

At Your Service



Interview//Andy Levinsky

From the call of duty to wake-up calls, Larry Broughton BA '90 knows what it means to serve.

If Larry Broughton looks familiar, it may be from his many speaking engagements or his appearances on cable shows like “The Big Idea with Donny Deutsch” (CNBC), “Your Business” (MSNBC) and “Hotel Impossible” (The Travel Channel). But well before he became famous for focusing on service at the boutique hotel brand that bears his name, Broughton was serving his country as a member of the U.S. Army Special Forces (aka the Green Berets). Broughton has also served his alma mater, returning to campus to speak with veterans about making the transformation from the military to the University and the working world--a path the Weston Mills, New York native and single parent of teenagers has followed himself.

You spent nine years in the military. What made you enlist and why the Green Berets specifically?

My father was a Marine who served on Iwo Jima in World War II, who instilled a sense of hard work, honor and patriotism in me, but never pushed me to serve in the military. In fact, when he had found out that I had enlisted, with the option of trying out for Special Forces (the Green Berets), he asked me if I knew what to heck I was getting into and tried to talk me out of it. Sadly, I’m not sure he felt I had the goods to make it. I had competed in wrestling throughout my high school career, then earned my black belt in karate shortly after graduating. I liked how those experiences had stretched and tested me. When I found out I had such exceptional

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scores on the entrance exam to join the military and that I had the aptitude for special operations, I was intrigued. I loved studying leadership and have always cheered for the underdog, so when I learned about the power and exploits of the small, highly- elite Special Forces A-Teams, I wanted to be a part of that brotherhood. I wanted to find a place where I belonged where the bonds of brotherhood were thicker than blood. When I finally passed all the required courses and trainings to become a Green Beret, and was assigned to a Special Forces A-Team, it was the proudest moment of my life! My father was at the graduation ceremony—which meant the world to me. I was blessed to travel and serve in several countries while in Special Forces, and it was there that I gained a deep interest in public policy, international relations, political science, and leadership. It was there that I understood that the power of small elite teams who are united behind a common mission can outperform and outmaneuver larger, better funded teams who lack vision and leadership.

Veterans often say that their military experience was directly applicable to their professional experience, particularly in business. Was that the case for you?

There's lots of truth that the skills and characteristics of self-discipline and motivation honed from the military that serve veterans in the professional and business arena, but it goes way beyond that. Those who study the nuance of success and business understand that leaders are problem solvers. All (and I mean all) problems in business boil down to people problems. Successful Special Forces veterans are masters at reading, inspiring, and motivating people during highly complex, dynamic and stressful situations. Military veterans in general have a spirit of service that transcends their military occupational specialty. When a service member enlists, it's said that they "go into the service" ...those who do well in business later on, continue to maintain a spirit of service for their team members, their clients, their families and communities. As a team member or

consumer, wouldn't we rather support a leader who serves others first, rather than someone who just takes or pushes their own agenda in front of the common good? Veterans understand the sacrifice, love and power of service to others; and that's contagious to those who experience it.

When you hear "Thank you for your service" from a stranger who learns that you are a veteran for the first time, how does it make you feel? Do you believe it is an appropriate acknowledgment or is there something else you would prefer they say (or do)?

Wow, that's a tough one. First of all, I try to take the comment in the spirit in which it's meant...truth is, however, most folks haven't stopped to actually think about what it really means to be willing to sacrifice everything on someone else's behalf. Too often I've heard military service members and

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veterans degraded or bad mouthed as uninformed; uneducated; sheep; hateful, mean-spirited war mongers, and similar names.

One of the reasons there are these misconceptions of veterans and service members is because most Americans don't personally know people who are serving or have served. A vast majority of those who join the military are not hateful, nor mean-spirited war mongers. You don't willingly offer to sacrifice everything for others because you're hateful, but rather because you love so damn much! You do it because you love your family, you love your neighbors, you love your way of life and the brother or sister to your right or left. I know

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some of the toughest, most bad-ass warriors in the world, who are also some of the most selfless and loving men you'll ever meet.

There's a verse from the Book of John that says, "There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends." Because of that, when someone says, "thanks for your service," I simply respond with, "Thanks. It was an honor." If some were to say something like, "thanks for your service and sacrifice," or "thanks for picking up the sword," or "I appreciate what you were willing to do for us," that carries a lot more meaning because it seems like they may understand the multi-generational impact that military service has on my family, community and our country.

Based upon your experience, do you feel the U.S. should have an all-volunteer military?

Boom! Another great question! Some argue that mandatory military conscription would democratize our military, while others argue it would militarize our democracy. With today's all volunteer force, most Americans don't personally know someone who has served. They may know of people, but not personally know service members. That's a huge problem. I often wonder if we would tolerate perpetual war and never-ending deployments, currently carried on the shoulders of about 1% of our countrymen, if every family had an immediate member serving in uniform. Those who do volunteer to serve in the military are there because they want to be, which leads to a more competent and motivated fighting force. That is, until they're stretched beyond their limits, with dwindling resources, indecisive leaders, and back to back deployments. I know I'm going to hurt someone's feelings, but this has to be said: we need to do a better job of recruiting volunteers and ensuring more of our young people are in fighting shape so they actually can serve...but sadly, the physical and psychological condition of many of our younger citizens wouldn't allow them to serve in uniform today. As a society, we've become soft physically, mentally and emotionally. I remind team members of my companies, and in keynote presentations I

deliver that "Tough times create tough men (and women). Tough men create easy times. Easy times create weak men. Weak men create tough times." We've coddled each other and bubble wrapped our kids to the point where they are weaker and more fragile than previous generations. If we don't change that, it won't end well for us. I'm a firm believer that common service produces greater tolerance among diverse populations and is an antidote to toxic tribalism that's rampant across our country. Perhaps the answer is not mandatory military service, but two years of service to our country or community. Perhaps it's service in the military if you choose, but it could be service in the Peace Corps, or for the National Parks Service, Habitat for Humanity, the Red Cross or hundreds of

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other worthy organizations. Serving others brings meaning to our own lives. After all, there is no higher calling than serving others.

How do you feel about the wave of veterans who became members of Congress in 2018? Do you weigh record of military service or lack thereof into your selection process when considering candidates' qualifications?

I love the idea of veterans running for political office, just as I love the idea of anyone who has the heart and brains to serve. Most veterans will view military engagement, interventions and options differently than non-veterans—which offers a much-needed perspective in Congress. Veteran status, however,

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is just one thing I personally take into account. Just as I've never voted a party line, I don't vote for someone just because they're a veteran. I know plenty of vets who are running solely or largely based on their military service, but I disagree with them on the issues, so I wouldn't vote for them. Just like any other social group, there are rock stars as well as idiots among the veteran community.

Is there one experience from your time at UCSB that you find applicable to your work--or life in general--today?

Absolutely! The conversations and debates during some of my Political Science classes, and with my roommates inspired me to ask more questions and to seek understanding rather than seeking agreement. When I understand where a point of view is coming from, I'm more likely to successfully navigate the disagreement. This is a vital skill to succeed in life and business. Sadly, I also learned that lots of us argue a point while lacking the foundation or conviction of experience to back up the point. University life is meant to be a playground of diverse thoughts where diverging ideas are tested and critical thinking skills are honed. Those are invaluable lessons for life and leadership.

You've visited with UCSB vets as a graduate. How did you first make the connection?

I met Coby Dillard, the Coordinator of the UCSB Veterans & Military Services at an event where I was delivering a keynote to military Veteran Entrepreneurs. I have visited the center a couple of times and met with some of the vets to answer questions about their transition from military service, to university to a career path. Coby's commitment to serving and supporting student veterans is authentic and heart-felt. I've expressed to him that I wish I had known, as a student veteran, that there were resources available that would assist me with my transition to and through my academic career.

Many veterans struggle with the transition through their academic careers and finding student peers who welcome them because they tend to be older, more widely traveled, with broader life experiences

that most of their classmates lack. These differences can lead to isolation of student vets. The vets center offers a place to meet other vets, and gain access to services and counselling that increases the chances for success of these students. I understand they are moving into a new, larger space and need some capital to renovate and retrofit.

Your first job out of the military was as a night auditor at a motel in the Tenderloin in San Francisco. Did that experience spark your interest in the hospitality business, or did you take the job because you always had that interest and wanting to gain some practical experience?

I took the job because I needed it, and it paid a whopping \$5 an hour! Since I worked from 11:00pm until 7:00am, I was able to attend college during the day. I was usually able to get a few hours of studying and homework completed while at work and attend classes by 8:00am. It was during my time there, once the property had been renovated into a boutique hotel that I recognized that the hospitality industry offered me an opportunity to seamlessly combine my creative, analytical, leadership skills. I was actually in the right place until the right time came along. I moved up through the leadership ladder, was made a partner in a growing hotel company, then launched my own firm in 2001.

You once aspired to be a U.S. Senator. Is politics a possible fourth career for you after military service, hospitality, and public speaking? Is there anything you would like to announce?

Ha! I've learned to never say "never." Although I've been approached a few times to run for congressional seats, it's very, very unlikely I'll run for office. I'm not sure I'd want to put my family through the grinder of political life. Plus, I'm built more like an executive than a legislator. Sitting around in committees and pointing the fingers at others, rather than taking action and solving problems sounds like death to me. I can make a bigger impact on the country and world by continuing my own entrepreneurial endeavors; writing more books; and helping create more entrepreneurs, leaders and high-achievers.