

OPINION

The need for more modern-day cyber warriors

By TRACY GREGORIO

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Airmen with 175th Cyber Operations, Maryland Air National Guard, train at Exercise Southern Strike at Camp Shelby, Mississippi, April 21, 2023. Southern Strike 2023 is a large-scale, joint multinational combat exercise hosted by the Mississippi National Guard that provides tactical level training for the full spectrum of conflict. (Renee Seruntine/U.S. Army National Guard)

The United States' next major conflict might very well be a cyber war, and our military, government agencies and contractors must prepare by finding and training modern-day, front-line cyber warriors. Easier said than done because many sailors, soldiers and airmen starting their careers don't know about the opportunities in cyber, and more importantly, are not aware how much their country desperately needs people with those skills to keep everyone safe in today's digital age.

My business partners and I have served the submarine community throughout our careers. Together we have built a company to enhance our military's advanced technologies to

improve their mission readiness and cyber resilience. Nuclear submarines, aircraft carriers and fighter jets are super-complex systems of systems. With their technology dependence and inter-connectedness, they are incredibly difficult to protect from cyberattacks. Our country's ability to prevail in future conflicts will depend on having more sailors and soldiers with cyber skills, just as we need an infantry that can shoot, and deckhands that can turn a wrench.

Fortune magazine reports that the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics has projected that the role of information security analyst will be among the fastest-growing and most in-demand jobs. Between 2021 and 2031, the number of information security analysts is projected to grow 35%, making it the eighth-fastest-growing occupation in the country.

In addition, according to employment data company CyberSeek, in May 2023, there were over 755,000 cybersecurity job openings in the U.S. It provides perspective to the angst my partners and I feel over the 23 openings we're working to fill.

With the U.S. Navy as our largest client, our company is constantly searching for well-qualified professionals who have experience in both cyber and the military. We have found that those who have received cyber training and experience through the armed forces are often the best candidates. One of the problems, though, in finding more talented professionals, is that cyber careers are not well understood and might seem daunting.

Two of our recent hires, who came onboard in 2022, are early adopters of cyber who launched their careers directly out of high school. One retired from the Navy after 20 years and the other after 9 years. These cyber security engineers are thriving based mainly on their Navy experience and cyber training, and each is earning nearly a six-figure salary.

One of the reasons for their success is they took advantage of the Navy's top-notch training that consists of many paid-for courses and certifications that include A Plus, Security Plus, Certified Information Systems Professional, Certified Ethical Hacker, and Certified Information Systems Professional.

The key in developing modern-day cyber warriors is getting the message out about opportunities in that field before another career path is chosen. People who start out in cyber are crucial to highly complex and technical service offerings. Entry-level cyber engineers are critical in developing a new-age fighting force.

Cybersecurity is a never-ending battle, as there are always new ways for hackers to get in. To keep us all safe, our military's cyber resiliency must be armed with the very best cyber warriors to plug vulnerabilities before they occur, and fight the digital, cloud and AI battles.

Tracy Gregorio is CEO of G2 Ops, an Arlington, Va.-based IT engineering company serving the Department of Defense. She started her IT career working at the Naval Undersea Warfare Center. Gregorio chairs the Cybersecurity Committee of the Virginia Ship Repair Association and serves on the Technical Advisory Board of the Virginia Commonwealth Cyber Initiative. Gregorio earned a master's degree in Computer Science from Old Dominion and a bachelor's degree from Virginia Tech.

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