A program in Texas helps turn veterans into farmers.

By Michael J. Mooney

For Doug Havemann, it's always been about the way he felt walking the land, feeding his animals, putting his hands in the soil. He grew up on a small family farm in South Texas, but it wasn't until he got back from launching rockets into Iraq during the first Gulf War that he realized this was his dream. When he first got out of the Army, he had a hard time adjusting. There were things from the war that he couldn't unsee, things that kept him up night after night. He got treatment for the post-traumatic stress disorder and he got a job as a computer engineer, building a career the way society told him to. But he wasn't fulfilled. He craved the independence of living off the land. He missed the open air of farm life.

So, in 2006, Havemann bought some land: 20 acres full of thick mesquite in Nixon, Texas, about 70 miles east of San Antonio. He
cleared it, plowed it, and planted the seeds of grasses native to Texas. And he did all of this in the middle of a severe drought.

"That shows you how much I knew about farming," he says.

He can joke now, but it's taken a lot of sweat and time to make things work. Havemann—who's 46 and a gruff, bald 6-foot-4, 235 pounds—first had to dig a massive stock tank, and then another, so there'd always be water. Although he didn't put in fish, when the waterfowl came, they carried fish eggs. Eventually he had largemouth bass, smallmouth bass, Guadalupe bass, and catfish.

Then came years of research, adaptation, traveling to farms across the country—he continued his corporate consulting work in the city during the week and worked on the farm on the weekends—before he felt like the land was ready to support cattle. It was slow going, but walking through that front gate, working toward that dream of self-sustainability, the stresses of life seemed to disappear.

"I've seen enough death," Havemann says in a deep, pensive voice. "In war, you see the worst sides of people, the worst parts of humanity. So it feels good to see so much life, to see the cycle of life up close. The business world is not life. The business world manipulates life. This is where life thrives."

Last year, at a farming seminar in San
Antonio that he and his wife, Melissa, attended, Havemann met Melissa Blair, the USDA's Texas Natural Resources Conservation Service partner with Texas A&M's AgriLife Extension Service. Blair invited Havemann to participate in one of the group's workshops in November called From Battleground to Breaking Ground: A Transformational Journey. The training was aimed at military veterans, with and without disabilities, interested in aspects of farming or ranching.

At the workshop, there were a lot of eager, young vets, most from the recent wars. Some came looking for work or looking for ways to integrate back into society. Some, like Havemann, came with hopes of self-sustainability and ways to distance themselves from the stresses of modern life. So much time in the military is focused on sustainability, figuring out what it takes to stay alive. An agrarian lifestyle isn't such a big leap.

In fact, approximately 45 percent of veterans come from a rural background, according to the program's co-director, Cheryl Grenwelge, an assistant professor at the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service who specializes in disability transition. And the average age of farmers in this country is now in the late 50s. The program aims to match the problem — fewer farmers of working age — and the solution — returning veterans who are willing to get their hands dirty and do an honest day's work.

"Farming also gives veterans a chance to serve again," says Erin Pilosi, a recent Texas A&M grad who now helps run the workshops. "They can serve America by feeding America."

As part of the Texas AgrAbility Project, the workshops help veterans and active duty personnel in obtaining employment and taking advantage of the therapeutic nature of agricultural work. (Some U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs doctors have been recommending agricultural therapy for a few years now, and some VA hospitals even have small gardens maintained by patients.)

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A lot of people show up with ideas, Grenwelge says. They want to start niche farms specializing in blueberries or a certain kind of peach or bees, or, like Havemann, grass-fed beef. For the workshops, Grenwelge and Pilosi bring in working agricultural economists to discuss potential business ideas. They can provide tips for turning a deer lease into a bed-and-breakfast, for example. Or explain how to sell the electricity generated by solar panels.

"As the face of agricultural changes," says Grenwelge, "it's all about value-added business."

The veterans go over the financial programs available to new and beginning farmers and ranchers with a panel that includes local representatives from the Farm Service Agency, the Texas Department of Agriculture, and the USDA's Texas Natural Resources Conservation Service. Attendees learn about loans and grants, programs for rotational grazing, and payment assistance for fencing. They learn how to get money to purchase land or livestock, and how to maximize and coordinate the various options. They hear other veterans talk about their experiences farming: what they did right, what they did wrong.

"We help build a network of contacts," Grenwelge says. "In this business,
people are your greatest resource.”

Havemann got a binder nearly 3 inches thick, filled with information about every loan and every grant he might ever need. Not just where to apply and when, but also whom to call if he’s still having problems.

“If I had this years ago, I’d be so much further along,” says Havemann. “I’d have been up and running before now. I’d be retired, living on the farm full time.”

A few weeks after the first workshop, there’s a follow-up session where attendees can go over the specifics of their business plans with an expert in the field. Every loan and every grant needs a business plan, a way to show viability. If a veteran wants to have a bee farm, for instance, his or her plan has to explain how many hives, how many bees, and how much the farmer has allotted for replacement costs.

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Havemann was able to calculate his total cost-per-animal, from the moment he gets to the moment he sends it away for processing. Even though his farm is completely self-sufficient—it exists totally “off the grid”—and his cattle are 100 percent herbivore, fed only on Texas-native grasses, his costs-per-pound of beef are still considerably lower than the corporate-owned factory farms. He says he saves money by not using hormones and not having to treat the illnesses that cows get from eating corn and living in tight quarters.

In the program’s first year, about 150 veterans went through the Battleground to Breaking Ground workshops, and 10 more workshops are scheduled across Texas for 2014. In addition to the networking resources, Grenwelge and Pilosi have helped several disabled veterans obtain needed equipment. For a deaf Texas AgrAbility client who was milking about 60 goats twice a day by hand—and as a result faced the possibility of long-term damage to his hands and wrists, which would affect his ability to communicate in sign language—they recommended a milking machine to his disabilities service provider. For a soldier who’d lost an arm and both legs, a man who thought he would be confined to staring out the window until he died, they helped him obtain a customized tractor.

Thanks in part to the program, Havemann began selling his meat in 2013 and produce in 2014. He calls his operation Mesquite Field Farm. He’s had friends on the East Coast ask him to ship them some of his beef. He politely declines, though.

“My meat doesn’t ship,” Havemann says, as serious as a drill sergeant. “I will hand-deliver it within 200 miles. That’s the model. If you want to try it, you have to come here. Or find a local farmer where you live and put some money in his or her pocket.”

The coming year is looking even better: He’s been talking with members of a chefs cooperative in San Antonio, and he’s hired a full-time farmhand, a fellow veteran who doesn’t want to be named. “He’s chosen not to integrate back into society,” Havemann says.

Soon, he’s going to start building a house on a back swath of his 20 acres. He plans to retire from corporate life and move out there full time within the next three years. Havemann says he expects that living out there, working the land, will add 20 years to the end of his life. No matter how many years he lives, though, he’ll be happy if he can spend them on his farm.

For more information and a schedule of upcoming workshops, visit texagreability.tamu.edu and agrilife-extension.tamu.edu.