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Helping Veterans Trade Their Swords for Plows

By **PATRICIA LEIGH BROWN**

VALLEY CENTER, Calif. — On an organic farm here in avocado country, a group of young **Marines**, veterans and **Army** reservists listened intently to an old hand from the front lines.

“Think of it in military terms,” he told the young recruits, some just back from Iraq or Afghanistan. “It’s a matter of survival, an uphill battle. You have to think everything is against you and hope to stay alive.”

The battle in question was not the typical ground assault, but organic farming — how to identify beneficial insects, for instance, or to prevent stray frogs from clogging an irrigation system. It was Day 2 of a novel boot camp for veterans and active-duty military personnel, including Marines from nearby Camp Pendleton, who might be interested in new careers as farmers.

“In the military, grunts are the guys who get dirty, do the work and are generally underappreciated,” said Colin Archipley, a decorated Marine Corps infantry sergeant turned organic farmer, who developed the program with his wife, Karen, after his three tours in Iraq. “I think farmers are the same.”

At their farm, called Archi’s Acres, the sound of crickets and croaking frogs communes with the drone of choppers. The syllabus, approved by Camp Pendleton’s transition assistance program, includes hands-on planting and irrigating, lectures about “high-value niche markets” and production of a business plan that is assessed by food professionals and business professors.

Along with Combat Boots to Cowboy Boots, a new program for veterans at the **University of Nebraska’s** College of Technical Agriculture, and farming fellowships for wounded soldiers, the six-week course offered here is part of a nascent “veteran-centric” farming movement. Its goal is to bring the energy of young soldiers re-entering civilian life to the aging farm population of rural America. Half of all farmers are likely to retire in the next decade, according to the Agriculture Department.

“The military is not for the faint of heart, and farming isn’t either,” said Michael O’Gorman, an organic farmer who founded the nonprofit Farmer-Veteran Coalition, which supports sustainable-agriculture training. “There are eight times as many farmers over age 65 as under. There is a

tremendous need for young farmers, and a big wave of young people inspired to go into the service who are coming home.”

About 45 percent of the military comes from rural communities, compared with one-sixth of the total population, according to the Carsey Institute at the [University of New Hampshire](#). In 2009, the Agriculture Department began offering low-interest loans in its campaign to add 100,000 farmers to the nation’s ranks each year.

Among them will probably be Sgt. Matt Holzmann, 33, a Marine at Camp Pendleton who spent seven months in Afghanistan. He did counterinsurgency work and tried to introduce aquaponics, a self-replenishing agricultural system, to rural villages.

His zeal for aquaponics led him to the farming class. “It’s a national security issue,” he said the other day outside a garage-turned-classroom filled with boxes of Dr. Earth Kelp Meal. “The more responsibly we use water and energy, the greater it is for our country.”

Mr. O’Gorman, a pacifist and a pioneer of the baby-lettuce business, started the coalition after his son joined the Coast Guard. The group recently received a grant from the [Bob Woodruff Foundation](#), co-founded by the ABC News journalist who was wounded in Iraq, to provide farming fellowships for wounded young veterans.

“Beginning farming has become the cause du jour among young people with college degrees and trust funds,” Mr. O’Gorman said at the farm, where there were stacks of Mother Earth News magazines in the bathroom and a batch of fresh kale in the sink. “My gut sense is a lot of them won’t be farming five years from now. But these vets will.”

Mr. Archipley’s own journey into organic farming was somewhat serendipitous. He joined the Marines in response to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and married between his second and third tours in Iraq. The couple bought three acres of avocado orchards north of San Diego.

Mr. Archipley, whose looks bring to mind a surfer dude, found pleasure tending his grove after leaving the Marines and eventually secured a loan from the Agriculture Department to build a greenhouse. His farm now sells organic produce to Whole Foods Markets in San Diego and Los Angeles.

In 2007, the couple started training veterans informally, financing the effort themselves. The new course, administered through MiraCosta College, costs \$4,500, with Camp Pendleton offering assistance for active-duty Marines.

Farming offers veterans a chance to decompress, Mr. Archipley said, but, more important, provides a sense of purpose. “It allows them to be physically active, be part of a unit,” he said. “It gives them a mission statement — a responsibility to the consumer eating their food.”

Even in this idyllic setting, it can be a challenging process. Mike Nelson Hanes, now 34, enlisted in the Marines at 18. In 1994, six days into his basic training in South Carolina, his drill instructor committed suicide with an M-16 rifle in front of 59 recruits.

“He blew his head off,” Mr. Hanes said. “That was right from the get-go, at age 18.”

In Baghdad, Mr. Hanes served as a .50-caliber machine gunner atop a Humvee. “I was the one they were trying to kill,” he said. He returned home with post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and a [traumatic brain injury](#). He was homeless for over a year, managing nevertheless to get a degree in environmental social services.

“Being outside was my comfort zone — still is,” he said. Two years ago, he stumbled upon the Archipley’s “Veterans for Sustainable Agriculture” booth at an [Earth Day](#) festival in Balboa Park in San Diego. Mr. Hanes still struggles but is gaining ground.

“One thing I’ve noticed about agriculture is that you become a creator rather than a destroyer,” he said amid ornamental eucalyptus shrubs.

John Maki, Camp Pendleton’s transition assistance program specialist, said the life experiences of young veterans equip them for demanding work. “For a comparable age, you won’t find people who have had as much responsibility,” he said. “They’ve been tasked with making life-and-death decisions.”

Weldon Sleight, dean of the University of Nebraska’s College of Technical Agriculture, which has six enrolled veterans, said discipline — a mainstay of the armed forces — was critically important in agriculture. “A lot of these rural vets have this wonderful knowledge base about agriculture,” he added. “But we’ve told them for years there’s no future in it.”

In Central Florida, Adam Burke, who left farming to join the military, came full circle, designing a wheelchair-accessible farm in which his signature “red, white and blueberries” grow in containers on elevated beds.

Mr. Burke, a Purple Heart recipient who suffered a traumatic brain injury in Iraq, recently opened a second farm. “Squeezing a ball in physical therapy gets monotonous,” he said. “And you don’t get the mist from the sprinklers or a cool breeze in a psychologist’s office.”

Matthew McCue, 29, formerly Sergeant McCue, runs Shooting Star CSA outside San Francisco with his partner, Lily Schneider, delivering boxes of organic produce directly to consumers.

He recalled how orchard farmers in Iraq pridefully shared their pomegranates, tomatoes and melons.

“You learn how to face death,” he said of his service in Iraq. But in farming, he learned, “There was life all around.”