“Baptism by fire” is a term used to describe a soldier’s first time in combat, that pivotal moment where they know they will never look at the world quite the same way again. It turns a person into a uniquely-equipped soldier, but often leaves them ill-equipped for civilian work. Many veterans leave the military searching for something that feels familiar and purposeful.

Meanwhile, a pressing question in ranching is, Who will carry it on? With a rising population and a shrinking pool of qualified job candidates, the future is unclear. Plenty of people talk about being a cowboy and running a ranch, but it’s not a job someone can simply step into.
Ben Minden is a United States Military Academy graduate with his MBA from Harvard Business School. He is a veteran of the 101st Airborne Division and 3rd Ranger Battalion.

“I did not grow up with ranching, at all,” he says. “I got involved by total happenstance with a cutting horse trainer when I was stationed at Fort Benning, Ga., who kind of took me under his wing and taught me the whole cutting horse deal.”

Johnny Daffin gave Minden the chance to get his foot in the door of the ranching world and, in turn, some of his fellow veterans as they got curious about Minden’s work and started to ride with him and Daffin.

Minden began to see how these two problems could have one solution. The void soldiers felt could be filled by cowboy culture and ranching surprisingly well. The ranching industry needs new blood. Yet this potential new wave of people with the passion and work ethic the ranching industry requires, lacked the education and tangible skills they need to succeed. The process of moving from soldier to cowboy was stopping many veterans from pursuing their passion. Entering this historic and heritage-rich industry and culture essentially empty-handed in terms of background knowledge and experience is daunting. He could step in the gap. That interest lit the fuse of what would evolve into the program Minden runs today, an opportunity to provide other veterans the same knowledge and experiences that he had, in a shorter amount of time.

Minden founded Bear Hug Cattle Company, a 501c3, in 2019 with the intention of condensing the basics of ranching and cowboying into a ten-week summer course for veterans. With bases in Walden, Colo., and Wilsall, Mont., the outfit gradually moves north over the summer from one base to another teaching four veterans the basic skills they need for an entry-level position on a ranch. At the same time, the program also offers time and space for recently-discharged veterans to adjust to the new phase of their lives. The overarching idea is to help veterans transition out of the military by teaching them a new set of skills and giving them some connections in the ranching world.

Many people spend their whole lives waiting for their life to change, to experience a rebirth or a revelation but are never willing to walk through the fire to find it.

Others, though, don’t have the time or patience to spend waiting for their lives to change. They would rather step into the fire and seek out that change. It is that very restlessness and intensity that drives so many in the ranching world and draws others like them to the industry. Every day is a new challenge, and every action has a purpose and a consequence. Chores are done, not just out of routine, but out of an obligation to the land and livestock. It is a mindset and will that not all possess, yet something that those in ranching and those who have dedicated years of their lives to the service of country have in common.

Veterans leave their service with years of knowledge and skills, both tangible and intangible—teamwork, leadership, quick thinking—that make them excellently equipped to handle their positions in the military. However, those same men and women may prove to be lacking when it comes to entering a civilian profession. Finding a position in the ranching world is difficult enough for those who have spent their whole lives roping, riding, tending the land and caring for livestock, but it can seem impossible for those who haven’t grown up with similar opportunities.

Whether he knew it at the time or not, Jacob Croxdale had a life-pivoting moment when he enlisted in the military after graduating from California State University, Sacramento. That moment would set him on a path that would see him deployed six times during his service in the Army with the 75th Ranger Regiment and lead him to meet people who would change his life all over again. After serving for almost eight years, Croxdale had a plan for post-service as he returned from his last deployment. At the encouragement of some of his friends from the military, he planned to attend business school in the fall for his MBA. His Army stint was ending in May. His summer was open.

Originally from Napa, California, Croxdale grew up playing sports and being involved in 4-H, but with limited experience working with livestock, a summer spent horseback was not initially on his mind.
“Ben had actually told me about the MBA opportunity,” Croxdale explains. “Especially coming from a guy who was enlisted, nobody really talks about going the MBA route, and knowing that it’s only 18 months to two years, I knew I could gain a lot from it. But Ben also broached this topic of ranching with me. He said, ‘Hey I’m going to do this, is this something that would interest you?’ And I was like, ‘One hundred percent.’”

Croxdale’s summer with Bear Hug began with another, rather abrupt, “baptism by fire” and view-altering realization.

“I got thrown off the first horse I got on at Bear Hug,” Croxdale says. “I made it about thirty seconds. And that was great for me. I tell people this all the time, ‘I don’t care when you got out of the service whether it was three years, five years, ten years, twelve years, you’re probably pretty dang good at what you did when you got out. Guess what? The horse doesn’t care, the cows don’t care. What can you deliver today? Because no one is going to want to hire you if you can’t do your job.’”

He wasn’t the only one with a rude awakening to cowboy life that summer, though. Beginning in Walden, the first four weeks focus on horsemanship.

“I think horsemanship is something people who have been around horses take for granted,” Minden says. “It’s very hard to learn to do in a short period of time. This past year it probably took us an entire day to just learn how to saddle and learn how saddles fit and how your saddle pad should be and how tight your cinch should be.”

Each student is allotted a small string of horses, with varying levels of training, with which they learn everything from the fundamentals of saddling and safely working with horses, to basic farrier work, riding and training. After building their confidence in the arena, they take hours-long treks across pastures and day work with neighboring ranches. Evenings consist of classes on ranching systems and economics, building a solid basis of knowledge about the industry.

All that training is put to good use for the last six weeks of the program as the Bear Hug crew travels to ranches all over Montana, Wyoming, and Colorado where they doctor yearlings, help with brandings, and meet professionals in the industry.

“We’ll go to a bunch of brandings, head-and-heel brandings,” Minden says. “That’s like a real wake-up call for the guys because they are definitely in above their head at that point.”

Under the guidance of Greg Putnam, a former Navy SEAL who now owns Little Belt Cattle Company in Martinsdale, Mont., Croxdale and his fellow students were able to run a small-scale branding of their own.

“Ben looks at me and goes, ‘You’re in charge’ and I go, ‘What do you mean I’ve never done this before!’” says Croxdale. “But we executed a full branding. For the most part it was all us.”

CARRYING THE LEGACY OF RANCHING ON IN A NEW GENERATION OF COWBOYS IS ONE THING, BUT BEAR HUG’S MAIN FOCUS IS THE VETERANS THEMSELVES.

“The parallels between military service and the ranching lifestyle, it feels almost natural,” says Croxdale. “At the end of the day you feel like you did something right, you did something productive. I think what helps people most is having a purpose. It is cut and dry, you have a purpose out there.”

The transition from active military service to civilian life can be jarring. Spending years in a career that requires every bit of focus and heightened awareness you have at the risk of your own life or your teammates, only to step away and into a society that moves at a leisurely pace in comparison leaves a void, a lack of direction, for many veterans.

“The skills that you develop in the military and that veterans typically have when they leave are really useful,” said Minden, “It’s leadership, it’s discipline, it’s work ethic, it’s teamwork, but the things they don’t have are the actual skills to do the job. Like roping and riding and starting colts and shoeing horses and all that stuff. But if you take time to give a veteran those hard skills, our idea is that they’ll be the best worker that anyone’s ever hired.”

The ranching world has always heavily emphasized respect, humility, loyalty, and work ethic, traits that the military and veterans value deeply.

“There’s a sense of pride in it at the end of the day,” Minden said “It’s the best fit I’ve seen for people leaving the military. And on top of that, the people in the military are amazing, the people in the ranching industry are amazing. Everyone has a set of values that they typically stick to. There’s a professional code of conduct.”

The integrity, beliefs, and mutual respect between the military and the ranching industry create a constructive environment for people leaving the service, allowing them to find something new—that still has a familiar structure and culture—even as times and society shift and change.

“Ranching people just care about raising their kids right, they care about doing their job right, that’s what I think it’s about, and creating these bonds with these people, it was just so refreshing and so cool to see,” said Croxdale.
As for Croxdale, he’s now following through with his plans for school after his summer with Bear Hug Cattle Company. He is currently attending Columbia Business School in New York, pursuing his MBA, but plans to get back to ranching as soon as he can. Learning about the economics of ranching and the complexity of the financial records kept by ranches piqued his interest during the course and gave him an avenue to pursue after graduation. “I would not be where I am today without Ben Minden and all the guys that are involved with Bear Hug,” Croxdale says. He is already looking forward to helping the Bear Hug crew for part of this summer before spending the rest at a different internship in conjunction with his degree. “Ideally, in five years I would be back out in the West working on a ranch,” he adds. “Or working for Ben on a ranch that is directly supporting Bear Hug. That to me is the long play. The long goal is to be able to continually give back to veterans.”

Bear Hug Cattle Company will undoubtedly impact veterans for years to come. Few career paths produce people with more pride in their heritage, commitment to their own improvement, and humility in their accomplishments than military service and ranching. They live to serve a world that may or may not understand the depth of their sacrifice, rising with the sun and suiting up for whatever challenge the day may present.

Croxdale and Minden’s dedication to the betterment of their fellow veterans’ lives, as well as their passion for the cowboy way of life, should serve to comfort and inspire others in both the ranching industry and the military. With their involvement and that of others like them, hopefully, Bear Hug Cattle Company will continue to guide more veterans to their own second “baptisms by fire” and give them the opportunity to see the world anew from fifteen hands high.

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