

Florence company keeps veterans at center of plan

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A training accident a decade ago forced Tony Coutsoftides out of the Army. It would take more than a parachute accident, two horribly broken legs and multiple surgeries, though, to take the Army out of Coutsoftides.

Ten years later he has a much different life than the one he once imagined. Instead of an Army "lifer," he's a married business executive with a daughter. He works in a Boone County office building, not on base in South Korea or Fort Bragg, N.C. He has become an entrepreneurial success story.

In his heart, though, he's still a soldier.

"(Serving) was my lifelong dream," he said recently, the regret still there.

Yet he's found another way to serve.

Coutsoftides, 38, and his wife, Lacy, are owners of Florence-based Legion Logistics, a third-party brokerage firm that connects clients needing freight shipped to other companies willing to transport it. Started in 2009, the firm has gone from a three-person family operation housed in the basement of the couple's Union home to a \$10 million success story – one that values the service of veterans as much as its own bottom line.

The company has made it a point of pride to hire veterans and a debt of honor to raise money for veterans groups like the Wounded Warrior Project, which gives aid to service members severely injured during active duty.

The commitment stems from Tony Coutsoftides' experiences following his 2002 Army discharge. The transition to civilian life wasn't easy, including a few short stints at other logistics firms and an air cargo business in Europe he was forced to abandon when fuel prices skyrocketed.

Eventually, he landed in Cincinnati, where he met Lacy. The couple married in 2008 and decided a year later to quit their jobs to start Legion.

"It took me a few years to find something that I loved as much as I loved serving in the military. Nothing gave me the same excitement, the same adrenaline rush," he said. "The sense of doing something worthwhile."

Together, the couple decided a commitment to American heroes was something worthwhile. As the business grew, so did their commitment.

Now nearly half of Legion's 22 employees have military ties. Six are Army, Navy or Air Force veterans with a combined 52 years of active duty. ("We've got everything but a Marine. Well... they are 'the few,'" explains Lacy.)

The Legion employee with the longest tenure – Lacy's brother, Levi Papai, who worked in the basement at the beginning – is an active member of the Army National Guard. Three other employees are military spouses. When the company expands again, as it expects to do in the first quarter of 2013, more vets and spouses will

join the ranks.

“Veterans and the spouses bring something extra to the table that I think gets overlooked,” said Lacy, who has become as fervent a proponent for vets as her husband. “If (employers) have never had exposure to military life or veterans, they don’t understand. Nobody in the military, especially today’s military, is ‘just a dumb grunt.’ Everyone has skills. Everyone is professional.”

Spouses, meanwhile, have had to deal with sudden relocations and long deployments when they’ve had to hold down jobs and run their household single handedly.

“The resiliency level in veterans and military spouses is so much higher than in civilians. For the veterans, if you’re not shooting at them, they’re OK. Even if you are shooting at them, they’re OK,” Lacy said. “And the spouses are just as resilient. These are people who are not going to have a meltdown in a high-pressure situation.”

And they have honor, added Tony.

“They’re straight shooters. Our clients appreciate that. If they can’t do something, they’ll tell you they can’t and figure out what they can do. If something goes wrong, they’ll solve the problem, apologize and move on,” he said.

Unfortunately, not all companies understand the value of vets.

Since 2002, more than 2.7 million veterans have served in the military, according to the Department of Defense. Over the next five years more than 1 million veterans are expected to join those who have already left the service for the civilian workforce.

Bleak numbers await them.

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics numbers place the unemployment rate of veterans higher than nonveterans – consistently more than a percentage point higher than for nonveterans.

“It’s a shame,” said Jason Hansman, an executive for Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, a New York-based advocacy group. “That number should be a lot lower. Ideally it should be zero. Veterans come with baseline skills like discipline, a sense of duty, loyalty, responsibility. Employers are starting to pick up on that, but there’s room for improvement.”

Meanwhile, DoD numbers put the unemployment rate for military spouses at a staggering 28 percent, which is nearly three times the national unemployment rate.

Angela Zanders can sympathize. A teacher by trade, she and her Army recruiter husband arrived in Cincinnati last year for his new post. A year later she was still unable to find a teaching job because of red tape. Schools often don’t recognize teaching certification from other states, and relocating as often as military families do makes it difficult to keep getting new approval from each new state.

Then Zanders met Lacy Coutsoftides at a veterans job fair. After learning about Legion’s focus on military families, she joined the company in August.

“It’s been a godsend,” she said. “I was getting disillusioned, then I met Lacy and I knew I wanted to work for this company. It’s become a second family.”

On the purely philanthropic side, Legion gives a \$1 donation to the Wounded Warrior Project for every load they arrange to move. Employees can wear jeans on Fridays in return for a \$5 donation to the group, and the men are growing beards through the end of November. For each one who doesn’t shave, the Coutsoftides will donate \$100 to WWP.

The company’s donation total for the year is nearing \$6,000.