FREE SAMPLE · THE CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER BRIEFING

STOP, DROP, AND ROLL

The Retirement Playbook for First Responders

TACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

Every chapter's Tactical Takeaways from the book, plus one complete Battle Card you can fill out today.

GEORGE McREYNOLDS, CFP®

CERTIFIED FINANCIAL PLANNER™ · FORMER ARMY MP · PARAMEDIC · POLICE OFFICER · SWAT

Have you seen the movie, *Lethal Weapon*? The 1987 buddy cop film that gave Detective Sergeant Roger Murtaugh, played by Danny Glover, the most quoted retirement line in first responder history?

"I'm getting too old for THIS."

Sooner or later, we all say it.

The quiet danger of retirement is that your money will say it first—and run out of road long before you do.

This book is about making sure it never does.

HOW TO USE THIS SAMPLE

Stop, DROP, and Roll is a 13-chapter playbook for police, fire, and EMS professionals heading toward retirement. Every chapter closes with a short list of Tactical Takeaways and a Battle Card worksheet. This sample gives you all 13 sets of takeaways, plus the complete Chapter 1 Battle Card, the Retirement Readiness Recon.

Read the takeaways. Check the ones you already have handled. Every box you can't check is a chapter worth reading.

CHAPTER 1

Your Retirement Is Different

And Why That Matters More Than You Think

> *"You can't use yesterday's playbook for tomorrow's game."*
>
> — UNCLE JOE



TACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

- [ ] Your retirement timeline is compressed—retiring at 50 means funding 30–40 years, not 20
- [ ] The same planning mistake costs you twice as much as it costs a corporate retiree
- [ ] Your health is the X-factor—plan for both the worst case (occupational damage) and the best case (living into your 90s)
- [ ] Your pension is not covered by ERISA or PBGC—fewer protections, bigger consequences
- [ ] Your 457/403(b) is not a 401(k)—different rules, different access, different penalties
- [ ] WEP/GPO repeal means your Social Security timing plan is outdated and must be re-evaluated
- [ ] DROP is the most critical financial decision most first responders will ever make
- [ ] The Murtaugh Moment is coming—be ready before it hits, not after
- [ ] T.H.I.S. is already built into your plan whether you see it or not: Survivors, Health, Inflation, Taxes
- [ ] If you're five years from retirement, the time to plan is yesterday

THIS CHAPTER'S BATTLE CARD

Retirement Readiness Recon *How Different Is Your Retirement? A Self-Assessment*

CHAPTER 2

Pensions: The Backbone of Your Retirement

Powerful, Complicated, and Not Bulletproof



TACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

- [ ] Read your pension summary plan description (SPD)—yes, all of it
- [ ] Know your multiplier, FAS calculation period, and pension cap
- [ ] Check for after-tax contributions—you may be owed a Simplified General Rule exclusion
- [ ] Confirm your vesting date and don't leave before you've crossed it
- [ ] Ask about COLAs—are they guaranteed, conditional, or discretionary?
- [ ] Understand survivor benefit options—what does your spouse actually get? (Chapter 8)
- [ ] Check your plan's funded ratio—know where you stand
- [ ] Stress-test your plan at ages 80, 85, 90, and 95
- [ ] Start building side funds now—457, Roth IRA, HSA
- [ ] Don't assume it's handled. If it's your pension, it's your fight.

THIS CHAPTER'S BATTLE CARD

Pension Intel Worksheet *Know Your Numbers. Avoid the Ambush.*

CHAPTER 3

Buying Back Service Time

The Hidden Lever That Could Add Years and Dollars to Your Pension

> *"You can't get your time back—but you might be able to buy it."*
>
> — UNCLE JOE

TACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

- ☐ Inventory your "opportunity years"—military, prior agencies, leave, teaching, part-time service
- ☐ Request the written buyback policy from your pension administrator
- ☐ Get a cost quote in writing—don't estimate
- ☐ Calculate the ROI: added annual pension ÷ buyback cost = break-even years
- ☐ Confirm that added years increase your benefit AND your eligibility—not just one
- ☐ Verify the minimum age rule—buying years does NOT usually lower the retirement age
- ☐ Know the deadline to apply—some plans have a window that closes
- ☐ Understand what happens to the buyback if you die before retirement
- ☐ If using a rollover to pay, understand the tax and liquidity implications
- ☐ Document everything—emails, cost estimates, written confirmations

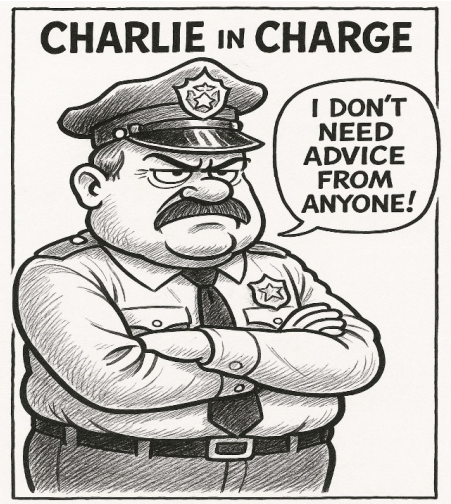
THIS CHAPTER'S BATTLE CARD

Buyback Battle Card *Is It Worth It? Run the Numbers Before You Write the Check.*

CHAPTER 4

DROP: Your Most Critical Decision

The Deferred Retirement Option Program—and How to Get It Right



> *"Nothing happens suddenly when you're paying attention. Everything is a surprise when you're not."*
>
> — UNCLE JOE

TACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

- ☐ DROP is typically irrevocable—understand every term before you enroll
- ☐ Your pension freezes at DROP entry—any future raises or promotions won't increase it
- ☐ Your COLA may not start until you exit DROP—confirm this with your plan
- ☐ Pension contributions stop during DROP—redirect that 4–7% into the Tax-Never bucket
- ☐ DO NOT roll DROP funds into an IRA if you're under 59½—you'll lose penalty-free access at age 50
- ☐ The lump sum distribution will create a tax event—plan for it with your advisor before it hits
- ☐ Understand how DROP interacts with your survivor benefit election
- ☐ Conservative investments in DROP protect principal but may not keep pace with inflation
- ☐ Don't be Charlie—a plan only works if you follow it
- ☐ If you don't have DROP or can't wait for it—see Chapter 5: Creating Your Own DROP

THIS CHAPTER'S BATTLE CARD

DROP Decision Card *Know the Terms Before You Sign*

CHAPTER 5

Creating Your Own DROP

When the Window Is Closed, Build Your Own Door

> *"Don't wait for opportunity to knock. Build the door."*
>
> — UNCLE JOE



Captain Owen Termes: The Door He Built Himself

TACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

- ☐ A DIY DROP means retiring, starting your pension, and taking a new job to stack income during your peak earning years
- ☐ It makes sense when you don't have DROP, can't wait for the DROP window, or have a better opportunity elsewhere
- ☐ Your pension starts immediately—with COLAs compounding from day one, unlike a frozen DROP pension
- ☐ You control where the money goes: Roth, 457, TSP, taxable—not a municipal formula
- ☐ A new Social Security-covered job adds credits to your benefit now that WEP is repealed
- ☐ You may earn a second pension, employer match, and health coverage at the new job
- ☐ Check reemployment rules in your pension plan before you make the move
- ☐ Plan for tax bracket shock—stacked income requires quarterly estimates and professional tax advice
- ☐ The Pension Shield question applies whether you're in formal DROP or DIY DROP
- ☐ The best financial plan is worthless if you're too broken to enjoy it—don't destroy yourself waiting for a DROP window

THIS CHAPTER'S BATTLE CARD

DIY DROP Battle Card *Should You Stay for DROP or Build Your Own?*

CHAPTER 6

Personal Savings: The Second Leg of the Stool

Safety, Income, Growth—and the Three Tax Buckets



> *"There is no investment for all seasons but there is a season for all investments."*
>
> — UNCLE JOE

TACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

- [ ] Sequence of returns risk is real—build a 2–4 year seawall reserve before you retire
- [ ] The Retirement Red Zone is the 5 years before and 5 years after retirement—protect it
- [ ] Recognize the Safety Reflex—your training saved your life on the job, but it can sabotage your finances
- [ ] Build all three sides of the retirement triangle: Safety, Income, and Growth
- [ ] Understand which tax bucket each of your accounts lives in: Tax Now, Tax Later, or Tax Never
- [ ] If most of your savings are in Tax Later (457, IRA, DROP)—you're dangerously overweight in one bucket
- [ ] Start building the Tax Never bucket now: Roth IRA, Roth 457, Roth conversions
- [ ] Don't chase a tax deduction today at the cost of a tax bomb tomorrow
- [ ] Your taxes are on sale today—every dollar you move into Tax Never now avoids future rates
- [ ] Know the difference between a 457, 403(b), 401(k), IRA, and Roth IRA—they are not the same
- [ ] Don't roll your 457 or DROP into an IRA unless you understand what you're giving up (Chapter 4)
- [ ] Ignore the gurus who don't know your life—evaluate every tool with your mission in mind

THIS CHAPTER'S BATTLE CARD

Personal Savings Battle Card *Where Does Your Money Live?*

CHAPTER 7

Social Security: The Third Leg That Almost Got Pulled

Now That WEP and GPO Are Gone, the Playbook Has Changed

> *"It's only 'double-dipping' when the politicians aren't doing it."*
>
> — UNCLE JOE

TACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

- ☐ If you planned under WEP/GPO, your entire Social Security strategy must be rebuilt
- ☐ Check your earnings history at ssa.gov—errors cost thousands, especially post-repeal
- ☐ If already collecting, confirm your benefit has been adjusted for the repeal
- ☐ Understand the 35-year rule—zeros in your record drag your benefit down
- ☐ A DIY DROP or side hustle in a covered job fills in zeros and raises your benefit
- ☐ Delaying to 70 creates delayed retirement credits, higher COLA compounding, and a larger survivor benefit
- ☐ The years between pension start and Social Security are your tax conversion runway—use them
- ☐ Spousal, divorced spouse, and survivor benefits are fully restored by GPO repeal
- ☐ For married couples, coordinate claiming strategies—the difference can be $200,000+
- ☐ Plan on current law, stress-test for 77% of benefits
- ☐ Up to 85% of Social Security is taxable—Chapter 11 covers the tripwires

THIS CHAPTER'S BATTLE CARD

Social Security Battle Card *Timing Is Everything—Know Your Numbers*

CHAPTER 8

Survivors and the Pension Pickle

"Honey, I Shrunk the Pension"

> *"'I can't live without you' is romance. Making sure she can is love."*
>
> — UNCLE JOE



MAX PENSION: He took the max. She got what was left.

TACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

- [ ] Understand every survivor option your plan offers—and the cost of each
- [ ] Don't be Max Pensión—never take single-life without a protection plan in place
- [ ] Know the six disadvantages of the traditional survivor option before you elect it
- [ ] Understand the Widow's Penalty—income drops, taxes go up (Chapter 11)
- [ ] Run the four-scenario analysis: both live long, spouse dies first, both die early, retiree dies first
- [ ] Explore the Pension Shield Option™—maximum pension with private protection
- [ ] INSURANCE FIRST, PENSION ELECTION SECOND—never reverse this order
- [ ] If you're in DROP, explore funding the Shield with ceased pension contributions (Guaranteed Five Pay)
- [ ] Coordinate your pension survivor election with Social Security survivor benefits (now restored by GPO repeal)
- [ ] Don't make this decision alone—sit down with a qualified advisor who understands both pensions and insurance

THIS CHAPTER'S BATTLE CARD

Survivor Decision Matrix *The Most Important Checkbox You'll Ever Mark*

CHAPTER 9

Health Coverage: The Hidden Threat

Bridging the Gap, Dodging the Traps, and Surviving the Long Storm



Bridget Gapp

> *"Everybody's got a plan until they get punched in the mouth."*
>
> — UNCLE JOE (PARAPHRASING MIKE TYSON)

TACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

- ☐ COBRA is 18 months, not a plan—know what comes after
- ☐ Check your Medicare quarters—you need 40 (10 years of covered employment) for premium-free Part A
- ☐ If short on quarters, a side hustle or DIY DROP in a covered job fills the gap
- ☐ Read your retiree health coverage fine print—what happens to your spouse's coverage if you die?
- ☐ Time your retirement for maximum sick/vacation health coverage extension (where applicable)
- ☐ Enroll in Medicare on time—late enrollment penalties follow you for life
- ☐ Understand IRMAA—your pension + DROP + Social Security can spike your Medicare premiums (Chapter 11)
- ☐ Buy Medigap during your initial enrollment period at 65—after that, underwriting can deny you
- ☐ 70% of people over 65 will need long-term care—have a plan, not a fantasy
- ☐ Explore hybrid LTC (Ben Franklin's Lightning Rod)—especially if you have idle "just in case" assets
- ☐ The self-employed health insurance deduction can save thousands during the bridge years (Chapter 12)

THIS CHAPTER'S BATTLE CARD

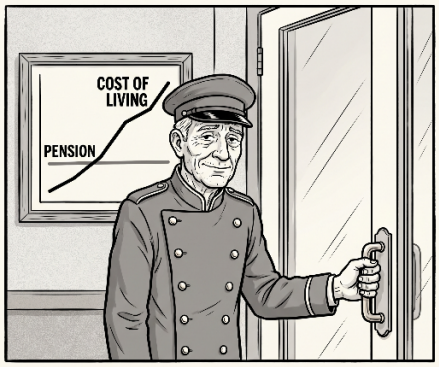
Health Coverage Bridge Planner *Mind the Gap—Before the Gap Minds Your Savings*

CHAPTER 10

Inflation: The Silent Pension Killer

Unavoidable, Unpredictable, but Not Unbeatable

> *"Inflation is the one thief that robs you without breaking in."*
>
> — UNCLE JOE



Chief Stan Still

TACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

- ☐ Inflation is the defining threat of a 30–40 year retirement—don't ignore it because it's quiet
- ☐ At 3% inflation, your purchasing power is cut in half in 24 years
- ☐ Your COLA may cap, stop, or never start—stress-test your pension at ages 70, 80, and 90
- ☐ The Safety Reflex—parking everything in cash and CDs—is the most dangerous response to inflation
- ☐ A RILA provides market-linked growth with a defined downside buffer—the bridge between Safety and Growth
- ☐ The behavior gap costs the average investor ~1.5%/year—more than the buffer costs
- ☐ A slightly lower return you can live with beats a higher return you can't
- ☐ Don't spend your retirement watching the gauge—build a plan that lets you watch the scenery
- ☐ RILAs are tools, not religion—evaluate them with your mission in mind

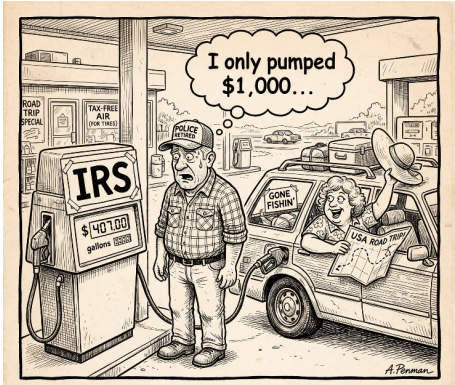
THIS CHAPTER'S BATTLE CARD

Inflation Stress Test *Will Your Pension Keep Up—or Fall Behind?*

CHAPTER 11

Defuse the Bomb: Stealth Taxes That Blow Up Your Retirement

The Taxes You Never Vote On—and Never See Coming



Sergeant Drew Downe: The $1,000 road trip that cost $407 in taxes.

> *"The difference between death and taxes? Death ain't getting any worse!"*
>
> — UNCLE JOE

TACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

- ☐ Retirement taxes are tripwires, not dimmer switches—one dollar can trigger thousands in stealth taxes
- ☐ The tax code contains roughly 85 stealth tax triggers—phaseouts, cliffs, surtaxes, and benefit reductions
- ☐ The Social Security Tax Torpedo can turn a 22% bracket into a 40%+ effective rate
- ☐ Social Security taxation thresholds haven't been indexed since 1983/1993—they catch almost everyone now
- ☐ IRMAA is a cliff (not a ramp), uses a two-year lookback, and is assessed per person
- ☐ RMDs force withdrawals from Tax Later accounts starting at 73—whether you need the money or not
- ☐ The Widow's Penalty amplifies every other stealth tax—plan for it while both spouses are alive
- ☐ Your taxes are on sale today—current rates are near historic lows and the math says they're going up
- ☐ The compression window between retirement and RMDs is your best Roth conversion opportunity
- ☐ Do Roth conversions on purpose, a bracketful at a time—not in a panic
- ☐ Be an intentional taxpayer, not an accidental one—the difference can be $200,000+ over a retirement
- ☐ This is not a DIY project—get a tax professional who understands stealth taxes, not just brackets

THIS CHAPTER'S BATTLE CARD

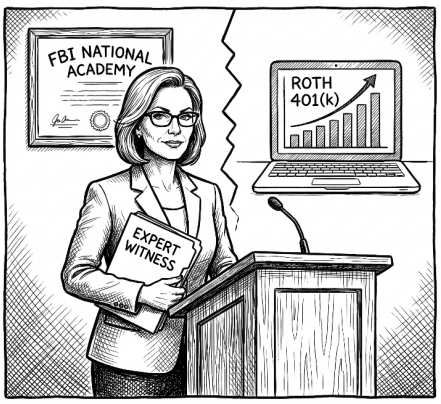
Stealth Tax Exposure Checklist *Are You Standing on a Tripwire?*

CHAPTER 12

Side Hustles and Second Acts

Purpose, Income, and the Post-Badge Identity

> *"The badge may come off, but the drive doesn't. Put it to work."*
>
> — UNCLE JOE



Tess Timony: Second Act Expert

TACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

- [ ] A second act isn't about grinding—it's about purpose, flexibility, and tax-efficient income
- [ ] Command-level retirees have uniquely marketable expertise in consulting, expert witness, training, and advisory roles
- [ ] Legitimate business deductions can reduce your AGI—lowering stealth tax exposure across your entire retirement income
- [ ] The self-employed health insurance deduction can be worth $10,000–$25,000/year in above-the-line deductions during the Medicare bridge years
- [ ] Solo 401(k) plans—especially Roth versions—let you build tax-free wealth from earned income
- [ ] Second-act income can fund Pension Shield premiums, Roth contributions, and delayed Social Security
- [ ] Too much income or sloppy documentation can trigger IRMAA, NIIT, self-employment tax, and hobby loss problems
- [ ] Real estate is not automatically a tax shelter—understand passive loss rules before you invest your DROP
- [ ] Work with a qualified tax professional. Your integrity and your deductions depend on it.

THIS CHAPTER'S BATTLE CARD

Side Hustle Battle Card *Your Second Act Planning Worksheet*

CHAPTER 13

Call for Backup

When It's Time to Raise Your Hand



> *"Never ask a barber if you need a haircut."*
>
> — UNCLE JOE

TACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

- ☐ Don't take financial advice from the locker room loudmouth—no matter how confident he sounds
- ☐ The Dunning-Kruger Effect is real: the less someone knows, the more certain they seem
- ☐ Never ask a barber if you need a haircut—if the advisor leads with a product, they're a salesperson
- ☐ Diagnosis without examination is malpractice—your advisor should ask questions before offering solutions
- ☐ The Six E's: Experience, Education, Exam, Ethics, Enthusiasm, Empathy
- ☐ If they don't know the age-50 rule, the Simplified General Rule, or what IRMAA stands for—wrong advisor
- ☐ Gather your worksheets, pension estimate, DROP projection, tax return, and SSA statement before you sit down
- ☐ The right advisor asks about your pension formula, survivor election, tax buckets, and health bridge—before mentioning any product
- ☐ Good advice is worth paying for. Bad advice—even free—can cost you a fortune
- ☐ You've done the recon. Now call for backup.

THIS CHAPTER'S BATTLE CARD

Advisor Vetting Card *Before You Sit Down—Make Sure They're the Right Backup*

Retirement Readiness Recon

How Different Is Your Retirement? A Self-Assessment

Answer honestly. This isn't a test—it's reconnaissance. The gaps you find here are the chapters you need most.

SECTION 1: YOUR TIMELINE

Your current age:

Your years of service:

Your earliest eligible retirement age:

Your planned retirement age:

Years between retirement and Medicare eligibility (age 65):

Years your savings need to last (estimate: retirement age to age 90):

SECTION 2: YOUR T.H.I.S. EXPOSURE

Check any that apply:

S — SURVIVORS

- ☐ I understand my pension's survivor options (single life, joint & survivor, period certain)
- ☐ My spouse and I have discussed what happens to our income if I die first
- ☐ I've heard of pension maximization / the Pension Shield Option™

H — HEALTH COVERAGE

- ☐ I know what my retiree health coverage will cost (or whether my department offers it at all)
- ☐ I have a plan for the years between retirement and Medicare
- ☐ I understand the Medicare quarters trap for pre-1986 hires

I — INFLATION

- ☐ I know my pension's COLA rate and whether it caps out
- ☐ I've calculated what my pension will be worth in purchasing power after 20 years
- ☐ I have investments allocated for growth, not just safety

T — TAXES

- ☐ I know what IRMAA is and how it could affect my Medicare premiums
- ☐ I understand how my pension, Social Security, and IRA withdrawals stack for tax purposes
- ☐ I have money in the Tax-Never bucket (Roth accounts)
- ☐ I've heard of the Widow's Penalty and understand how it could affect my spouse

SECTION 3: YOUR STOOL

Estimated annual pension at retirement:

Total personal savings (457, 403b, IRA, DROP estimate, other):

Estimated Social Security benefit (check ssa.gov):

Biggest gap or concern you have right now:

> **SCORING** Count your unchecked boxes. Each one is a chapter in this book you can't afford to skip. Zero unchecked? You're ahead of 95% of your peers. More than five? You've got work to do—and this book will walk you through every one.

Notes:

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

George McReynolds, CFP®



Before George McReynolds became a sought-after retirement strategist for public safety professionals in America, he was one of them.

He went on to serve as a decorated police officer, paramedic, SWAT team member, and self-defense instructor. He left the front lines the way most first responders do—banged up, beat down, and burned out. But not done.

Then the calls started coming from his former colleagues—cops, firefighters, and medics who were being oversold, underserved, and dangerously overexposed by advisors who didn't understand public safety retirements. George realized he was in a unique position: the only person in the room who had worn the vest and passed the CFP board exam.

George lives in Telford, Pennsylvania, where he continues to serve the public safety community as a financial planner, author, and speaker. He built his first career defending people with his hands. He built his second career defending them with his mind. This book is the bridge between the two.

GET THE FULL PLAYBOOK

Case files, sidebars, charts, and all 13 Battle Cards. Available in hardcover, paperback, Kindle, and audiobook.

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