

FOX BUSINESS NEWS – Vets-Turned-Entrepreneurs to Ex-Soldier Hopefuls: Just Do it

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By Liza Porteus Viana

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After serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, three former soldiers say facing their fears when they returned home has made all the difference.

Many war veterans have seen it all: firefights, improvised-explosive-device blasts and even sometimes seeing friends and fellow soldiers killed in combat. Through it all, they put on a brave face and courageously fight for their country.

While none of that may scare them, many vets say starting up a business is, well, that's a whole other story.

Brian Iglesias served 13 years active duty in the Marines and currently is in the Reserves. He earned a college film degree while on active duty, became a second lieutenant, then captain and completed two tours of duty in Iraq as an infantry platoon commander. Now, back at home in Hazlet, N.J., Iglesias is running his own film production company. He said getting started required him to take a huge leap of faith in himself and his abilities, with the helping hand of Syracuse University.

"I knew I wanted to do film and video production. That was a passion of mine," Iglesias said. When he returned home from service, he said he knew he had great management and leadership skills, thrived in chaos and had certain technical skills, and was indeed overqualified for most entry level jobs. Yet he didn't quite have what employers were looking for in mid-level positions. "I found myself stuck," he said. "I was basically alone and unemployed. I had a mortgage and a wife and a newborn baby" on the way. He was doing some nighttime security work for film companies and was sitting in an office applying for a Macy's shipping and trucking position when, he said, a light went on.

"I was like, 'Wow, this is not where I need to be,'" he said.

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Then when he got the Macy's offer, he said he realized, "[taking this job would be] an act of fear – me reaching out and grasping something," instead of trying to start his own business doing something he loved. "I went home and said, 'I can't be scared, I can't be afraid. I wasn't afraid in combat – I can't just sit here.'"

So, when Iglesias' mother-in-law told him about The Entrepreneurship Bootcamp for Veterans with Disabilities (EBV) program at Syracuse University, partially funded by the U.S. Small Business Administration, he said he jumped at the chance. And Syracuse gave one to him, accepting him into the program.

After completing the program Iglesias said he took the skills it gave him and partnered with another former Marine Captain to start a film company. From February through October 2009, Iglesias and three other vets toured the country filming a documentary, while living out of a van eating MREs and shooting with donated camera equipment. They interviewed 185 South Korean war veterans in 27 cities and 14 states. They lived off credit cards, what they had in their savings account and a few donations.

"We're Marines, we're used to doing more with less – we're used to chaos. We actually do better," Iglesias said of his first real filming experience. "At this moment I don't have any money – I don't sleep. I don't eat but it's taken me over 32 years to get to this point. Every day, no matter how grueling, it's the best day of my life."

Iglesias and his team were chosen to participate in Independent Film Week in New York City in September, a festival for unfinished films. They spoke to representatives from A&E, PBS and other sales agents and distributors interested in "Chosin," which documents some of the 15,000 U.S. soldiers and Marines who fought in and survived the South Korean battle of the Chosin Reservoir.

The movie trailer went live on YouTube Nov. 11, and they had over 5,000 hits in 10 days. Today, Iglesias said he is in talks with PBS, A&E and others interested in licensing movie clips and other potential business deals. He said not many filmmakers have access to these seldom-told stories, and that is what makes his work so coveted. He credits the EBV course with teaching him to find that gap in the marketplace and turn it into a business venture.

Starting your own business is "just like being part of the military - being bold and taking action and controlling your destiny," said Iglesias. "When you come back, you can't ... force somebody to hire you ... If the door of opportunity isn't going to open, just blow it off the hinges."

John Raftery, founder of the Texas-based Patriot Contractors Inc., is also an EBV graduate. He served in the Marines from 1999-2003 and in Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom. He said he always knew he wanted to eventually own his own business. When he came back to the states in 2003, he took a corporate job working behind a desk for two years, but said he couldn't stand being confined. He discovered the EBV in July 2007.

"I knew it was exactly the piece that was kind of missing," Raftery said. He knew some ins and outs of starting a business, he said, "but I didn't know how to put it all together."

After finishing the EBV in August 2007, he gave two-weeks notice for his corporate job and launched his own company as a government contractor. Although his firm has since evolved into a construction contractor, he said 98% of his work is still with the government. He has three full-time employees and two part-time ones, and hires as he needs on a per-project basis. In 2010, his firm stands to take in several million dollars in revenue.

"In and of itself, the program mimicked entrepreneurship ... they bring together the resources. It's like you live in an entrepreneurial bubble," Raftery said. "What I learned was how to pull together a business plan. ... [and] I was able to identify a niche that we could work in or different value-added things we could do as a company that made us more appealing."

Robert Domenici got help growing his small business in just a few years into a \$4.8-million revenue maker with the help of the SBA's Patriot Express loan. His company, Strategic Response Initiatives, specializes in emergency response and planning.

SRI's first job was from the State Department, training the first Shiite HAZMAT team in Baghdad. SRI was later chosen by the Department of Homeland Security to develop an Accident Reconstruction Program in Texas and to help train border agents. SRI also trained the Afghan national military on how to run a refueling site.

Domenici said he knew his niche after retiring from the Army in 2004 as the commander of the anti-terrorism unit for weapons of mass destruction. On Sept. 11, 2001, his unit was the first deployed to the World Trade Center site to conduct site surveys, air monitoring and chemical testing.

"I wanted to help build county response forces, first responder response forces and also train other response forces all over the world," Domenici said.

When SRI started getting more calls for work, Domenici said he realized he needed more capital to expand. He got his first Patriot Express Loan of \$250,000 in 2008, and soon paid it back in full.

SRI took out a second loan last December and will soon get an increase of \$500,000, which he said will be paid back by the end of this year.

Domenici has seven full-time employees, 25 trainers across world, and will do \$4.8 million in gross sales this year. He said he also hires many other veterans with that loan money, as well as former responders within the community.

“The Patriot Loan for us was a way to expand the business and we’re continuing to use the program – it’s the most cost-effective program out there for a small veteran’s business,” Domenici said. “You’ve got a lot of skilled vets out there who just don’t know where to go to get money for their business.”

Even with all of their success in the private sector, Iglesias, Raftery and Domenici admit their everyday business challenges are still daunting, and, quite frankly, a little scary. But, they say, those fears are worth being faced head on as they today are in control of their own career destiny, and they can help other veterans in the meantime. Their advice to other vets with unique and applicable skills thinking about launching their own business: Just do it.

“If it’s what you want to do, you can go out and make it happen,” Raftery said. “You come out with a very particular set of skills. I think a lot of vets don’t realize how much all the different skills they learn apply to entrepreneurship and owning their own business. If they can learn how those skills are valuable, that’s a huge thing.

The veteran has “got leadership skills, he’s got team-building skills - there are so many skills that are transferable,” he said.