

Jose Cajar

Advanced Composition

Dr. Maxwell

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Paying It Forward: An Interview with Juan Campana

Juan Campana is a Marine Corps veteran who served four years in active duty. Living in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, young Juan used to look at the military flags displayed on the lawns of veterans in 1998 and wonder. It was not until his ninth grade in high school that he knew he wanted to enlist. Juan was inspired to join after watching the September 11th attack of the U. S. Trade Center on his home television. “I felt inclined to help the United States when it was at its weakest,” Juan said. He acknowledges that he did not know what it would be like serving in the military but that, “As a citizen you have to help your country.”



As soon as he finished high school, he enlisted. In August of 2005, he shipped off to Parris Island for recruit training. “I told my recruiter, ‘I don’t like sitting behind a desk,’” he

said. His recruiter then suggested explosives, and eighteen-year-old Juan responded, “Alright that sounds like fun!”

But as we talked, we broached aspects of his time in Marine Corps that were very dark. Juan touched on some of the death he experienced while serving. “One of our Staff NCOs got injured,” Juan said, explaining that the Staff Non-Commissioned Officer later died during surgery. This was the first death he ever experienced in the Marine Corps, and he had been on active duty for less than five months.

Shortly after training, he deployed to Iraq and was the youngest Marine in his unit. As a Lance Corporal, he became a SAW Gunner in addition to Combat Engineer. “I went into theatre, as my first rotation, with very seasoned vets. It made me feel safe,” he told me. The Marines from his first rotation are thankfully alive today. Juan still talks to all of them. While deployed, they quartered the homes of Iraqi locals. Juan has a different perspective on the overall situation now that he is older: “If we’re here in the United States and some form of military comes in and tells you to get out your house for a week or two and don’t come back, how would you feel?” At the time, though, he was contemplating his mission.

“First time getting in a gun fight I got ambushed,” he said. He explained he was “seeing how many IEDs there were and how long it took EOD to get to us—EOD was only a mile away.” Yet the explosive devices delayed his team’s extraction from the conflict. This was not an isolated incident. On the same tour in Iraq, Juan engaged in direct contact. He earned a Combat Action Ribbon and some difficult memories.

After completing his service for the Marine Corps in 2009, Juan began looking for other opportunities to use the skills he learned in the Marine Corps to serve his country as a civilian.

“Being a private security Contractor was a great experience,” Juan said, reminiscing. The initial trouble for Juan was that he was used to the chain of command. Instant and willing obedience to orders is not what he received while being a private contractor or working at the State Department. Learning to use tact was an essential part of his transition.

Transitioning to civilian life was difficult for Juan, like many other veterans. “Even to this day it’s still a little hard,” he told me. It’s a lot easier now going through these development courses seeking mental health and getting advice from your senior mentor.” Juan is part of a special Veteran Assistance Organization called Vantage Point. The aid he received from programs like Vantage Point has led him to volunteer there and to give back to his community. “If you get help, pay it forward,” he said. This seems to be Juan’s life motto now.

Eventually, Juan made his way to The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina, where he decided to continue his education. When he arrived, there was no organized veterans’ program or even facilities for veterans. Juan was set to change that. Over time, the Student Veteran Association, developed under Juan’s leadership, now behaves like an actual organization. Acquiring donated furniture, uniting veterans across campus, and sharing this program across the country, Juan has made a positive impact on the veteran community in South Carolina. He has certainly paid forward all the help he has received, and then some.