

## CASE STUDY

# REALISE YOUR FULL POTENTIAL

**PETER SANDERSON, 37,  
CATERPILLAR TECHNOLOGY  
APPLICATION SPECIALIST**



Peter Sanderson considers he might just have the dream job. As a technology application specialist for heavy machinery giant Caterpillar, he gets to combine his interest in construction, his skills as a trainer and the values instilled in him during five years in the Australian Army. Most days, he says, “I’ll be out on the road talking to customers or teaching people how to operate the equipment. I love it.”

But Peter’s journey from the Army to meaningful civilian work was anything but straightforward.

Raised in Victoria, he’d been 19 when he joined the Australian Defence Force (ADF) in 2006 as a weapon locating radar operator. He was selected to go to the United States to undergo training in the use of drones, and then in 2007 deployed to Afghanistan for several months. Upon return to Australia, he did further Army training in surveillance systems.

By 2011, however, Peter had been medically downgraded due to stress fractures in both legs. Leaving the Army on a medical discharge at the end of October 2011, he “spent the next three years trying to find a job that had some sort of meaning. I did cash jobs here and there for mates. I even sold barbecues for a while. But none of it really went anywhere. None of it really was enjoyable.”

Part of the problem was that he didn’t have a clear idea of what he wanted to do in life. “All I’d known as an adult was military life.” In addition, he was struggling to translate the skills he’d learned in the Army onto paper. “Trying to get the right language into a CV about how my military career was relevant was a challenge,” he says.

In 2015, Peter’s fortunes started to change. Having relocated from Brisbane to Melbourne, he reached out to ex-service organisations including Soldier On. “I realised there were people out there who’d had the same experiences as me, who understood.”

The network would prove important. On Anzac Day 2017, he was introduced to an ex-service person who was helping to connect veterans with work in the construction industry. The jobs started coming – and Peter realised he had found his tribe. “Construction was the closest thing to my Army experience that I’ve managed to find in the civilian workforce,” he says. “It’s small groups working together to do a particular task.”

When the Caterpillar dealer in Victoria advertised for a trainer, he jumped at it – and got the job. “Because of my time in the army, I had a lot of training experience,” he says.

“While Caterpillar provided training, a lot of it was very heavily aligned with the training I went through in the Army. The process is the same.”

After years of searching, Peter is now doing a job that aligns with his skills, abilities and potential. “It gives me variety. It makes me think. It challenges me to problem solve and come up with new ways to try to fix things,” he says. “But I’ve also got a really great team who support each other.”

For Peter, being a team player is one of the most important values he brought from his time with the Army. Then there’s reliability. “Even 12-13 years after leaving the Army, if I say I’m going to do something, I’ll do it. And I’m always on time, or early.”

Meanwhile, he’s continuing to serve – as a community volunteer. “I started volunteering for an organisation called Disaster Relief Australia in 2017, when I needed to do something that provided a sense of purpose,” he says. “Whenever I can get the time off work, I usually give a week or so.”

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With the benefit of hindsight, what advice does he have for people leaving the ADF and looking for work?

“You need to know what you’re passionate about, and you’re not going to find that out until you start doing a few different things,” Peter says. “Get involved with the ex-service organisations. You will meet people, you will network. If I hadn’t been doing volunteer activities through Soldier On, I wouldn’t have met that contact on Anzac Day 2017 and landed in construction.”

What would he say to employers who might be a little unsure about hiring an ex-service person?

“I think they need to know that the CV part can be a challenge for an ex-service person,” says Peter. “But if you can get them to the interview stage, just sit them down and have a face-to-face conversation – that will tell you so much more about the sort of worker they could be than a piece of paper can.”



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