ship, became the network administrator. I had a database that maintained all our lights, lighthouses, and buoys. I didn't touch a computer all through high school. I got that Mac plus at the Coast Guard Academy butstill didn't really know what the application was, and so got a full experience on my first tour and ended up going to Coast Guard headquarters and managing our ACE navigation system for the entire coast guard. That qualified me for grad school. I was able to go to grad school on the Coast Guard's dime, full-time on active duty and then I had to do a payback tour and I did that and actually, West Virginia of all places that the Coast Guard is. We have what's called an operation system center there. We manage all our international systems for law enforcement, marine safety and so on. They are congressional mandated to have up-time of 99.7 percent or higher so I got lots of great experience with systems. As Davon mentioned I became certified in UNIX and then eventually Linux. When I got off of active duty which was right after 9/11 that qualified me to walk into teaching which I had never even considered. I was able to start teaching when I got off active duty and I taught computer science, math, IT classes, and continued to look at certifications as they became available. I was able to get my A plus, my Net plus, Security plus, Linux plus, and just stayed in that vein. Got to a point where I lost a job because I didn't have a PhD. I was like, "I'm going to look into the PhD" notrealizing that my GI Bill had not been tapped yet because I had been fortunate enough to get my bachelor's and master's while on duty so I was able to get 40 percent of my PhD covered.

Speaker #2 (Davon Copeland):

Stop the presses, hold on. As an officer? You came in, you had a bachelor's degree, you had a bunch of certifications, could have walked away?

Speaker #4 (Mike Peterson):

Yeah.

Speaker #2 (Davon Copeland):

You decided to stay in and get your master's degree, right?

Speaker #4 (Mike Peterson):

Correct.

Speaker #2 (Davon Copeland):

At that point there were so many opportunities for you out there, you stayed in and then eventually you get out, and you lost a job because you didn't have a PhD?

Speaker #4 (Mike Peterson):

That's correct.

Speaker #2 (Davon Copeland):

That point you started tapping in. TA was already paying for your, not TA, but whatever. Since it's that you had the blood money thatyou had to sign to be a department head to get that moneyto go to school on the dime of the government. You did all of that. You would think that you'd get out and be adequately prepared to do everything, because I'm assuming that you also had a security clearance dealing with all that IT.

Speaker #4 (Mike Peterson):

I'm still at TS. Yeah, absolutely.

Speaker #2 (Davon Copeland):

You go and get the PhD, and I understand that you just said that you lost a job because of it, but is that the only thing that drove you to get that PhD?

Speaker #4 (Mike Peterson):

No, I wanted it for a long time. I was in a temporary teaching position because we had moved and so I was inthis temporary position for about two years and then they opened it up to full time, and I applied and I was like, "I got this. I've been here for a couple years, I'm doing well" and somebody witha PhD showed up and that was the first time I had reconsidered. It's one of those things that just hangs out and you think, "Maybe that's something I'll do" but there's neverreally that extra push and that was the push. That was the extra thing I needed. In to that point as soon as I started working on that and it finished my coursework, the WGU job became available and they wanted me to work from home, and pay me a little bit more and it was a no-brainer at that point and because of my certifications, and my military background that's why I got the job at WGU. They were looking for somebody to come and support the new Linux courses that they had just launched and the fact that I was ABD at that point. It was also a feather in my cap in terms of qualifying for the job. Great sequence of events that I want to say were out of my hands, but the military paved the way for me. That's for sure.

Speaker #2 (Davon Copeland):

Absolutely. Dan, you and I have hada million conversations specifically about education and attainment, and all of those things that we promote in the military. You shared with me an article that you had read that lit a fire under me. It was specifically about how an enlisted person in the military could never get a PhD. I'm going to hold your beer. Talk to us about that.

Speaker #3 (Dan Morril):

I was actually in a meeting, and I was with a Gartner analyst. Gartner Group, the big ones withfancy graphs and all the fancy researchthat they do and all the questionnaires that they ask. The Gartner guy was absolutely adamant that there is no one who ever started off as enlisted, and went and got their PhD. He defended that position quite well. The only problem is there's an elephant in the room. There's an enlisted guy with PhD sitting right next to him. With him thinking absolutes, he's like, "You'll never do this. This never happens. It's just statistically impossible. "Just like the whole nine yards. No, I'm sitting right next to him. I said, "I was enlisted, and I have a PhD. "Then the guy didn't miss a beat. Then we started talking about the navy corpsman that wanted to become a doctor. That went all the way through doctor school to become a full on-flight surgeon. Then we talked about the airman. If I remember correctly, her name is now Lieutenant Cheryl, who is now a research PhD scientist, he had started off as an airman. Again, it's that thing if people will tell you, no, you can't do this or no, that unicorn doesn't exist. But I know three of them. I'm one of those three. We have another guy here, Mike, that started off as an officer doing the same thing. We all exist. It's doable, it's achievable, and it's obtainable even if people are telling you it can't be done or that these people don't exist.

Speaker #2 (Davon Copeland):

Last week, our last podcast, we talked about the roles and how we got to where we got there. I used tuition assistance and I got the AEV, which is the advanced education voucher. Then you had other people who I worked with that were officers who got the GEV, which was the graduate education voucher. There were a lot of opportunities that were out there. Although we've spoken about going to college, I want to hone into that enlisted person or even that officer with the bachelor's degree who decided to get all these additional certifications and was able to leverage them once they did get out of the military. What types of hot certifications are out there that an enlisted person can get on or an officer that can get who is getting ready to transition out of the military, whatever branch it is? How can they leverage what they already have in military experience, certifications, and the fact thatthey have a security clearance that may even be a TS depending on where they work?

Speaker #3 (Dan Morril):

For me, I think honestly from that. My IT, cryptologic, radioman, those are really more the things or anything in the MOS 25 range. That's really more where I came from. From that viewpoint, if you're in IT and you're in the military, you're getting things like your network plus to go up in rank. That's always a hot ticket. Your security plus. If you're an officer, I would go more for the policy side. So I would go more for your CISSP from ISC squared, the Certified Information Systems Security Professional Cert. Linux is always a winner. Windows is always a winner, but Windows has reduced their certificate platforms to strictly the Cloud. They are only doing Azure certifications now. They're not doing server, they're not doing Office or Windows or anything else like that, it's all just the Cloud. Those are always going to be popular. There are companies that see Amazon as an amazing competitor, so they'll never use Amazon's Cloud solution, they'll always go with the Microsoft solutions. If you're wanting to work in retail and things like that, you're going to go with a Microsoft solution, you'll need those as your certs. Also the military with the contract for work Cloud with Microsoft as a solution. You going to want those certs to get intoeither contractor with MITRE or SAIC or Booz Allen Hamilton. That's my viewpoint. Mike, what do you got? What do you see from your vantage point in computer science?

Speaker #4 (Mike Peterson):

Computer science and IT for sure have some overlaps. But I would say that what a lot of people underestimate is justhaving a military record in addition to education, in addition to certifications puts you at the top of the list.

Speaker #2 (Davon Copeland):

Say it louder for the people in the back.

Speaker #4 (Mike Peterson):

Military training, I'll tell you what, it gives you credibility of beyond belief. Actually, I've hired some folks here at WGU that have gone up the chain. The senior manager said, "Oh, they didn't interview well, " and I said, "Do you realize this person went to the Naval Academy or did 4, 8, 12 years in the Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force or whatever, and you're overlooking them? I think we need to talk to him again. "Actually, 100 percent of the time they've goneback and interviewed those folks and pressed them a little harder, and they weren't selling themselves. That's the thing, is they were minimizing their military record. Putting that in the forefront, they got hired. There's a lot to be said for that. The government invest so much in our training, and then we sell it short. It maybe doesn't show up on the resume the way it should. It doesn't show up in the conversations, in the interview questions and things like that. I think it's unprecedented in terms of the level of training we get, whether it's academy, whether it's boot camp, whether it's four years, whether it's 22 years like my friend, Senior Chief Copeland, there's a lot to be said for it, honestly.

Speaker #2 (Davon Copeland):

Yeah. You know what? Military personnel are taught service above all. There's a level of humility that we must have. That appraisal of self. It's very hard for us, especially when it comes to our transition, especially if we're pivoting. I talked to somebody this last week who is in LS, works in logistics, is going full bore into the information system technology. When this person comes out not leveraging all of the leadership, all of the logistics, all of the management, all of the things that made this person great for the military, they're going to think, you know what, I'm just starting this IT stuff. They're not going to leverage it. I think that it's extremely important that we utilize all of those strengths and make sure that we put that stuff out there. I'm glad that you brought that up. I got a couple questions for you all. In this profession, again, you went from enlisted to PhD, and we've got the officer to PhD. What are some common myths about this profession or when it comesto pivoting that you guys can like debunk or that are out there, or things that you are just like, "That's not true, that's not how we roll. This is what it really is. "That you can bring up. Are there any out there?

Speaker #3 (Dan Morril):

I think one of the biggest myths I had to overcome was the POS, the actual dissertation. Everyone always crashes against a dissertation. When you're working on your PhD, you've got that final paper, that final presentation and the defense. Everyone always has, "Oh my God, it was such a nightmare. It was such a horrible thing. Oh my God, trauma. " All the trauma you would ever want to see has been labeled against the dissertation. I was actually really surprised because it was more like a meeting of friends. By that point, me and my dissertation committee had been through a year's worth of work together. We all knew each other really well, and we knew what to expect from each other. There were no surprises. It wasn't horrible. It was more just a meeting of friends. That dissertation process for me wasn't combative at all. It was just let's do this final check marks, so I can call you. Congratulations, Dr. Morrill.

Speaker #2 (Davon Copeland):

Nailed it. What about you, Mike?

Speaker #4 (Mike Peterson):

Yeah. I was thinking a couple of things. Just that in some way, education isn't worth it. I've got a friend who served in Desert Storm and he's got a job with Microsoft right now and he's like, I just don't think I need the education. I don't think it's worth my time. But he's working a 100 hours a week and he doesn't have the ability to move back and forth and make choices and things like that, and he had a great career with the military and he's obviously doing great in terms of what he's doing for work now, but he doesn't have choices. I think education does open doors and when you have Bill Gates and other folks that dropped out of college to fund these big companies, you get this impression that that's the norm and the norm is that if you get that sheet of paper, that bachelor's degree, that master's degree, and then even a PhD, it really does open doors and so for me the opportunities have been really boundless just because I've been able to access and pursue education. At the same time, I will say being an officer, being an academy graduate and not staying until retirement, I took some lumps for that, probably more self afflicted than anything that, you didn't stay and you didn't retire, you're not going to be as successful as your peers who went on for me to make Captain and even Admiral at this point because I'm 30 years out from graduation, but I have been successful and I have a lot of peers that have got out of the lieutenant/ lieutenant commander rank and have gone on to be very successful. That's another myth is that, you've got to stay in and do your 20 years plus to be successful if the military invest in you and it's not true. It's a launch platform. Then these folks that are retiring at 20 or 30 years, a lot of them have gotten masters degrees or getting doctorates to have a second career and so they have to do that to open doors as well. They can all be consultants. Those are the two big myths for me.

Speaker #3 (Dan Morril):

I'd like to jump in on that. A friend of mine worked atMicrosoft Game Studios for three years as their senior security engineer. Best job ever. But I was a contractor at the time and the manager I was working for, Jason, didn't have a degree. They will hire you in Microsoft without a degree but to get promoted, you have to have the degree. They'll bring you on board but you have a limited lifespan without that degree on board and Jason really hit that wall while I was in the middle of it and I was teaching at ITT Tech atthe time part-time and he was desperately trying to figure out how he could get his bachelor's degree so he could get promoted and not get kicked out because Microsoft Game Studios is the best place in the world to work.

Speaker #4 (Mike Peterson):

Sure.

Speaker #2 (Davon Copeland):

As I listen to both of you speak, I'm moved to ask a question but before I do, I want to bring it back to the levels tothis and the part that was poignant when you were speaking isthat you're always going to run into a roadblock if you're notlooking for a way to move up and move on and what I mean by that is this, if I only get my certifications, it's only going to take me this far. If I only get my bachelor's degree, Associate's degree, master's degree, it's only going to take me this far. You have to have a whole body. Next week, we're going to have somebody come on that is an employer. He works in the tech spaces. He's from CCS Global Tech and he looks at not only getting people certified, but colleges also and how you can marry that stuff up so that you can havethat full body comprehensive or holistic educational piece so that you're able to maneuver and pivot because that's basically what you all did. During your time teaching at ITT Tech, working at these places, what are some of the biggest challenges that you had to overcome inthose roles other than just the certifications? Well, that's a big one, the certifications and the teaching, but what were some of the day-to-day things thatyou had to deal with that were challenging in those roles?

Speaker #3 (Dan Morril):

I think for me the biggest one was job pivot. You get hired in to do a thing and then your job morphs off to be something completely different andyou have to go with where your job is going or you find yourself basically not doing what your job is. I may have been hired in as a security engineer but the job started morphing more often to a network engineering so I needed to go get my CCNE. That was the only way that I was going to be able to retain and stay on that contract was going through the CCNE because that's where they needed the skills. That was my big thing. The job will pivot all the time. Just because I got hired at WGU to teach Linux with Mike and now here I am teaching and running the Cloud computing program, I've had to go get my AWS cert, I'm getting my Microsoft certs, my Azure ones now. I'm constantly reshaping who I am and what I need to learn every day.

Speaker #4 (Mike Peterson):

That's great. As I mentioned before, for me, I was in a job, I was doing well in it and obviously the degree is what failed me. That was one pivot. The next job I moved into after that and I didn't mention wasan information security role and they wanted to make sure that I had the Network Plus and Security Plus Certifications and so I had to get those and I had to get them pretty quickly and they're not easy certification. So those were big challenges. I had to study a lot while I was working full time and wouldn't you know, once I got those, that's what qualified me for this job at WGU that I eventually got. It was fortuitous and much like you said, Davon, just the conflation of degree, experience, certifications, military background, that was the magic for me and I've been turning away work ever since honestly. It's been fantastic.

Speaker #2 (Davon Copeland):

I love it. I love it when a plan all comes together.

Speaker #4 (Mike Peterson):

Yeah. Sure.

Speaker #2 (Davon Copeland):

This is going to be my last question for you gentlemen and again, I've enjoyed this thoroughly. What is the one thing that you wish you had known at the beginning of your career? Think about that before you answer. The reason why I asked this question is because we have service members leaving the military every day not knowing where they're going to go, what they're going to do, afraid of the opportunities. They know that it's time for them to go, but they may not have necessarily had the time because, you know, mission comes first, you come last and that's a part of our culture but whatwas the thing if any that you wish you knew when you began? I'll go first this time, Dan.

Speaker #4 (Mike Peterson):

For me, I was 17 when I went to the Coast Guard Academy and Ididn't know what was possible and now I know thatso much is possible and I would have been a lot more bold, a lot of trepidation and so now I'm in a spot where I'm like, I'm so confident, not cocky. I just know that I bring experience to the table, I bring skills, I bring communication and leadership and honestly, I didn't come into the prime of understandingthat until probably in my late 30s, early 40s. Actually I just watched the Coast Guard Academy graduation. Biden spoke and I'm watching those kids graduate and here itis 30 years after I graduated and I'm watching each one and I'm like, you have a future in front of you. I hope you've got a mentor that's telling you what's possible and I had that. I don't know if I listened as well as I could have or should have. I was just probably too immature. But I'm looking for people that are inthat age group now that I can mentor and be there for and Ifeel like WGU is a great opportunityfor us to find folks like that or just maybe younger, looking for some direction. To inspire and develop leadership principle is something that I aspire toregularly and I'm always looking for opportunities to reach out and support people, give them an idea of what their potential is andselling them on themselves. That's a big thing.

Speaker #2 (Davon Copeland):

Before you say a word, Dan, my body has to get readjusted because you just gave me chills in my whole body. I didn't know what was possible.

Speaker #4 (Mike Peterson):

Absolutely. That's the key. The future is boundless.

Speaker #2 (Davon Copeland):

I'm just saying that is the realest thing that I've everheard in my life and as a young person, it's the truth, none of us know andnone of us know our potential until we get out there and do it. Oh, man, Dan what do you got?

Speaker #3 (Dan Morril):

I absolutely got my cup on this one. This is one thing I love about the military is that they will always pull the chairout for you to sit down at the table. They always will do that. If you miss that opportunity at one command, you'll get it at another command. It wasn't until my third command that I actually really understood what that opportunity was and I wish I had seen that opportunity when I first landed on the shores of Iceland formy first duty station that I had an opportunity to go learn computer systems and I mean, we're talking, they old IBM select computers, the old big hunk and chunks of metal and I wish I had done that and I didn't. I didn't until I got to my third duty station and a person said, I don't want you in my communication center, go work over here. Well, over here was the regional telecommunication center for all of Europe. That was that moment where I said, okay, I'm going to take this one, but I wish Ihad seen those other opportunities along the way. I'm really on the lookout every day now for those little opportunities, those little places to grow, learn something new, something to enjoy, and be confident in yourself that you can learn these things. Even if you don't get a certificate or something else, if you've learned something, there's your individual victory every day. If you learn something new every day, there's your victory every day.

Speaker #2 (Davon Copeland):

Powerful, learn something new every day, there's your victory. There is victory in progress, and that is what we're all about. One thing that I learned from this conversation is that you may not be the smartest, you may not have direction, you may not know where you're going but if you have hustle, if you have drive and you have determination, excuses are nothing, you're going to make it happen. I appreciate that, guys.

Speaker #3 (Dan Morril):

I love it. Thanks Davon. That's a great way of closing this out here. Here, elbow, I'll do the elbow bump there.

Speaker #2 (Davon Copeland):

Big elbows.

Speaker #4 (Mike Peterson):

Nice to meet you too, Davon. Yeah, great to be here today.

Speaker #2 (Davon Copeland):

It was awesome. I feel like we could talk for hours, but sadly, we do have to go, so thank you for coming, Mike. It's been a pleasure. Hopefully we can get you to come again. Everybody tune in next week, we are going to have a special guest next week. Like I said, it's going to be from CCS Global Tech. His name is Joshua Dominic. He's going to be out here and he's going to be helping outthose veterans that are transitioning from the military looking for jobs in tech and opportunities. We're going to get some insight into employers because it's not justgood to get a degree or certification. You want to make sure that you get good employment so you can hang out a little bit. Dan, you got anything?

Speaker #3 (Dan Morril):

No, I'll just see you all next week. I'm looking forward to this one.

Speaker #4 (Mike Peterson):

Same here. Thanks you guys.

Speaker #1 (Narrator):

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