

# Post-Army Biography

By Allen Lawless

If you've made it this far in your reading, you know that I left Germany in November, 1994, on my way to retirement from the Army in January 1995.

After mustering out of the Army at Ft. Dix, NJ, I got on a plane at Newark – destination Detroit. Since I didn't have anything lined up and didn't really have a clue as to what I would do in my next career, I was rather anxious and not a little frightened. While I had many options in front of me, I decided not to tempt fate and chose to return to Michigan where my family would provide me an opportunity to get my feet on the ground.

Events turning out the way they do, I happened to sit next to a cheery fellow named Steve Northcott in the tourist section of the aircraft. Steve and I began talking and when he asked me about myself, I gave him some details and remarked that I was in job search mode.

Steve mentioned that he was a Quality Control manager for a small pharmaceutical company in Ferndale, Michigan. Ferndale is a small community located just north of the Detroit city limits and features small businesses and modest homes most of which date from the 1920s. Steve rather dryly remarked that the company, named Ferndale Laboratories, was not quite 100 years old, was privately owned, and featured more vice presidents than it had people in his department.

I asked a few questions about the pharmaceutical industry in general and a few more questions about Ferndale Labs. He explained that his department was principally responsible for testing of raw materials, intermediate product, and finished product. These were the chemists and microbiologists who conducted the testing using instruments and equipment that were specialized and complex. Their work was documented and reviewed within the department, then passed on to another department called Quality Assurance. Steve mentioned in passing that Quality Assurance was looking for a couple of people to hire. I asked what the people in Quality Assurance did and he, rather tongue-in-cheek, stated he didn't quite know – but that they looked quite impressive walking around the manufacturing area wearing lab coats and carrying clipboards. I found this very intriguing and being quite confident in my own clipboard-carrying skills, I stated quite emphatically that I could carry clipboards with the best of them. (The one unknown factor was the lab coat thing, but I thought sure that I could learn to wear them just as well as the next person.)



We chitchatted for the rest of the flight and I passed him a copy of my very military-sounding resume, although I had detuned it best I could.

A couple of weeks later, I received a call from Lisa, the Quality Assurance Manager. She asked me a few questions and I answered them the best I could. Satisfied with my answers, she asked if I would consider coming in for an interview. Since my only success with interviews to date consisted of successfully finding parking spots and being on time for the interview that resulted in no job offer, I answered in the affirmative.

Since I had taken the trouble to secure a couple of suits for interviews and I hadn't quite worn them out yet, I showed up once again on time and ready for the unexpected.

I met Marcia and a few others, to include Steve, whom I met on the plane. Everything seemed terrific for an all-day interview. For lunch, Lisa and Marcia took me to a local restaurant where I ordered a salad. Promptly dropping a portion of salad (with dressing) in my lap, we all chuckled good-naturedly about that.

At one point in the interview, I noticed that Lisa had a few notes on her desk about a Customer Complaint Coordinator. This job sounded very intriguing, whereas the lab coat-wearing, clip-board carrying job seemed just intriguing. I asked her about that and she explained she was looking for somebody to manage the customer complaint program. She had been doing it herself and she was finding difficulty in getting all the other things done she was expected to do plus manage complaints. I expressed interest particularly in that job and outlined how I could help her with that.

The interview ended in early afternoon and I was once again cautiously optimistic, but prepared to accept defeat. Certainly I had no experience in the pharmaceutical industry, so why should I be surprised if no offer came?

So you can imagine my shock when an offer did come. Lisa called me a couple of days after the interview and offered the job of Customer Complaint Coordinator, with a rather dismal salary offer of \$21,000 per year. Seeing an opportunity here, anxious not to blow it but being disappointed at the meager salary, I explained on the phone to Jim, Lisa's boss, that I couldn't consider working for Ferndale Labs for less than \$24,000 per year. He didn't seem to blink an eye to that and readily agreed to that salary. The offer letter was revised and I accepted.

Now it was time to spend some money. I hadn't really bought any business attire in many years (apart from the two suits I did purchase before I left BK), so on the Friday following Thanksgiving 1994, I went to the local J.C. Penney and spent almost \$1,500 on slacks, shirts, ties, sport coats. Over to another store for a couple pairs of shoes (wing tips, of course) and to yet another store for a decent watch (\$50) and I was ready for corporate America. I reported to work the Monday after Thanksgiving and set out on what I hoped would be my second career.

I had a lot to learn. Without going into a lot of detail, I learned how detail-oriented and focused the pharmaceutical industry was. Always being aware that regulatory agencies would question decisions made, documentation became the cornerstone of what we did. The old adage was, "If it wasn't documented, it didn't happen."

So I set to work within the system as it was defined to me. Lisa was a good boss, but tended to be somewhat emotional and said things at times that were inflammatory. For the most part, I stayed under her radar screen.

At the end of January, 1995, I drove up to Selfridge Air Force Base near Mt. Clemens, Michigan, and traded in my active duty Army ID card for an retired Army ID card. I expressly relished the "NONE" verbiage in the "EXPIRATION DATE" field. It was official. I was now retired from the Army. Up till

that time, I had been on terminal leave.

In March, 1995, Ferndale hired a new director of Quality Assurance. Without really knowing why, I was told that I was no longer reporting to Lisa and would report to the new director. This gentleman took a liking to me, perhaps because he was former military himself, and for all intents and purposes, he became my mentor and I his protégé.

I continued my customer complaint work, but also began writing procedures, managing the company training program, and conducting retrospective validation work. The retrospective validation work was considered to be very valuable for the company in that FDA was ready to withdraw Ferndale's license to manufacture until suitable validation work was performed. My work, supervised by my boss, resulted in FDA withholding such action.

While I enjoyed my work thoroughly, I knew I wasn't earning money to my full potential. I began searching for a new position and I especially wanted to leave Michigan. I had seen all I wanted in the state that I grew up in and from my military experience, I knew there was a much better situation for me elsewhere.

All the same, I returned to music when I realized that during Christmas, 1994, I had performed nothing for the first time in many years. I missed performing Christmas music and I knew that I could not simply put aside skills that I had worked on for so many years. So in communication with my good friend Richard Naujoks, with whom I had maintained a close correspondence, I bought a Besson 967 euphonium from him for \$2,000. This was a great horn at a great price, since I knew he had bought it new.

I began playing euphonium with the Oakland Concert Band, a community band. For the first time since my post-high school days, I was playing in a community band. This time, however, I knew most of the literature and saw the general differences between a professional-level ensemble and an amateur ensemble. While there is a lot of good that comes out of amateur ensembles, for audiences and musicians alike, there is a general lack of discipline and sense of loyalty toward the music itself. Most community bands and orchestras, I began to see, were mostly social organizations that happened to play some level of music.

While I in no way mean to portray myself as an arrogant, egotistical former professional musician, I felt I could not in clear conscience adopt the same types of cavalier attitudes toward the music that I was seeing in my fellow musicians. I began seeking a better musical experience, one that I hoped I could find. I found something like that when I began playing trombone with The Pros, a semi-professional dance band/stage band that catered to the swing era crowd. This was a

fine experience, one in which I found many musicians like myself – forced to earn their livelihoods outside of music, but who had a healthy respect for music and respectable musical ability to be able to play the more challenging charts. I played with The Pros for about a year before my life took another turn.

I interviewed for a position as a Quality Assurance Supervisor in a medical device company called Wesley-Jessen. WJ manufactured specialty contact lenses, the types often worn by those seeking a more elegant eye. WJ flew me out to O'Hare Airport in Chicago and I took a cab to the Des Plaines facility. This was on a Friday in December, 1996. On Monday I received a job offer paying \$34,000 per year, a substantial increase in salary. I accepted the position, knowing that the shift schedule would be brutal.

WJ ran a 24/7 operation. There were four shifts covering the entire week, including weekends. The "C" Shift came in at 9:00 P.M. on Saturday nights (I was in usually at 8:00 P.M.) and ran a full 12 hours till 9:00 A.M. Sunday morning. The process would repeat Sunday nights, Monday nights, and alternate Tuesday nights. My weekends occurred in the middle of the week and while it was difficult, there were many family people on the shift who had lives to lead during the day. This made it difficult for them and sleeping or tiredness was occasionally a problem. All the same, I had about 8 to 10 people on my shift. As a supervisor, I was beginning to understand that my military background was a bit overbearing for some. While I make no apologies for what I did and the decisions I made, I realize in retrospect I could have handled some of these differently.

In September, 1997, the two production supervisors on "C" Shift were abruptly let go. There was an opportunity on that shift for me to see what working the other side of the aisle would be like. I made the lateral move for yet more money and dove into a situation that just about killed me.

In essence I had taken the job of two people. I literally ran myself ragged, night after night, hearing every kind of conceivable problem, every kind of excuse. Saturday nights were especially bad because many of the people working that shift were young and, best I could determine, would prefer to do Saturday night things than go to work. We routinely failed to meet production goals because of poor attendance at work and the efforts of informal leaders to run the shift. Sabotage became a problem and while I knew who was doing it, I couldn't prove it. Those who failed to meet the attendance policies were terminated by HR. All this turmoil, I felt, was necessary in bringing the shift back under a certain level of control. The two previous supervisors were dismissed because of improprieties and other behaviors which were contrary to good order. But I had bitten off more than I could reasonably have expected to chew.

All the same, I maintained this insanity for over a year. Finally, in late October, 1998, I requested release from the shift and a move over to a day shift. I felt I had put in my time on a night shift, over weekends, and with a crew of people most of whom were decent and respectable. But there was a contingent of people who were terrorizing the others including communicating threats of bodily harm and other illegal activities. Again, I knew who was doing it, but nobody was talking.

So I moved over to the "A" Shift. I now went into work on Sunday mornings at about 8:00 A.M. and worked until 9:00 P.M. Mondays, Tuesdays, and alternate Wednesdays that schedule repeated itself. I now had at least a Saturday I could call a weekend.

In January, 1999, I met Margaret while on-line. We talked and talked and talked some more. She lived and worked in Jackson, Tennessee, and I in the Chicago area. That was a logistical problem, but it didn't stop me from driving down there and visiting. One thing led to another; I proposed marriage and she accepted. I felt that my Chicago days were numbered, so I quit my job in April and moved immediately to Tennessee. We bought a house and we got married in May.

My career stalled. After repeated looking and even a few interviews, I found absolutely nothing except an offer to work production on a rotating shift. This was unacceptable, so after talking about it, I decided to go back to school. In researching the requirements for the University of Tennessee MBA program, I was going to need two accounting courses, a statistics course, and a finance course. I got these out of the way and began UT's MBA program in January, 2000.

But in December, 1999, I interviewed for a position as Quality Assurance Manager for a small privately-owned conglomeration that assembled small parts for Johnson Controls, Inc. JCI was a chief supplier of automotive parts for the auto industry. Conrad Birmingham, the owner of the company, liked my background in pharmaceuticals and medical devices. He extended an offer for \$30,000 per year for one of his small assembly shops. His mandate was to begin work toward securing QS 9000 certification. QS 9000 was the automotive quality system equivalent to ISO 9000. I began work toward eventual certification by writing procedures and interviewing local quality assurance professionals within the automotive industry.

Also in January, 2000, I received a phone call from my old mentor from Ferndale. He asked if we would consider moving to Salt Lake City. He had an opening as a senior quality assurance auditor that he thought I'd be a good fit for. Watson Labs flew me out for the all-day interview on a Friday. I was the only candidate for this position, so I knew I'd be hired. But it still took until April for the offer to come in. I

was chomping at the bit because by this time, I realize that the QS 9000 effort would be unattainable. Conrad, my boss, clearly did not understand the level of financial commitment that QS 9000, indeed the adoption of any quality system, would take. It was a no-win situation for me because I knew I would not be able to bring it off.

As soon as the offer came in, I informed Conrad that I would be leaving. His first reaction was, "Good. I'll be saving your salary." If I had doubts about leaving, I didn't have after that comment. All the same, we parted on good terms. Margaret and I drove out to Salt Lake in April, 2000.

The QA department at Watson was very small. It got smaller again within three months after I started work there and I very quickly became the "expert" on the street. While my boss was familiar with the systems and processes, he certainly was not available full time for questions and problem resolution. So it became important for me to get up to speed in a hurry.

I sampled raw materials and intermediate products, audited the production lines, pulled finished product samples, delivered samples, stored reserve samples and documented everything I did. I reviewed raw material documentation, intermediate and finished batch records, and within a few months, released raw materials for cGMP use. When I wasn't actively training someone or doing the work myself, I reviewed our internal procedures and rewrote many to coincide with the current methodologies. I also wrote new procedures to provide consistent methodologies for those performing those tasks.

I participated in several initiatives as part of a team, to include the implementation of a Laboratory Management System (LIMS), a corporate-wide deviation system using a validated computerized platform, and project-specific tasks involving clinical trials. I was doing something different just about every day and that was something I thoroughly enjoyed. Even the more repetitive things generally offered a different twist which kept me interested.

In 2002, Watson promoted me to QA Supervisor. I now had

three people reporting to me and I had new responsibilities over in QA Development. I picked up two more people in time. It was very hectic and very stressful. I often would work from the moment I stepped into the building at 7:45 A.M., right through lunch, and often past 5:00 P.M.

In February, 2004, Margaret's father died. Since our families were all back in the Midwest, it became important for us both to be geographically a little closer. I began working toward leaving Watson and finding something in the Midwest. That finally happened in July, 2004. I interviewed for a QA position at a small multi-functional drug development company in Ohio. I won the position and work there presently, performing the cGMP QA role in the manufacture of Active Pharmaceutical Ingredient (API) intended for Phase I and Phase II clinical trials. There is some talk of manufacturing commercial API, but that has not yet happened.



My professional goals are modest. I simply want to do the best job I can while I'm at work. I don't believe in taking work home with me and I'm certainly not aspiring to be some kind of corporate ladder climber. Life's too short for that nonsense. If God allows, I'll be able to retire a second time at age 62. After that, my third career starts. That's the one that'll see me at the sports club for 90 minutes in the morning, then I come home

after a leisurely shower for a couple hours of practice – first on the piano, then on the euphonium. Maybe I'll take naps in the afternoon or donate some time caring for some parrots. Maybe I'll just try to do something good for someone else. That's always healthy.