

Female Veteran Entrepreneurs Credit Military for Business Success

Skills developed while serving their country led these four women to start their own companies

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The number of female veteran-owned businesses in the U.S. is on the rise, according to the Small Business Association (SBA). Between 2007 and 2012 alone, the number of businesses owned by women vets nearly tripled from 130,000 to 384,574.

There might be many reasons for this spike, including a rising unemployment rate among this group of veterans. The Department of Labor reported that the unemployment rate for female veterans increased to 3 percent in October 2018, up from 2.1 percent the year prior. Another reason for the growth of businesses owned by female vets is initiative. That's what Kristina Guerrero, an Air Force vet, said the military did for her when it came to starting TurboPUP, a company producing snack bars for dogs.

"The military teaches you how to take initiative, how to have a goal and how to execute a goal," said Guerrero, an Air Force Academy graduate who would go on to fly C-130s. "The military puts a huge amount of responsibility on us at a really young age. The most important thing is how to always think about others. But it also creates courageous people and brave people who are not afraid to speak up."

Guerrero left the Air Force because she was working on her master's degree in occupational therapy at Pacific University in Forest Grove, Ore., but her unit was located in Colorado. The outdoor enthusiast was on a backcountry ski trip with her dog Dunkan in 2011 when she realized he was as hungry as she was. She shared her food with him, but knew it didn't offer the type of nutrients he needed.

That led to her developing TurboPUP and its "Complete K9 Meal Bars" from her kitchen in Oregon.

"I registered my business with the state and was so excited, and then we sat for two years

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doing research and development,” said Guerrero, who served in Afghanistan and Iraq with the 731st Airlift Squadron. “There was so much trial and error, so many intricacies that I did not know about.”

She attended Syracuse University’s V-WISE conference and made business connections. Through one of those networking opportunities, she found out that the TV show “Shark Tank” was looking for veteran entrepreneurs.

Guerrero ended up going on “Shark Tank” in January 2015 to pitch her product. Daymond John was one of her first investors, though Guerrero said he was so quiet, not asking many questions.

“He told me after the show, ‘I didn’t want to invest in your company, I don’t know anything about the pet food industry,’” Guerrero recalled. “But I’ll be damned if I let the other judges disrespect a woman who fought for our country and not invest in her.”

TurboPUP is still located in Oregon, but Guerrero and her husband, Brandon, along with their two children live in Vermont. At press time, Guerrero was preparing to re-enlist in the Air Force Reserves. Visit www.turbopup.com.

‘This Doesn’t Have to Be This Way’

When Dawn Halfaker was medically retired from the Army in 2005, she was not prepared for it.

“I loved being in the military,” said Halfaker, a West Point graduate who lost her right arm after an RPG explosion in Iraq in 2004. “There were downsides, you know. Getting blown up was not fun. [Being medically retired] pushed me into a position to figure out what I wanted to do.”

Halfaker said that she was specifically looking for jobs where she could support the military and that she wanted to keep serving, even if she couldn’t as an Army officer.

“I experienced lots of challenges getting access to my benefits,” Halfaker said. “I thought, ‘This doesn’t have to be this way.’ I thought I could do this better on my own given the sense of urgency I thought was required.”

At first, Halfaker worked as a Pentagon consultant. But she still felt more could be done in the transition process, so she started the Arlington, Va.-based Halfaker and Associates.

Halfaker, who served with the 293rd MP Company in Iraq, said her company’s mission is to “continue to serve.” She said the military taught her to have a clear vision, strategy and

execution plan.

The entrepreneur added that it has helped her get her logistical consulting company established.

“My military leadership experiences have helped me be successful in this world as well,” said Halfaker, whose company’s workforce is 30 percent veterans.

One of Halfaker’s clients is the VA. Her firm hopes to create a “singular management system,” so that all of a vet’s information is in one area, allowing the VA to access data in order to see a veteran’s “personal profile.”

“If you call the hotline, you don’t want to have to keep calling around,” Halfaker said. “You want to be able to take care of everything with one call. It’s the way it should be.”

Visit www.halfaker.com.

'All of the Odds Were Against Me'

After visiting 13 countries in her eight years in the Navy, Liz Perez found herself homeless. She had a 6-year-old daughter and another child on the way. She was in a verbally and mentally abusive relationship.

“It was better to leave than stay there and accept it,” said Perez, who was an aviation logistics specialist in the Navy. “I lived at a Motel 6 near Camp Pendleton and had a full time job at Xenergy. But I knew there was no way I would make it on my paycheck.”

She began looking at her veteran benefits, which she hadn’t done before. She couldn’t find a shelter because most would not accept children.

“I was too ashamed to tell my family,” said Perez, who served from 1998-2001 with HC-4 (H-53 Helicopter Squadron), where she did multiple deployments throughout the 5th and 6th fleets (Mediterranean and Middle East). “I didn’t want to tell my friends, either. I had never asked anyone for anything. I had to pick myself up out of that situation.” She used her disability check and savings to buy a home and set aside \$5,000 in 2009 to start GCG, which is a consulting company. It specializes in providing environmentally efficient solutions for businesses. It’s not about new construction, Perez said, it’s about “reuse, reuse, reuse.”

She said her children were the motivating factor in starting her company, which counts one-third of its employees as veterans.

“All of the odds were against me, but it was up to me to connect,” she said. “It wasn’t easy; in

fact, it was very difficult.”

Perez said her military experiences taught her to be flexible and to adapt to all situations. Today, Perez serves as a non-executive board member on GCG.

She works for the California Department of Veterans Affairs (CalVet) as the deputy secretary for minority veterans.

“This job had ‘me’ written all over it,” she said. “It’s very rewarding at the end of the day. If I didn’t enjoy being here, I would not be here. If you love something, it doesn’t seem like work.”

Perez oversees the Veteran Business Enterprise program and the Minority and Underrepresented Veterans Division.

“My entrepreneurship experience has come in handy with my new role,” she said. “Veterans have to work together in order for the next generation of veterans transitioning out to be able to succeed.”

Visit www.gcgreen.com.

Navy Boosts Photographer’s Confidence

For Beth Graeme, starting Beth Graeme Photography was the best option because she has three children. Having to ask the contractor she worked for in Maryland for time off each time one of her children was sick or had a school activity was difficult.

Her husband was a contractor in Afghanistan at the time, so she was a de facto single parent.

“I always had a passion for photography,” said Graeme, who served as a Navy electronic technician from 2001-07. “I was getting first place enough in contests to think, ‘Hey, I might be pretty good at this.’ My husband always thought I should have my own business. He is my biggest cheerleader.”

She said her experiences of problem- solving in the Navy have helped her with her business. She also credits her time in the military with her level of confidence and organizational skills.

Graeme said that last year, her business’s revenue surpassed six figures, and she opened up a studio space.

Living in southern Maryland, which Graeme describes as a “thriving” real estate

community, her specialty is real estate and realtor head shots. She also has a line of photography called Boudoir by Beth, which is modern portraiture.

Her oldest son just completed Army boot camp.

Visit www.bethgraeme.photography.

These entrepreneurs represent all of the female vets forging ahead to make their own way in the civilian world.