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Former Soldier now helps others make the transition

By Ed Drohan
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HEIDELBERG, Germany – A few months ago, Morris Russell was an active duty Soldier assigned to the Warrior Transition Battalion-Europe. Four deployments to Iraq had taken their toll and he was going through the process of being medically retired from the Army.

Today, Russell is using that experience to help other transitioning Soldiers prepare for life as civilians by helping them get ready for the job market. At the same time, his work is therapy for him as well.

Russell is an instructor for the Wounded Warrior Project's Transition Training Academy in Baumholder, Germany. Twice a week, WTB-E Soldiers travel from posts around Germany – some driving as many as three hours – to attend his Introduction to Computer Repair course. All hope to receive their CompTia A+ certification, something that opens employment doors in the information technology industry.

The course, which started Oct. 1, will run eight weeks before the 12 students get a three week break to study for their certification test. They then return for another eight weeks of training on practical applications that they'll need to work in the IT field, Russell said.

All the students had to first complete the TTA's Introduction to Computer Technology course before attending the computer repair course. Russell said most of the students were surprised when he came in the first day as the course instructor since he'd been one of their fellow students in the first course.

"The last time I was here as a student in the Warrior Transition Unit," Russell said. "The first day of class, all the guys were looking around and asking where the instructor was because I went to the first course with these guys."

While still a Soldier in the WTB-E, Russell was working on his degree in cyber security and pulling on-the-job training with the U.S. Army Europe IT help desk. He was able to pass the test for his CompTia A+ certification, and, after medically retiring in Germany, was offered the instructor's position.

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He said at first, though, he didn't think the job was right for him.

"I had just gotten the A+ certification and they (WWP) asked if I'd like to work with the Wounded Warriors," Russell explained. "At first I didn't want to work with them. I had a lot of anxiety issues about speaking to groups of people because of my PTSD, but I was working with my therapist to work out those issues, to get me out of my shell."

Eventually he decided to accept the job offer, looking at it as a challenge.

"It forces me to get in front of the class," Russell said. "It allows me to take small steps and work in a room full of guys I can relate to. It's therapy for me."

His students run the gamut in experience, from one Soldier who has worked in the IT field for years to another who has almost no experience at all.

"Some of the guys have been doing this stuff since they were 8, others have never touched a computer," Russell said. "The end goal is that they absorb as much information as they can, not just from me, but from their classmates, research – anything that can give them the edge."

His students agree that the TTA is something they couldn't pass up.

"This is a fantastic opportunity," said Maj. Robert Stohler, who is a member of WTB-E's D-Company in Vilseck, Germany. He's taking the course with his son, who is his registered caregiver. "It's great that somebody would do all this, go through this large expense, all so we have something to take into our civilian career."

Russell said he makes it a point to tell his students something positive about themselves every day of class to plant the seeds of encouragement in them. His goal is the same as when he was active duty.

"My goal is to have these guys leave here knowing more than I do, with a better plan than I had, and go out and accomplish more than I did," Russell said. "A good leader always wants his Soldiers to be better than they are."

He added that he gets as much out of the experience as his students do.

"Here I am teaching IT classes, still working with Soldiers and helping them," he said. "I still feel like part of the team – I'm still serving."

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CUTLINE:

Morris Russell, a former Soldier who know teaches computer repair for Warrior Transition Battalion-Europe Soldiers in Baumholder, Germany, describes the functions of different components on a computer motherboard for Maj. Robert Stohler, left, and Spec. Akindade Johnson during a recent class session. Stohler and Johnson are Soldiers assigned to the WTB-E. (Photo by Ed Drohan)