

VETERANS FIND NEW CAREER IN FARMING

Brian Paddock, a retired Air Force officer and reservist, used assistance from the Farmer Veteran Coalition to purchase a wood chipper for his almond operation in Esparto, Calif. He is one of the organization's roughly 10,000 veteran members nationwide.



COURTESY OF FARMER VETERAN COALITION

After the military, thousands of American veterans have moved to a new life in agriculture

By **TIM HEARDEN**
EO Media Group

ESPARTO, Calif. — A retired Air Force officer and reservist, Brian Paddock says his entry into farming about a decade ago was “a little bit of accident and a little bit of economy.”

He and his family were living in Vacaville, Calif., where Paddock was a reservist at Travis Air Force Base in addition to his job piloting commercial airliners. They wanted to live in the country, so they bought land in nearby Esparto.

The property had about 450 ancient almond trees, so the family harvested the nuts and sold them to a local farmer to make almond butter. Eventually, Paddock replaced his 100-year-old trees with 1,400 new ones, and his Capay Hills Orchard now markets organic almonds directly to customers through a website and roadside stand.

Paddock sees many similarities between organic farming and military service.

“The military teaches you procedure, to be forward-thinking, and there’s a level of intensity in the military,” said Paddock, 53, who retired from the service in 2015 but is still a commercial pilot. “You’re always going from one crisis to another, whether it’s self-inflicted or not. That is very much true in farming.”

“I’m organic ... which is about 90 percent paperwork,” he said. “When I get inspected, I get one big, fat email with a link with all my documentation in it. ... All that documentation, paperwork and accounting — that’s right up the military alley.”

Thousands of veterans

Paddock is one of thousands of veterans across the country who’ve either taken up, or returned to, farming or a related field in recent years. Some seek a new identity after their years in the military. Others just need to make a living.

And many find a form of therapy in working with nature.

“There is a peace to being out in your orchard,” Paddock said. “There’s a oneness with God because you’re working in his creation. It’s all around you. You just can’t ignore it.”

Paddock and many other veterans who entered farming did so with the help of the Davis, Calif.-based Farmer Veteran Coalition, whose nearly 10,000 veteran members nationwide include 1,191 in California, 194 in Oregon, 277 in Washington and 69 in Idaho, spokesman Evan Eagan said.

Started by long-time organic farmer Michael O’Gorman, the coalition has given out \$1.5 million in small grants since 2011 to buy equipment for beginning farmers and created the Home Grown By Heroes label, which veteran farmers can use to market their goods.

O’Gorman worked in agriculture some 40 years, de-



Michael O’Gorman

veloping a specialty in farm management in vegetable production, and never served in the military. But his oldest daughter worked in a building facing the World Trade Center during the terrorist attack on Sept. 11, 2001, he said.

“She escaped only with the trauma that people get when they go into combat,” O’Gorman said. “My son joined the military a week later and served two tours overseas.”

O’Gorman pointed to a 2007 study by the Carsay Institute of the University of New Hampshire finding that rural areas bore a disproportionate share of military fatalities in Iraq and Afghanistan, meaning many service members are from farming communities.

“I was wanting to do something for veterans because my son was soon to be one, and it hit me,” he said. “We need some new people in agriculture, so we put the two things together.”

The coalition issues competitive grants through its Fellowship Fund with the help of companies such as Kubota Tractor Corp., which donates four tractors a year to members, O’Gorman said.

One of those tractors last month went to Cherri Marin, a 21-year Air Force veteran, who owns Sunshine and Reins farm in Sweet Home, Ore.

New chapter

The Farmer Veteran Coalition may soon have an Oregon chapter. Marin and more than a dozen others were scheduled to attend a Nov. 8 organizational meeting in Salem.

Wendy Knopp, an employee of Northwest Farm Credit Services in Spokane, Wash., and who heads the Coalition program in that state, was invited to speak to the Oregon group.

Knopp directs the FCS “Ag Vision” program, which supports young and beginning producers. She and others believe veterans and farmers share common traits, including work ethic, a sense of responsibility and attention to detail.

Other groups help veterans start in agriculture, too. One is the San Rafael, Calif.-based Ranchin’ Vets, which was started five years ago by Kevin and Cory Downs after Kevin’s brother, U.S. Marine Corps Capt. Phil Downs, came home from tours in Iraq.

With assistance from the California Cattlemen’s Association and private fundraisers, Ranchin’ Vets works with agricultural employers to place veterans in jobs and gives them a 6-month stipend to augment their income, Cory Downs said.

Kevin was working on a cattle ranch in Marin County when his brother and his fellow Marines came home and were “very much thrown into the civilian world,” and it

wasn’t an easy transition, she said.

“One day while Kevin was working on the ranch, there was a particular moment when he came up with the idea,” she said. “It was right along the coast, the sun was going down and the fog was rolling in over the hills, and it was just incredibly peaceful. All he could hear was the sound of cows ripping grass out of the ground, and he thought, ‘This is what veterans should be doing.’”

Back to school

Other veterans find their own way into agriculture after going back to school. Clayton Churchill, 27, of Weaverville, Calif., served four years in the Army and spent 13 months in Baghdad, Iraq, before getting out in 2012. He then spent a year and a half in the National Guard.

Afterward, he started working in construction in Washington state but found that “the excavator operator was making four times as much as I was” swinging a hammer, he said.

That brought him to the heavy equipment program at Shasta College in Redding, Calif., where he has earned a certificate in diesel mechanics and is earning another one in welding. His goal is to work in logging, he said.

“I like being out in the woods, and having a vocational skill and a technical skill will help me in the long run,” Churchill said. “With being a veteran, it’ll help me out because (employers) know I can do the hard work.”

Paddock, the Esparto almond grower, hasn’t needed a degree to make it in agriculture, although he’s relied on help from the Farmer Veteran Coalition and others. His Capay Hills Orchard is just now turning profitable after seven years of bringing his trees along and building a brand.

He said he values the help he’s received.

“This is a family operation, and I’ve had influence from many different groups,” he said. “Military, civilian, government, neighbors — all have played a role in it.”

“If it weren’t for them, I really couldn’t have done it,” he said. “I’ve been associated with some pretty brilliant people. The smartest people I’ve ever met have been farmers, hands down.”

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