

THE VETERAN'S GUIDE TO
**CRUSHING MBA
ADMISSIONS**

How I Secured a Top MBA
Admission With a 2.9 GPA

UNCLASSIFIED

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Introduction

In October 2024 I made one of the toughest decisions I have ever made: I decided that I was going to get out of the military. I was no longer having fun, I wanted to give my loved ones more stability and it just wasn't as "high-speed" as I thought it was going to be. It felt good to finally make that decision.

Five minutes later, I was freaking out about what I would possibly do when I get out of the military.

For the next three months, like any good intel officer, I consumed every piece of information I could find about the process for getting out, opportunities on the outside, why all these veterans are getting MBAs and how to paint the big picture. Thanks to the incredible veteran network, and organizations like Service 2 School and Sitreps 2 Steercos, I learned about the MBA program, post-MBA careers and why getting an MBA was ideal for my transition.

My goal with this book is to catch you as close to the beginning of your "getting out freak out" as possible, and create a dialed-in road map, so that you can spend as much time as possible on the hard work, like studying for the GMAT, and less time getting your feet under you.

This book is purposely short. I want you to receive this information as efficiently as possible. That is why this book is 55 pages and cut into short paragraphs like a Medium article. I also created very distinct sections. If you already know you are going to get an MBA, please skip the "Why get an MBA" chapter.



Who am I and What do I Know?

My name is Shawn Witschen, and I was a ground intelligence officer in the Marine Corps from May 2021 to May 2026. I grew up in Woodbine, MD, and went to the University of Maryland, where I was a leader in the Naval Reserve Officer Training Corps. Over the last four years I have led multiple intelligence teams, including one team on a deployment to Australia, and commanded a company of 175 Marines. In my free time, I play in two USTA tennis leagues on the weekend and am a Court Appointed Special Advocate Volunteer, serving as the eyes and ears of a superior court judge to advocate for a foster youth in my community.

What I just gave you was the 30 second introduction I give to interviewers who ask me to introduce myself. We will talk about this in the “How to crush the interview” section, but it is important you hear other people’s introductions to give you perspective about how to build your own.



My biggest fear when applying to school was my low GPA. I was able to get a 3.4 GPA in Community College but graduated from the University of Maryland with a 2.9 GPA. Starting the application process, I thought only the 2.9 GPA would count. Realizing I might be able to “superscore” my 3.4 and 2.9 GPA, I calculated it out to a 3.1. I talked with my consultant the next day and made the joke “last night I went to bed C student Shawn, and this morning I woke up B student Shawn!”. She did not think it was funny, probably because she knew the amount of hard work we were going to have to do to present an application that a top business school would accept.

I decided to hire a consultant to help me with my application. I paid \$11,000 for her to consult me on three application packages. I believed I had a strong story, coupled with a strong GMAT Focus score and solid work experience, but that I wasn’t a good enough storyteller to convey it on my own. I believe I made the right choice. I was fortunate to have saved enough money through deployments and being TAD to afford a consultant. I believe I would not have gotten interviews at the places I did without her. That being said, utilizing this guide along with a Service 2 School mentor and tapping into MBA veterans clubs will position you in a great spot to apply without needing a consultant.

What I'm sharing in this book comes from the things I learned from my Service 2 School mentor, multiple Sitreps 2 Steercos calls, networking with over 30 vets from various MBA veteran's clubs, attending school visits, applying to multiple top-15 schools, and interviewing with three of them.

I was accepted to the NYU Stern School of Business, and I will begin my MBA there in June 2026.

The views and content in this book are purely my own and not representative of any organization or person other than me. I am not a consultant or expert, but I truly believe my lived experience outlined in this book can provide you with a solid base to set you up for success.

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Why Get an MBA?



Speak the Same Language

When I joined the Marine Corps, I wasn't just thrown into a leadership position. I spent two years in NROTC developing very basic leadership skills and systems. I went to Officer Candidate School for six weeks and then The Basic School for six months. Then the Infantry Officer Course, Scout Sniper Employment Course and two intel officer courses for another nine months. Needless to say, I was about as ready as training could make me to lead in the military.

I want that same preparation for entering the business world. When applying, I didn't know what EBITDA, DCF or NPV meant, or why those matter when starting a business. I have never been responsible for making money before, and the only thought I have had about how much money to spend is "how much will supply give me".

Build a Network

An MBA is like TBS (introductory training for all Marine officers) for the business world. You learn all the acronyms, cultural norms and modern thoughts of the business world, and build a solid network in the process. The friends I made at TBS are some of the closest friends I have today. We talk to each other more about life than anything, but if I have a work question or need help, there are 20 people who would help me with anything, and I would do the same for them.

MBA programs are designed to connect people together and build your network. Each school is a little different, but generally they put you in a cohort of 50–100 people you'll spend a lot of time with. You get a platoon of bright, accomplished people from all over the globe, with varying backgrounds, and they all want to make friends too. The odds of building your network and making friends are stacked in your favor.

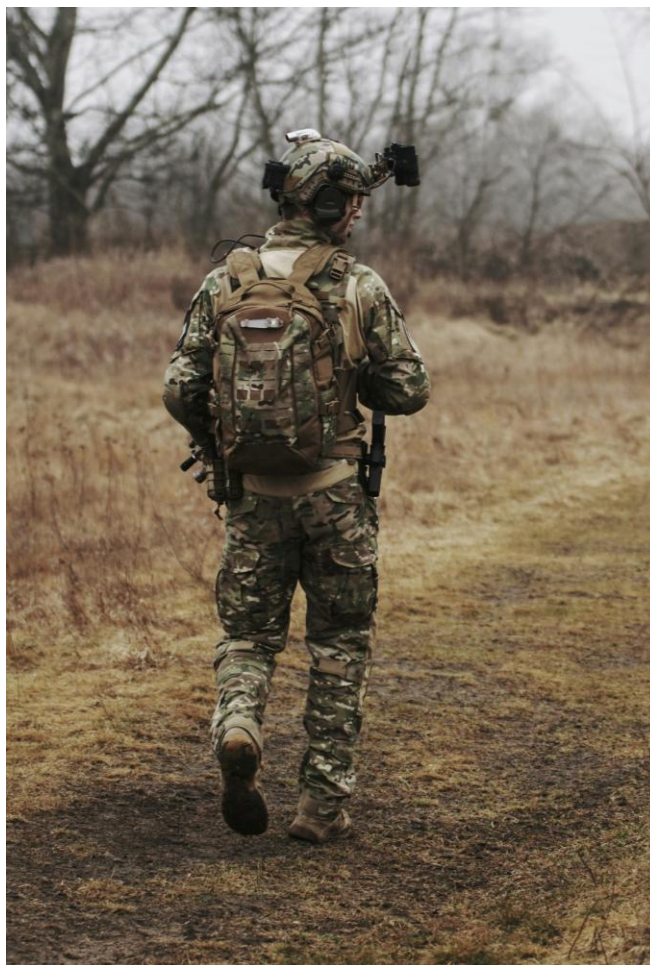
Your classmates will be from many different professions: consulting, banking, healthcare, fellow vets etc. If you are seeking to go into one of these fields, what better people to ask than those who have already done that job?

Decompress from the Military

Leaving the military is tough. We are used to structure but sometimes hate it at the same time. No more standing duty, waking up at 3 a.m. for the rifle range, or police-calling on Saturday because some guy lost his NVGs. But this culture and attitude becomes such a strong part of our personality that we can forget who we are.

The military is the best thing that ever happened to me. I was a kid without direction, and I got that direction in the military. The people I met are some of the best I've ever known. I have observed and tried to be more like the great leaders who I have worked under and alongside.

By that same token, I have lost a little bit of what makes me unique, due to the nature of the importance of collective unity in the military. I believe being in an academic setting for two years, alongside unique people, will allow me to reflect on what makes me unique.



Career Outcomes and Wealth

When you scour Reddit (hopefully not as much as I do), you will see plenty of threads that talk about the return on investment (ROI) of an MBA program. Their math looks like this:

$$\text{Career earning with MBA} - \text{Career earning without MBA} - 2 \text{ years of current salary (opportunity cost)} - \text{Cost of a top MBA} = \text{MBA ROI}$$



Their math and our math are not the same. Here's why:

- ◆ **Career earnings without MBA:** They are likely already in a competitive industry, like banking, consulting or tech. These roles have solid exit opportunities (also known as exit ops). The military has good exit ops too, but not nearly as lucrative in the civilian world. If you work hard and follow the basics you learned in the military, you'll have solid career earnings. But, if you seek to enter the lucrative world of consulting, banking and the exit ops that come with them, your career earnings without an MBA will likely be significantly lower.

- ◆ **2 years of current salary:** I had a couple of intel sergeants, absolute studs, get out of the Marines and make mid-\$100ks and low-\$200ks in government work and tech, respectively. If you are a veteran, and have a degree, you can likely secure a job at \$130k-\$150k, depending on MOS, your degree and interviewing ability. This is the real math you should do when considering ROI.
- ◆ **Cost of a top MBA:** If you have the full GI Bill, every top MBA program is free for you, or nearly free. On top of that, you will receive housing allowance for your location. Even if you don't have the GI Bill, you may be eligible for VR&E, a VA benefit that provides free education with a housing allowance (if you have any GI Bill entitlement remaining). This is our competitive advantage.

So, here is the Vet MBA Math:

Career earnings with MBA + GI Bill MHA - Career earnings without MBA – 2 years of post-service salary (opportunity cost) = MBA veteran ROI

Now, let's talk about career earnings WITH an MBA.

According to employment reports from schools like Wharton, NYU Stern, UVA Darden, and Tuck, the median base salary for a new MBA graduate is \$175,000.

But in the corporate world, base salary is just one piece of the puzzle. You also need to factor in:

- ◆ **Signing Bonus:** usually between \$30,000 and \$50,000.
- ◆ **Performance Bonus:** Year-end bonuses in finance and consulting can range from \$30,000 to \$100,000+ depending on the firm and market conditions.

Total First-Year Compensation: When you stack the base, the signing bonus, and the expected performance bonus, the average graduate from a top program in a target industry (Consulting/Finance) is looking at a Total First-Year Compensation of \$225,000 - \$260,000.

The Long-Term: The military pay scale is linear. You know exactly what an O-4 makes, and exactly what an O-5 makes. It's steady, but it's flat. The post-MBA pay scale is exponential. It is not uncommon for post-MBA total compensation to look like this today:

- ◆ **Year 1:** \$225k
- ◆ **Year 3-5 (Manager/VP level):** \$350k - \$500k
- ◆ **Year 10 (Partner/MD/C-Suite):** \$1M+

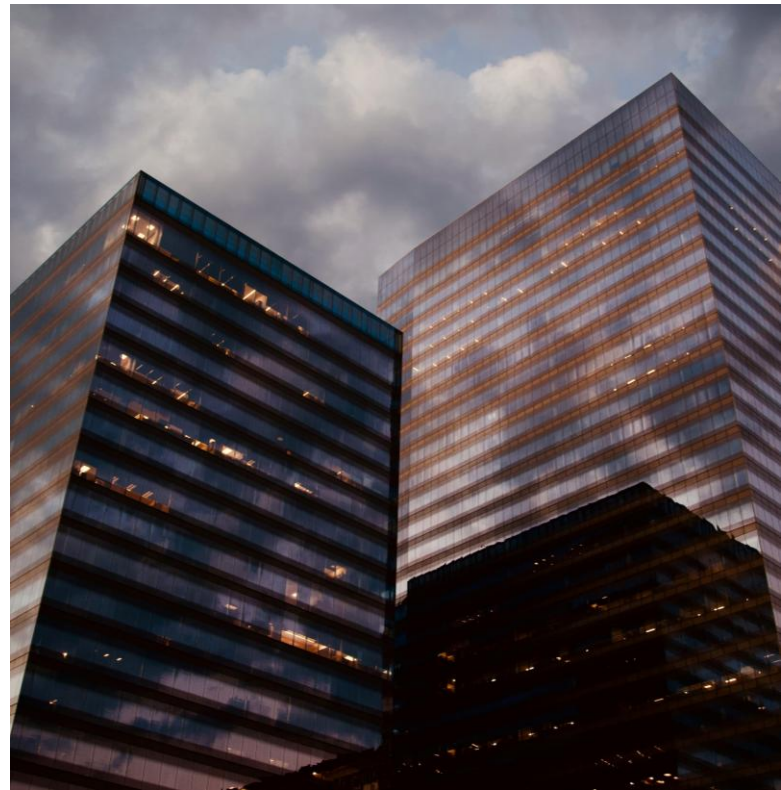
Types of Careers MBA Students Typically Pursue

01. Management Consulting

- ◆ **The Job:** Companies hire consulting firms (like McKinsey, Bain, BCG, otherwise known as “MBB”) to solve their hardest problems. You work on a project for 3-6 months, analyze data, fix a broken process, or help them launch a new product, and then move to the next client.
- ◆ **Why Vets Love It:** It feels like working on a high-performing staff. You work in small teams, the tempo is high, and you are solving complex problems with limited information. It is a meritocracy where the best idea wins, not the highest rank.
- ◆ **The Lifestyle:** High travel (Monday-Thursday on the road), long hours, but fast promotion cycles.
- ◆ **Total Compensation (Year 1):** \$200,000 – \$250,000

02. Investment Banking

- ◆ **The Job:** You are advising companies on massive financial transactions like mergers, acquisitions, and IPOs. You are essentially the broker for multi-billion-dollar entities that are engaged in some type of deal.
- ◆ **Why Vets Love It:** It is high-speed, high-stakes, and requires an insane work ethic. If you liked the operational intensity of a deployment, banking scratches that itch. It is also the most direct path to the highest earning potential.
- ◆ **The Lifestyle:** 80-100 hour weeks are common. It is a grind, but it is often seen as a 2-year “boot camp” that opens doors to exit opportunities (“exit ops”) like Private Equity and Hedge Funds.
- ◆ **Total Compensation (Year 1):** \$250,000 – \$350,000+

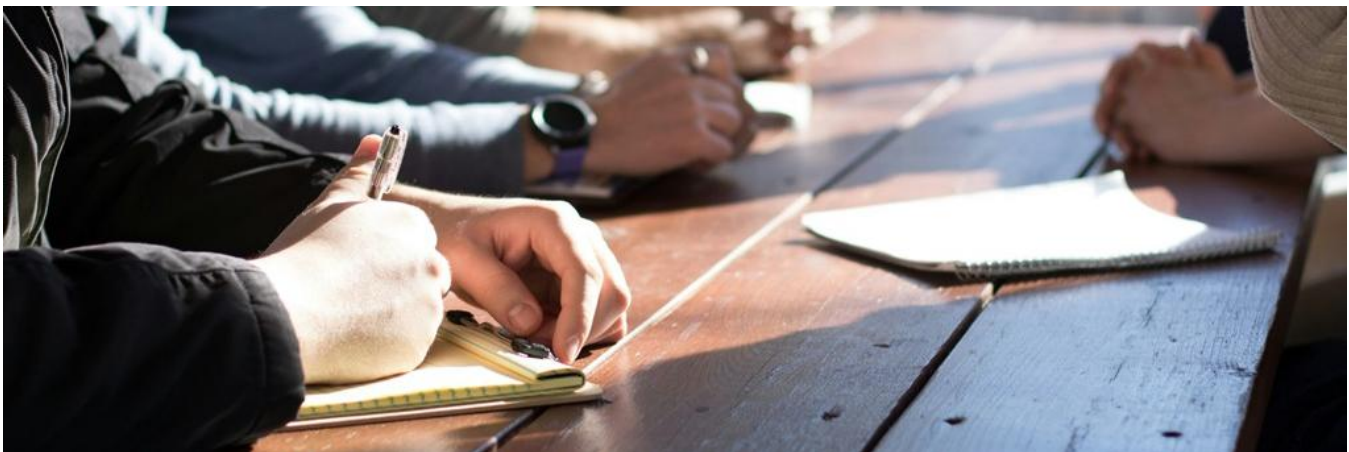


03. Technology / Product Management

- ◆ **The Job:** Product Managers (PMs) are often called the “CEO of the product.” You don’t write the code, and you don’t design the graphics, but you lead the engineers and designers to ensure the product gets built on time and solves the customer’s problem.
- ◆ **Why Vets Love It:** It is pure leadership without direct authority. You have to influence people to work toward a common goal (something every Lieutenant learns on day one).
- ◆ **The Lifestyle:** Known for a great work-life balance, casual culture (jeans and t-shirts), and stock options (equity) that can explode in value if the company does well.
- ◆ **Total Compensation (Year 1):** \$200,000 – \$270,000 (includes stock options)

04. General Management / Leadership Development Programs (LDPs)

- ◆ **The Job:** Large companies (like Amazon, DaVita, Danaher) love veterans. They create rotational programs where you spend 2 years rotating through different departments like operations, marketing or finance to learn the business inside and out.
- ◆ **Why Vets Love It:** It’s the closest thing to taking a Platoon or Company Command. You could be given a team of direct reports immediately and held responsible for a P&L (Profit and Loss). You are operational, making decisions, and leading people.
- ◆ **The Lifestyle:** Typically better work-life balance than finance or consulting, with a clear path to executive leadership.
- ◆ **Total Compensation (Year 1):** \$130,000 – \$210,000





05. Private Equity & Venture Capital

- ◆ **The Job:** Buying companies, fixing them up, and selling them for a profit (PE), or investing in brand new startups hoping they become the next Google (VC).
- ◆ **Why Vets Love It:** It combines the analytical rigor of finance with the strategic thinking of consulting. It is extremely competitive.
- ◆ **Note:** These roles are hard to get directly out of an MBA without prior finance experience, unless you hustle hard, network, and use tools like SkillBridge (which I highly recommend) to get your foot in the door. Some will say it's impossible to go from the military to PE/VC. That is false – I networked with two vets who made exactly that jump. It is extremely difficult, but not impossible.
- ◆ **Total Compensation (Year 1):** \$250,000 – \$500,000+ (Highly Variable)

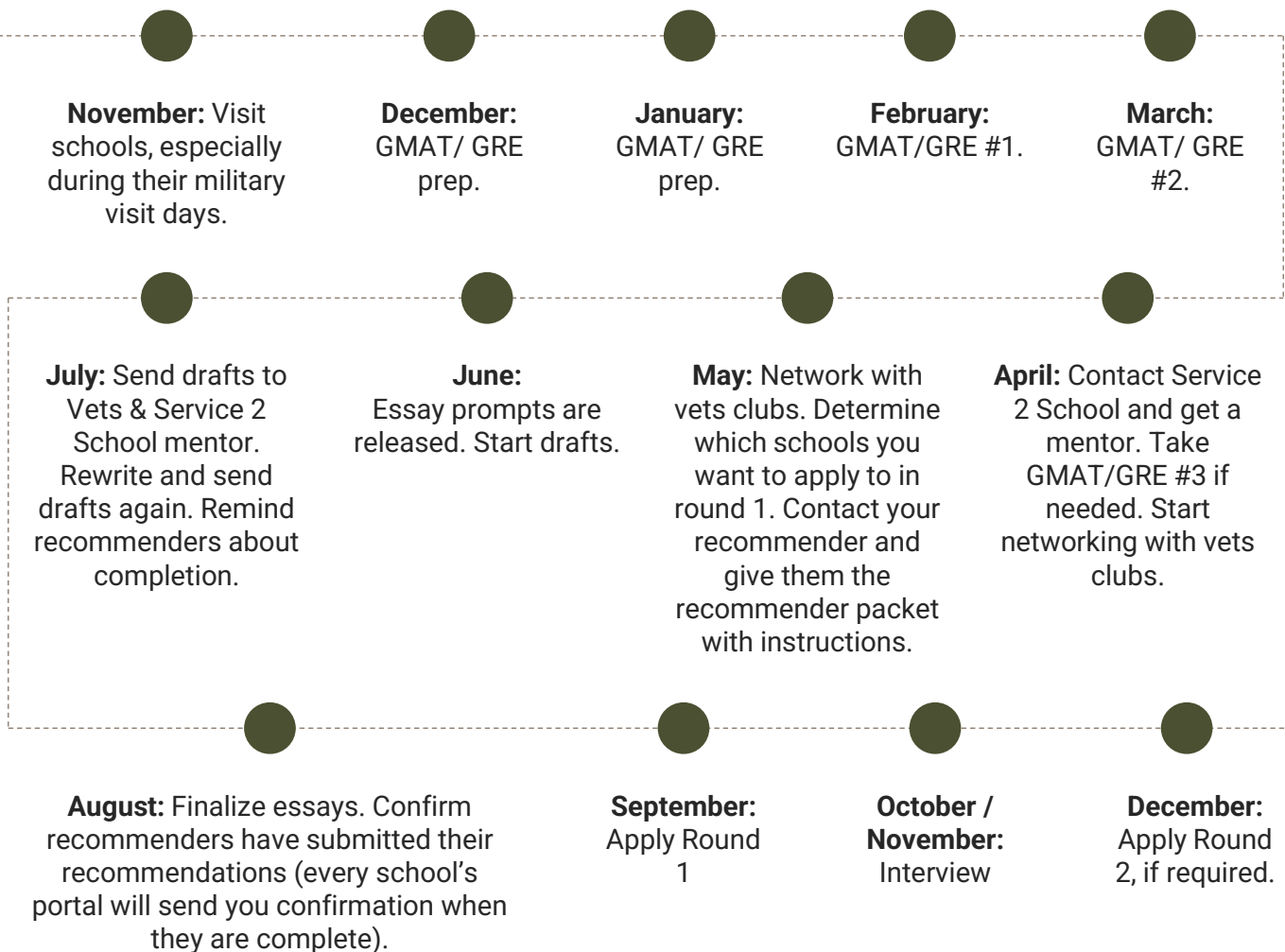
Post-MBA Career Paths for Military Veterans: A Comparison Guide

	Management Consulting	Investment Banking	Tech / Product Management	Leadership Development Programs (LDP)	Private Equity / Venture Capital
Year 1 Comp (Median Est.)	\$200K-\$250K	\$250K-\$350K+	\$200K-\$270K (with stock)	\$130K-\$210K	\$250K-\$500K+
Lifestyle & Hours	High travel Mon-Thu, long hours, fast promotion, "up or out" culture	80-100 hours weeks, intense 2-year grind, pathway to PE/HF	Great work-life balance, casual culture, remote flexibility, equity upside	Better balance, direct reports immediately, rotational, clear executive path	Extremely competitive, very long hours, deal-driven, usually requires prior finance
Why Vets Love It	High-stakes problem solving, rapid learning, strong team environments	High intensity, direct financial impact, parallels military discipline	Building mission-driven products, innovation focus, adaptability	Immediate leadership responsibility, mentorship, organizational impact	Strategic decision making, high risk/high reward, competitive edge
Key Attributes & Fit					
	Problem Solvers, Strategic Thinkers, Team Players	Analytical Rigor, Endurance, Financial Acumen	Innovators, Cross-Functional Leaders, Tech-Savvy	Operational Leaders, General Managers, Mentors	Deal makers, Investors, Risk Takers

Note: Compensation figures are estimates and vary based on firm, location and market conditions. Figures often include base, bonus and sign-on. Non exhaustive

The Big Picture: Timeline & What Makes a Winning Application

Timeline: The MBA application process is lengthy, time consuming and hard work. You can do it last minute, but that does not set you up for success, especially if you have a big weakness in your application like I did. The best time to prepare for applying to an MBA program is 12-18 months prior to submitting your application. Here is the timeline that I followed, and the one I would recommend to you:



The Intangibles (Mindset, Story, Maturity)

Your Story

The most important part of applying to an MBA program is developing your story. Who are you, what got you here, and where are you going?

This step, while the least labor-intensive, might be the hardest part of the process. If you think your story is just going to be about your time and experience in the military, think again.

The military was impactful for all of us. It sent us all over the world with people we became best friends with, to do things that only sometimes made sense. This is a beautiful part of the story, but it can't be the whole story.

What you are going to have to do to build your story is take a deep look at yourself and your life. What was your childhood like? Who were the people that made the most impact in your life? What were the defining moments of your life this far?

I built my story by mapping out my life incrementally, like this:

I was born in February 1999. When I was one, my parents divorced, and I was assigned a guardian ad litem to observe visits with my dad. I moved to New York with my mom, where she taught math in inner city Syracuse. Later, I moved to Maryland, where my mom, my stepdad and my little brothers would stay until present day. In middle school, I was particularly passionate about the Rubik's Cube and got my time down to 26 seconds. I enjoyed the algorithmic pattern of the cube. Due to my father's addiction, and because he lived in Minnesota, he was not a steady presence in my life. Because of my mom, the amazing male role models and friends that I was surrounded by in high school, I didn't follow the path of addiction and incarceration that claimed many members of my father's side of the family. After high school I went to community college and then to the University of Maryland, where I did NROTC. Following commissioning, and ground intel training I arrived at Camp Pendleton and quickly deployed to Darwin, Australia. While in Australia, I attended and refereed a basketball game at an Indigenous Peoples' festival. It was there that I got the opportunity to speak with village elders and learn more about their culture. Following deployment, and further military training, I began volunteering as a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA). CASAs provide a stable adult presence in a foster youth's life and are the eyes and ears of the Superior Court. This is something that has brought me an immense amount of joy over the last year and has opened my eyes to the value of volunteering. For the last year, I have been a Company Commander at Combat Logistics Regiment 17, where I lead 175 Marines.

I did this exercise many times. Not only did it provide me with great content for the essays that I wrote, but it was a good exercise in understanding who I am outside of the uniform, and who I want to be after the military. I recommend you do this as well.

In my life story, I mention volunteering as a CASA. This experience gave me a greater appreciation and understanding of our foster care system, and the tools that we have available to make children succeed. This experience gave me thoughtful perspectives and experience that I used to write my essays. I also believe that this experience differentiated my application and made me more competitive to programs I may otherwise have not been competitive at.

There are many ways to build a great story for your application, but I believe one of the most underutilized ways is through volunteering. It is important that if you choose this path, you pick a volunteering role that you are truly passionate about. I say this for a few reasons:

1. When taking on a volunteer role, you are usually taking on a decent amount of responsibility. Like you learned in the military, when taking on responsibility, it is your duty to see your commitment through.
2. If you're doing it just for the "application boost," it will show in your essays, in the way you talk about it, and in your actions.
3. Being a CASA is such an amazing part of my life. I spent hours writing a court report to a level of detail that made me feel like I was doing a command investigation again. I was unfazed, because I believe in the cause and know that I am making an impact. When you take on a role you are passionate about, you will get this feeling too.

If you find an opportunity to differentiate your application in a positive way, take it.

Why MBA? Why Now?

These two questions came up during every school interview I had and are usually asked in a different way in essay prompts. It is important that you have a clear answer for this question. Coming from the military, this question is pretty easy.

My answer was: My 5-year service commitment to the military ends next summer, and as I transition out of the Marines, I am looking to bridge the gap between the analytical knowledge & leadership experience I have gained in the military and a professional career in finance. Getting an MBA directly following this transition will allow me to build a network, become educated in business and recruit for finance internships and full-time roles.



Academic Profile

Remember this:

Your work experience will not offset your academic profile, and your academic profile will not offset your work experience.

They are two separate beasts.

Your academic profile is based on a few things:

1. Your undergraduate GPA
2. Your GMAT/GRE test score: Schools ask for either your top score, or all of your scores.
3. Additional & supplemental coursework



Undergraduate GPA

The second you get your diploma; your undergrad GPA is set in stone. You can't retake classes, take additional courses to raise it (more on that below), or get classes removed from your transcript.

There is one caveat: if you attended multiple undergraduate institutions, those GPAs don't "superscore," but they are reviewed together and considered in context.

If you are like me, and didn't do so hot in college, do not panic. I am living proof; you CAN mitigate a bad GPA.

Your GPA & test score likely make up the preponderance of your academic profile. If you have a below average GPA AND a below average test score, it becomes increasingly hard to mitigate.

GMAT/GRE

Taking the test is a huge step in your journey and should be one of the first. Achieving a great score on one of these tests is the key to the kingdom and can make or break an application. There are schools that accept test waivers, and if you simply cannot get a good score, you can apply for one. But crushing the test signals to schools that you have the current academic aptitude to succeed in their classroom.

There are two tests that are accepted by MBA admissions: the GMAT Focus Edition and the GRE.

The GRE consists of:

1. Analytical Writing
2. Quantitative Reasoning
3. Verbal Reasoning

The GMAT Focus Edition consists of:

1. Data Insights
2. Quantitative Reasoning
3. Verbal Reasoning

Schools have consistently said they do not have a preference. Note: throughout the process, you'll notice schools say things publicly and people ask, "But is that really true?" From my experience, everything the schools said was true and should be followed.

So, which one should you take? The general rule: take a practice test in both, and commit to whichever test that you score higher in.

I think this is good, logical advice. Personally, I knew I didn't want to be graded on my writing and that my work as an intel officer aligned well with the Data Insights section, so I focused on the GMAT Focus, no pun intended, from day one.

Here are a few things to consider about choosing the test:

- ◆ The quantitative, or "quant", section of the GMAT is generally considered harder than the quant section of the GRE.
- ◆ With the GRE, you can skip a question and come back to it later.
- ◆ When you take the GMAT, you are only competing against other people applying to MBA programs. When you take the GRE, you are competing against all students going into master's programs. It's a double-edged sword when you think about it. I learned a long time ago not to academically spar with the engineers. Nerds.

Studying

Trust me when I say this: you need to study. If you are like me, you have not been tested on your reading comprehension since you took the DLAB and had to learn a fake language. To say I was rusty is an understatement. When I took the SAT eight years ago, I got a perfect score in math. My first GMAT practice quant score? 46th percentile.

Once you have chosen which test you are going to focus on, you need to develop a study plan. You can reasonably expect this to take three to five months.

How to Study: The first thing you need to do is find your study platform. I wouldn't recommend going out and buying a big "GRE for Dummies" book. I have never found use in those things, especially when the online resources are so abundant and better.

The popular test prep programs are:

- ◆ Target Test Prep
- ◆ Magoosh
- ◆ Sherpa Prep (+ Veterans discount)
- ◆ Kaplan
- ◆ MBA.com official GMAT Prep



When it comes to test prep, one size does not fit all. I learn best by doing practice problems over and over until I learn the pattern and pick up concepts along the way. Some folks learn better by talking with an instructor or reading a lot of text. You should research each of these programs and see which ones align with your desired learning style.

I went with the MBA.com GMAT prep website for two reasons: the GMAT Focus was brand new, and I figured the other companies hadn't caught up yet (GMAC, the creator of the GMAT test, runs MBA.com and the prep guides) and I got the GMAT prep starter kit for free. There were a ton of practice problems and 6 practice tests, exactly what I needed, and it cost me a total of about \$120.

My strategy was simple: spend all of my time attacking my weaknesses. I spent my time studying like this: 10% data insights, 30% verbal reasoning and 60% quantitative reasoning. I did this because my quant score was always my lowest.



Taking practice tests: I recommend taking two practice tests for every one official test you take. This allows you to practice everything about the test. I recommend you take them at a local library, to imitate the quiet but public environment you will be in. Wake up at the same time you would for the real test, take only the allotted breaks, and bring some brain snacks. Train like you fight. The test is no joke, and you need to prepare as such.

When is my test score good enough? Generally, when you're at or above your target school's median or average score. If you are at your school's median, and so is your GPA, you can probably move on from the test. If you're like me and have a low GPA, you should take it until you are above the school's median.

What many schools' admissions officers have told me during Q&As is that they like it when an applicant retakes the test if they got a low score. So, unless you absolutely crush it the first time, you should expect to take it again.

That being said, there is a point of diminishing returns. Generally taking the test three times is considered the sweet spot. Taking it any more than that means you probably didn't put the requisite energy into studying for it that you should have, and now you are wasting time that could go to refining essays or taking supplemental coursework.

The executive director of admissions at Dartmouth Tuck School of Business told me that he saw an application where the applicant took the GRE 14 times. That applicant did not get in.

Additional & Supplemental Coursework

Any post-undergraduate coursework you did is a plus. It will be factored into the holistic review of your application. It won't change your GPA, but if you did well, it will help your academic standing in your application. MBA programs care most about your quantitative and analytical capacity. If you earned a master's in creative writing, it won't help as much as a master's in mathematics (though I'd love to chat about the writing degree).

The good news is, if you need to mitigate your GPA, besides crushing the test, supplemental coursework is your way to do it. If your GPA is below the average for your desired school, I recommend taking a supplemental course.

There are a few options for courses:

1. UC Berkeley Extension School / UCLA Extension
2. HBS CORE
3. MBA Math
4. Local Community College

I took Math for Management with UC Berkeley Extension School. It was asynchronous, so I could work at my own pace. More importantly for me, since I was past the UCLA extension start date, I could start it at any time. It wasn't a difficult course and took some rust off of my statistics ability.

From all of the research that I conducted, I have come to the conclusion that the best course of action for a veteran trying to mitigate their GPA is to take **Math for Management with UC Berkeley Extension or Math x110 with UCLA Extension**. Beyond that, if you have the time, you can take a microeconomics class or statistics class with those institutions.

MBA Math is so brief that it does not carry near the same weight as a course from an accredited university, and HBS CORE doesn't give regular grades.



Work Experience

Work experience is the third pillar of the application, and typically the best part of a veteran's application. Schools are looking for demonstrated leadership, growth, and effected change. You have likely done all three of these things.

But can you explain that to an admissions committee member who is a 36-year-old former marketing manager?

The way that you display your work experience in your application is through the resume. Don't underestimate how much time it takes to drill in your resume. I went through 14 drafts before I had the resume that I submitted to schools.

I wrote a bullet point in my first draft that looked like this:



Served as S2 at 1st CEB and developed SUAS programs to improve MAC company's ability to recon.

You may know what I mean, but I can assure you that an admissions committee does not.

We are now at the dreaded point of "translating military experience into civilian speak". Don't worry, it's not that hard, especially now with AI. What you want to focus on is "What did I do" and "what was the impact of that."

In the business world, they don't care what you were *responsible* for. They care about the *impact* you made.

The Translation Let's fix that "S2" bullet point I wrote above.

- ◆ **Context:** Instead of "S2," I am an "Intelligence Officer-in-Charge." Instead of "1st CEB," I am in an "800-person combat engineering battalion."
- ◆ **Action:** Instead of "developed," I "spearheaded a digital transformation."
- ◆ **Result:** This is the most important part. What actually happened? "Reduced reporting time by 40%."

The New Bullet:



Spearheaded the digital transformation of intelligence systems for an 800-person combat engineering battalion, implementing drone technology that reduced data collection time by 40% and increased reporting accuracy.

See the difference?

Important Note: Don't over-translate. Equating your role as operations officer with being a "COO" comes across as tone-deaf. You need your audience to understand what you did, but do not try and compare it to a civilian job title, because they are just too different.

Using AI to Help: We have a tool that veterans 5 years ago didn't have: AI. Don't let ChatGPT write your resume for you because it sounds robotic and lacks the specific details that make you unique. But it is an incredible tool for translation.

Paste your jargon-heavy military bullet into Gemini or ChatGPT and ask it: *"Translate this military bullet point into corporate language emphasizing leadership and quantifiable impact."* It won't be perfect, but it will get you 80% of the way there.



Very Important: Your resume for business school must only be one page. No exceptions.

What Schools to Apply To (and Why You Should Visit Them)

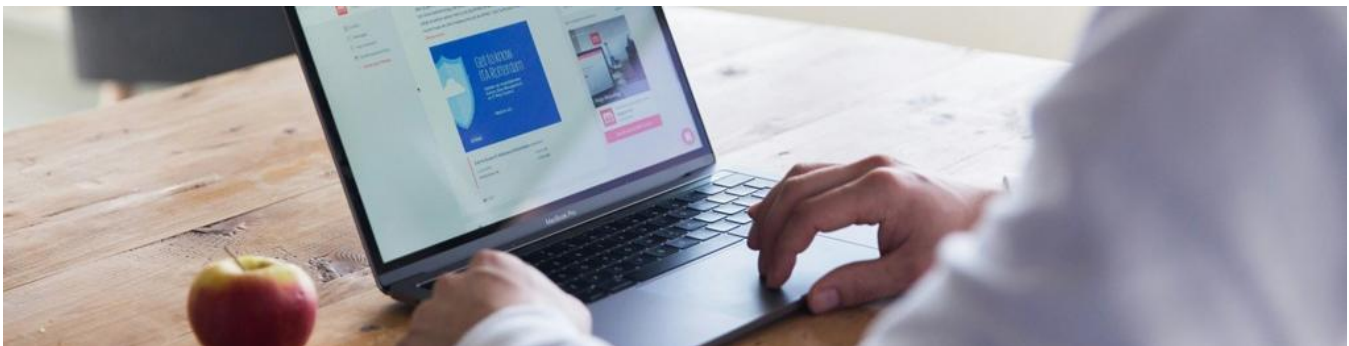
There are a lot of MBA programs out there. What this guidebook is focused on is getting you into a top MBA.

What is a Top MBA?

A top MBA generally means an MBA from a program in the top 25 list of schools. That begs the question: from which list?

There are many school rankings out there; US News, Poets & Quants, Financial Times. While school rankings change year to year, there are generally accepted groups of schools. Here they are:

- ◆ **HSW:** This stands for Harvard, Stanford, Wharton. These schools are generally seen as the most prestigious MBA programs in the world.
- ◆ **The Magnificent 7 (M7):** Harvard Business School (HBS), Stanford Graduate School of Business (GSB), University of Pennsylvania (UPenn) Wharton, Columbia Business School (CBS), MIT Sloan, Chicago Booth, and Northwestern Kellogg.
- ◆ **The Top 15 (T15):** M7 plus Dartmouth Tuck, Berkeley Haas, Yale School of Management (SOM), New York University (NYU) Stern, University of Virginia (UVA) Darden, Michigan Ross, Duke Fuqua, Cornell Johnson and UCLA Anderson.
- ◆ **The Top 25:** T15 plus University of Texas (UT) McCombs, Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) Tepper, University of North Carolina (UNC) Kenan-Flagler, Emory Goizueta, USC Marshall, Indiana Kelley, Georgetown McDonough, University of Washington Foster and Vanderbilt Owen.



HSW

- ◆ Harvard
- ◆ Stanford
- ◆ Wharton

M7

- ◆ Columbia
- ◆ MIT Sloan
- ◆ Chicago Booth
- ◆ Northwestern Kellogg

T15

- ◆ Dartmouth Tuck
- ◆ NYU Stern
- ◆ Duke Fuqua
- ◆ Berkeley Haas
- ◆ UVA Darden
- ◆ Cornell Johnson
- ◆ Yale SOM
- ◆ Michigan Ross
- ◆ UCLA Anderson

T25

- ◆ UT McCombs
- ◆ Emory Goizueta
- ◆ Indiana Kelley
- ◆ CMU Tepper
- ◆ UW Foster
- ◆ Georgetown McDonough
- ◆ Vanderbilt Owen
- ◆ UNC Kenan-Flagler
- ◆ USC Marshall

There are a few principles to understand when applying to school:

- ◆ **Don't self select:** If you got in to every school, you didn't set your sights high enough
- ◆ **Rankings aren't the only thing:** Don't let rankings be the only reason you choose a school
- ◆ **Find your Culture Fit:** Many schools are very intentional about the culture they set and the students they let in. Take that seriously into consideration when deciding which schools to apply to



Don't Self Select

Each school releases their class profile every year for their incoming MBA class. This will give you a good look at the average GPA and test scores, as well as an 80% or 100% range for those stats.

Remember: MBA admissions is truly a holistic process. Put great effort into being above the averages in everything that you can, but if you are below zone in one category, do not let it prevent you from applying.

NYU Stern releases the full GPA range for each incoming class. The Class of 2027's lowest GPA was 3.18. Whether they factor my GPA from Maryland (a 2.9) or my "superscored" GPA (a 3.10), I was below the lowest GPA in last year's class. I seriously considered not applying, thinking, "They must have a GPA cutoff, and I'm surely below it." I applied anyway and will be starting my studies at NYU Stern this summer.

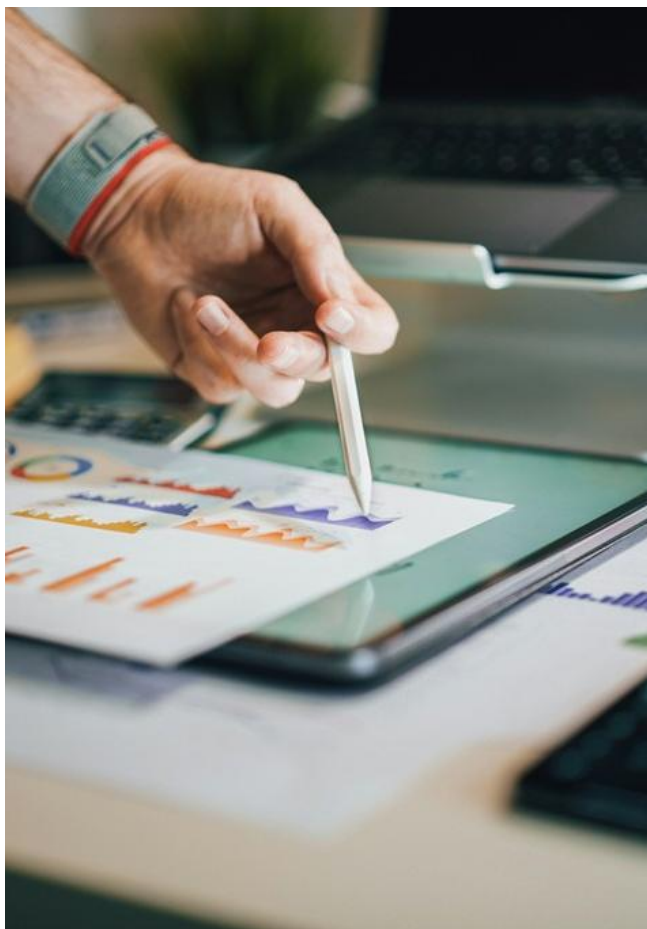
Service 2 School published a great webpage with relevant data on this subject [here](#). What you can see from their data is that veterans, especially those who have high test scores, were able to secure admissions to top MBA programs despite some perceived negatives in their application.

Rankings aren't the Only Thing

Go on r/MBA on Reddit and you will be inundated with people talking about school rankings and giving advice on how to maximize "prestige". It is easy to read these posts and develop the same mindset.

The outcomes from T25 schools are very similar. If you look at the average salary, and job placement % from the T25, you will not see a large variance. You will see an aggressive drop off after the T25, but top schools hold their own.

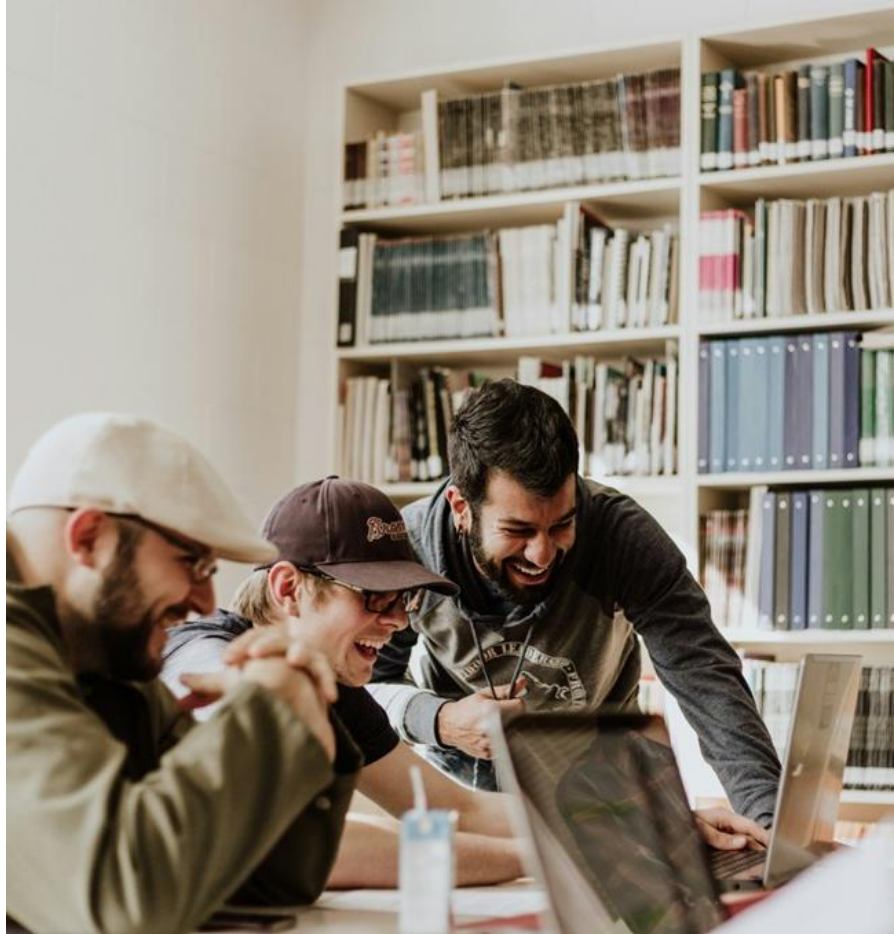
In practice, the tangible difference between going to HSW and going to a T15 is the network and opportunities for "one-off" specialized roles (think: Private Equity and Hedge Fund roles). I am not discounting this difference, and it is an important planning factor. What I am saying is that when it comes down to it, the school ranked #6 and the school ranked #12 is a lot less different than you may think.



Find your Culture Fit

The best way to determine a culture fit is to visit the school. I highly recommend going to veteran's clubs visit days. Many schools have these events. You sign up through the veteran's clubs and they take you through a day of programming. Usually they include: a mock class, a veteran-specific financial aid overview, an admissions overview, a Q&A with students and another with the admissions panel, and a happy hour type social at the end.

I went to Cornell and Wharton's military visit days, had official tours with Tuck and Sloan, and went to a Veteran's club happy hour with NYU Stern students.



I hope you can use this as a reference to what you may be able to learn from visits. Here is what I learned from mine:

- ◆ **Cornell:** I had personal conversations with the dean of the Johnson school of business, and the dean of Cornell. The wives and husbands of current students were having breakfast with everyone when I arrived, and they shared how awesome the partner's club was. My overall impression is that Cornell is a very warm community, and they build their class around students that are friendly and easy to work with.
- ◆ **Wharton:** The mock class that I took was very interesting and engaging. Students and faculty were very focused on career outcomes and using Wharton to get there. My impression was that the school looked for students who were highly competent and accomplished, and that their MBA program will get those students from point A to their chosen point B.
- ◆ **Stern:** I happened to be in New York City on the day of the Veteran's Club spring happy hour. One of the students happily invited me to join. When I showed up, I was the only one without a name tag and I couldn't find my student friend. When I told the guy next to me that I was visiting, he was warm and engaging. The rest of the veterans were the same. I can't count the number of vets who actively gave me their number and offered any help they could provide. Professor Yeo, who teaches Fertitta Summer (veteran-specific programming at Stern), was there and clearly loved by the students. He spent about 15 minutes telling me about his experience at Stern. Overall impression: very welcoming student body, who love their professor and are willing to help me out.

- ◆ **Sloan:** Very industrial. The tour took us through the basement where you could see students in lab coats doing something I probably couldn't understand but that is also fascinating. The Sloan staff told us that many students leave as entrepreneurs, and that the innovative spirit is very alive at Sloan. I met with a vet who walked me around campus for an hour and had a beer with me. Overall impression: go to Sloan to build, the veterans community is great.
- ◆ **Tuck:** Tuck is in a beautiful spot in Hanover, NH. It is remote, and Ubers are hard to come by. The student body is truly "Tuck Nice" and are approachable and friendly. I knew from research Tuck does very well in consulting, and talking with students it was clear that they do well in finance as well. The admissions committee members were active in talking with applicants and made the experience feel very personal. Overall impression: Tuck is a warm and welcoming school that has great outcomes and offers a very different rural MBA experience.

I applied to some of these schools, and others I chose not to based on my visit. They are all top schools, but finding the right fit is important. In all cases, I would not have been able to learn these things through online research.

How many of these schools should I apply to?

I applied to four schools in the first round, and I would have applied to four schools in the second round, if needed. I chose four because it was the number of schools that I knew I could give ample amount of time to make the applications the best they could be. I made the choice to apply to my top four choices in the first round for two reasons:

1. My girlfriend and I could plan our move and her new job early.
2. If you are a splitter like me (low GPA & high test score, or vice versa), the general guidance is that schools are more likely to accept you in the first round.



Networking (and Why You Have To)

This was (arguably) my biggest learning point in the whole process. If networking was a thing to get into undergrad, I sure as hell wasn't tracking. Networking is a thing for MBA admissions.

What is Networking?

In this context, networking is communicating with current students, former students, faculty members and admissions committee members. Usually this is done through an "informational interview" that lasts about 30 minutes over the phone or through Zoom. If able, like when you are visiting schools, meet with people in person to build a better connection and make the encounter more impactful to both you and the person you are networking with.

Why you have to Network

1. **School Fit:** Networking with students will give you an idea of what the school is like. Everyone from a school is friendly? Every student is very focused on job outcomes? Yearly event that everyone loves? Networking will help you get a feel for a school.
2. **Admissions insight:** Who better to ask about getting in than the people who have actually been admitted? They won't have any more insight than anyone else to the admissions black box, but they will be able to explain their strategies and what they think worked. If you start hearing the same thing from multiple students, you can be reliably confident that their strategy is one that you should adopt. Not only that, but many veterans personally offered to read my application and suggest edits.
3. **Showing Interest:** Beyond that, schools are very concerned with their yield rate, i.e., the percentage of students that were accepted and chose to attend the school. A school only has a limited number of data points to understand how much a student desires to go to their school. One of these data points is the level of involvement that the applicant has with the school. If an applicant has networked with 5 students, attended three webinars, and visited campus, the school can reasonably suspect that applicant is more likely to attend if admitted than an applicant who has not.



4. **Veteran specific insights:** Networking with veterans at schools specifically will give you insight into veteran specific information. For example: at Stern, the Fertitta Program provides veterans a \$20K/year housing stipend (on top of your GI Bill housing allowance) and starts classes specifically for vets a month and a half early so that they are ready for the rigors of business school. I wouldn't have known that, or what VR&E is, without networking.
5. **Application boost:** You can (and should) talk about the networking that you did on your applications. After speaking with multiple admissions committee members throughout the process, they all appreciated when a student did thorough research and invested in learning about their program. You can show this in your essays, or where schools specifically ask about networking you have done.



How to Network

I felt very out of place when it came to networking. It is just not something that I really had to do in the military. Below are the steps that I learned about networking:

1. Build out your LinkedIn profile. LinkedIn offers a free year of Premium for veterans who are 1 year from leaving the military. Take full advantage of that offer. Before people talk to you, or if they talk to others about you, it is common for them to pull up your LinkedIn. You never know who is going to see your profile and want to hire you or offer you an opportunity.
 - ◆ **Photo:** Make sure you have a good photo. Portraits for Patriots offers free headshots for transitioning vets. I got mine done through them and it was a great experience. Before you get your headshot, upload a high-quality picture of just you, preferably either in dress uniform or in dress clothes.
 - ◆ **Work Experience:** This is your living resume. Ensure that everything is up to date.
 - ◆ **Posting:** You don't have to post much on LinkedIn. I understand the sentiment that some posts are disingenuous or self aggrandizing. That being said, posting about the good things you are doing helps keep people that may want to help you updated and allows visitors to your profile to see your progression.



2. **Contact the Vets Clubs.** This is the single greatest resource that veteran applicants have, and they should be your first contact. Go to their website and they will either have a form for you to put in your information, or they will have the email/LinkedIn of the vets in their program on the website. I made it a habit to go to these websites and reach out to all of the Marines in their club. Nearly 100% replied and were open to chatting. Common practice for these networking chats:
- ◆ **Reaching out to the student:** A LinkedIn message to a veteran at an MBA program is completely appropriate. I typically said “Hi (name)! My name is Shawn and I am a ground intelligence officer in the Marines out in San Diego. I am transitioning out of the military in May of 2026 and am planning to pursue an MBA. Would you be open to chatting with me about your experience at (school).” You can find the networking scripts that I used throughout my application process in appendix A and some questions to ask in appendix B.
 - ◆ **Prior to the call:** Develop a list of questions that you have for the student. Preferably, these aren’t questions you could easily Google, but most vets are just happy to answer any questions you have on your mind. Do them and yourself a solid and build out your questions before the interview.
 - ◆ **After the call:** Follow up with a thank you note. They aren’t getting a whole lot out of the call and are giving their time to help you. It is common courtesy to follow up with a thank you.
3. **Contact students at clubs you would be interested in.** Once you have dusted off your networking cobwebs by talking with a few vets at a school, it’s time to reach out to regular students. It is important you do this, so you get an understanding of campus life outside the veteran perspective. Preferably, you find students in clubs you think you would like to join. The same networking common practices apply for talking with students.
4. **Attend networking & school sponsored events.** Organizations like **The MBA Tour**, **CentreCourt**, and **Poets & Quants** host multi-school information events, often attended by admissions committee members and former students. I recommend attending a few of these, and speaking with as many people as possible, including other applicants. Many schools also offer networking and information events at their school or in big cities. I attended numerous MBA events in San Diego for schools that were on the East Coast. Every time you go to one of these events, you will be asked to write your name down or check-in with the school. See above, these are data points for the school.
- ◆ Seek to connect with everyone you meet on LinkedIn. Tactical note: if you click the search bar on LinkedIn on your phone, there is a QR code button where you can scan others QR codes, or have others scan yours, so you skip the spelling each other’s name thing.
 - ◆ I met some awesome people during these networking events. One veteran that I met, *and connected with on LinkedIn*, posted about a SkillBridge that he did in private equity, and that the company was looking for another intern during the exact time I was set to do SkillBridge. I reached out to him, he set up an interview for me, and I got the internship. This story is a tangible, real-world benefit to networking and connecting with everyone you meet.

How to Approach Writing Your Essays



Throughout this process, I was told how important essays were. I was skeptical – how much can you really learn about someone from 1,000 words? Turns out: a lot.

I recommend planning to devote a considerable amount of time and energy towards your essays.

The first thing you should do, if you haven't already, is reach out to Service 2 School, and find a mentor. They will hook you up with a student who goes to a school you are targeting, and that is volunteering their time to help make your application strong.

Next, go back to what you built during the “intangibles” part of this guide. Who are you out of uniform? What are some significant struggles you faced in and out of uniform? Why are you choosing the MBA route out of all the options you could choose?

The story you build is the most important part of your essays. This is as important in the business world as it is in admissions, and that is why schools are looking for the emotional intelligence to acknowledge when you failed, and most importantly, coherently explain what you learned from it.

The answer to those questions and many more will help you develop your essays. See appendix D for an essay workflow checklist.

Steps to Building a Winning Essay

- 1. Reading the school's essay guide.** Almost every school has a dedicated webpage that explains exactly what they are looking for from an applicant in their essays. Beyond that, many schools are developing unique essay prompts. MIT Sloan's application has a one-minute video component, NYU Stern's has a "pick six" where you submit six different pictures.
- 2. Read through sample essays here: [Aringo MBA Essay Samples Database](#) or the [Poets & Quants MBA Admissions Advice Collection](#).**
- 3. Focus on one school at a time and outline all of your essays.** Put each essay prompt, including the character/word count requirement, into a document and bullet-point everything you could possibly include. Whittle it down from there until you have a coherent narrative.
 - ◆ *Here is the perfect opportunity to use AI.* Put your maxed out outline into Gemini and see what it thinks is most relevant and what story it says you are building. Note: Do NOT use AI to write your essays. It may or may not be allowed at certain schools, but it diminishes the human quality of your work.
- 4. Once you are happy with the outline, build the essay.** Your first draft is going to suck and be too long, but that is okay. Continue refining it and ask AI for feedback. Once you have a rough draft you think is pretty good, find a veteran at that school and/or your Service 2 School mentor to read through it. Keep iterating like this until you have a final product you are happy with.
 - ◆ When you have a final draft, put it through Grammarly, and Gemini for grammar and spelling, and to make sure that it aligns with the school you are writing for. The LAST thing that you want to do is turn in an essay for Sloan that says Wharton or submit an essay with spelling errors.



The Additional Essay

The additional essay is available on just about every MBA application. The prompt usually says something like “Is there any other information you would like to share with the Admissions Committee?” Most schools allow 500 words or 2000 characters. Harvard Business School only allows 75 words.

You typically use the additional essay in these circumstances:

- ◆ **Low GPA:** If you had a 2.5 GPA your sophomore year because you were balancing ROTC and a family emergency, explain it here directly and briefly.
- ◆ **Employment Gaps:** If you have a 6-month gap on your resume because you were waiting for a TS clearance or recovering from an injury, state it here.
- ◆ **Recommender Choice:** If you aren't using your current supervisor because you haven't told your command you are leaving yet, this is where you explain that.

It is important in this essay to keep it short and factual. You do not need to fill all 500 words. If you are writing about a low GPA, take responsibility for it, but also explain if there were any real-life barriers to your success that were occurring outside of your control. An admissions committee member told me at an event, “If you don't write it, we don't know it. We encourage students to be forthcoming about anything they think is an important part of their story.”



Recommenders

Welcome to the part of the application process in which you have the least control (besides actual admissions, I guess).

Most schools require two recommendations. Some have the recommender turn in a standard PDF recommendation letter, some use their online portal to ask questions and many have them fill out, on a 1 to 5 scale, your competence across many different attributes. I was concerned that this would amount to a lot of work for my recommenders, but after speaking with them it took about 45 minutes total.

There are a few key things you must do to have good recommendations:

- ◆ Choose appropriate recommenders who will say great things
- ◆ Prepare your recommenders appropriately
- ◆ Follow up with your recommenders and ensure they submit



Choose Appropriate Recommenders Who Will Say Great Things

I received advice from a well-meaning educational counselor on base: reach out to your Commanding General and ask them to write you a recommendation, schools LOVE to see high-ranking recommenders. Every single admissions consultant, MBA student and admissions committee member I have spoken to has emphasized that this is completely wrong. What they all say, in no uncertain terms, is to find the recommenders who know you the best and whom you have worked with for a significant amount of time. For military members, this is typically your officer-in-charge/SNCOIC or the officer whom you directly report to.

You are looking for a few criteria for a good recommender:

- ◆ You worked for them for a decent amount of time.
- ◆ They will say great things about you.
- ◆ They will take the time (45 minutes to an hour) to write great things about you and enter them into the various online portals required.
- ◆ Less important, but if you have the option, choose someone who is the best communicator.
- ◆ If they are high ranking, or an ambassador, or a cabinet member etc. that is great, but they need to know who you are and have tangible and relevant things to say about you.

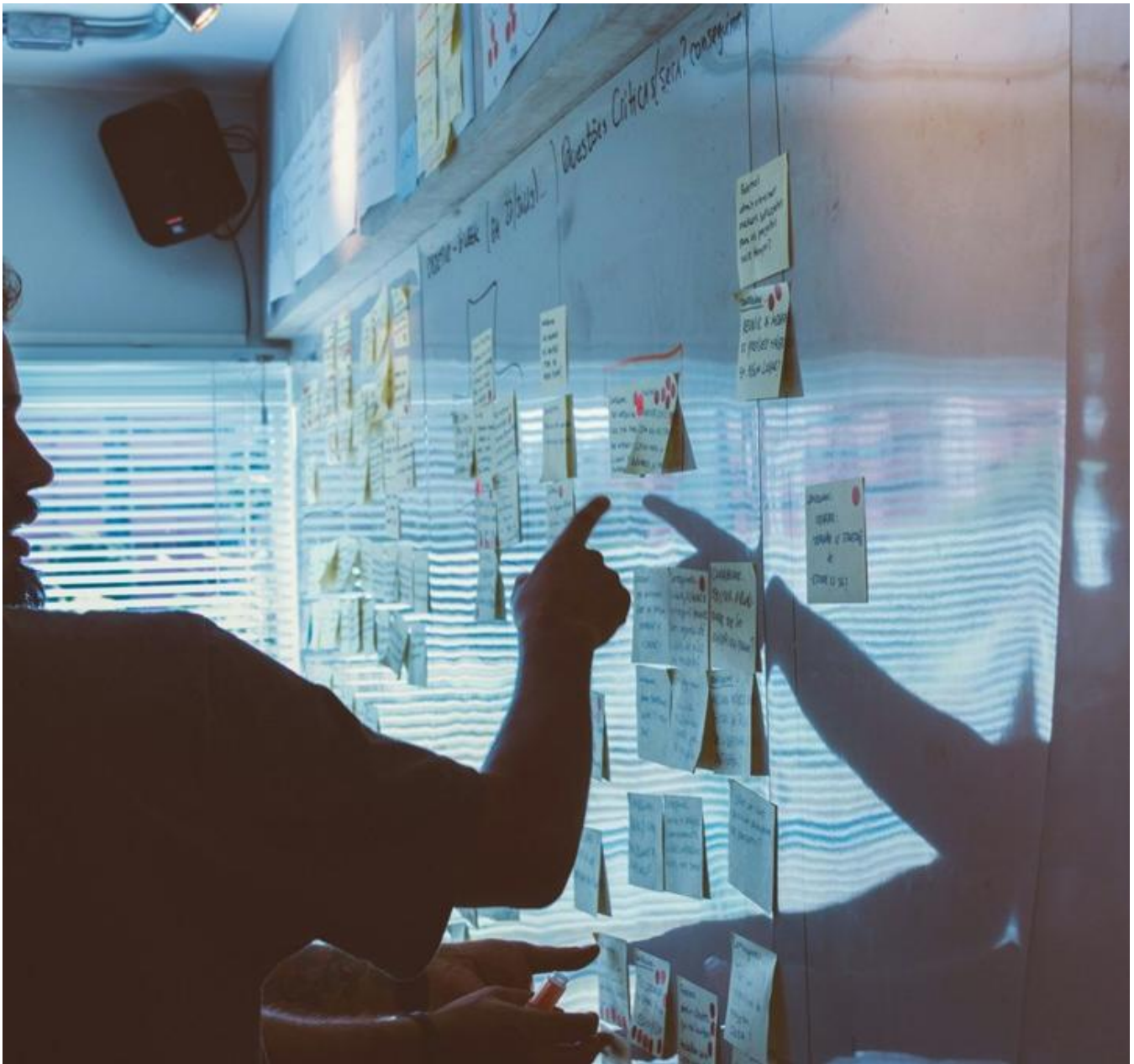
Once you have chosen your recommenders, the next step is to prepare them with a recommender packet.



Prepare Your Recommenders Appropriately

Build a document to send to each recommender. I recommend sending it three months in advance. See appendix C for a template. This document should have:

- ◆ A thank you note, thanking them for doing this for you
- ◆ An overview of what school you are applying to and the due dates for those schools (write the due dates two weeks before they actually are, trust me on this one).
- ◆ Explain that some schools will ask you to answer specific questions, and others will have you upload a recommendation letter.
- ◆ Write about the characteristics and attributes that each school you are applying for cares about, and describe the characteristics that you would suggest to your recommender you have.
- ◆ Describe your perceived strengths and weaknesses. On every recommendation form, recommenders are asked about your weaknesses too. Tell your recommenders that admissions is looking for real weaknesses that you have improved on, not fake weaknesses that are really strengths.
- ◆ An overview of all that you did together and all you accomplished.



Follow up

Trust me, follow up. No recommender, in the history of time, has completed a recommendation letter months before it was due. Joking, but it might be true.

I recommend every month just checking and reminding your recommender about the deadline. Make sure to tell them the deadline is two weeks before it is, because that buffer might be crucial to you. My recommenders were awesome about being on time, but I have heard horror stories.

The Interview

I did not spend any time worrying about the interview until I submitted my applications, and I suggest you do the same.

Some schools, like Northwestern Kellogg, seek to interview all applicants, while schools like HBS interview 20% of their applicants and admit about 50% of those who interview.

Making it to the interview is a big step in the process, but you are definitely not out of the woods yet. My post-interview Wharton rejection and Tuck waitlist can attest to this.

Like other steps in this process, and especially this step, the school's veteran's club is your best resource. They likely know or remember the questions they were asked in their interview.

Each school does their interview a little differently, and asks slightly different questions. After doing veteran networking and online research, there was no question that I was asked during an interview that I wasn't prepared for. The three schools that I interviewed at all asked versions of these questions:

- ◆ Why an MBA and why now?
- ◆ Why do you want to attend [our school]?
- ◆ What are your short term and long term professional goals?
- ◆ Behavioral questions (usually school specific). Things like:
 - ◆ Tell me about a time when....
 - ◆ You faced a challenge
 - ◆ You had to work with a difficult team member
 - ◆ You took initiative beyond your job description
 - ◆ You failed

You can find STAR-L templates in appendix E to help you construct your answers to these questions.

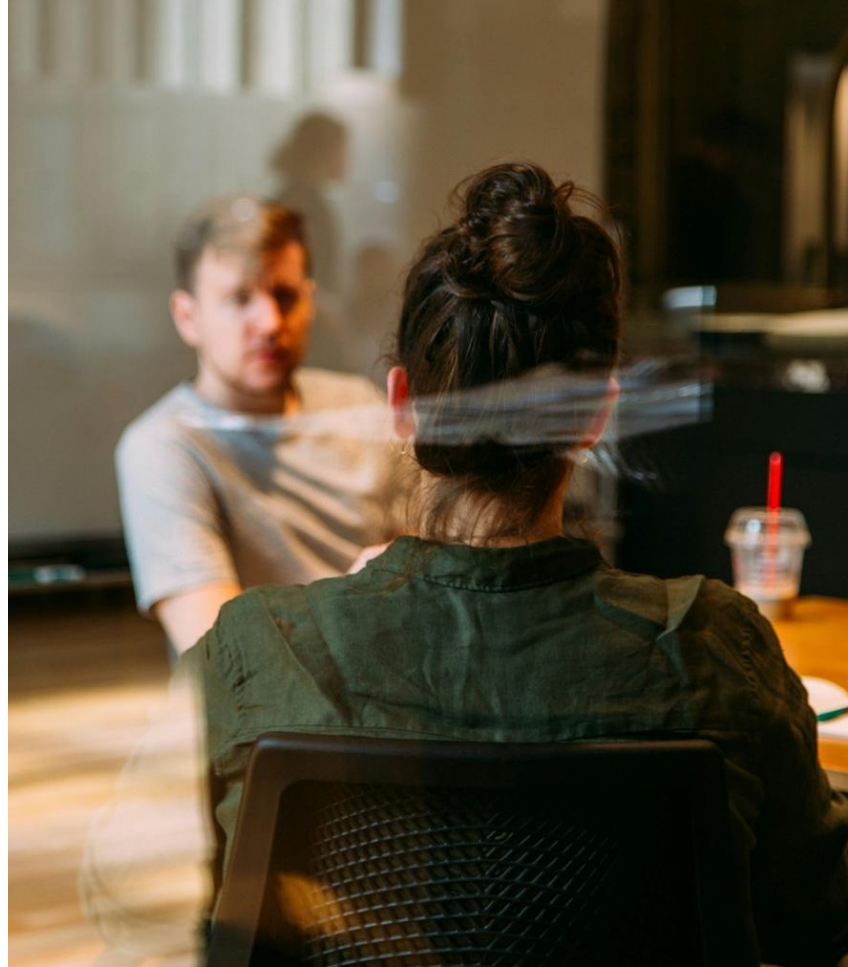
Ground Rules

Wear a suit and tie (men) or business formal attire (women). A black or navy suit is appropriate for either.

Why an MBA and Why Now?

This question is pretty easy for vets. My answer was that I learned a lot of great soft skills in the military, and I wanted to get an MBA to build the hard skills and network required to succeed in business. Why now? My five-year service commitment is coming to an end, and I want to build an education foundation as I pivot careers. Your answer is likely some version of these things.

Why (School)? This is where you show off the networking and research that you did. It is entirely appropriate, and recommended, to name drop students you have talked to and what you learned from them. Most important, tie that to why this information makes this school your top choice and perfect for your goals.



Behavioral Questions

These were difficult for me at first. These aren't things I think about very much. What helped me was building a repository in my head (first on paper) of stories that can apply broadly to multiple questions.

I built these stories using the STAR-L format:

- ◆ **S: Situation.** Background information behind the story I am about to explain
- ◆ **T: Task.** What my role or given responsibility was in this scenario.
- ◆ **A: Action.** What I did in the scenario.
- ◆ **R: Result.** What were the outcomes of my actions.
- ◆ **L: Learned.** What did I learn from this scenario.

You want to find stories that answer the question well and align with your story. If the question asks about a time you failed, answer with a time you genuinely failed. Don't try and spin it to make yourself look good. Schools are looking for the emotional intelligence to acknowledge when you failed, and most importantly, coherently explain what you learned from it.

Interacting with Your interviewer

Almost all schools offer online interviews, and some offer in-person interviews. Most schools are very clear that choosing between one or the other does not affect your application success chances. That being said, especially if you haven't visited the school, it is advisable to do the interview in person to get a feel for the school and show interest.

Some interviewers will give you their email at the end, some won't. If you get an email address for your interviewer, I highly recommend sending them a thank you email.



Money, Benefits, and Resources

I continue to be amazed at the benefits that are offered to veterans. I knew that the GI Bill was a benefit when I joined and that's it. Over the last year I have dug deep and learned about a lot of the different benefits given to veterans and how to take advantage of them. Here are the big ones when it comes to MBA application:



The Post-9/11 GI Bill

If you have served 36 months of active duty, you qualify for 100% of the Post-9/11 GI Bill (some contracts, like the academies, have specific agreements that make your service commitment to receive the GI Bill much longer). This is the bedrock of your funding.

- ◆ **Tuition:** It covers 100% of in-state tuition at public schools. For private schools, there is a national cap per academic year (\$28,937.09 for the 2024-2025 school year, and it adjusts annually). At many schools, which you will learn below, Yellow Ribbon covers the rest.
- ◆ **Housing Allowance (MHA):** This is huge. You get paid E-5 with-dependents “BAH” for the zip code of the school. If you go to school in New York City, San Francisco, or Boston, that is a significant amount of tax-free income going straight into your pocket every month you are in school.
- ◆ **Book Stipend:** You get up to \$1,000 a year for books.

The Yellow Ribbon Program

You may be thinking "The GI Bill covers 29K, but top MBA programs are upwards of 80-90k, how will I cover the rest?"

Enter the Yellow Ribbon Program.

This is an agreement between the school and the VA to split the remaining cost. If a school is a "Yellow Ribbon school" (and almost all top business schools are), they agree to contribute a certain amount to your unpaid tuition, and the VA matches it dollar-for-dollar.

In practice, at most top MBA programs, this means 100% of your tuition is covered.

Check the limits: Some schools have a cap on how many students get Yellow Ribbon, or a cap on the dollar amount. However, many top tier schools have "unlimited" Yellow Ribbon spots for eligible veterans. Always verify this on the school's financial aid page.

Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E)

This is the benefit that I had never heard of, and most active-duty service members do not know about. This is often called "Chapter 31," and in the veteran community, it is a hidden gem.

If you have a service-connected disability rating of at least 10%, you may be eligible for VR&E.

Why use VR&E instead of the GI Bill? VR&E is an employment program, not an education program, but it pays for education if that education is required to help you find suitable employment. If you can make the case that your service-connected disabilities prevent you from doing your military job (e.g., infantry) or a physical civilian equivalent and you need an MBA to pivot into a professional role that doesn't aggravate your condition, VR&E can pay for the entire MBA.

As long as you have at least 1 day of your Post-9/11 GI Bill left, you will receive the Post-9/11 Subsistence Allowance, which is equivalent to the E-5 with Dependents BAH rate for the school's zip code. This ensures you don't take a pay cut by switching to VR&E.

The kicker? It doesn't use up your GI Bill entitlement. This means you could potentially get your MBA paid for by VR&E and still have your GI Bill left over at the end.

Tactical Note: Each region has their own VR&E counselor. Wharton's counselor in Philadelphia is a different person from Dartmouth's counselor in New Hampshire. Some counselors are very liberal with approving VR&E applications, some are not. If this factors into your decision at all, you should reach out to veterans at each of your target schools and inquire about the regional VR&E counselor and what their experience was with applying to VR&E.

Scholarships

On top of all this, you are still eligible for merit-based scholarships from the school. If you are going to a private school, these scholarships will go towards your tuition, but if the GI Bill is already paying your tuition, you will not see any additional money. If you go to a public school, like UVA Darden, and receive a scholarship, you get that money given to you in a check at the beginning of the semester. I have friends who, on top of school being paid for and getting a housing allowance, are essentially getting a bonus each year to attend school.

Resources for Veterans

Here is a quick hit list of the resources that you should bookmark:

- ◆ **Service 2 School (S2S)**: Free mentorship from student veterans. This organization pairs applicants with students or former students who volunteer their time to help with their application. I used S2S and my mentor, Ben, was invaluable to my success.
- ◆ **Sitreps 2 Steercos**: A great guide to MBA/transition news and information. They have an Instagram and a newsletter that breaks down the "why" and "how" of business school for vets. They run a good amount of programming on discovering what career path is right for you and displaying high paying jobs to apply for on their website. Also, they have funny memes.
- ◆ **Portraits for Patriots**: Free headshots for transitioning veterans.
- ◆ **LinkedIn Premium**: Free for 1 year for veterans.
- ◆ **MBA.com**: I had success using their GMAT Focus resources to study for the GMAT.
- ◆ **Sherpa Prep**: A prep program that continuously gets raving reviews from vets and has a veteran's discount.
- ◆ **Tuck Next**: Immersive, two-week certificate program designed specifically for military veterans and elite athletes to build foundational business acumen and translate their service experience into the corporate world.
- ◆ **SkillBridge**: I included in my application that I was participating in a private equity SkillBridge, and I believe it added credibility to my military to finance plan. I highly recommend trying to lock on SkillBridge. The great part about the program is that everyone wants vets to work for them for free, companies get a lot out of it and so do you. Because of that, you can "punch above your weight class" and get an internship you otherwise have no business getting.
- ◆ **American Corporate Partners (ACP)**: ACP pairs veterans up with a mentor. Everyone I know who has used ACP (including myself) has loved it.



- ◆ **McKinsey Early Access:** A program for incoming students that provides a dedicated recruiter to review your resume and offers exclusive webinars to help you navigate the firm before campus recruiting begins.
- ◆ **ExperienceBain:** A pre-MBA immersion series that gives you early exposure to Bain's culture, resume tips, and problem-solving toolkit through virtual webinars and networking events.
- ◆ **BCG Unlock:** A virtual summer program that offers mentorship, resume workshops, and industry deep-dives to prepare you for the recruiting season before you arrive on campus.
- ◆ **Blackstone MINT:** A paid summer internship program specifically for transitioning veterans that provides direct experience in private equity and asset management before your MBA classes begin.
- ◆ **MBA Veterans Network:** The host of the annual MBA Veterans Career Conference, the largest recruiting event for military MBAs where you can secure internship offers from top companies early in your first year.
- ◆ **Veterans Coaching Project (VCP):** VCP runs multiple cohorts a year and provides veterans with 15 to 18 weeks of 1-on-1 professional executive coaching. As of this writing, I am three weeks into VCP and have had a great experience thus far.

Conclusion

In service to this country, you have learned how to lead, operate in austere environments, and endure pain for long durations. During your transition, if you are like me, you will experience competing requirements, long days & weekends filled with work, and the anxious voice that says you aren't good enough to make it.

Just like you did in the military, kill that voice. Follow the steps laid out in this guidebook, work your ass off, and have faith that you are going to crush civilian life the same way.

I made this guidebook free so those who follow me can benefit. Like the vets who took the time to teach and mentor me, my only ask is that you pay it forward, and guide the vets following you, so that we can continue to prove veterans are a powerful asset for our community and the United States.

Semper Fidelis.



Appendix A: Networking Scripts (Copy/Paste)

LinkedIn "Cold Call" Message (To a Fellow Veteran)

Subject: Marine Officer / Prospective [School Name] Applicant

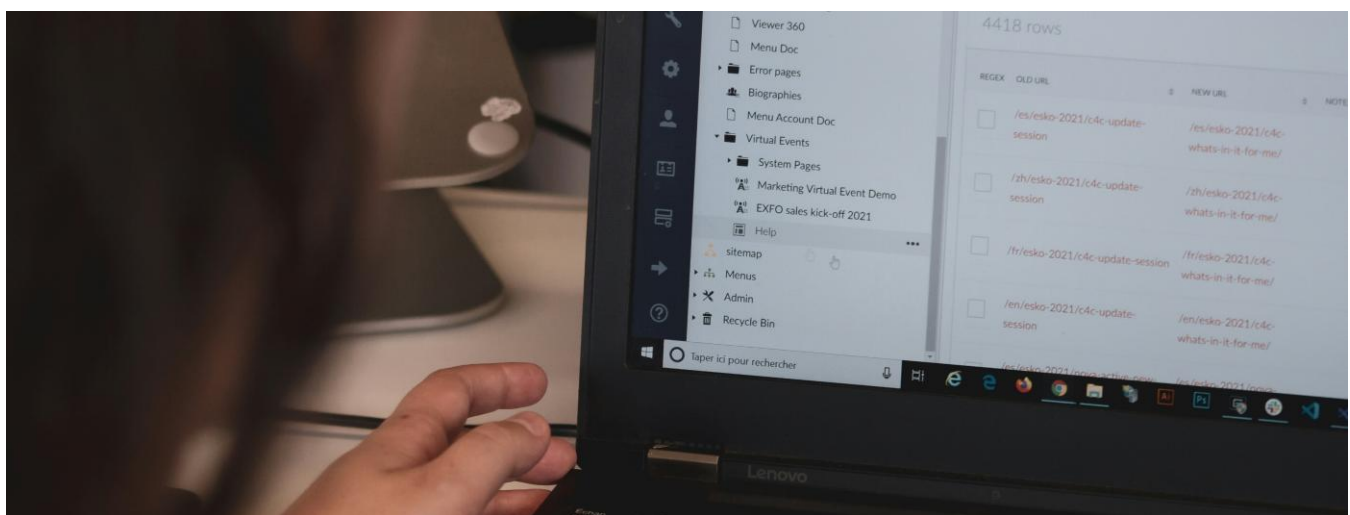
Hi [Name],

My name is [Your Name], and I'm a [Your Rank/Role] currently stationed in [Location]. I'm transitioning out next year and [School Name] is my top choice for an MBA.

I saw you transitioned from [Branch] to [School Name], and I would love to ask you a few questions about your experience and the transition process. Do you have 15-20 minutes in the next week for a quick chat?

Thanks,

[Your Name]



Cold Email (To a Non-Veteran / Club Leader)

Subject: Prospective Student Inquiry - [Club Name] / [Your Name]

Hi [Name],

I hope you're having a great week. My name is [Your Name], and I am a prospective applicant for the Class of 2028.

I am particularly interested in [School Name] because of its strong reputation in [Industry/Culture], and I noticed you are a leader in the [Club Name]. I would appreciate the opportunity to briefly connect and ask about the culture of the club and how it fits into the broader student experience.

I know you are busy with classes, so I am happy to work around your schedule.

Best,

[Your Name]

"Thank You" Follow-Up (Send within 24 hours)

Subject: Thank you / [School Name] Chat

[Name],

Thank you for taking the time to chat with me earlier today. I really appreciated your insight on [Specific thing they mentioned, e.g., the recruiting process for consulting or the ski trip tradition].

It was great to hear how supportive the community is. I'll keep you posted on my application progress.

Best,

[Your Name]



Appendix B:

Informational Interview Question Bank

10 Questions for Veterans

1. How did the veterans club support you during your first semester?
2. Was the transition from the military culture to the business school culture a shock? How did you handle it?
3. How "vet-friendly" is the admissions committee and the career management center?
4. Did you participate in any pre-MBA programs (like Tuck Next or McKinsey Early Access), and were they worth it?
5. How do you manage the GI Bill and Yellow Ribbon paperwork here? Is the financial aid office helpful?
6. What is one thing you wish you knew about this program before you EAS'd?
7. How is the social dynamic between the vets and the non-vets?
8. Did you find your military leadership experience translated well to group projects here?
9. What are the most common career paths for vets graduating from this program?
10. If you could redo your application process, what would you change?



10 Questions for Non-Veterans (General Students)

1. What does a typical "Tuesday" look like for you regarding class, recruiting, and social events?
2. Why did you choose [School] over other programs you were accepted to?
3. How accessible are the professors outside of class hours?
4. What is the "hero" class or professor that everyone says I must take?
5. How competitive vs. collaborative is the recruiting environment here?
6. What is the housing situation like? Do most students live near campus?
7. What is the biggest complaint students currently have about the program?
8. How active are the clubs? Is it easy to get leadership roles?
9. What is the one tradition/event that defines the culture here?
10. What kind of student doesn't do well here?



Appendix C:

Recommender Packet Template

Subject: *MBA Recommendation Letter Prep Packet*

Sir/Ma'am,

Thank you again for agreeing to write my recommendation letters. Your support means a lot to me and will be a huge factor in my acceptance.

The Logistics:

- ◆ **Deadline:** [Date - set this 1 week before the actual deadline]
- ◆ **Format:** You will receive an email from [School Name] with a link to a portal. It typically involves answering 3-4 short questions and rating my performance on a scale.

The Schools & What They Value:

- ◆ **[School A]:** Values "collaborative leadership" and "community."
- ◆ **[School B]:** Values "analytical rigor" and "innovation."

Refreshers / "Ammunition" for your writing: *To make this easier, here are a few reminders of projects we worked on together. Please feel free to use your own words/examples, but I hope these jog your memory:*

- ◆ **Constructive Feedback:** (Schools *will* ask what feedback you gave me and how I responded).
 - ◆ *Example:* Remember when you told me I needed to delegate more during the [Exercise Name]? I took that to heart by implementing [Action], which resulted in [Result].
- ◆ **Leadership/Initiative:**
 - ◆ *Example:* The time I led the implementation of the new [System/Protocol] while we were short-staffed.
- ◆ **Teamwork/EQ:**
 - ◆ *Example:* How I handled the conflict between [Marine A] and [Marine B] during the deployment workup.

My Goals (So you know why I'm doing this): I am leaving the service to pursue a career in [Industry]. I believe my time leading Marines gave me the soft skills I need, but I need this MBA to build the hard business skills to be successful.

Thank you again. I will send a gentle reminder a week before the deadline!

Semper Fi,

[Your Name]

Appendix D:

Essay Workflow Checklist

Phase 1: Brain Dump

- ◆ Create a "Life Map" (timeline of your life from birth to now).
- ◆ Identify 3 "Pivot Points" (moments that changed your trajectory).
- ◆ Identify your "Why" (Connect the military past to the corporate future).

Phase 3: Draft

- ◆ Write the "ugly first draft." Don't worry about word count.
- ◆ Sleep on it for 24 hours.
- ◆ Edit for structure (STAR-L format).

Phase 5: Polish

- ◆ Grammar check (Grammarly).
- ◆ Read it out loud (catches awkward phrasing).
- ◆ Final Word Count check.

Phase 2: Outline

- ◆ Copy/Paste the prompt into a blank doc.
- ◆ Bullet point your answer. Does it actually answer the prompt?
- ◆ Use AI (Gemini/ChatGPT) to critique the *outline* logic (not the writing).

Phase 4: Feedback Loop

- ◆ Send to Service 2 School mentor.
- ◆ Send to a Vet student at that specific school.
- ◆ **Do NOT** send to 10 people. Stick to 2-3 trusted reviewers.

Appendix E:

Interview STAR-L Story Bank

Fill this out before your first interview. Have 5-6 "Core Stories" that can answer almost any question.

Story 1: The "Leadership Challenge" Story

Use this for: "Tell me about a time you led a team," "Describe a challenge you faced," "What is your leadership style?"

Story Tagline (Name it so you remember it): _____

Situation (Context - 10%): Where were you? Who was there? What were the stakes?

◆ *Draft:*

Task (The Problem - 10%): What specifically were you trying to achieve? What was the obstacle?

◆ *Draft:*

Action (What YOU did - 60%): This is the most important part. Use "I" statements, not "We." What specific steps did you take?

◆ *Draft:*

Result (The Outcome - 10%): Quantify it if possible. Did you save time? Save money? Save lives? Improve a metric?

◆ *Draft:*

Learned (The Takeaway - 10%): What does this say about you as a leader today?

◆ *Draft:*

Story 2: The "Failure" Story

Use this for: "Tell me about a time you failed," "What is your biggest weakness," "Tell me about a regret."

Story Tagline: _____

Situation:

◆ *Draft:*

Task:

◆ *Draft:*

Action (The Mistake): Be honest. Don't say "I worked too hard." Say what you actually messed up.

◆ *Draft:*

Result (The Consequence): What happened because of your mistake?

◆ *Draft:*

Learned (The Pivot): How did you fix it, and how do you ensure it never happens again?

◆ *Draft:*

Story 3: The "Conflict / Difficult Team Member" Story

Use this for: "Tell me about a time you dealt with a difficult person," "Describe a conflict at work."

Story Tagline: _____

Situation:

◆ Draft:

Task:

◆ Draft:

Action (The Resolution): How did you approach them? Did you pull them aside? Did you listen first?

◆ Draft:

Result: Did the relationship improve? Did the project succeed despite them?

◆ Draft:

Learned: What is your philosophy on handling interpersonal conflict?

◆ Draft:

Story 4: The "Analytical / Problem Solving" Story

Use this for: "Tell me about a time you used data to make a decision," "Describe a complex problem you solved."

Story Tagline: _____

Situation:

◆ *Draft:*

Task:

◆ *Draft:*

Action (The Analysis): What data did you look at? What tool did you use (Excel, etc.)? How did you convince others?

◆ *Draft:*

Result: Quantifiable improvement.

◆ *Draft:*

Learned:

◆ *Draft:*

Story 5: The "Innovation / Initiative" Story

Use this for: "Tell me about a time you went above and beyond," "Describe a time you challenged the status quo."

Story Tagline: _____

Situation:

◆ Draft:

Task:

◆ Draft:

Action (The Change): What new process or idea did you implement? How did you get buy-in?

◆ Draft:

Result:

◆ Draft:

Learned:

◆ Draft: