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November 24, 2010

Trained for Battle, Now Operating A Small Business

By PAMELA RYCKMAN

In November 2004, during Justin Bajema's second tour of duty in Iraq, his LAV-25 infantry fighting vehicle was hit by an improvised explosive device. Surrounded by heavy machine-gun fire, he was pinned under 28,000 pounds in a drained canal for 40 minutes. "It threw my vehicle in the air like a toy," he recalled. "I almost lost my leg, almost bled out and died."

He endured eight operations and spent six weeks in the hospital, but doctors were able to save his left leg. He learned to walk again on a limb with no sensory nerves. "That experience made me question everything," said Mr. Bajema, a Marine corporal. "I later dropped out of business school because they were teaching me to get a job, but I knew I was here to do more than the daily grind. So I made the decision to start this business."

In 2008, Mr. Bajema returned to Grand Rapids, Mich., his hometown, and began buying and renovating foreclosed properties with money he had saved while in the service. He was trying to regain the confidence he lost when he was injured in war. "I was sick of taking orders," he said. "I was looking for a bigger purpose."

While combat veterans face countless challenges in their transitions back to civilian life, Mr. Bajema and many of his peers credit the military with giving them the courage, discipline and determination to start businesses. They believe even harrowing experiences, if managed and overcome, can lend perspective and fearlessness in commerce and provoke that "healthy discontent with the status quo" that galvanizes entrepreneurs.

"The Marine Corps instilled a lot of things I've applied to the business world," said Mark Llano, who fought in Operation Desert Storm in the Persian Gulf and who, in 2003, founded [Source One Distributors](#), a company based in Wellington, Fla., that simplifies the procurement of tactical equipment by government and law enforcement agencies. "When I saw an opportunity for this business, I hustled every day, working 80 hours a week. Because of my experience in the [Marines](#),

the hard work didn't scare me.”

Like Mr. Llano, many veterans who become entrepreneurs cultivate as clients government agencies that give preference to businesses owned by veterans, especially if they are disabled. “If you have served in the military and you understand the government, you have knowledge other people don't,” Mr. Llano said. “If you can apply that niche to business, it's a home run.”

Veterans have other advantages as well. “If two people walk in the door with the same idea for a lemonade stand, the veteran will get more assistance than the civilian,” said James Mingey, a Vietnam veteran and entrepreneur who is president and chief executive of [the Veterans Corporation](#), a nonprofit that fosters business opportunities for veterans.

Mr. Mingey and others in the field said they did not know of anyone keeping definitive statistics on rates of entrepreneurship for veterans, but that they believed the percentage remained small. Those veterans who do start businesses can benefit from many nonprofits and mentoring organizations and vast networks of veterans willing to help, but they also face challenges that veterans of earlier wars did not.

“World War II veterans were a large part of the work force,” said Kevin McDermott, who in 2007 helped found [Patriot Taxiway Industries](#), an airfield and aircraft lighting provider based in Lomira, Wis., with a fellow Air Force veteran. “The 1950s workplace they created was a reflection of military culture.” Recent veterans, however, struggle to reconcile the disparate cultures of the military, which is regimented and hierarchical, and the entrepreneurial realm, which values critical thinking and innovation.

“In the military you're told what you're going to do from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.,” Mr. McDermott said. “Veterans need to adjust. We give goals or objectives and they need to learn to set their own schedules.”

While military training provides relevant lessons in loyalty and leadership, moving to the private sector can be agonizing. “When you get out of the military, it's like being hit in the face by a brick wall,” Mr. Bajema said. “You don't even know where to start.”

Veterans often lack business education and the ability to translate their skills into desirable qualifications for an employer or client. “A veteran thinks if he cleaned guns in the military, he'll probably have to do that when he gets out,” said John Raftery, who was a member of the First Marine Division during the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and who founded [Patriot Contractors](#), based in Red Oak, Tex. “But if you can identify the skills you learned — like keeping an inventory — you

can apply that to something like a retail career.” To facilitate the shift, Mr. Raftery and Mr. Bajema attended the [Entrepreneurship Bootcamp for Veterans with Disabilities](#), a program at [Syracuse University](#) that teaches skills like defining a value proposition and taking a product to market.

Communication can be a hurdle. Most civilian employees expect greater diplomacy and tact than is normally afforded military personnel. Mr. Bajema said a substandard employee once cried during a performance review, and later quit. “It was an eye-opener for me,” he said. “In the military there’s no sensitivity. I’ve toned it down and tried to improve myself by asking people I respect how to deliver feedback.”

Some veterans continue to suffer psychological torment long after physical injuries have healed. Of an employee with post-traumatic stress disorder, Mr. McDermott said, “Some days he’s our greatest employee, and other days we have to give him a ride home.”

“We’ve had over one million people rotate through Iraq — a million people who’ve seen their buddies killed and have taken lives,” Mr. Bajema said. “We were a heavy combat unit. Three-quarters of my platoon got purple hearts. Those are deep scars. Even if you’re not wounded by shrapnel, you’re wounded on the inside.”

Still, Mr. Bajema maintains that veterans are disproportionately suited to the sweat and toil of entrepreneurship. His company, [Access Property Management](#), rents residential units Mr. Bajema owns and also leases and manages buildings for others. With eight employees overseeing assets worth nearly \$10 million, Mr. Bajema said the company is profitable on revenue of a little more than \$1 million a year.

“I saw an incredible opportunity in real estate here,” he said. “We bought foreclosures at a deep discount.” While his hometown has a high unemployment rate, he is betting that a blossoming health science industry will attract people to Grand Rapids and that they will choose to rent, rather than buy, their homes. “People are scared to buy,” he said. “We’re seeing increased demand for our properties.”

Now, as he tries to expand Access into a regional company, Mr. Bajema is relying once again on his military training.

“At first it was just me, the lone man in the trenches fighting for survival,” he said. “I was trying to do everything myself instead of delegating authority, and I was cheap when I should have spent money to grow my business. I’ve had to change on the fly.”

Eventually, the increased volume of inquiries persuaded him to hire additional sales representatives.

“It’s the same in the military,” he said. “You never have the complete picture, but you need to make a decision. You act or you get killed.”

Though he recognizes additional hiring requires a risky outlay of cash, Mr. Bajema is searching for a senior manager or “lieutenant” to help spearhead growth.