

Pete Coughlin

The After-Action Review

“Pete Coughlin, you are an Ironman!”

The year was 2014, and Pete had just endured his fifth and final attempt at crossing the finish line after a 2.4-mile swim, a 112-mile bike ride, and a 26.2-mile run. “When I came out of the military, I was used to walking 25 miles with 50 pounds on my back,” he recalls today. “I thought I was invincible. Then I started doing triathlons with my wife, who is now a four-time Ironman finisher. When I started, I thought, what’s the big deal?”

During his first attempt, the swim went well. During the bike ride, however, the heat began getting to him. Seven miles into the run, he was toast. “My body shut down,” he says. “The experience really made me step back and reassess my self-concept and approach.”

At that point, Pete engaged in a practice that had led him to success time and again through his years in service: the after-action review. He reflected on his preparations, assessing what he had done right and what he could have done better. “The military teaches you to do after-action reviews to learn from your mistakes and reinforce your successes,” he explains. “I had gotten out of the habit of doing them, but I realized I could apply that mentality to everything I do, personally and professionally.”

It was this methodical, committed, reflective process that ultimately compelled Pete to victory, and the announcer’s proclamation that day in 2014 was one of the most rewarding accomplishments of his life. Now, he brings that same grit and determination to his work as cofounder and Managing Partner of PiperCoughlin, LLC (PiCo), a Veterans Affairs (VA) verified Service Disabled Veteran Owned Small Business serving U.S. government defense, intelligence, and civilian customers.

Pete met his partner, Duane Piper, in 2006 at SAIC, a large government services and IT

support company headquartered in Tysons Corner, Virginia. The two had different backgrounds and experiences that allowed them to work well together, complementing each other’s strengths and weaknesses. Duane left SAIC to take a job with GDIT and then with Silverback7 in 2010, where he recommended they bring Pete onboard. Pete accepted the position, and together, they helped grow the firm’s intelligence and analytics work, transforming the company from a small to mid-sized business.

Toward the end of 2013, over lunch, Pete and Duane got to talking about the possibilities. They had achieved success for companies big and small, so why not try venturing out on their own? “I had always thought about doing it,” says Pete. “We wanted to take what we had learned across the various business contexts and see if we could be successful doing it for ourselves.”

The idea lay dormant for a while, but periodically resurfaced, and Pete and Duane began fleshing it out on napkins when they’d meet to talk. Momentum grew, and by September of 2014, they were ready to pull the plug. While Duane finished the year out at Silverback, Pete focused on putting the pieces in place, and in January of 2015, PiCo became operational in earnest.

Today, PiCo specializes in the core competencies of multidisciplinary intelligence analytical support, financial integrity services, security support services, and program support services for Department of Defense and federal customers. With a developed and mature business operating platform, the firm is always on the lookout for the new tools and technologies it needs to stay viable and grow. “Duane has built a very strong back office support infrastructure, and with adequate financial resources, we’re well-positioned for success,” says Pete. “But timing and opportunity are key in the contracting world, so



we do all we can to maximize that.”

In leading PiCo, Pete brings a tried-and-true approach that revolves around common sense, hard work, discipline, and a commitment to do the job right—qualities he’s honed since he was born at Fort Knox, Kentucky, where his father was serving in the Army. His mother was firm, fair, and caring, and his father was a patriotic, stern, and ethical man. Both believed there was a right way and a wrong way to do things. They had high expectations for their children, which were instrumental in shaping them into the people they are today.

When his father retired from military service, the Coughlin family settled in Montgomery, Alabama. Growing up, Pete’s family savored the conversation around the table during family meals and the fun of getting together to watch a TV show on Friday nights. They weren’t rich by any means, but they had what they needed, and the kids got that one present they really wanted for Christmas. The parents modeled a strong work ethic, and the kids were expected to work around the house. Pete also spent grueling summers mowing lawns and doing plumbing and HVAC for a mechanical engineering company. “I still remember the unbearable heat of doing that kind of work in Alabama in the summer,” he says. “As the smallest guy on the team, I’d have to crawl up in the attic to fix things. For \$2.25 an hour, I’d carry pipe up staircases all day on a hospital remodeling project, and I’d come home so tired I’d pass out immediately. I knew I didn’t want to be doing it for the rest of my life.”

While his parents never pushed any certain future on their kids, Pete knew they were expected to finish high school, attend college, get a job, and move out. After high school, Pete enrolled at the University of Alabama with dreams of becoming an eye surgeon. He had ploughed through three years of Latin in high school to prepare for the medical field, but he was ill-prepared for the fun and freedom of college, and his grades suffered from all the distractions. “It was a sacrifice for my parents to put me through college, and I still remember how bad it felt when they saw my grades after my freshman year,” Pete recalls. “The university put me on academic probation and told me to take a semester off. I knew I had to turn things around.”

Pete went back to work for the dreaded mechanical engineering company during his time

off, underscoring the importance of buckling down and exercising discipline. He would never be a straight-A student, but he knew how to work hard, and his diploma would be a product of that conviction. On the lookout for every opportunity to boost his GPA, he and his roommate enrolled in an ROTC leadership class as an elective during their sophomore year—a decision that would change the course of his life forever.

As the semester neared its end, Pete’s instructor, Captain Alsup, invited him and his roommate to attend a ROTC camp for the summer. He had no intention of going into the military at that point, but he and his roommate liked the idea of getting paid to go to Kentucky together for the summer. “It wasn’t at all what we thought it would be,” he laughs now. “We were on different planes, and I didn’t even see Adam until we had been there for a week. By that time, our heads were shaved.”

When the camp ended, Captain Alsup asked Pete if he was ready to sign up for military service. “I ran out of his office and went straight home,” Pete recalls. “Then I started thinking. My freshman year career assessment said I might be good in the military, and I knew my parents would be proud that I’d have a job when I got out of school. The next day, I went back and signed the papers.”

Pete was commissioned in 1984 and went into active duty in May of 1985. He began his career in the Army as an infantry officer with the 82nd Airborne Division. It was during that period that he met Leah, the sister-in-law of a lieutenant in his company. After a dinner date by the bay in Mobile and an exciting evening together at the greyhound track, she had taken his heart. Within a year, they were married.

Soon thereafter, Pete rebranched into military intelligence with a concentration in counterintelligence. He asked to be sent to Korea at a time when forecasted danger in the region was compelling many to seek other assignments. As fate would have it, Desert Shield launched just after assignments had been made, so everyone assigned to Europe and Germany wanted to be rerouted. Eager to serve in the regions of greatest needs, Pete asked to switch, but he was locked into Korea.

Pete then returned to Fort Bragg to serve another four years as an intelligence officer, followed by a three-year stint in Tampa at the

United States Special Operations Command. He spent the next two years in the 10th Mountain Division at Fort Drum, then spent a year overseas as the Commander of a Counterintelligence detachment in Kuwait.

When he returned from overseas, Pete spent four years working as the Director of Security for the White House Military Office, where he managed a comprehensive security program in support of the DOD officials traveling in support of the President. He and his wife liked the Washington Metropolitan area, so Pete decided to retire as a Lieutenant Colonel in 2006. "By the time we moved here in 2002, my kids had been in four different schools in a five-year span," he recalls. "I think they're more social and adaptive because of it, but we were ready to lay down some roots."

Reflecting back on his 21-year career in the military, Pete was given every assignment he ever wanted, and he contributes his success to the quality of the noncommissioned officers working for him. He connected with these officers deeply and genuinely, to the extent that in every assignment, an enlisted soldier would ask if he, too, had ever been enlisted. "To me, that was a huge compliment," he reflects. "Soldiers often feel that officers don't care about them, so I was honored that they found me relatable and engaged. I truly cared for the men and women serving their country and working under my command." His attitude and poise, which he attributes to his father, set him apart as a leader who felt responsible for his team and deeply invested in each individual team member's success.

With this trademark approach to leadership and work, Pete envisioned a natural transition into a corporate environment that would allow him to continue supporting national security interests and our men and women in uniform. Drawing on his military intelligence and counterintelligence background, Pete accepted a job with SAIC managing Army programs in support of the Intelligence Community. But at first, the sailing was hardly smooth. "Making my start in the corporate world was like being a Second Lieutenant in the Army all over again," he says. "I knew nothing about their processes or acronyms, and I wasn't getting much guidance. I was nearing the end of my rope, trying to decide if I should tough it out or move on to something else."

Fortunately, Pete got a call from a fast-paced division manager who didn't have the time of day for people unless they were on his team. To Pete's surprise, he offered him a program management job, where he flourished for the next two years supporting large intelligence contracts. He was promoted to division manager, where he worked happily for another couple of years before receiving the call from Duane Piper to join Silverback7, a training and exercise development company. "I hadn't planned to leave SAIC," he says. "I was comfortable in that skin—not necessarily happy, but content. If Duane hadn't reached out, I probably would have worked there another 20 years and retired."

At Silverback, Pete served as the VP for Analytics and was charged with growing the intelligence division. "I could do business development, but my passion was the people-side of the house and delivering the product in a quality manner," he recalls. "Over the next year, we grew the division from a 13-employee, \$2 million venture to over 100 employees and \$16 million in annual revenue." He then made the leap to PiCo, where the future remains to be written.

Through it all, Leah's love and support have been critical ingredients in Pete's success. She was fully behind him in the launching of PiCo, and Pete finds himself constantly in awe of her vigor and strength. "She had the toughest job I can imagine, raising two kids when I couldn't be around much," he says. "She's the most disciplined person I know, and I'm so appreciative of everything she's brought into my life. I wouldn't have had the Ironman on my bucket list if it wasn't for her. I'm incredibly proud of all she's done."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Pete underscores the importance of genuine connection and interaction despite the constant pressure to be on our phones. He also encourages balance between hard work and quality of life, recognizing that relationships and health are important to maintain along the journey to success. Above all, his example is a testament to his unshakable character, and to those periodic after-action reviews that serve as stepping stones along the way. "Leah and I talk sometimes about how we never thought we'd be where we are today," he says. "Back in Alabama, I had no idea what I wanted to do. Yet somehow we've arrived here, successful and grateful and looking toward the future."

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About Gordon J. Bernhardt

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Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit www.BernhardtWealth.com and [Gordon's Blog](#).

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