

VERC Leadership Journal

From Orders to Ownership™ Leadership Lessons for Veteran Entrepreneurs

My First Encounter With the Expat Life

Series: From Orders to Ownership™ | Volume One **Author:** Jerome W. Fisher, Founder, Veteran Entrepreneur Resource Center **Estimated Reading Time:** 5 minutes **Published:** 1 **Content Current As Of:** 14 August 2026

HERO IMAGE SLOT Brief: Wide shot of a Middle Eastern city skyline at dusk, or an ordinary residential street with palm trees and low villas. Warm evening light. No military vehicles, uniforms, aircraft, flags, seals, or insignia. Licensed stock only. Alt text: "Evening view of a residential neighborhood overseas."

Sometimes one dinner conversation changes the direction of your life.

My interest in expatriate life began during my Army service, long before I ever considered living overseas by choice.

In 2005 I was serving as a Major, assigned to the U.S. Central Command forward headquarters in Qatar. Our work supported operations across the CENTCOM area of responsibility. The days were long and the responsibility was real. Contractors, military personnel, and other professionals moved constantly between the headquarters and locations across the region.

At that point I understood overseas life through one lens only: orders. Traveling outside the continental United States meant missions, operational requirements, force protection, and a return date. Living abroad as a family enjoying another culture, building an ordinary life outside the United States had never entered my thinking.

Then one evening I had dinner with a contractor supporting U.S. forces. I had worked with him professionally for months. That night the conversation turned personal, and he mentioned that his wife and children lived with him in Qatar.

He was not counting down days until he rotated home. He had built a household overseas. His family shared the experience with him, met people from other backgrounds, and lived a normal daily life on the other side of the world.

That dinner was my first real introduction to the expat lifestyle.

PULL QUOTE

"A person might live overseas without living in a war zone."

A Country in Motion

What I observed at that table was one small piece of a much larger shift. Qatar was absorbing foreign workers at extraordinary speed. The country's population roughly doubled in six years, climbing from about 744,000 at the 2004 census to approximately 1.69 million by 2010, with foreign workers driving nearly all of that growth.

I was not a demographer. I was a staff officer eating dinner. But I was sitting inside one of the fastest expatriate build-outs in the world without recognizing it.

The Music System

The contractor also showed me a music system he had installed in his home. He selected a song on a computer, and it played through his stereo no stack of CDs, no tangle of cables, no separate components. I remember being genuinely impressed.

Looking back, the system almost certainly used Apple's AirPort Express and its AirTunes feature. Apple announced the device on June 7, 2004 and shipped it that July at \$129. It connected to a home stereo and streamed music wirelessly from iTunes.

Today that is unremarkable. In 2005, in a villa in Doha, it looked like a window into the future.

What Actually Stayed With Me

The technology was not the lesson.

The contractor's life represented freedom, mobility, and choice. He was supporting an important mission, earning a living, exposing his family to another culture, and building a comfortable home far from the United States all at the same time. Until that night, my entire overseas

experience had centered on duty: deployment, planning, security, and responsibility for soldiers and missions.

He showed me the other side of international life. A person might live overseas without living in a war zone. A family might experience another country without filtering every movement through an operational timetable. A home abroad might include dinner with friends, weekend routines, music playing through the house, and time spent learning a new culture.

That realization stayed with me for the rest of my career.

VERC INSIGHT

Many of my Army friends chose to remain outside the continental United States after retirement or separation. Their reasons vary marriage, employment, cost of living, climate, culture, or simple attachment to places where they spent meaningful years. What they share is that the decision was made deliberately, with preparation, and not on impulse. The veterans who struggle overseas are almost always the ones who moved first and planned second.

Returning by Choice

For veterans, peaceful international travel carries a particular weight. Most service members first encounter foreign countries under demanding conditions. Airports become transit points. Cities become operational environments. Travel becomes a requirement.

Returning by choice is a different experience entirely. There is time to sit in a restaurant, walk a neighborhood, visit a beach, learn local customs, and talk with people without an operational clock running. The same part of the world looks different through the eyes of a traveler, a resident, an entrepreneur, or a retiree.

That dinner in Qatar planted an idea I did not fully understand at the time: life did not have to remain confined to one country, and international living was not reserved for diplomats, executives, or lifelong travelers. Veterans, retirees, entrepreneurs, remote workers, and families were building meaningful lives overseas too.

The evening did not cause me to leave the Army or pursue expatriate living immediately. It did something more durable. It expanded my view of what life after service might include.

Years later, traveling for personal reasons and exploring business opportunities outside the United States, I finally understood why the memory held. The contractor had a mission, a

career, a family, a home, and a connection to the wider world at once. For a Major whose overseas experience had been entirely operational, that combination was new information.

One day I might return overseas without orders. Without a mission brief. With time to build relationships, friendships, and a business.

That was my first encounter with the expat life, and the idea has stayed with me ever since.

MISSION REFLECTION

Military service taught us to operate anywhere in the world. Entrepreneurship teaches us to create opportunity wherever we choose to live.

The transition from orders to ownership begins long before you board an airplane. It begins with preparation.

ACTION PLAN

Three steps you can take this week, wherever you are stationed or living:

1. **Write down your actual reason.** Climate, cost, family, adventure, business access — name it in one sentence. Reasons that survive contact with paperwork are the ones worth planning around.
 2. **Audit your income portability.** Sort your current and projected income into two columns: income that follows you anywhere, and income that requires a U.S. address, a U.S. worksite, or a U.S. client base. The ratio between those columns is your real timeline.
 3. **Talk to one person already doing it.** Not a blog, not a video — one conversation with someone living the version of the life you are considering. Ask what surprised them in the first six months.
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Drawing on decades of military leadership, federal service, international assignments, and business ownership, Jerome helps veterans turn military experience into functioning businesses — in the United States and beyond.

RELATED READING

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- Building Your First Business Plan
 - (*Additional titles will be listed here as they publish.*)
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SOURCES

- Qatar population figures: 2004 and 2010 Qatar census results, as reported by Gulf News, "Qatar population doubles since 2004."
 - Apple AirPort Express announcement date, ship date, and pricing: Apple Newsroom press releases, June 7, 2004 and July 14, 2004.
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