

Gary E. Shumaker

Showing Up

When Gary Shumaker was making his way through college, he received a letter from the regional draft board. Because he wasn't on track to finish his degree within four years, his classification was being switched from II-S to I-A, indicating that his draft registration was no longer being deferred due to study. As of that day, he was officially "available for military service" in the Vietnam War.

Gary had never been outside of Michigan before, save the one day each summer when his family visited an amusement park on an island in the Detroit River that technically was part of Canada. He knew those days were over. Opting to take his future into his own hands, he signed up for ROTC to avoid being drafted as a private, and was required to sign a contract consenting to be drafted immediately if he defaulted on his commitment. Only after signing did he receive a second letter from the draft board indicating that they had misinterpreted a directive from Washington and should not have rescinded his student deferment after all. "They made a mistake, but the wheels of my life had already been set in motion," Gary recalls today. "It's the reason I am where I am today."

Gary's signature on the ROTC paperwork committed him to a two-year obligation to the Army, and he was resolved to show up and make good on his promise. The first year was spent studying and training before shipping off to Vietnam for the second, where he served as a First Lieutenant working in military intelligence twelve hours a day, seven days a week. There, he lived not in an installation on the airfield, but in a house in town, and can still remember the sound of the explosion nearby when a terrorist dropped a grenade in the gas tank of an American military jeep. "The driver of the jeep had run back up to his apartment for a moment because he had forgotten

to comb his hair," Gary recalls. "Thankfully he wasn't hurt, but two local Vietnamese were killed on the street by the explosion. That incident was indicative of the experience overall—the whole country was a war zone."

Navigating that foreign terrain, Gary worked with a Vietnamese soldier his own age, who was trained as a high school math teacher. Through conversations, Gary came to learn that there had been a war going on in the country for as long as his friend could remember, preventing him

from ever teaching math as he had hoped to do. "In our country, we're raised with an understanding of how great it is to be an American, but coming face-to-face with that alternate way of life really drives home how lucky we are," Gary explains. Now, decades after the war and with his feet firmly planted on American soil, Gary is the co-founder, President and CEO of C2 Solutions Group, Inc. (C2), a government contracting firm specializing in IT professional

services. It has become his way of showing up every day to give his all, serve his country, and give back, affording others the opportunity to do the same.

C2's expertise falls within the parameters of management consulting services, IT consulting and support services, financial services, application development, and knowledge management. With Gary at the helm, C2's Executive Vice Presidents, Brian Newell and David Murphy, specialize in business development and technical and financial expertise, respectively. A Service-Disabled-Veteran Owned Small Business of around 50 employees and \$10 million in annual revenue, it offers a "performance as promised" commitment to ethics and reliability that has earned it the loyalty of clients like the Departments of Homeland Security, Veterans Affairs, Transportation, and Defense, as well as the



Executive Office of the President and the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission. Focused on continued growth for the future, the company is now exploring avenues to broaden its footprint and earn new credentials in more technical areas. "There's lots of room to do more of what we do so well, and we're pursuing that," Gary notes.

The company's pursuit of altitude and excellence comes from its heart of service—a bar set by Gary, and reciprocated in the commitment of his team members. Many of C2's employees are new U.S. citizens who have sought refuge in the United States from around the globe, including India, China, Vietnam, Egypt, and Somalia. C2 is a way for them to give back in meaningful, substantive ways to their adopted country, and is likewise a way for American-born citizens to connect with the larger context of their country. "Our work helps to make this a better country, and that's a mission I really love," Gary says. "It's my reason for getting up in the morning, and it enriches my life in ways I couldn't even begin to put into words."

Gary was born and raised in a small town in Michigan, where he enjoyed a solid middle class upbringing. His father, who had started college during the Great Depression but never finished, worked at a casket factory and then became a general contractor, immersing himself in the building of houses. While Gary was growing up, his Dad would break houses into apartments, which he would rent out. "He had five houses around town, and they all had coal-fired furnaces," Gary says. "I remember him going around in the winter shoveling coal into the stokers twice a day."

His father took over several music stores, a shoe store, and a women's wear store. Gary worked in one of the music stores from age ten, sweeping and cleaning or helping to deliver pianos and repair broken stereos. "My dad was my role model, so it always felt natural to help out with the businesses," he recalls. "And while I learned my work ethic from my father, I learned empathy and caring from my mother. She was a housewife in my early years but then worked at the women's wear store and the music stores."

In high school, Gary joined a band and played a half-hour DJ show once a week on the local radio station. He would borrow equipment from his dad's stores to DJ dances around town, and he would sometimes operate the sound systems for the Friday night wrestling matches at

the National Guard Armory, for which his father had a contract. He didn't think too much about the future, vaguely interested in the idea of becoming an electrical engineer. "When you're that young, there are so many jobs you've just never even heard of," he reflects. "It's often hard to know with any real knowledge what you want to do later in life."

Tragically, Gary's mother and grandmother suffered a terrible car accident when he was a freshman in high school, which took a tremendous financial and emotional toll on the family. His grandmother survived for nine months but never truly regained consciousness. His mother recovered after a lengthy stay at the hospital, but she died of breast cancer a few years later. His father died shortly thereafter, leaving Gary and his two younger brothers to make their own way in the world. Thankfully, their parents had always emphasized the importance of getting a college degree, so Gary enrolled at Michigan State University to make good on that goal. There, he met and married Eleanor, the supportive partner who has been his wife for fifty years now. There were times it was hard to scrape out a living, but joining ROTC afforded some extra support for the essentials.

When Gary's two-year commitment to the Army was drawing to a close, he contemplated life beyond. "The internet hadn't been invented yet, so it was hard to job search and interview from Vietnam," he recalls. The Army offered to send him wherever he wanted to go if he agreed to stay on, so he opted to sign up for another year. His wife had been living in Woodbridge, Virginia, so he became a Company Commander at Fort Belvoir, and then later at Fort Myer.

One year became two, which became ten, and finally twenty. Through that time, Gary served in Virginia, New Jersey, and Georgia, before returning to Michigan State to get his graduate degree in telecommunications. After some time stationed in California, he and his family moved to Germany, where he was assigned to a NATO war planning headquarters. "I still remember attending a reception hosted by the Oberbürgermeister of Stuttgart for the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe," Gary recalls. "It was the big leagues, with top decision makers from 43 nations present. It was a remarkable place to be for a kid who didn't leave Michigan until he was 20."

After his time in Germany, Gary was sent

to Aberdeen, Maryland. From there, he did a tour on the staff of the Military Academy at West Point and then finally finished his Army career in a Pentagon assignment. At that point, his sixth grade daughter had been in six different schools. "It was a fun ride, but I wanted some stability for my family, and I was ready to see what else I could do," he explains. "I had worked with contractors in my various assignments, and it seemed like a good way forward."

Gary was recommended by a colleague to a government contracting firm called Automation Research Systems, Ltd (now ARServices, Ltd). He was hired on as a Systems Analyst, an invaluable opportunity to learn and grow. In that capacity, he was also mentored by a program manager and business developer at a larger government contractor, EDS. The colleague didn't mind giving Gary a hand up, since EDS only went for the biggest contracts, while ARS operated on a more moderate scale.

At ARS, Gary was assigned a contract with the Army in Korea, which left extra time on the clock to take on other projects and learn more of the business. He was promoted to Program Manager, where he worked for several years and then decided he wanted to shift to business development. "I got to go on a few business development trips, and it seemed like you just made PowerPoint presentations and then went out to talk with people," he recounts. "I love going out and meeting people, so when I saw an advertisement in the paper to do business development for Signal Corporation, I leapt at the opportunity."

Signal became one of the most successful government contractors to come up the small business route, and Gary's skills evolved in lockstep. Given free reign when he started at Signal, he set up a meeting with a GSA small business advocate within his first two weeks on the job. "I think they were expecting me to spend the first couple months mastering the presentation, but I kind of hit the ground running," he recalls. "I memorized the pitch and decided I needed to start somewhere, so off I went."

The GSA representative listened politely and said she didn't have anything for him, but instead offered a list of five people he should talk to. Gary went to each of those five people and received the same response: they didn't have any business for him, but they could offer a list of five

more people to talk to. Over the next six months, Gary met with each lead, to no avail. But when he finally met with the last person on the list, he received a call on his car phone shortly after the meeting ended. The woman he had met with wanted to know if they could incorporate a contract to provide an AT&T 5ESS switch to a Navy customer in Jacksonville. Gary said he thought they might, and he'd get right back to her after lunch. "You don't understand," came the voice over the phone. "I want to award you a \$100 million contract this afternoon." As fate would have it, it was the last day an 8(a) company could be awarded a sole source contract greater than \$3 million. It was the win Gary had been waiting for, and a game changer for Signal.

Also originating from that first brave meeting at GSA, Gary was connected with GSA's Philadelphia office, which had an extra spot available on the list of contractors pitching for a \$40 million 8(a) contract. Gary took the slot, made the presentation in Philadelphia, and won the contract, cementing his rock star status as a new business developer. "Learning the business from that lens was invaluable," he reflects. "You come to understand that it's okay if you don't do one pitch perfectly, because you just move on and try again. There are a million opportunities to perfect it."

After he learned all he could in that capacity, Gary accepted a position as the COO for Multimax, Inc, which was owned by a geophysicist from Hong Kong. Top on Gary's list in that capacity was finding a COO who would teach him what the job entailed, including sophisticated financial, human resources, and security management. He managed to grow the company 25 percent annually for the three years he served there, ultimately departing to take a job with Access Systems, Inc, in 2002. "The owner of the company was an amazing woman who just needed some help running it," Gary recalls. "There was a lot of opportunity for growth, and the job also cut my daily commute to a fraction of what it had been before."

In 2003, they tripled the size of the company. Gary laughs when he says that they had a bad year in 2004, only growing by 60 percent. By 2005, the Access Systems was on decidedly solid footing, and Gary began wondering what he wanted to do for the rest of his life. Weary from his high-powered years as a COO, he was drawn to

the idea of hanging his own shingle and working as a consultant to help small businesses learn the government contracting arena and develop their intellectual infrastructure. He did that for several years and loved the work, but he couldn't deny his interest when he was approached by Brian Newell and David Murphy to join in the launch of C2.

When they started, C2's corporate office was little more than a table in the back of a restaurant where the team would meet every other Friday morning. They found opportunities now and then but the going was tough. "When we started the company, GSA put out a government-wide acquisition contract, and we had 90 days to write a proposal," Gary explains. "We put together a team of small businesses, with CSC as our anchor, and were able to include all the past performance our principals had from previous companies. It took the government 18 months to go through 400 proposals and make 40 awards across two functional areas, but we got awards in both areas. That was really the start for C2, and in the past decade it has grown into what it is today."

That growth is in part thanks to Gary's collegial leadership style, which is far more interested in identifying system failures than in assigning blame to a particular individual in the event of a mistake. "If something goes wrong, my first question always has to do with the system we have in place and how we can improve it to reduce the likelihood that we'll have the same problem twice," he says. "And I always remember that Brian, David, and I are responsible for fifty people's ability to pay their mortgage and put food on the table. Whenever I have to make a difficult decision, remembering this responsibility puts things in perspective and makes it much easier."

This leadership style has contributed to C2's success, both financially and as a fixture in the business community. It was named one of the Best Places to Work in Virginia by *Virginia Business* for three years and was included on the Virginia Chamber of Commerce Fantastic 50 list, as well as on the Inc. 5000 list of Fastest Growing Companies, Government Services Companies, and Virginia Companies. C2 was declared a top-ranked Veteran-Owned Company by the *Washington Business Journal* and a "Fast 50" company by *Washington Technology* magazine. The company has

also been a runner-up in several categories for the Stevie Awards, a business award competition. As a member of the American Legion and the Disabled Veterans of America, Gary also leads C2 in support of other veterans' organizations like Wounded Warriors.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Gary underscores the importance of looking the part. "Work hard and be professional in speech and appearance," he suggests. "It takes both leaders and followers to make the world work, so have a respect and sensitivity about when it's appropriate to respect others' leadership and when it's time to step into those shoes yourself." He also sings the praises of a small business atmosphere, where employees are often given the chance to wear more hats and evolve a more well-rounded skill set.

Beyond that, perhaps the best piece of advice Gary can give is the simplest: show up. "A lot of success in this business is luck, but you have to make your own luck by being there," he says. "If you write a proposal, you might lose, but one of the few things that's absolutely certain is that you will not win if you don't try. You can talk yourself out of it by saying you don't have the right experience, or that the incumbent's a sure winner, but you have to take your chances. On the battlefield, in school, on the job, and in all facets of life, you only know what's possible if you try."

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