



Paul Greive

Starting a Business As a Veteran Entrepreneur After Service

A Q&A with Paul Greive, Primal Pastures

CI: Tell us a bit about your background – what brought you to farming and why did you choose to launch a farm?

A: I definitely don't have your typical farming background. I grew up in Seattle in the city, and then came to California for college to study accounting. But I didn't really want to be an accountant at 22 and sit at a desk, so I joined the Marine Corps as an officer. I was an intelligence officer and served for four years, including a tour in Iraq, and really had an eye-opening experience not just in Iraq but also here, stateside, as well. I had some great opportunities to lead large units. So when I finished my service, I figured I should probably go be an accountant. I got my CPA license, but I just wasn't really fulfilled and was pretty bored with it. It was good money, it was a good job – it just wasn't fulfilling me like the Marine Corps did. At the same time, my health had also started declining. I got arthritis in my knees, elbows, and back. I was just a young guy and I thought I was eating pretty healthy, but I'd started learning more about the effect of the foods that I put into my body on my overall health, and that really inspired me to figure out what was going on not just with my health, but with the overall food system.

I started looking online to figure out where good food came from and what cultivating that food looked like. I was able to find a lot of resources for produce grown this way, but I was having a hard time finding really healthy meat that was reared locally. Right around the same time, my two brothers and my father-in-law had similar things happen where they lost a lot of weight by changing their diets or fixed health problems they were having

by changing their diets up. One weekend in 2012, we were all sitting around and just started joking about getting some chickens. We had a little plot of land here and we thought it would be pretty wild if we got chickens. All of a sudden, my brother-in-law disappears from the room, then comes back ten minutes later and says oh, I just bought 50 chicks – they'll be here in two weeks so you better get ready for it. We had no background at all, but that's pretty much how the farm started.

CI: Tell us a bit about Primal Pastures – what are your goals for your business?

A: We got those first 50 chicks and we raised them the way that we wanted to eat them – living outside, eating grass, bugs, and worms, the way a chicken would out in nature. We didn't know if we would sell any of them, but we put up a couple of Facebook posts and all 50 of the chickens sold within two weeks. We had a waiting list of over 100 families by the end of ten weeks when the chickens were actually ready for consumption – and then we had the next 100 families sign up, and then 500, and then 1,000 and the whole thing just kept growing. We've always just sold directly to the consumer here in Southern California – we don't work with any restaurants or grocery stores, we just sell directly to people.

We eventually got a flock of sheep, and we started working with a couple of local ranches to sell their products. The concept is that everything we sell is the highest quality available here in Southern California, so the animals live outside, on the grass, they eat their natural diet, and don't have antibiotics or hormones added. Since we started with really

humble roots back in 2012, we've grown from an initial investment of about \$2,000 into Southern California's most prominent pasteurized livestock farm. My brother and I have both quit our jobs and we work full-time for the farm now, and hopefully my other brother and father-in-law can do that pretty soon, too.

CI: We have heard from other veterans and those who work with veterans that many who return from service are most interested in a job with a mission or purpose, rather than taking any job simply to earn money. Are there aspects of your service training and experience that help or drive you in your current work?

A: Yes, for sure. You learn to be self-sufficient. To a certain extent, in the military they teach you everything you need to know, how to take care of yourself, and so on. But a big thing you learn during your service is the value of teamwork, and that's important in this work because you can't pull off an entrepreneurial venture by yourself. You're counting on a lot of other people, really figuring out who you can trust, and you're relying heavily on those people to either give you feedback or support you. So it's a balance of self-reliance with building a network or team that can help you out and get what you need to get done.

That drive that you learn in the military is pretty much everything. As an entrepreneur, you don't have a nine-to-five schedule; you're not clocking out or anything. It's a true, true grind, much like it is on a deployment. When you're carrying out a mission in the military, there are not always exact rules or regulations to follow – you're just literally doing whatever it takes to get the job done. I feel like that's a huge advantage that members of the military, especially the Marine Corps, have over anyone else who tries to start their own business. We've been through complex challenges already and we know when to push ourselves and keep up that drive. But I do think that it's all about mission, and I think the reason that people sign up for the military is that they see the purpose and the mission and the higher calling. Even if it turns into something else once they've been in for a while, that initial reason why you joined is the reason that really drives you. So I think having some kind of mission to do work that you care about is really important. I was making a lot more money before in my accounting job than I am now, but I'm a lot happier now, doing my own thing and doing something I really believe in.

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CI: Do you think other veterans should consider entrepreneurship endeavors as opposed to working for an established business? What are the advantages and disadvantages for veterans of running your own business?

A: I'd say consider it for sure, but proceed with caution and know what you're getting into. The route that I took was pretty balanced, which I recommend – go work for somebody else first and then start the company while you have a paycheck. It's a major grind to do it that way and it's pretty tough, because you're working a nine-to-five and then trying to squeeze in work getting your business up and running before or after the hours of your other job, but it really decreases the risk, especially if you have a family. It puts you in a position where you can take a little bit more risk with your new business because you still have a paycheck to fall back on.

Overall, though, I do think former military members should really consider entrepreneurship. I think it leverages a lot of the skills, motivation, and drive that we have. That's especially true for agriculture, because it's all about men and women working outside with their hands, doing something that they really believe in. And working with animals is amazing – there are all kinds of studies that show that for those who have traumatic brain injuries or PTSD, coming back and working with animals has had a huge impact. To be able to do all of this in a really meaningful way that's profitable and exciting is really cool.

There is a nonprofit organization called the Farmer Veteran Coalition – they've connected me with a ton of mentors and support, and through them I've been able to mentor and support some younger guys that are coming up. It's a great network where I can go and check out another veteran who's raising chicken in North Carolina, or somebody else who's producing pork in another region, for example. There's a huge network of veterans working in agriculture. We can always go back to each other

and talk about anything that's going on and it's an instant connection because they're also veterans. The Farmer Veteran Coalition provides a little bit of financial support, as well. The founder, Michael O'Gorman, was really successful in agriculture as a veteran so there are a lot of mentors there as well. It's just an incredibly helpful network for us.

CI: What advice would you offer others returning from service who are thinking about starting a business? And how do you think veterans might successfully translate their military skills into civilian workplace skills, whether they are working for themselves or for an established business?

A: It's a somewhat different situation for me because I'm working for myself – I can directly apply the skills I learned in the military to my current work. But if you're applying for a regular job as a veteran, I would say you have to put yourself in the employer's shoes. You can't just think about your own experiences from what you've done in the military – you have to determine what kind of value you're actually providing to civilian employers. They're looking at assets, and at the end of the day, they're looking to hire the

right person for the job. Don't think of it as a charity thing, that just because you've served your country that they have to hire you. Try to put your best foot forward and customize your skills and experience to the needs that they have for a specific position.

CI: Are there things that you think banks, community partners, government partners and others can do to support veteran entrepreneurs?

A: The G.I. Bill has been an absolute godsend for us – I would love to see that supported and see it be better utilized by other veterans. You can still get a paycheck while you're going to school, you get a housing stipend, and you can leverage that to start something new while you're in school. Something like only five percent of veterans are taking advantage of the G.I. Bill and that's just crazy to me. It's a great program. **CI**

Primal Pastures:
primalpastures.com

Veteran Farmer Coalition:
www.farmvetco.org