



## THE LAUNDRY INDUSTRY— A 'HIDDEN TREASURE' FOR VETERANS

Here we begin a series of profiles of U.S. military veterans in textile services

**Q** &A with Mike Knowles, a U.S. Army veteran and current vice president, Western Division, for Superior Linen Service, Tulsa, OK

**Q. Can you tell us a little about your military background?**

I enlisted in the Army in 1977 as an Armored Cavalry Reconnaissance Specialist (Scout). I served four years on active duty, stationed both stateside and in Europe. During that initial four years, I attended three levels of noncommissioned officer leadership courses, and separated at the rank of Sergeant. Four years later I went back into the Army Reserve, in an Infantry/Basic Training (Drill Sergeant) unit to enhance my civilian educational

benefits. There, I ended up serving another 12 years and attended Drill Sergeant School and First Sergeant School. I served at numerous basic training installations and separated at the rank of Sergeant First Class/E7.

**How did you end up in the commercial laundry industry?**

When I separated from the Army (my initial four-year tour), I didn't have a plan besides finding a job. I worked for a year as a forklift operator, but the company was downsizing in a shaky economy. I was offered a job (at the recommendation of my father-in-law) at Industrial Uniform and Towel Supply in Tulsa, OK. My initial job duties were unloading trucks and baling shop towels. Within 30 days I was on a route. In two years I was a route supervisor. Getting to VP took a little longer, but there were a few promotions along the way.

**Are there any similarities between working in a laundry and the military?**

The similarities are that you have a chain of command, a mission and multiple goals and objectives that build toward accomplishing that mission. If you are on the sales or service side, you also have adversaries (competitors) to contend with.

**What did you learn in the military that's helped you in your civilian job?**

The skills that the military taught me are almost too numerous to account for here. But the highlights are:

- **UNDERSTANDING AUTHORITY**—Who do I work for? Who do I have authority over, and what issues should I take to a manager from a different department?
- **LEADERSHIP**—In the military, you learn about leadership. Not being a boss, but getting people to follow you...and there's a huge difference between the two. The latter is a much more likely path to success.
- **WORK ETHIC**—Maximizing efficiency, being focused and staying engaged until the job at hand is done.
- **ABILITY TO TRAIN**—Once you've attained any supervisory role (military), you typically have had to train subordinates. The obvious civilian benefit is that it prepares you to train subordinates.

**Is the laundry industry a good place for veterans to work?**

The laundry industry can be a hidden treasure for veterans when it comes to seeking employment. Often industrial laundries can be challenged to find employees who can (eventually) develop into leadership roles. That is where veterans as a group typically shine—the ability to lead. **TS**

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** On June 7, during the Clean Show, TRSA will honor all industry members who are veterans of the U.S. armed forces during a special breakfast at 6:45 a.m. at the Las Vegas Convention Center. A discussion will center on how to draw more ex-service personnel into careers in the laundry industry.