

*This Week at VA*

*Episode # 43*

Gary Profit – Army Veteran, Walmart Military Programs

<https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/40217/gary-profit-army-veteran-walmart/>

(Text Transcript Follows)

[00:00:00] Music

**[00:00:02] PSA:**

**Man:** VA's around the clock hotline can put veterans who are homeless in touch with the resources and support they earned through their military service. Call 877-424-3838.

[00:00:14] Music

**[00:00:25] OPENING MONOLOGUE:**

**Timothy Lawson (TL):** Hello, everyone and welcome to Episode 43 of *This Week at VA*. I am your host, Timothy Lawson. Today's episode includes a conversation with Walmart's Senior Director for Military Programs, Mr. Gary Profit. We'll also mention our Veterans of the Day and how you can get a Presidential Memorial Certificate in honor of a Veteran buried at a National Cemetery. But first, as many of you have seen, Secretary Shulkin has been making appearances at SVO Conventions this summer and, just this week, he spoke at AMVETS Convention in Norfolk, Virginia. You may remember the conversation I had with AMVETS National Director, Joe Chenelly, here on the podcast earlier this year. I want to play a segment from Secretary Shulkin's remarks at the convention. If you're interested in hearing it in its entirety, go to [usvets.tv](http://usvets.tv) [link to usvets.tv website] and follow their link for the 73<sup>rd</sup> National AMVETS Convention. Here it is, check it out.

**Secretary Shulkin:** So, let me just talk to you a little bit about – um, what's happening in VA and what's happening across the country. Probably the question I get the most is "Can we actually fix the VA? And if so, what can we do to fix the VA?" And – uh, if I didn't believe that we could fix the VA and make it a much stronger organization than it is today, I would have not taken this position. And I believe, and you'll see the way – the – the approach

that I'm taking is one of the first things that I did when – uh, when coming secretary was to actually go out and talk about what the problems in the VA are. Now a lot of people – [microphone goes out] is going on and off – might have not thought that was a good strategy to start off by talking about the problems that you have but frankly that's the only approach that makes sense to me which is, you can't fix problems if you don't acknowledge that you have problems. You can't ask for help if you don't tell people where you need the help. And so early on, when I became secretary I actu – I asked the president if he would mind if I used his White House Briefing Room and from there on live TV I went out and I talked about thirteen areas that I thought that if we didn't fix that we weren't going to fix VA. We were just going to put Band-Aids on it. So, you can see a list of these thirteen areas that I talked about. We have some major issues that we have to fix if we're going to keep this a sustainable, strong organization. I'm not going to go through all these, but I just wanted to show you that's the approach. Now, even though I started, and I continue to talk about the problems that we have I don't want to give the impression that we're not making progress, cause we are making progress. Uh, since the beginning of this year, we've scheduled forty-six percent more appointments out in the communities, so Veterans are getting care that they need and not waiting for care. Uh, but forty-six percent more appointments since just the beginning of this year. We've reduced our wait time lists for those waiting the longest by sixty-four percent. Eighty-two percent of our VAs across the country have shown significant improvements in their quality measures and in terms of satisfaction just two years ago, forty-two percent of Veterans said that they trusted VA, today that number is sixty-five percent. Not high enough but [applause] thank you - but I want to show you we're making progress. But I don't believe we're gonna really fix the VA the way that our Veterans deserve and need it, unless we address the thirteen areas that I talked about. Now, a lot of people complained about the VA and you read newspaper articles all too often about the problems that we have, but I do want to let you know that last week, a study came out in one of the publications that actually went directly to Veterans and just listened to them without it going through lots of reports and commissions. It was actually on Yelp where Veterans get to actually rate their experience. And you can see Veterans when they directly rate their experience, rate VA hospitals higher than their community hospitals. The VA scored a 3.7 out of 5 where private hospitals scored a 3.19. So, I think there are some things we can point to that we're headed in the right direction, we're making progress. But I really want to talk about what we need to do this point forward to make a big difference for all of you. And so, I've come up

with five priorities and these are the five areas that I believe we need to focus on to fundamentally transform and fix the VA.

**TL:** Secretary Shulkin then goes into describing his five priorities which are – uh, creating greater choice, modernizing our systems, focusing on resources, improving timeliness in all areas, and then suicide prevention. Uh, again, usvets.tv – uh, has the full video and more from the AMVETS Convention. Today’s feature interview is with Mr. Gary Profit. Gary is a retired Army General and is currently the Senior Director for Military Programs at Walmart. Gary talks to us about joining the Army, his experiences in the military, his work at Walmart, and the importance of hiring and employing military Veterans and their spouses, and the value they bring to the workforce. Enjoy.

[00:06:09] Music

### **[00:06:13] INTERVIEW:**

**TL:** Wonderful. Alright Gary Profit, Army Veteran – uh, I should’ve had this pulled up with your exact title: Director – Director of Mili – sorry you’re going to have to say it. I had it pulled up and then I closed the tab –

**Gary Profit (GP):** Oh no.

**TL:** And now I’m lost.

**GP:** That’s fine. Tim, I’m the Senior Director of Military Programs at Walmart.

**TL:** There we go, thank you I knew the Director and Walmart and programs were in there but of course, I got click happy and closed the tab. Uh, Sir, thank you so much for joining me. Uh, we are going to start this interview where we start all interviews and that is – uh, going back to your decision to join the United States Army. Bring us back to that day for you.

**GP:** Oh certainly, I – uh, was – uh, commissioned through the – uh, Reserve Officers’ Training Corps program, ROTC at Eastern Michigan University – uh, in 1974 – um, many of us remember that is the time when – uh, the Vietnam War was winding down and – um, I think that what attracted me to – um, service – uh, in part was – uh, the fact that my father was a Marine Corps veteran of World War II.

**TL:** Semper Fi!

**GP:** And in part...[laughter]

**TL:** [Laughter]

**GP:** Um, just by my sense that – uh...uh, one of the important parts of – uh, being a citizen of the United States was to be willing to serve – uh, my country and in – in some way and my way of choosing was to see that through military service.

**TL:** Okay and any – um, just curious, any reason why you chose – chose the Army?

**GP:** I guess probably because – uh, that was the ROTC program...

**TL:** Oh sure.

**GP:** affiliation – uh, at Eastern Michigan University. I’m not sure it was any more complex than that.

**TL:** Yeah, okay. Um, I usually don’t ask but for some reason – uh, I was – I was curious there.

**GP:** Sure!

**TL:** Um, let’s – um, I know you had a – you had a long time in but – uh, let’s – let’s try to narrow it down to one experience, one story that maybe you recall on often, something that maybe you view as noteworthy,

significant, or just the epitome of your time in. Do you have a story like that you could share with us?

**GP:** Gosh, over the course of 31 years there were probably – uh, lots of them.

**TL:** Yeah.

**GP:** Um, I – uh, I guess, that one set of experiences – um, would be associated with the time that I worked for the Secretary of the Army and – and Congressional Budget and Legislative Liaison on Capitol Hill and – uh, made, shortly after the Wall came down, - um, some trips to what I had remembered as the USSR and now was just thought of as Russia – uh, and was in Red Square on the 4th of July.

**TL:** Oh wow. That's – uh, I've – I have stood in Red Square as well, and it is a pretty surreal feeling.

**GP:** Yeah, and at that time was just kind of a very ironic sort of – um, picture for me, I guess.

**TL:** Yeah.

**GP:** Um, or having been there – uh, during the holiday and – and seeing – um, people worshipping – uh, around Christmas in ways and – uh, in times that they probably hadn't known in their lives for years.

**TL:** Sure. So then – uh, what year did you retire?

**GP:** I retired in – uh, in February of 2006, so about 11 years ago after those 31 years and I was – um, privileged to be able to retire as a – as a Brigadier General and so had I – um, had a – had a I guess, a good run.

**TL:** Yeah. Uh, I ask this of many of my guests that have this experience. Um, you know, you – you served during the – uh, the transformation that our military took – uh, through the 9/11 attacks. Can you just exp – uh, describe in your segments, your part of the military. Uh, you know, talk

about the change you saw between September 10, 2001 and September 12, 2001.

**GP:** Yeah – um, well having been in the Pentagon on September 11<sup>th</sup> –

**TL:** Oof.

**GP:** Uh, I never thought I would – um, would draw hazardous duty paid by – uh, you know, showing up at an office building but I don't suspect that those in New York City or in a field in Pennsylvania – um, felt that way either. Um, I guess the difference – um, that I saw from arguably one day to the next was an incredibly increased sense of urgency – um, and – and a mobilization of country, around not only – um, not only that particular series of events but around the people who had – um, volunteered to serve. And so unlike the Vietnam experience where we couldn't seem to separate, as a society, our – our views on the war from those who – um, had been asked to serve and sacrifice during it, we had apparently learned something over those years and – and regardless of what we thought about – um, the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq we were certainly – um, destined to be able to still honor the service – uh, and recognize the sacrifice of those that were serving as volunteers during those – those times.

**TL:** Sure, absolutely. Um, let's talk about your transition after retirement, did you – uh, how did you find your transition into the military? What was that experience like?

**GP:** Well it was – um...um, particularly interesting I guess I would say. I was probably a little bit better positioned than some because many of my service experiences had exposure to the private sector and – uh, other parts of the public sector. So, I don't know that – um, mine would've been necessarily as hard as – as some. Um, there was also, I guess, this sense that maybe general officers needed more help than others and so we certainly were afforded a – a good deal of support. Um, but I'm not sure that I – I managed it as well as I should have, even with all of that – um, insight that I should've had and – and the – um, the support that I received. And so, while I – um, spent a couple of years in – in the government and – um, defense services industry, I think I did so – um, because that was maybe the easy path rather than maybe the right path

for me in the long run and it took me a couple of years to – um, of good experience with a really, really good company – uh, to realize that I saw my future in a little different way and then had the opportunity to come to Walmart. And what I've had here was a great capstone opportunity – uh, for a professional career where I provide – um, offer recognized value to the business but the real passion for me is that I get to give back to those with whom I've had the privilege of serving for so many years.

**TL:** Sure.

**GP:** And that's not a bad way to be able to get up in the morning.

**TL:** No, and – uh...uh, something I like to ask my guests that I know my audience really appreciates, and you can answer this to whatever comfort level is but....

**GP:** Sure.

**TL:** A lot of – a lot of Veterans, when they separate from the military, experience some sort of emotional challenge or emotional crisis just in dealing with that transition. Is that anything that you experienced?

**GP:** Um, probably, but not to the extent that some do. I – um, it – it did take me, as I probably have – um, alluded in the most recent comments, a- a – a bit of time to find a sense of mission and purpose – um, that I found while I was in uniform and that I have – um, found here at Walmart. But I – I do think that is something that – that we all have to find – uh, once we take off our uniforms, it – it took me a couple of years I think to get there – um, but mine certainly wasn't as challenging – um, Tim, as – as some others find.

**TL:** Sure. So Senior Director Military Programs at Walmart – um, can you just briefly describe – uh, I know – I know you mentioned it, you know, giving back to the Veteran community but how are you doing that through the entity of Walmart?

**GP:** Sure. Well, my responsibilities began when I came here about – um, oh, I guess a little more than eight years ago, I guess I tell people far longer than I expected to be here and, and certainly – um, far longer than I had been anywhere. Uh, but I came here initially – uh, to try and do a better bit of work here at Walmart to – um, attract, recruit higher growing, develop, manage, and retain people from the military community constituencies but over those years I have been asked to broaden that experience to include not only that – um, part of our employment brand but also the very important reputational interest that we have in our relationship with the military. And also – uh, the very important – um, segment of our customer population that is either parts of Veteran families or military families or frankly those serving in the military.

**TL:** Yeah. So – um, we – you and I connected – uh, because of – um, someone who proposed the idea of talking about Walmart’s grant to – uh, Hire Heroes USA.

**GP:** Yes, sir.

**TL:** Uh, and brand – uh, and the audience will have heard Brian – well, Brian Stann’s interview last week. Um, can you talk about what the grants – uh, why Hire Heroes was awarded the grants and what value Walmart sees in that organization?

**GP:** Oh, you bet. First of all, I – to give you some context – uh, the work that I do is essentially is bucketed in three different places and I’ll leave the – the work that I do with the Walmart Foundation, which is a very important way that we try and address – uh, unmet or under met needs. Um, but also, you have to kind of think of that in the context of the other three buckets that are the work that we do organically to hire – um, Veterans and members of military families – uh, and to encourage others to do the same. Uh, the important work we do with the Coalition for Veteran Owned Business because we learned a long time ago that while we can do a lot organically, Tim, if we get into our supply chain and into the supply chains of others, the multiplier effect is pretty staggering. And then finally, since we find ourselves in communities across the country, we think it's important to – um, try and have a positive effect on the public discourse at the community level and you

might remember – uh, our launch a couple of years ago, of a campaign called “Greenlight a Vet” –

**TL:** Yeah.

**GP:** that was designed, frankly to not – um, diminish the – the sacrifice that those have made in their service to our country but to close the dialogue that seemed to be a dichotomy of, hey, they’re either heroes or they’re victims when we really think they’re just valuable parts of our communities.

**TL:** Yeah. That’s absolutely right.

**GP:** And – and so – um, that’s what that was really all about and is all about. Uh, when you talk about our philanthropy – uh, and my great partnership with the Walmart foundation, it’s really important because one of the things that we know about Veterans and those who have served is civic and social responsibility is really important thing and the organization Hire Heroes USA is – uh, just another great example of – of the many that – with whom we’ve – we’ve had the privilege of partnering. They – um, are a bunch of really highly trained Veteran transition specialists offering personalized career coaching – uh, to US military members, Veterans and – and – and spouses and we know that – that a job is one of the most important things, a career is one of the most important things to offer these folks – uh, the sense of – um, purpose and mission in their lives and – and – and to say nothing of the importance of – of financial – uh, stability that it brings to their families. And so, we’re really, really proud to – to participate with – with Brian and his – and his organization in a really, really important piece of – of the work that we think – uh, we do with Veterans and military families.

**TL:** Yeah, how competitive is a – is a grant like that? What’s the – what sort of things do – uh, does Walmart – does Walmart Foundation look into before –

**GP:** Oh gosh, yeah, the due dilig – diligence of my partners in the foundation is pretty rigorous because, as you can imagine, Tim, everybody asks Walmart to do everything –

**TL:** Yeah.

**GP:** and we can't and we don't and so those that are able to – um, bring – um, essentially – uh, the kind of – uh, demonstrated outcomes – uh, in an organization with the same kind – um, of moral ethical foundation that we believe we have at Walmart, are the kinds of organizations that – that tend to make the cut.

**TL:** Yeah. You mention that – uh, the partnership – uh, a few years ago with the Coalition for Veteran Owned Businesses, - um, I think it's really – I think it's really important that – uh, there is continued support for Veteran owned businesses because that is a segment of the Veteran population and a segment of the business-ownership population that have both been declining, especially - um, if you go back as far as World War II where over half of Veterans returning from war started their own business. Um, and so entrepreneurship, I think in the Veteran space and in – in – in the small business space, I think is – is really important to at least keep that alive even if it doesn't match, you know, historic numbers – uh, but you know to make sure that – that the segment of that population – um, continues to thrive.

**GP:** Oh, I – I couldn't agree with you more, I think you're spot on. I think that we know that Veterans – um, and military spouses – um, disproportionately are interested in entrepreneurship and – and in starting their own business. Uh, we want to support them – uh, in all the ways that the coalition does. Um, whether it's – um, it's selling to other businesses, or whether it's selling to consumers – uh, whether it's participating in the – um, you know, the large supply chains, if you will, of a Fortune 500 company or whether it's – um, participating in much smaller supply chains. We just really believe in the coalition that, in addition to opportunities in – um, public sector economies – um, there is just a huge – um, opportunity in the private sector and – and too

often our – my Veteran counterparts don't always find that as quickly as they do government contracting.

**TL:** Even though this is a – uh, you know with the Department of Veteran Affairs, we – we – we focus on post-military/Veteran experiences, I think one thing that my audience would find interesting is on – uh, on Memorial Day there was an announcement in which – uh, Walmart announced that they're going to offer differential pay to associates that take a leave of absence for military assignments.

**GP:** Yeah.

**TL:** Um, yeah, can you speak on that? That's a pretty significant announcement to –

**GP:** Well, we – we think it's really important for us, now, to support our Veteran associates – um, after they join us and we do it in a couple of ways. Um, the one you mentioned – um, is through our military leave of absence policy. Um, we know that – um, we've actually offered differential pay since – um, at least 2008, but importantly we enhanced it this year in a number of ways. The most important, which in my view, is the fact that we now – um, are going to pay differential pay for those associates who choose to enlist in the military and go to basic training.

**TL:** Oh wow.

**GP:** So, one of the final barriers, at least the final financial barriers is someone choosing to serve their country, we've tried to remove. Um, and I think that's – um, was an important step that we took and – and – and one that we felt very proud to take. The other thing I – I – I would just offer is that we know that – that – um, military spouses – um, maintaining their careers – um, represents a really, really challenging – uh, kind of experience and our Military Family Promise – uh, is a way to turn jobs into careers, where we – um, guarantee a job at a nearby store or club for – um, military personnel and military spouses who are employed by the company who move to a different part of the country because they or their spouse have been transferred by the US Military.

So, we have stories of – of spouses who have maintained – um, multi-year careers with Walmart – um, as their spouse – uh, was reassigned from Hawaii for example to Florida –

**TL:** Wow.

**GP:** to Texas to – to New York and that's a pretty cool thing when, I think, you can actually keep a – a military spouse in the same payroll and personnel system much like I was when I was – uh, moved around the world.

**TL:** Yeah, absolutely, I mean military spouses, the – you know, the untold hero of every –

**GP:** Yep.

**TL:** uh, military family and I think the sacrifices of military spouses, as much as we even try to recognize them still go under – under - underappreciated. Um, the constant restarting or revamping of one's career every two to four years gets exhausting, especially if you're – uh, married to a – a lifer in the military. So, I think it's – it's – it's important that Walmart is – is noticing that and doing what they can to support.

**GP:** Yeah and in some cases – uh, Tim, it's really enlightened self-interest because why wouldn't we want to keep a great employee?

**TL:** Yeah, yeah, absolutely. Uh, Gary, a couple of questions – uh, to – to wrap up: Um, you know Brian Stann and – and Hire Heroes probably come to mind first but if you can give me a – a different example – um, tell me a Veteran or a Veteran organization – uh, that really has you excited right now with what they're – what they're doing.

**GP:** Oh gosh, I – I – the first one that comes to mind is – is – is my friend – um, Mike Haynie at the Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University and our great relationship with them – uh, as thought partners and thought leaders – um, but now – uh, very, very focused on an initiative called America Serves. Um, basically – um, to streamline and – and digitally connect Veteran services available in

communities and create – um, actually the nation’s first coordinated system of public, private, and nonprofit organizations and – um, we’re very focused right now on the states of New York – um, the Carolinas, and Texas with designs to ultimately link community – communities across the country and the – the promise of what we’re seeing in those places now is – is really incredible. And then the other thing I guess I would mention, is – uh, we talked about the work that needs to be done to respect with military spouses but I’m also very proud of some work we’re starting with Boston University School of Medicine – um, through the Women Veterans’ Network. Uh, I guess I don’t know if I can call it an acronym but short, WOVEN –

**TL:** Yeah.

**GP:** um, where – um, Boston University clinicians and researchers are leading a five year initiative to establish a nationwide network of structured – uh, trained peer facilitated ten week – uh, support groups for female veterans. Uh, really, really underserved part of the military to this point.

**TL:** Sure.

**GP:** And we’re trying to enhance wellness, quality of life, family relations, all of those things that – that – um, are important – uh, to all of us.

**TL:** Yeah – uh, and it's due for Veterans and military families, affectionately referred to as IVMF – uh, as most people are –

**GP:** Yes sir.

**TL:** probably familiar with it, doing a lot of great work and respected in the Veteran community – uh, since – since they’ve come – uh, been instituted. Um, what is a skillset that – or discipline, talent, whatever you want to call it, that you learned in the military that’s contributing to your success today?

**GP:** I think the most important thing was the military's commitment to my growth and development as a leader. Uh, from the time I was a lieutenant, and my leadership was – uh, quite a directive and – um, based upon – um, I guess what you would call the authority of – of just merely out ranking someone to the work that I do here which is essentially- um, trying to influence people with ideas over whom I have no authority. And – and I think that arguably better than any institution in the world, the US military makes that commitment to grow and develop leaders and I think over the years that they've been pretty successful.

**TL:** Absolutely. Gary, I have one last question for you. What's it like living with a last name as Profit? [Laughter]

**GP:** Well, it's kind of funny actually – um, Tim. When I was in graduate school at the University of Michigan, everyone thought that was very – um, either funny, strange, ironic, you kind of pick the – pick the label but – um, I guess when I was in graduate business school it -it seemed kind of appropriate And I guess – um, it's probably not a bad name to have at Walmart.

**TL:** No [laughter], no, definitely not. Gary. Thank you so much for your time, I appreciate it. Thank you for your service to our country and your continued support to Veterans – uh, in the Military Program's – uh, part of Walmart. Really appreciate it.

**GP:** Well it – it was a great pleasure to be with you, Tim, and – um, we are really proud of – uh, the little part that we are able to play with the work that Dr. Shulkin is doing at – at the VA. I think it's really – uh, headed in – in all the right directions and – and we are really pleased to host him down here a month or so ago and then to see him at – uh, some work that the Bush Institute did earlier in – in – in, I guess maybe it was June now, but anyway – um, really proud of the partnership that we're developing and enhancing.

**TL:** Yeah. Very cool. Gary, thank you so much – so much for your time. I appreciate it.

[00:32:44] Music

## **[00:32:48] PSA:**

### **Woman:**

There are nearly two million women Veterans who served and deserve the best care, anywhere. VA is dedicated to meeting the unique needs of all women Veterans. VA offers comprehensive primary care, specialty care, mental health care, and women's health specialty care, such as advanced breast and gynecological care, maternity care, and infertility treatments. At each of the 168 VA Medical Centers nationwide, a Women Veterans Program Manager is available to advise, advocate and coordinate care for women Veterans. Women Veterans who are interested in receiving care at the VA should call the Women Veterans' Call Center at 1-855-VAWomen or 1-855-829-6636 or contact the nearest VA Medical Center and ask for the Women Veterans Program Manager. For more information about benefits and other services for women Veterans, visit [www.va.gov/womenvet](http://www.va.gov/womenvet) [link to the Women Veterans webpage] .

[00:33:47] Music

## **[00:33:50] CLOSING MONOLOGUE:**

### **TL:**

The resource or opportunity that isn't brought up often is a Presidential Memorial Certificate. A Presidential Memorial Certificate is an engraved paper certificate, signed by the current President in honor of the memory of a deceased Veteran who is eligible for burial in a National Cemetery. This program was initiated in 1962 by President John F. Kennedy and has been continued by all the subsequent Presidents since then. An eligible recipient, i.e. a next of kin, a relative, a friend upon request – uh, may apply for a PMC by completing a form. Uh, that form and more information can be found at [va.gov](http://va.gov) [link to the VA website] and just look under 'Burials and Memorials'. The menu's right there on the top. Uh, if you've already requested a PMC, if you're familiar with this, if you already tried this and it's been more than sixteen weeks since you have not received it, call 202-565-4964 to find out the status on your request. For the rest of you that are just hearing about this for the first time and you're interested, if you are a relative, next of kin, or even a friend, and you have a Veteran – uh, in your life that is buried at – uh, one of our National Cemeteries, you can contact NCA – uh, using that website: [va.gov](http://va.gov), look under Burials and Memorials, and fill out a

form to get your Presidential Memorial Certificate and honor that Veteran. Today's Veteran of the Day is Phil Ayers. Phil served in the Marine Corps in Vietnam from 1966 to 1967. During his tour, he was awarded three Purple Hearts for injuries he sustained. He is currently the pastor of Glade Creek Baptist church near Roanoke, Virginia. We thank Phil for his service. To read Phil's full writeup and to nominate your own Veteran of the Day, visit [blogs.va.gov](https://blogs.va.gov) [link to the VA podcast webpage]. That does it for Episode 43. Thank you so much for taking the time to listen. Be sure to follow us on Facebook at [facebook.com/veteransaffairs](https://facebook.com/veteransaffairs) [link to the VA Facebook page] for more stories from our community. If you have any questions you'd like to have addressed on the show, email us at [newmedia@va.gov](mailto:newmedia@va.gov) or tweet at us using #vapodcast. I'm Timothy Lawson signing off.

[00:36:10] Music out

(Text Transcript Ends)