

Making Tracks

Former “Gunny” finds success on the rails as part of BNSF Railway’s Experienced First Line Supervisor Program.

by Warren Duffie

Keith Thomas knows how to coax large, machinery to life. The former gunnery sergeant spent his 20-year Marine Corps career as a mechanic and aviation technician first mastering the nuts and bolts of 26-ton tanks and later the electronics of aircraft such as the C-130.

But when he met Connie McLendon – military staffing manager for BNSF Railway Company – and she presented him with a new challenge, he was hesitant.

“Last year, I was stationed at Camp Pendleton and preparing to leave the military,” says Thomas, 39. “She told me about her company and how I would be a good fit. I told her I didn’t know anything about railroads or trains, and she said, ‘You’ve supervised people, right? You can be a leader with us.’”

Quick Stats

Company: BNSF Railway Company

Founded: Over 150 years old

Headquarters: Fort Worth, Texas

of facilities nationwide: 32,000 route miles in 28 states and two provinces

of employees: 40,000

2005 Annual Revenues: \$13 billion

Web site: www.bnsf.com/careers/military

Less than a year later, Thomas is glad he took McLendon’s advice. He’s realizing wonderful success in BNSF’s Experienced First Line Supervisor (EFLS) program – an intense leadership initiative that trains new employees to manage railroad workers. EFLS encompasses the transportation, engineering, and mechanical departments. Thomas works in the signal division of the engineering department and supervisors around 20 signal mechanics and operators.

Signaling a New Career

EFLS lasts a rigorous six months and comprises three parts. First, new hires attend a corporate orientation at BNSF’s Fort Worth, Texas, headquarters, where they learn about company culture and rules. Afterwards, they attend technical training in Overland Park, Kan. – studying railroad terminology, safety regulations, and personnel management. Finally, all of this is followed up by on-the-job training with a mentor.

“You’ve supervised people, right? You can be a leader with us.”

- Connie McLendon, BNSF -

Based at a railroad yard in Lincoln, Neb., Thomas begins his day at 6:45 a.m., first going through the previous night’s e-mails. He then meets with his mentor, and the pair spends the day overseeing the testing of track signal systems and addressing various issues. It’s demanding work: Thomas is sometimes required to visit sites along several hundred miles of track, and he’s on call 24/7.

Military Crucial to Development

“My military training has been crucial in my development here,” he says. “As a former mechanic, I can understand the technical side. But I also spent three years as a recruiter, so that’s helped me interact with my signal crew. I’ve been able to earn their respect.”

Helping Vets Engineer Success

Respect is one thing BNSF has for its military employees. Operating one of America’s largest railroad networks – 32,000 route

The Thomas File

Highest Rank Held: Gunnery Sergeant (E-7)
Education: Tracked Vehicle Repairman, Aviation Technician, Quality Assurance, and Maintenance Material Management Hazardous Waste Handlers Course.
Experience: Spent 20 years on active duty in the Marine Corps as a tracked vehicle repairman, recruiter, and aviation technician.

Chronological Résumé

2006 - Present: Experienced First Line Supervisor (EFLS) program, BNSF Railway Company, Lincoln, Neb.
1986 - 2006: U.S Marine Corps : Duty stations included Twentynine Palms, Kuwait City, Okinawa, and Camp Pendleton.

Day in the Life

0645 - 0800

0800 - 1600

1600 - 1630

1630

Arrive at the office, check e-mails and prepare the day's priorities.
 Meet with mentor to determine what equipment needs to be tested, test equipment, meet/communicate with signal mechanics and operators to address any outstanding issues.
 Plan tomorrow's activities.
 Go home.

miles in 28 states and two Canadian provinces – the company hauls more grain than any other U.S. railroad and enough low-sulphur coal to generate about 10 percent of the electricity produced in this country.

This success is bolstered by veteran muscle. Named one of *G.I. Jobs* 2005 “Top 25 Most Military-Friendly Employers,” the BNSF has long partnered with the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), to recruit veterans.

In 2005 the company hired 750 veterans and is on track to hire 1,000 more this year. Some positions include management (like Thomas), track maintenance, mechanics, diesel engine mechanics, and electricians. But even veterans with non-technical backgrounds can do well as conductors, says Con-

nie McLendon. Conductor positions, averaging \$67,000 annually, “can be for a young soldier who did four years in the infantry who may not have the mechanical skills, but has the leadership, attention to detail, self-reliance, organization and planning skills.”

Salaries for those in the EFLS program range from \$56,160 to \$62,400 base, with bonus potential.

From College to the Corps

Thomas didn't join the Marines planning to be a leader of men. In fact, he didn't plan to enter the Marines at all.

“The Air Force recruiting office was closed,” says the Baltimore, Md., native. “When I turned to leave, the Marine recruiter ordered me to get in his office.”

“I really needed some discipline at the time,” he continues. “I had just finished my first year of college, and it didn't go well. I needed some drive and to grow up some.”

After basic training at Parris Island, S.C., Thomas was sent to Twentynine Palms as a tracked vehicle repairman. A few years later, his unit shipped out to Kuwait during the first Gulf War.

When he returned stateside to re-enlist, he was told his occupational specialty was full and he would have to find a new one. So he attended aviation technician school, and later served in Okinawa and at Camp Pendleton.

But by last year, Thomas was facing his 20-year mark: “I wanted to get out after 20 years, that way I would have enough time to have a successful second career as a civilian.”

Lift-off with Locomotives

He began preparing earnestly for his separation by Thomas attending TAP classes, review his résumé, and attending a number of career fairs — including the one where he met McLendon. Early this year, he took terminal leave and returned to Baltimore. In April he received a call from McLendon, who told him to post his résumé online with BNSF. Three weeks later, he was invited for an interview and was hired within two days.

“I had a very smooth transition, no difficulties at all,” he says. “My time as a recruiter really prepared me for interacting with civilians. Plus, BNSF is very military-friendly, and there's a large number of veterans working here. It's like being among friends.” ★

Thomas' Advice

Start preparing early. “When I attended TAP classes, I saw too many people with only a couple of months left on their enlistments. Give yourself at least a year.”

Don't just stick with your military career field. “You'd be surprised at what you might qualify for. Look at me. I never dreamed of working for the railroad.”

Take an interview quiz. “Get some interview books, and answer some of the basic questions. That will help you get in the right mind-set and allow the interview to go smoothly. It worked for me.”

Dig deeper at www.gijobs.net/sep

- Archives of past Sr. Enlisted Profiles.
- For more on career opportunities at BNSF Railway see page 31 or go to www.gijobs.net/bnsf.
- Link to the May 2006 Recruiter Intel featuring BNSF's Connie McLendon.



Gunnery Sgt. Keith Thomas
 USMC (1986-2006)

From Planes to Trains

Airman turns military know-how into BNSF Railway success.

by Warren Duffie

As an Air Force air transportation specialist, Dave Nickles mastered the art of moving large groups of people and supplies on and off massive cargo planes. As a civilian, he transferred that skill into a rewarding career as a terminal master.

“You would think there’s a big difference between cargo planes and the railroad,” said the former senior master

sergeant. “However, the systems are very similar. The only real difference is that coal moves slower than people.”

Nickles, 42, is a terminal train master for BNSF Railway Company. He oversees the rail yard in Alliance, Neb., one of the company’s most important hubs. Each day, the yard sends nearly 80 trains through the open-pit mines of the “Coal Loop,” which winds through South Dakota and Wyoming.



Dave Nickles
Terminal Train Master
BNSF Railway Company

Vets on the Railroad

Leadership is the main reason BNSF actively seeks military veterans. Operating one of America’s largest railroad networks – 32,000 miles over 28 states – the company hauls more grain than any other U.S. railroad and enough low-sulphur coal to generate 10 percent of the country’s electricity.

BNSF recognizes that a large key to its success is because of veteran muscle. Named No. 1 for 2007 *G.I. Jobs* Top 50 Military-Friendly Employers®, the railway has long partnered with the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), Army Career

and Alumni Program (ACAP), and Family Support Centers.

“Available positions include management, track maintenance, mechanics, diesel engine mechanics, and electricians. But even veterans with non-technical backgrounds can do well as conductors,” said Connie McLendon, BNSF’s military staffing manager.

Conductor salaries start at \$67,000 annually. BNSF sees a direct benefit to military leadership skills and appreciates the training in self-reliance, attention to

The Nickles File

Highest Rank Held:

Senior Master Sergeant (E-8)

Education:

Air Transportation training,
Sheppard Air Force Base, TX
A.A. in Logistics Management, Community College of the Air Force

Experience:

22 years in the Air Force

Chronological Résumé

2006 - Present

Terminal Train Master, BNSF Railway Company, Alliance, Neb.

1984 - 2006

Air Force

Served in Japan, Arkansas, Korea, Illinois, Washington, and Diego Garcia (B.I.O.T.).

The Daily Grind

0530

Arrive at work, review e-mails and general notices, and go over previous shift’s communications.

0600 - 0645

Plan arrival and departure of trains.

0645 - 1700

Execute daily plan through meetings and conference calls.

1700 - 1730

Prepare the day’s information for the next shift operator.

1730

Go home.

detail and organization skills that come with a military background.

One of the company's premier offerings is the Experienced First Line Supervisor (EFLS) program – an intense leadership initiative that trains new employees hired from outside the company to manage railroad workers. EFLS encompasses a variety of departments, including transportation, engineering, and mechanical.

EFLS lasts a rigorous six months and comprises three parts. First, new hires attend a corporate orientation at BNSF's Fort Worth, Texas, headquarters, where they learn about company culture and rules. Afterwards, they attend

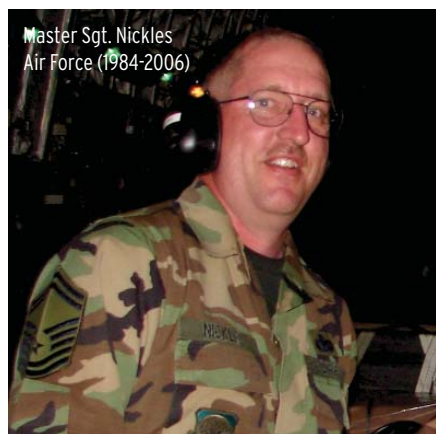
technical training in Overland Park, Kan. – studying railroad terminology, federal safety regulations, and personnel management, to name a few. Finally, all of this is followed up by on-the-job training with a mentor.

Master Sgt. Nickles forward deployed to the Middle East.



From the Midwest to the Military

An Iowa native, Nickles enlisted in 1984. After basic training, he attended technical school at Sheppard Air Force Base, Texas. He was stationed in Japan, Arkansas, Korea, Illinois, Washington, and Diego Garcia (B.I.O.T). Nickles participated in Operations DESERT STORM, Operation RESTORE HOPE in Somalia, Operation ENDURING FREEDOM and IRAQI FREEDOM, and disaster relief efforts in Florida and California.



Master Sgt. Nickles
Air Force (1984-2006)

In 2006, Nickles made the decision to retire and spend more time with his family. As he prepared for his transition class, a buddy of his told him to check out the BNSF material while taking his course.

"He said that BNSF was hiring and looked like a good place to work," Nickles said. "I always liked the railroad, and it looked like a way to keep my transportation skills intact while learning about another aspect of the business."

Nickles applied with BNSF in June 2006, and was hired that August. He entered the EFLS program that October.

"I have to say that my transition was pretty much perfect," Nickles said. "There were no problems at all. One great thing is that my pay went up."

"The company looks to military veterans because of our leadership skills," he continued. "BNSF trusts us to get the job done, and there is no need for micromanagement." ★

Nickles' Advice

Start preparing early. "Develop your network. Figure out where you want to work and live. This will remove a lot of uncertainty from the transition."

Use TAP. "You'll be exposed to a lot of useful information that will make your life so much easier."

Brag about yourself. "Sell yourself to a company. Stress what you can bring to the table."

BNSF
RAILWAY

Quick Stats

Company: BNSF Railway Company

Headquarters: Fort Worth, Texas

of Employees: 40,000

2006 Revenue: \$15 billion

Web site: www.bnsf.com

Did You Know?

Nickles' buddy was the last buck sergeant in the Air Force.

What He Likes Best About His Job:

- The challenge of meeting company goals.
- The company makes you feel like you're part of a close-knit team, much like the military.

