<u>Our Goal:</u> help Veterans identify the right place for them (and their families if applicable). The decision to leave the military is intensely personal. Aside from the fact that you might get killed, the military represents a rather safe career path from a stability standpoint. Sequestration aside, the military doesn't really fire people. You get paid on time, receive non-taxable living subsidies, and full benefits without paying much, if anything. You earned it too.

Leaving all of that behind and charting an uncertain path in the private sector takes guts. It's a risk, albeit a calculated and intelligent one if you're looking at top tier business programs. Those of us in the Darden Military Association want to help you navigate this process. We can't get you into school—only you can do that. What we can do is educate you on Darden and the application process. We are a resource.

Before we go further, I'd love it if each person that reads this applied to Darden. In some instances, Darden might not represent the right place for a Veteran. That's fine. It's better we figure that out sooner rather than later. To the extent that I can, I'm happy to facilitate introductions to Veterans at other schools.

I've divided the remainder of this content into three pieces: Strategic Advice, Tactical Recommendations, and When to Apply

<u>Strategic Advice</u>

1. Darden Focus on Veterans.

- Darden has an unparalleled track record when it comes to Veterans. It's that simple. Each business school takes Veterans, some schools like them, and a small few seek out and embrace them. Darden leads that charge. The proof is in the numbers. It is not uncommon to see Veterans comprise 6-8% of a class (320 students in a class). It's not a guarantee. You won't see it every single year without fail, but you'll see a percentage in that territory more years than not. The focus on Veterans comes straight from the top. Darden School Dean Bob Bruner is easily one of the strongest, if not the strongest, Veteran advocate you will find at an elite business school. The Dean's Military Initiative—a formal effort to identify and professionally develop transitioning Veteran talent—is more than a list of nice ideas codified on official letterhead. I could provide you with countless examples of the Darden's support for Veterans. I won't. For a complete list of ways in which Darden goes out of its way to ease tuition, help you assimilate to business school, and accomplish a variety of other somewhat daunting tasks, please see the Military Applicant portion of the Admissions webpage. The one item not mentioned on the webpage that you show know about: Dean Bruner hosts the entire Darden Military Association at his home for Veterans Day. The food is good. Much better than MREs.

2. Understand what an MBA is and what it isn't.

For Veterans the MBA serves three primary purposes:

- Foremost, it represents an opportunity to learn the fundamental skills essential to business. Darden will also allow you to select a focus (similar to a major) for your Second Year in one of seven Career Track Concentrations:
    - Asset Management/Sales Trading
    - Corporate Finance/Investment Banking
    - Entrepreneurship
    - Consumer Marketing
    - Business-to-Business Marketing
    - Strategy Consulting
    - Supply Chain Management

  Darden also offers four Theme Track Concentrations:
    - Corporate Innovation
    - Business Development and Growth
    - Market Analytics
    - Sustainability

It is important to note that as a student you aren't required to have a Concentration, although it is offered. In your Second Year (SY) at Darden you will have the opportunity to take a wide array of classes. Many students elect to sample from the extensive offerings. Some even take courses that aren't pertinent to their chosen career field simply because they are unlikely to have that chance ever again.

- Secondly, an MBA from a reputable school allows you to switch careers and enter at an attractive level. To me, this was business school's primary value proposition. I didn't exactly know what I wanted to do when I was coming out of the military. Putting myself at the mercy of a JMO placement group was not enticing. Those firms work for the companies—not us. Attending business school at Darden (or any school with robust general management requirements) will force you to learn the basics about all aspects of business. As a Veteran without private sector experience, the opportunity to breathe deeply, take personal inventory and consider what I wanted in life was critical. Consequently, the idea of taking some time for myself before beginning the next stage of life was psychologically comforting. Finally, the MBA will allow you to enter the private sector at an attractive level. JMO firms will tell you that "after a couple of years of working you'll be at the same level as your friends that pursue MBAs for the next couple of years." This is partially true depending on where you go to work. What JMOs won't tell you is that an MBA entering that same organization will have a different, higher career trajectory than the person that didn't pursue the degree.
- Lastly, pursuing an MBA at Darden (or another strong school) will allow you to build out a network that includes something other than military guys and gals. Your classmates are some of the best resources you'll encounter—both now and in the future. They come from myriad career functions in a variety of different industries and can educate you on what they liked

about their previous jobs, what they didn't, the kinds of people that were successful, and how that company and industry are evolving.

Beyond your two years at school and searching for an initial career, your business school classmates are people that will serve as excellent resources when you're contemplating switching companies, starting one, or engaging in any other number of career-related activities. Alternatively, your relationships may amount to annual golf trips, attending weddings, traveling abroad with spouses and children, etc. Long story short, the relationships that you build at Darden will stay with you long after graduation. You don't have to take my word for it though. Using annual giving as a proxy for alumni loyalty, Darden has the third most loyal alumni base in the country.

What the MBA isn't. An MBA isn't a panacea. It doesn't make problems go away or guarantee that you'll be running a Fortune 500 company someday. An MBA gives you the chance to pursue opportunities with premium companies and ultimately enter one with excellent prospects for advancement. If you want to be a Management Consultant I have good news for you. McKinsey, Bain, and Boston Consulting Group flock to Darden multiple times a year. Each firm takes a significant number of Darden students. Many other consulting firms, both small and large, come to Darden to recruit each year as well. Investment Banking? J.P. Morgan, Goldman Sachs, Morgan Stanley and a host of other bulge bracket, middle market, and boutique banks make the trek to Charlottesville. General Management companies aren't any different. You'll find Amazon, Google, Alcoa, Danaher and more on campus. Marketing is the same deal. General Mills, Target, Campbell's Soup, etc. Beyond those four big "buckets", Darden hosts companies from several other sectors. For a complete look at which companies recruit at Darden, where graduates take jobs, and the compensation they are awarded, please click here.

Tactical Recommendations

Know why you want an MBA. I won't regurgitate everything from above. By now you know what an MBA offers…and what it doesn't. Let's shift focus and think about Career Goals. Veterans can struggle to identify precisely what they want to do after graduation. This doesn't mean that you can blow off thinking about what you want to do when you grow up. In an interview setting, this can make or break a candidate. What you have at your disposal is an undergraduate major, professional military experience, and personal strengths/interests. Based on those three factors, you should be able to identify where in the private sector you sense a fit. If you're a quant jock with a passion for stock and bond markets, then maybe Investment Banking is for you. Perhaps you view yourself as more of a generalist. In that case take a look at the General Management companies that recruit at Darden. Research them until you find something you believe you could do…and that you want to do. This will form the basis of your Career Goals conversations and essays.

Once you get in, you can change it. Nobody polices you once you're in. For the purposes of admissions though, you need to have a nice, tight story that logically connects your past to what you want to do in the future…and why the Darden MBA is the tool that's going to allow you to achieve this goal. The Admissions Committee doesn't expect Veteran applicants to be as savvy about the private sector as a more traditional candidate. However, the Admissions Committee does need to know you're a selfstarter that has done extensive research and is cognizant of what is available to Darden MBAs. For instance, it would not be advisable to say you want to work in the energy space, with Enron your #1 choice.

The "fit" piece and Darden. The first question the ADCOM will seek to address when assessing your candidacy is, "Can the applicant do the work?" The ADCOM will generally use GPA and GMAT to make this determination. Provided that you've demonstrated you can do the work, the ADCOM shifts to a more amorphous concept: fit. Loosely defined, fit is simply an effort to figure out whether a candidate is going to integrate well and be a value-added member of the community. Each business school looks for this, although some are more stringent than others. As a general rule of thumb, the smaller the business school, the more fit matters. The reason for this is that in a smaller community, one bad apple has the potential to make the experience sub-optimal for a larger proportion of the class.

I can't provide you a thorough list of what makes somebody a good fit for Darden, simply because I don't know. We're a diverse community and people come in all different types. You don't have to be cookie-cutter perfect to get in. However, having been here for a year, I will make a poor man's attempt at capturing some of the important qualities:

- **Articulate and eager to share your perspective**
- **Thoughtful**
- **Enjoys teams**
- **A preference for disagreeing agreeably (when disagreement is necessary)**
- **Humility**
- **A willingness to check the ego at the door (leave the faux macho, military bravado behind; nobody cares how much you bench press either)**

If you now feel like an eHarmony advertisement has interrupted your business school research, well that's the point. Schools are trying to determine compatibility. Each of these qualities would be great to have, although you certainly don't have to have each in spades. For the purposes of the application, it is hard for you to demonstrate these. One way to capture this content is to talk with your Recommenders. Explain to them why you've chosen to apply to Darden and what the school is like. The Recommenders are going to be asked to put down a lot of candid thoughts about you. This is one area where a good Recommender can add value to your candidacy. The Recommender should focus on answering the questions succinctly while highlighting the interpersonal and other non-quantifiable skills that make you a sentient being.

Writing the perfect essay. The word "essay" connotes visions of English class. For our purposes don't think of this as an essay. Think of this as non-fiction story-telling. Michael Lewis and Malcolm Gladwell are two contemporary authors that have mastered the art of distilling complex ideas and presenting them in a simple, engaging way (read a Gladwell book like *Outliers* if you're looking for a good example of strong, award winning writing).

The best essays generally share three characteristics:

- They clearly answer the question; you'd be surprised how many people either never fully answer the question or bury the answer so deep in the text that someone who's reading quickly is going to gloss right over it.
- The sentences are short and to the point. This is not English class. There aren't bonus points for long sentences with a smattering of dependent clauses.
- The vocabulary employed is simple, yet appropriate. The ADCOM is going to read 3000 of these things. They might go look up a word if they don't know it, but do you want to run the risk that they won't? Again, this isn't English class. These are smart ladies. They aren't going to swoon over your ability to use big words.

Consider a Murphy's Law worst case scenario. Start by putting yourself in the high heels of your average ADCOM member (they are overwhelmingly women at any business school). It is a Thursday night the week before Thanksgiving. The window on issuing interview invitations to Round 1 applicants is soon closing. She is jet lagged because she just got back from a six day trip through Hong Kong, Bangalore, and Mumbai. She meant to review 50 applications before her trip, but her car broke the day before she was set to fly out. Instead of reading applications she was stuck at the dealership listening to some guy talk about catalytic converters. She doesn't know what those are, but she does know that she's falling uncomfortably behind. After her car was fixed she took the aforementioned trip across the world. Now, in addition to all these essays, she's reading and responding to the 600 "Thank You" emails she received from the prospective applicants she met in Taiwan and India. Also weighing on her mind is finalizing Thanksgiving travel plans and ensuring she's got the right Christmas gifts for her friends and family. What she'd really like to be doing is drinking a glass of wine or going to yoga. But she's not. Instead, she sat down to read these applications. Because she's a professional, she's going to give your application her full attention. However, she's probably not going to go back and re-read sentences several times to ensure she understands everything. It's incumbent upon you to make this easy on her. You have to meet her more than halfway. Nice, clean sentences. No big words. No military jargon. Connect the dots. Answer the question. Make this easy for her to digest.

As part of the "make this easy for her to digest" bit, choose an appropriate story to tell. Some military guys like to lead with blood, guts, and bombs. My personal advice is that you should tell the story that allows you to clearly and powerfully answer the question. Since you're trying to pivot to the private sector, maybe a story about a more mundane topic (e.g. changing your Platoon's maintenance culture) is better. The skills that you used to change your Platoon's culture are transferrable to the private sector because companies hire leaders to enact changes as well.

The essay is a direct action mission. Infiltrate, neutralize the target, and egress while inflicting little to no collateral damage. Well-rehearsed and executed fundamentals yield better results than complexity for the sake of complexity. You will stand out in a positive way if you can do these things.

The best MBA writing guide I've found to date is Evan Forster and David Thomas' book, The MBA Reality Check: Make the School You Want, Want You. This book is a guide for how to write for ADCOMs.

All things being equal, apply sooner rather than later.

Being perfectly honest, there isn't a big difference between R1 and R2. However, all things being equal, apply in R1. All the seats are open in R1. All the scholarship money is available. It's one essay.

The caveat to all of this is that if you believe you can materially improve your application by waiting until R2 then wait. You want to present the strongest application possible. R2 is the largest application round by volume and it's also where a plurality of the Admits come from. However, because it's big it's also (on the margins) slightly more competitive than R1.

And yes, people are admitted during R3, including military guys. This is a competitive round and a candidate should be ready to answer the question, "Why are you applying during the last round?" A deployment or extenuating circumstances (an injury that has prematurely curtailed your military career and now you are transitioning to the private sector, death in the family, house burned down, etc.) are compelling and appropriate reasons. Something that amounts to, "I was really busy at work and couldn't find the time" is less likely to resonate.