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PHOTO COURTESY OF TOM BENNETT

Tom Bennett has removed his staff sergeant stripes and left the Marines, but he now brings the same gung-ho attitude to sustainably raising his pigs and chickens.

Veterans Find New Purpose in Farming

BY JORDAN STRICKLER

Charley Jordan stops to listen to the quiet and to feel the breeze as his cattle graze in the distance. The silence is a stark contrast from the thunderous helicopter rotors he knew in the Army.

Richard Gwilt no longer breathes the cordite he once did as a range master and paratrooper. His days in the 101st Airborne are over. Today he serves as director of operations for the Desert Forge Foundation, a nonprofit located in Albuquerque, New Mexico, that is dedicated to transitioning veterans to farmers. The former chief warrant officer raises horses, cows and chilies, among other crops.

Tom Bennett has removed his staff sergeant stripes and left the Marines, but he still has the same gung-ho attitude, which he has been able to apply to raising pastured pigs and chickens. He has found a vocation that allows him to apply the problem-solving skills that he honed in the military.

Many veterans come home to a life completely different from the one they grew accustomed to in the military. Some aren't lucky enough to adapt. For thousands of veterans, farming has become that new life: an occupation that is saving both them and agriculture.

There are currently more than 23 million veterans in the United States. When their service ends and their tours are over, veterans often have no place to turn. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, today's vets are more likely to be unemployed than both civilians and veterans of prior conflicts. Through 2012, veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan had an unemployment rate of 9.9 percent – compared to about 7.9 percent for the general U.S. population.

The median age of American farmers is almost 60 and is continuing to rise. Current farmers are retiring and no one is taking their place. Additionally, U.S. farmers over the age of 55 control more than half the country's farmland. The long hours, meager pay and underappreciation have many opting to take up occupations in other sectors of agriculture or sometimes out of the industry altogether. The number of entry-level farmers has fallen by 30 percent since 1987. In fact, less than 1 percent of the American population consider themselves full-time farmers.

Now veterans are once again taking up the call for our country.

NEW WAYS TO SERVE

"Military veterans are used to the long hours it takes to be a successful farmer," says Evan Eagan, communications manager for the Farmer/Veteran Coalition. Eagans was a combat correspondent in the Marines from 2003 to 2007. "In the military, they were constantly presented with new challenges for which they had to find solutions, a lot of the time on the fly. The same kind of skills are needed in farming, so it is natural that they would make a transition into that line of work."

Bennett, owner of Bennett Farm in Edwardsburg, Michigan, has always had a passion for agriculture. Growing up, he admired farmers – something that might have had to do with the cow his neighbors raised, he says. Bennett knew that he wouldn't be a Marine forever, so halfway through his tour he used the internet to teach himself how to farm.

He now owns 20 acres on which he raises hogs and chickens. He says it's important to let consumers know where their food comes from, and he wants to help erase the negative stereotype that a lot of people have about farmers. He does this by always having an open-door policy for consumers to look at the farm and learn about his growing practices. He also loves to point out that pork from his farm tastes better.

"People don't know what products exist," says Bennett, whose hogs and chickens are pastured. "I want people to know that there is great-tasting food out there. Food can taste a lot better than the stuff you might find at the grocery store."

The farmer/veteran movement got a tremendous boost with the 2014 Farm Bill. Under the Farm Bill, the USDA for the first time designated veterans as a distinct class of beginning farmers, allowing them access to low-interest rate loans to buy animals and equipment. It also allows them to apply for grants to upgrade their farm and can aid them in receiving extra payments to implement conservation practices on their land.

"The Farm Bill had a huge impact," said Erin Kimbrough, program coordinator for Battleground to Breaking Ground, a program at Texas A&M that assists veterans transitioning into farming. "It gave a high priority to helping veterans get into farming. It was incredible."

So why do some veterans gravitate to cultivation?

"One of the best things about farming is creating something from nothing," said Jordan, owner of Circle J Ranch in Woodlawn, Tennessee. "It's kind of addicting to watch something come from nothing. You plant a seed and watch it grow. You take a chicken, use its eggs and make an omelet. There is just something really special about it."

Beginning a career in farming can be a calming antidote to years of stressful situations. Most veterans also believe it has a symbolic relation to the military's trials and tribulations.

"Agriculture is rewarding hands-on work, in that you get to see actual 'fruits' of your work in the finished product," said retired Major Jason Morgan, a teacher in the Texas A&M program and owner of Sweet Genevieve Farm. Morgan served 24 years in the Marines as an F-18 pilot. "It is low stress when it comes to dealing with people compared to fast-paced corporate ladder types of jobs. Animals are easier to deal with than people. You are your own boss, and you set the pace of operations."

Jessica Stith served in the Navy from 2002 to 2004 and is part-owner of Stith Farm, located in Stamping Ground, Kentucky. She is on the board of directors of the veteran suicide prevention nonprofit, 22 Until Valhalla.

PHOTO BY FARMER/VETERAN COALITION

A group of veterans attends the UC Santa Cruz Center For Agroecology & Sustainable Food Systems summer internship program.

Tom Bennett, owner of Bennett Farm in Edwardsburg, Michigan, has always had a passion for agriculture and now raises hogs and chickens.

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"I believe that the therapeutic qualities of agricultural life tend to attract veterans. Of course it can be very stressful, but I believe that we have all found peace in mild tasks like bush-hogging, dragging paddocks, mucking stalls, raking hay – those jobs that may seem mundane, but allow your mind to relax."

VETS IN NEED

According to a 2016 report by the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, which analyzed 55 million veterans' records from 1979 to 2014, an average of 20 veterans a day die from suicide. The VA also states that as many as one in five veterans returned from Iraq with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

In 2013, The Guardian reported that "for the first time in at least a generation, the number of active-duty soldiers who killed themselves, 177, exceeded the 176 who were killed while in the war zone. To put that another way, more of America's serving soldiers died at their own hands than in pursuit of the enemy."

In her role with 22 Until Valhalla, Stith works toward the prevention of veteran suicide. "That is very gratifying and definitely helpful when seeking a new purpose in your life. The veteran friends that I personally know who have transitioned into ag-life seem to be doing very well and are satisfied. The nice thing is that there is a supportive community around when you need it."

Kimbrough echoes Stith's sentiments.

"I absolutely believe farming saves lives. I have someone contact me at least once or twice a month telling me how farming saved their life. Some veterans hoping to use the program have had PTSD so bad that they have had to have others call on their behalf. Farming has a large impact on decreasing veteran suicide rates."

Gwilt says farming can turn a veteran's life around.

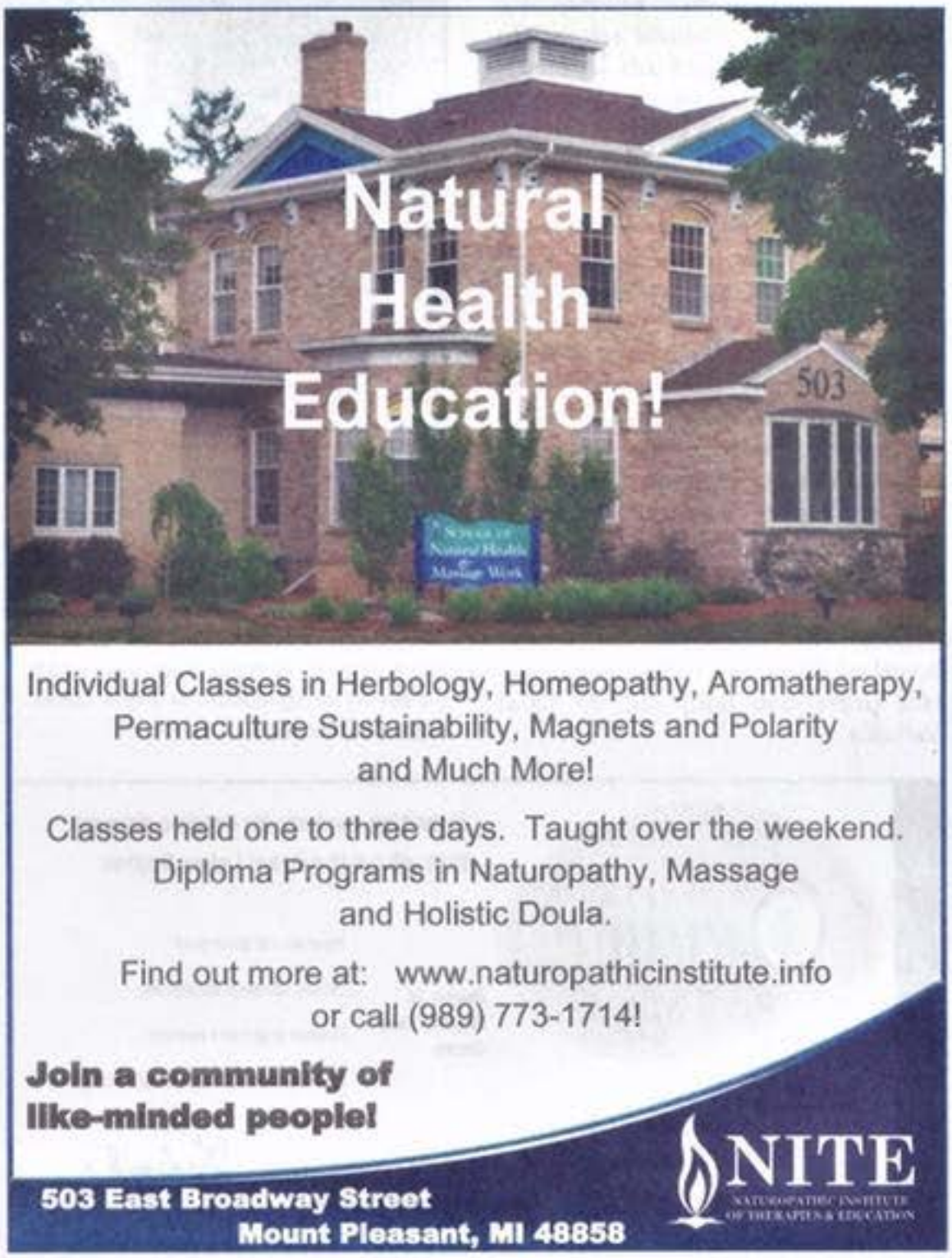
"For those who have been mentally affected, it can keep them alive. When you get back into nature, you get much more than any drugs the VA will give you."

As those already involved in agriculture know, barriers to entry in farming are high. Expensive start-up costs, along with the steep learning curve, could cause many vets to balk at the prospect of taking up a new agriculture-based life. And while the workload and mentality are similar to the work in the military, most servicemembers do not have the experience and know-how to begin a new lifestyle in the fields. Luckily, there are a number of organizations rising to the occasion to put vets on the right path to their new endeavors.

HELPING VETS TRANSITION

Texas A&M's Battleground to Breaking Ground provides a multi-tiered program involving months of teaching and educational tools in all aspects of agriculture, from aquaculture to ranching, including a course that pairs them with a mentor. Vets can take workshops on rural business ideas, business planning basics and resources for beginning farmers and ranchers. After the workshop stage, students undergo months of training for more detailed business planning and counseling in the areas of agriculture they wish to pursue.

"So many vets get a renewed purpose from farming," said Kimbrough. "Nine-to-five jobs don't suit a lot of them, and farming is restorative. It's a place they can find peace, but they might not have the farming back-



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ground or the business experience to do it. Our program gives them knowledge and tools for breaking into farming."

Jordan also wants to make life a bit easier for veterans looking to make their way into farming. The former Army aviator helps head up the Tennessee Beginning Farmer Development Program (TBFD).

In conjunction with the University of Tennessee, the USDA, the University of Tennessee .Extension, Tennessee State University Extension and the Tennessee Department of Agriculture, TBFD provides resources and assistance to beginning farmers, with a focus on those who are military personnel, veterans and farmers with disabilities.

"We've got all kinds of cool programs," says Jordan. "We're teaching people not only some farming skills but programs like business management as well."

One specific goal of TBFD is to give farmers a leg-up by teaching them how to create a business plan, as well as instructing them in marketing skills and encouraging them to generate a safety and health plan.

Additionally, the TBFD hopes to increase awareness of available programs that can assist farmers with planning and implementation of various aspects of a farm business plan. It seeks to encourage them to adopt recommended agricultural best practices, as well as to provide on-farm assistance.

The Army has also begun to offer many career-training opportunities through its Career Skills Program (CSP) for soldiers who are in the process of leaving the service. Soldiers within 180 days of their separation date can receive permissive temporary duty orders to attend training to learn skills such as welding, truck driving, business management and even farming.

The new Soldier to Agriculture program is a free five-week CSP training opportunity at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina, that is run by NC State University. Participants, while still on active duty, receive hands-on training in a variety of ag-related fields as well as mentorship and assistance in starting a farming career.

USDA programs such as Homegrown By Heroes have gone a long way toward giving veteran farmers a fighting chance in the farming business. Established in 2013 by the Kentucky Department of Agriculture, Homegrown By Heroes is now a nationwide service available to farmers, ranchers, fishermen and value-added producers who own 50 percent or more of a business or operation and are veterans of the armed forces. It is a program many vets take pride in becoming a part of.

The Homegrown By Heroes project, which is denoted by circular insignia consisting of a silhouette of a saluting solider in front of the American flag, supports farmers by branding their products and giving them marketing assistance.

As Bennett says, "Farming is 90 percent marketing, and Homegrown By Heroes lets everyone know that a veteran did this, something we take pride in."

25 Programs Helping Vets Succeed in Ag

Archi's Institute: *archisinstitute.com*; 760-751-4380
Armed to Farm: *ncat.org/armedtofarm*; 800-275-6228
BattleGround to Breaking Ground: *txagrability.tamu.edu/bgbg*
Combat Boots to Cowboy Boots: *ncta.unl.edu/specialty-programs-ncta-curtis*; 1-800-3CURTIS
The Organic Farming Certificate Program: *bit.ly/2KJZgiO*; 215-489-2904
The Enhancing Veterans Farm Fellows Program: *veteransfarm.org*
The Farmer to Veteran Coalition: *farmvetco.org*; 530-756-1395
Farmers Assisting Returning Military: *farmvet.org*
Green Veterans: *greenvets.org*; 561-904-1920
Growing Careers in Agriculture: *farmvetco.org/programs/education*; 530-756-1395
Growing Warriors Project: *growingwarriors.org*
Growing Veterans: *growingveterans.org*; 360-445-2399
Heroic Food: *heroicfood.org*
Homegrown By Heroes: *farmvetco.org/hbh*; 530-756-1395
Hope Farms: *bit.ly/2NCjBV7*; 713-520-0443
The New Farmers Veterans Program at USDA: *newfarmers.usda.gov/veterans*; 202-720-2791
Operation Groundwork: *facebook.com/operationgroundwork.org*; 765-336-1154
The Rodale Institute's Veteran Farmer Program: *bit.ly/2N3RQUa*
Servicemember Agricultural Vocation Education Farm: *thesavefarm.org*; 785-537-7493
Veterans Agricultural Center of Connecticut: *vac-c.org*
Veteran Farmers of America: *vetfarm.org*; 805-797-5539
The Veteran Farmer Program: *arcadiafood.org/veteran-farmer-program*; 571-384-8845
Veterans Farmers Project: *cfra.org/veteran_farmers_project#training*; 402-687-2100
Veterans to Farmers: *veteranstofarmers.org*; 720-477-0225
Vets to Ag: *msustatewide.msu.edu/Programs/Details/3084*; 571-353-4822

Source: *foodtank.com/news/2018/06/veterans-new-food-movement*