

Charting Their Own Courses: For Marine Veteran Entrepreneurs, Service Lays the Framework for Success

By Sara W. Bock

Flexibility, perseverance, organization, responsibility, integrity and innovation—these traits, instilled by the Corps in all who earn the title “Marine,” are key to success not only in military service but also in entrepreneurial endeavors and business ownership.

Enterprising Marine veterans have grown good ideas into flourishing companies, including delivery service FedEx, pizza chain Little Caesars and internet domain registrar and web hosting service GoDaddy. And while not every Marine-owned small business becomes a household name, many are extremely successful and allow their proprietors to enjoy the numerous benefits of working for themselves after leaving active duty.

According to the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA), veterans are more than 45 percent more likely to be self-employed than non-veterans. But that certainly doesn't mean that starting a small business is effortless, even for them.

“Veterans are more prone to self-employment and entrepreneurship than the rest of the population, but it's not easy—it's hard work,” said retired Marine Gunnery Sergeant Mark Williams, who manages the SBA's Boots to Business program, a training track within the Department of Defense's Transition Assistance Program (TAP) taught by SBA personnel

and its resource partners. “A lot of the attributes you gain through your military service do come through, but it's not magic, it's not a sure thing ... but there are a lot of resources to help.”

Whether those resources come in the form of the multitude of free programs and services available to servicemembers and veterans—or through mentorships, partnerships or higher education degree programs—one thing is certain: The more tools they're equipped with, the more likely they are to succeed.

“We're striving to make sure that veterans who are transitioning or even already transitioned or looking for the next challenge, whether that's entrepreneurship or jobs or anything else, that they are informed consumers,” said Misty Stutsman, the director of entrepreneurship for the Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) at Syracuse University, an interdisciplinary initiative that conducts research and provides programs, education and training to active-duty servicemembers, veterans and military spouses.

The following are just a few of the many relatively new small businesses owned by Marine veterans who turned dreams and business plans into reality. While their stories are different in many ways, they all continue to grow, learn and develop as they live out their version of the American Dream.

Popcorn Friday

Popcorn was the last thing on Master Sergeant Dan Schrubbs' mind as he prepared to retire from the Marine Corps.

The career combat cameraman had plans to start a real estate photography business in the Texas Hill Country, and while attending the Transition Assistance Program at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., he opted for the Boots to Business “Introduction to Entrepreneurship” track offered by the SBA. Schrubbs completed the two-day in-person course, which teaches fundamentals of business ownership and entrepreneurship, and then enrolled in an eight-week online follow-on course offered by IVMF.

Over the course of the two programs, Schrubbs wrote up a real estate photography business plan.

“In doing the business plan, I got frustrated because the margins were low, the time away from the family was

going to be considerable and the photography field is saturated,” Schrubbs said.

It was through the Boots to Business and IVMF courses that Schrubbs and his wife, Priscilla, came to a realization: Their plan was not going to work.

This is a common scenario, said Williams, who emphasized that the Boots to Business course is not designed to convince servicemembers to start their own businesses; rather, it's to give them the information they need to make an educated decision.

“We're there to say, ‘OK, if you want to go into business, this is the landscape, these are the regulations, these are some of the things you need to look out for,’” Williams added.

A chance encounter with fellow Marine veteran Jim Ford, owner of The Popcorn Bag in Fredericksburg, Va., set the Schrubbs on the path to



DAN and PRISCILLA SCHRUBB

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—Dan Schrubbs

open Popcorn Friday, a specialty-flavor gourmet popcorn shop in the town of Spring Branch, Texas, just after Dan's retirement from the Corps in early 2015. After visiting Ford's shop, trying the popcorn and getting to know him, the Schrubbs and Ford ended up signing a unique business contract, which included his training and mentorship as well as a license to use his shop's dozens of popcorn flavors, which include white chocolate Oreo, red hot cinnamon, jalapeno ranch and sea salt caramel, under their own brand name.

When Priscilla Schrubb asked Ford why he encouraged them to start a popcorn shop and spent so much time helping them get started, his answer was simple: "You're a Marine family and we take care of each other."

Popcorn Friday has been a welcome addition to Spring Branch, a small, affluent suburb of San Antonio, but the early years haven't been without challenges. The Schrubbs didn't draw a paycheck for themselves during the first year, relying on Dan's military pension and their personal savings while reinvesting every dollar Popcorn Friday earned back into the business.

While the plan for the photography business he wrote up during his Boots to

30-day instructor-led online course, an all expenses paid nine-day residency at participating universities nationwide—Schrubb attended his at Texas A&M—and 12 months of post-program support and mentorship.

In 2018, Dan and Priscilla together attended another IVMF program, Veteran EDGE (Engage, Develop, Grow, Evaluate), a four-day conference and networking event; and Priscilla earned a bachelor's degree in business management from Brigham Young University-Idaho. The Boots to Business and IVMF programs that Dan has taken advantage of, she said, brought him up to a similar level of knowledge of business and entrepreneurship.

"I learned all of the things that he was learning at EBV in my entrepreneurial class," said Priscilla Schrubb. "So we could talk about these things, and we had the same vocabulary and knew what we were talking about. It was so beneficial."

Networking with other veteran entrepreneurs both nationwide and particularly within their local community, has proven to be key to their success thus far. Dan has regularly attended city council and town hall meetings to get involved in the community and recently was appointed to the city's zoning board of adjustments.

"I'm kind of integrated into this community and the network of people that I know in the community is growing," he said, adding that after leaving the Marine Corps, his business gives him a new purpose. "I feel like I'm an asset to the community as opposed to a liability."

Popcorn Friday has grown steadily at a rate of 6 to 7 percent each year. In 2016, their website began online sales and "The Texas Hill Country's Best Popcorn" is now available

for delivery nationwide.

When asked what advice they would give to Marines and their spouses considering starting a small business, Priscilla replied: "I think it's going to be harder than you think. It doesn't matter if you know it's going to be hard—it will be the hardest thing. But there's a lot of rewards, and you have to be patient for them."

"Ask a lot of questions, because it's a lot of hard work," said Dan of entrepreneurship. "But if anyone can handle it, it would be a Marine."



COURTESY OF RANCH ROAD BOOTS

SARAH FORD

Ranch Road Boots

She has an MBA from Harvard Business School under her belt, but Marine veteran Sarah Ford insists that her four years as a Marine officer prepared her more for life as an entrepreneur than Harvard did. Not only did the Corps help her develop the qualities that she says are vital to being an entrepreneur, but being part of a network of Marine veterans in business has also proven invaluable.

"As far as a network, the Marine Corps 'alumni' network is just as valuable as the Harvard Business School alumni network," said Ford, who started Ranch Road Boots in 2012. "Not to knock my Harvard alum friends, but it is just to elevate the point that the Marine Corps alumnus are very successful and really care about each other," she added.

What began as an online custom boot-making business has evolved into a ready-to-wear collection of luxury boots—western, non-western and military combat boot inspired—handcrafted in Spain from high-quality leather and available for purchase through the Ranch Road Boots website. Ford recently hired the former vice president of well-known leather boot manufacturer The Frye Company to assist her as she transitions the business to wholesale this fall, which will transform her inventory and bring her boots to high-end department stores and boot retailers both in store and online.

Now married to an active-duty Ma-



COURTESY OF POPCORN FRIDAY

Business course didn't pan out, Schrubb says that he easily was able to apply the fundamentals he learned during the course to their new endeavor.

After opening Popcorn Friday, Schrubb continued to take advantage of the resources available to him and to other veterans and as well as their spouses. He attended IVMF's Entrepreneurship Bootcamp for Veterans (EBV), a three-phase entrepreneurship program for veterans whose businesses are in "early growth mode." EBV is offered free of charge and includes a

rine stationed at Marine Air-Ground Combat Center Twentynine Palms, Calif., Ford is in a unique position to understand the drive many veterans have to start their own businesses, as well as a military spouse's desire to have a portable career.

Twice deployed to Iraq as a logistics officer in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Ford was unexpectedly recalled from the inactive reserve and deployed to Afghanistan in 2007 just after graduating from Harvard Business School.

"Right when I got out of Harvard, I was back on the rifle range at Camp Lejeune," Ford recounted with a laugh.

After returning from that deployment, she worked in the business sector for several years before she came up with the idea to start a custom cowboy boot business. The self-described "entrepreneur type," who was raised in a small town in west Texas, grew up with an appreciation for good boots because her grandfather was a cowboy. Ford fell in love with the idea of custom boots when she designed a pair for herself and enjoyed the entire process.

She leaned on advice from a Harvard classmate who encouraged her to focus less on business plans and paperwork and more on making things happen.

"Just try to sell 50 pairs of boots," her friend said. "You can sit there all day behind spreadsheets pretending this is how much money we're going to make in the future, but getting your first customers is the most important thing."

Ford now gives the same advice to other aspiring entrepreneurs.

"I would focus on getting revenue as quickly as you can and figuring out how you're going to get your first customers. You'll know if somebody's going to buy what you're going to sell," she said.

In 2015, she began to sell a ready-to-wear collection rather than custom-made boots after a former owner of The Frye Company, Stan Kravetz, called her and said, "I like your story, I like what you're doing—I think you should do ready-to-wear."

Kravetz helped Ford find a manufacturer during a shoe show in Las Vegas, when he encouraged her to talk to representatives from a factory in Spain.

His phone call came after one of the numerous times over the course of her business when she strongly considered quitting.

"I think when you're in the fog of your business, you need to have a lot of perseverance. Sometimes success is that

"You don't have to get out and immediately start your business. You can start working for somebody else."

—Sarah Ford

you're still just standing—that you're still a business," said Ford. "You just need to keep going and keep trying, and don't quit, because what seems like a rocky start or a slow start ... things can happen overnight."

And while she went the business school route and believes that for her it was worth every penny, Ford insists that veterans do not need a degree in business to successfully start one. She encourages them to take advantage of resources like those offered by SBA, as well as to plan prior to their end of active service (EAS) date, stockpile as many funds as possible and have minimal to no debt.

"The other thing is you don't have to get out and immediately start your business. You can start working for somebody else," said Ford. "You may have to have two jobs—one is your own



COURTESY OF RANCHROAD BOOTS

business and one is paying your bills in the short term."

Ford is working on growing a small program that provides Ranch Road Boots to veteran amputees free of charge, with aftermarket modifications that allow the boots to easily fit prosthetic feet. She also donates a portion of the proceeds from every Ranch Road Boots purchase to Semper Fi Fund, which provides financial assistance and lifetime support to wounded, ill and injured servicemembers and their families, and she's proud to operate a business that stays true to her Marine Corps roots.



COURTESY OF LT COL TY MOORE, USMC

TY MOORE

Black Ops Grooming

Starting a small business wasn't something that Lieutenant Colonel Ty Moore ever planned on—let alone becoming an entrepreneur while still on active duty. The mustang infantry officer, who has deployed to combat zones numerous times, enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1995 after losing a bet with his college roommate, and is currently serving as a military planner with U.S. Alaskan Command.

Moore, who plans to retire from the Corps in 2020, is the founder and part-owner of Black Ops Grooming, or

"BOG," a high-end line of tactically-inspired shaving goods—pre-shave oils, shaving creams, shaving soaps, aftershaves and razors—designed primarily to appeal to current servicemembers and veterans.



JORDAN HALLAND

“If you can find a partner, someone who’s going to walk through that with you, then they’re going to have more at stake than just giving you advice.”

—Ty Moore



JORDAN HALLAND

LtCol Ty Moore and his son, Nate, stand on the beach in Hawaii in 2017. After Nate sustained traumatic injuries requiring several surgeries on his face, both father and son found healing in an unlikely activity: shaving.

“In the Marine Corps you kind of go from one assignment to the next. When I think about the future and I’m a platoon commander, I’m thinking about becoming a company commander. When I’m a company commander, I’m thinking about becoming a battalion commander,” said Moore. “But what happened was I had kind of this significant disruption in my life, and to be perfectly honest, to my career also. I kind of had to start thinking, ‘What’s next if not the Marine Corps?’ So that’s kind of where this all started.”

It was after his family faced a series of difficulties while stationed in Hawaii—a cancer diagnosis for his wife,

Jennifer; a near-fatal accident that left his 7-year-old son, Nate, in need of facial reconstruction; and the realization that he himself was dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) due to his son’s trauma—that the father of three began to formulate a business plan. And it was all because the simple act of shaving had become his way of “grounding” himself to deal with the symptoms of PTSD.

“When I felt the need to break away, I would shave my face,” Moore said during a short documentary, “Shaving for Beginners,” directed by Jordan Halland, which features the Moore family’s story.

When he realized that shaving helped him overcome the feelings of helplessness he battled, he taught his young son to shave with a safety razor. It was, he said, how Nate learned to look at himself in the mirror again.

“Watching Nate get his confidence back gave me mine back, and this became something that was important to me,” Moore said during the film. “I want to provide that same feeling that I got with my son to everybody else. I want a mechanism to give back.”

That desire manifested itself in the form of Black Ops Grooming, which launched in January 2017, and which Moore says wouldn’t have been possible without the help of a few civilian partners who, veterans themselves, had both entrepreneurial and business experience and helped him navigate through the processes and procedures that go along with owning a business.

“A mentor is good too,” said Moore, “But if you can find a partner, someone who’s going to walk through that with you, then they’re going to have more at stake than just giving you advice.”

Relying on the knowledge and expertise of his civilian partners eliminated much of the intimidation from the equation, said Moore.

“If you were a businessman and you went to war, you would want a combat vet to help you navigate that environment. And this is just the opposite. We don’t know how to be an entrepreneur. As smart and as good as we are as military members, this is something that we haven’t done yet,” he added.

Even though he wasn’t yet preparing to leave the Corps when he started Black Ops Grooming, Moore participated in the Boots to Business program, which many servicemembers don’t realize they are eligible to attend at any point, not just during a transition period—and their spouses as well.

“It’s never too early to start thinking

Entrepreneurship Resources For Servicemembers, Veterans and Military Spouses

Have a great idea but not sure where to start? The following are a few of the many resources available:

Boots to Business—

Run by the U.S. Small Business Administration, the entrepreneurship training track is available on military installations worldwide to servicemembers and their spouses, with priority given to those transitioning from active duty. Visit <https://sbavets.force.com> for more information or visit the transition office on your installation to register.

Boots to Business Reboot—

Identical to the Boots to Business program offered on military bases and stations, Reboot is held in local communities, allowing access to veterans from all eras. Visit <https://sbavets.force.com> to view a list of upcoming courses, and then create an account to join and request a desired date.

Institute for Veterans and Military Families—

Run by Syracuse University, the institute, which developed the Boots to Business curriculum, delivers a number of follow-on courses, programs and conferences including Entrepreneurship Bootcamp for Veterans (EBV) and EBV Accelerate, Veteran Women Igniting the Spirit of Entrepreneurship (V-WISE) and Veteran EDGE. An enrollment

about it. You need an unbelievable amount of resources to execute it, and it’s never too early to get started ... to reach out to resources and get moving” said B2B program manager Mark Williams, speaking to servicemembers still on active duty who are interested in starting a business that they can continue to grow after transitioning to civilian life. “It’s free and you serve your country—you deserve it. However early you want to start, SBA



A group of female entrepreneurs gather at a V-WISE event in San Diego. A cooperative program of the IVMF and SBA, V-WISE is specifically focused on women and offers training in entrepreneurship and small business management to veterans, active-duty servicemembers and military spouses.



EBV attendees gain expertise from an instructor during the nine-day residency phase of the program. During this phase, students learn from more than 30 accomplished entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship educators.

team stands ready to talk to interested veterans to help determine which program or programs works best for their situation. Visit <https://ivmf.syracuse.edu> for more information.

Veterans Business Outreach Centers—A program of the SBA, 22 organizations nationwide serve as

VBOCs, providing business training, counseling and analysis to transitioning servicemembers, veterans and military spouses who are either starting or looking to grow a small business. For a list of the centers and their contact information, visit <https://www.sba.gov/tools/local-assistance/vboc>.



Veteran small-business owners participate in the residential portion of the EBV program, sponsored by IVMF, which includes more than 80 hours of instruction.

SCORE—A resource partner of the SBA, SCORE provides free mentoring and small business education offered by a network of volunteers. To be paired with a mentor or find a SCORE location, visit www.score.org.

and our team is ready to help you.”

Moore hopes to run Black Ops Grooming full time after he retires in 2020 and is excited by the idea of doing something different after a quarter of a century of military service.

His guidance to aspiring entrepreneurs is simple, and it’s something he reminds himself of often: “Never take advice from somebody you don’t want to switch places with.”

The Way Forward

Whether you’re in the transition period from active duty, are still on active duty or left the Corps some time ago, it’s never too early—or too late—to explore the idea of entrepreneurship. The free resources available to you, combined with the skills and qualities developed during military service, are an invaluable benefit. Organizations like IVMF are constantly changing their programs based on current research and evaluation so that veterans are equipped to meet challenges and barriers head-on.

“It’s data-driven—veterans make better entrepreneurs, frankly. They out-earn their counterparts, they grow at a higher rate,” said Stutsman, adding of IVMF: “We want to make sure we partner with you as you go forward.” 🐾

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