

# Supporting Vets Who Tech



The Case for Expanding Veteran  
Benefits for the 21st Century Economy

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It's incumbent upon Congress to ensure that the services provided to our citizens are of the highest quality and that the changes in a 21st century

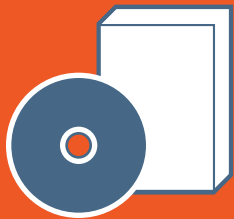
Military veterans are uniquely positioned for roles in the tech industry. Trained as leaders and decision makers in complex situations, many veterans have the fundamentals to quickly learn or adapt problem-solving skills as an entrepreneur launching a startup or an engineer at a tech company.

Each day, nearly 550 experienced veterans transition to civilian life looking for jobs. Meanwhile, the tech industry is growing, driving up the demand for hardworking individuals who can take on roles in well-paid and understaffed tech fields. Technology itself is lowering the barrier of entry for new business formation and these young high-tech firms, too, are contributing to net job creation.

ress to update the  
veterans to reflect the  
economy.

# YEAR 2022 SNAPSHOT

## Tech Jobs



↑ 22%

Software  
developers



↑ 8%

Computer  
programmers



↑ 20%

Web developers



↑ 15%

Database  
administrators

## Non-Tech Jobs in Tech Industry



↑ 48.5%

Business and financial  
operations occupations



↑ 39.3%

Office and  
administrative support  
occupations



High-tech sector sees **23% more new business formation** than the private sector



Information and communication technology sector sees **48% more new business formation** than the private sector

Unfortunately, many veterans who choose to enter the tech industry—either as an employee or a founder—face major obstacles.

Federal funding guidelines make it particularly difficult for veterans

to access non-traditional, skill-based education programs that are relatively new to the education landscape, but are already producing success stories. These programs provide crucial resources for making tech accessible

Congress should develop policies that help veterans transition into roles in the tech sector. Growing the diversity of the tech sector and expanding innovation in America depends on it.

to people of all backgrounds, especially those who are entering the civilian workforce. Not only can these programs provide skills that bridge military experience with roles in the tech sector, but they also provide the tech vocabulary and network that enable veterans to land the job.

Similarly, federal funding guidelines make it hard for veterans to use the benefits they have earned through their service towards building a business. Twenty-five percent of active duty service members report that they would like to start their own company. Many veterans are empowered to create their own jobs and jobs for others. But restrictions around the use of GI benefits preclude them from putting that money toward a

startup or un-accredited alternative entrepreneurial education programs that help bring their ideas to reality.

*In the pages that follow, you'll meet seven veterans from around the country who've pursued careers in the technology sector following their military service. Each of their stories is unique: some built on tech skills that they had already acquired during their services, others sought to build an entirely new skill base, and several of the veterans profiled here have started their own companies. Together, these men and women showcase the enormous potential within the veteran community to serve and lead in our country's most rapidly growing job sector. Yet to accelerate these successes and enable more veterans to enter into this industry, we must do more.*





# Aaron Saari

Army Veteran

CEO

Base of Fire

Head of Operations

Remoov

When Aaron Saari applied to West Point in 2002, he was well aware that in a post-9/11 world a military deployment would immediately follow his graduation. “Our whole class knew what was coming after graduation,” he says. Indeed, Aaron did end up deploying twice after graduating from West Point in 2007. He spent 15 months in Iraq and another six months in Afghanistan as an officer. It was these experiences, leading a team of soldiers halfway across the world, that inspired him to become an entrepreneur.

“I’m less than a year out of college and at 23, I’m given 30 people—some older than me, some younger than me, some men, some women—and \$15-20 million worth of equipment, and I’m told to do all these things I’ve never done before...if that’s not being an entrepreneur, I’m not sure what is.” His experience in the field

also taught him risk analysis, leadership, how to be nimble, and how to pivot quickly in life-threatening situations.

Upon returning stateside, Aaron recognized a further career in the military wouldn’t

entail the same kinds of responsibilities he had been afforded as an officer on the battlefield—it looked a lot more like a desk job. Growth opportunities seemed riddled with layers of bureaucracy and hierarchy, a stark contrast to the relatively flat and merit-based culture of technology entrepreneurship.

All the while, Aaron had been following and studying startups and successful entrepreneurs. While still in

the military, Aaron read Tim Ferris’s *The 4-Hour Workweek*. “It was a paradigm-shifting book,” Aaron explains. “It gives you a glimpse into the future of work and how the global economy operates.” He picked up other ideas and

***But ultimately, he didn’t want to spend two valuable years sitting in a classroom gaining a graduate degree, and the other resources available to veterans just seemed outdated.***

skills from books on entrepreneurship, the lean startup model, and Internet marketing, teaching himself what it would take to eventually start his own business.

"When I got out, I started building the business," Aaron says.

To pursue a career change from a military officer to a technology and marketing entrepreneur, Aaron first considered some of the resources the GI Bill provided. He could earn an MBA or take advantage of business education programs offered by Veterans Affairs and the Small Business Administration. But ultimately, he didn't want to spend two valuable years sitting in a classroom gaining a graduate degree, and the other resources available to veterans just seemed outdated. "The concepts that they're teaching are not the way the world works any more."

In addition to the books he had read, Aaron also came across online resources covering the latest trends in digital marketing, data analysis, and usability testing. He sought out informal, online communities of veterans who had started their own businesses or worked at fast-growing technology companies. "I found people that were doing things, doing things well, doing things quickly... [who] created their own networks." Aaron found these resources were relevant and easily available to prepare him to launch his own business

and take a lead role at a growing startup.

Today, he runs Base of Fire, a growth and marketing consultancy for small businesses, but that's not all. After focusing on Base of Fire for nine months, Aaron attended a startup event in San Francisco where he met the founder of a new company called Remoov—an online platform that helps people declutter their homes by integrating pickup, moving, and donation services. Soon,

Remoov was recruiting him. Realizing that scaling operations at a young company would offer him even greater experience and exposure as a burgeoning tech entrepreneur, Aaron joined on as head of operations.

Aaron continues to tap into networks of veterans in the tech and startup world as he seeks out

advice in growing and expanding his latest ventures. As a business leader, he also wants to hire veterans. However, he worries many veterans transitioning to the civilian workforce aren't getting the education they need, noting that many of the officially accredited programs haven't kept up with the pace of technological and business changes.

One thing is certain though—the veteran community is a unique workforce because more than anyone, veterans know how to "adapt and overcome," Aaron says. "We're a community of problem solvers. We're going to find a way to get things done."

***Aaron continues to tap into networks of veterans in the tech and startup world as he seeks out advice in growing and expanding his latest ventures.***



# Isaac Elias

Army Veteran  
Software Engineer  
True Link Financial

After five years on active duty with deployments to both Iraq and Afghanistan, Isaac Elias left the U.S. Army in 2009. As he transitioned out of the military, he found that a large portion of existing career development resources were available through formal partnerships with traditional industry, like manufacturing or logistics. "Those roles just didn't make sense for me," says Isaac, who realized during his deployment to Iraq as a human intelligence coordinator that he thrived in small, agile teams.

So Isaac decided to use his GI benefits to attend college. He was able to finish a degree in business administration at California State University in just three years, and in 2012 he began looking for a job. During school, Isaac had started teaching

himself programming and coding skills. He had been inspired by professors who extolled how technological advances were dramatically changing business. However, from November 2012 to April 2013, Isaac tried to find a job and couldn't get any traction. "I had a business degree,

but I wasn't getting anywhere with that. Then I had these self-taught technical skills that I was passionate about, but no formal training."

In the spring of 2013, Isaac learned about General Assembly (GA), an educational institution that offers a variety of technology-focused classes. He applied and was

accepted into their 12-week full-time Web Development Immersive (WDI) program—an opportunity to receive that formal technical training he lacked. With three young children at home, Isaac knew the program

***Isaac accumulated \$25,000 in debt on four separate credit cards to pay for the program and his family's living expenses while he was in school—a debt that Isaac is still repaying two years later.***



*His current job as a software engineer for True Link Financial pays almost three times what he could have made when he was looking for a job with just his business degree.*

would be a commitment, in terms of both time and money.

Isaac accumulated \$25,000 in debt on four separate credit cards to pay for the program and his family's living expenses while he was in school—a debt that Isaac is still repaying two years later. "It was a big commitment, and I wasn't sure that I could manage the whole thing. But it was absolutely worth it."

Following graduation from the GA program, Isaac was hired as a full-stack developer at a Pleasanton, CA based startup, Milyoni, which builds tools to make video watching and sharing more social. Since then, he has held positions at two other companies, moving into higher-paying, more advanced roles each time. His current job as a software engineer for True Link Financial pays almost three times what he could have made when he was looking for a job with just his business degree. And on top of that, he is frequently contacted by recruiters.

Isaac is proud of how far he's come. He should be. But he noted how he felt like

he had to fight and break down barriers to achieve these goals. "People who have been in war zones have skills that are applicable to startup world: we are dedicated, disciplined, entrepreneurial. We know how to build and manage teams. We take assignments and commitments seriously. We know how to deal with less-than-ideal surroundings, fatigue, hunger, and stress. We just need the right training and the relationships to get into that world. It shouldn't be that hard."



# Nick Mastronardi

Air Force Veteran  
Co-Founder & CEO  
POLCO

When Nick Mastronardi transitioned out of the Air Force in 2014, he knew he wanted to start a company. Even though he was able to serve in senior positions in the Pentagon and White House, there was one assignment that forged his desire to build a business. "I was an Economics professor at the Air Force Academy, and from teaching knew small businesses and startups were the engine to and an indispensable component of our economy."

"I wanted to make sure military members were implementing representative and crowd-sourced public policies." Out of this idea came POLCO, a political participation platform that allows citizens to find, learn about, and participate in their public policies. "I wanted to create a platform where the best minds in our country could wrestle the day's most

important policy debates in front of citizens to win their favor."

Having already earned a PhD in Economics while serving, Nick knew he really needed private sector experience to make his dream a reality. Additionally, with two young children, Nick knew he couldn't be as cavalier as someone with greater financial flexibility. After some exposure to the community through TechStars Patriot Boot Camp, an intensive three-day program that provides veterans with entrepreneurial education and mentorship, and a

year at Amazon, Nick was accepted to the Seed Sumo tech accelerator in Bryan, TX. He decided he was ready to take the leap and left Amazon to move to Texas and start POLCO in the spring of 2015. Since then, POLCO's website has launched and the company is making progress.

***In a time of less financial certainty for his young company, Nick would use his benefits towards a VA home loan, which would provide more stability for his family.***

Nick would like to be able to put some of his GI benefits towards POLCO, but the rules around GI benefits don't allow for this. "I have over \$100,000 of GI benefits

going unused right now. Money that I earned and want to use in an impactful way," he says. "The current GI Bill blanket policy is not adequately flexible to support veterans seeking entrepreneurship instead of school, even though they are arguably of comparable value."

In a time of less financial certainty for his young company, Nick would use his benefits towards a VA home loan, which would provide more stability for his family. Even though Nick has good savings, great credit, and a history of private-sector earning potential, it's very tough to get a VA or any type of home loan until he has a two-year track record of self

employment. "One thing I was really looking forward to for my family following my active duty time was growing some roots in a community."

***"I think one of the most valuable lessons from the military is learning how to deal with adversity, face challenges, and ultimately expand your frustration tolerances. As a startup founder or employee, you are directly responsible for the fate of your company, which is exhilarating with growth and frustrating with plateaus. During these periods you rely on your ability to deal with those ups and downs. Military adversaries don't slow down for you out of sympathy and neither does the market so you always have to keep charging."***

sympathy and neither does the market so you always have to keep charging."

Military experience uniquely prepares veterans for entrepreneurship and roles in the tech economy—but financial constraints for transitioning service members disincentivize veteran participation in the startup economy. Because of this unique preparation, Nick is committed to hiring veterans at POLCO. In fact, his entire team is composed of veterans.

As Nick puts it, "I think one of the most valuable lessons from the military is learning how to deal with adversity, face challenges, and ultimately expand your frustration tolerances. As a startup founder or employee, you are directly responsible for the fate of your company, which is exhilarating with growth and frustrating with plateaus. During these periods you rely on your ability to deal with those ups and downs. Military adversaries don't slow down for you out of



# Alan Tweedie

Navy Veteran

Test Automation Engineer

Echostar

Alan Tweedie knew ever since he was little that he wanted to be a military officer. Upon completing his ROTC program at University of Florida in 2004, he went on to become a surface warfare officer in the Navy, an analyst for the North American Aerospace Defense Command, a program manager at the Pentagon, and later a Software Test Engineer for DigitalGlobe. Throughout all these roles, his love for technology and its potential for changing the way we see the world has been consistent.

But when Alan initially left the military for a civilian post at the Department of Defense (DoD) in 2010, he had trouble landing the kinds of project management roles he had in mind. It wasn't until he worked in Washington DC, at the Pentagon and DigitalGlobe, with training from the Transition Assistance Program at DoD that he felt he was fully prepared to take on roles that

were more leader-oriented. He spent years preparing his experience and resume for a comparable, non-military role. This is especially tricky for veterans entering tech since veterans use Military Occupational Speciality (MOS) language and ultimately

***He spent years preparing his experience and resume for a comparable, non-military role.***

need to translate this into civilian business language, or, more specifically, into the language used in the tech industry.

In order to get the engineering role he wanted, he knew he would need to diversify his skillset and pursue further education. Initially, he planned to use GI benefits to cover the training he'd need. A developer bootcamp—a fast-paced, immersive course—seemed the best way to expand his skills as a software engineer, enable a career jump to mid-level engineer, and make himself a more marketable candidate for web-based engineering roles.

So Alan decided to enroll in a course at



## ***Six months later, Galvanize is still going back and forth with the VA, seeking a retroactive reimbursement that would leave Alan debt-free.***

Galvanize, a skill-based technology school. He elected the “Full Stack Web and Software Development” course: a 24-week program that would train him as a developer for nearly any software engineering role and usually costs students over \$21,000.

Alan kickstarted the process with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to ensure that he would receive GI benefits to cover the cost of the program. A general “approval” letter came in the mail, so Alan enrolled and began his studies, aware that complete approval by the VA would take a long time. He later found out, however, that this letter was only a generic response to benefit inquiries from the VA. The letter acknowledged Alan, a qualified veteran, could use benefits at some point, but not towards this specific program.

This small but critical piece of communication from the VA complicated Alan’s life, right as he was working to take on a completely new skillset in an intensive, fast-paced environment. Now, he also had to worry about paying for the course. Galvanize tried negotiating with the VA on Alan’s behalf, spurring his U.S. representative to get involved. Ultimately,

an under secretary at the VA reached out to Alan, acknowledging the confusion, but confirming that his Full Stack Web and Software Development Program would not be covered by his GI benefits. Six months later, Galvanize is still going back and forth with the VA, seeking a retroactive reimbursement that would leave Alan debt-free. However, he’s still foregone the supplemental income that comes with GI Bill-covered educational opportunities.

Not long after graduating from the course, Alan landed the role he wanted. Today, he’s a test automation engineer for a satellite technology company called EchoStar. It’s a fulfilling role with room for growing his technical skills and his career—exactly what he was looking for.

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# Carly DaCosta

Army Veteran

Director of Operations

FaunaDB

As a communications officer in the Army, Carly DaCosta was integral to making sure the military stayed connected in the field and in homeland. She set up the technology necessary at bases in Alaska that enabled units to talk to one another: computers, landlines, networks, and cell phones. Though a nuclear engineer by training, with a longtime interest in technology, she wasn't certain what was next for her after leaving the military.

She chose to pursue an MBA, a move she thought would help her transition to civilian life. Following graduation, she began working in the financial industry as an account manager. In her new role, she learned

what it means to build a business, how to network, and started to recognize the power of technology in new ways: she knew she wanted to move into the tech industry.

***She "was interested in learning the practical side of engineering first and, after speaking with people who had gone through bootcamps versus the four-year [computer science] degree, it seemed the bootcamp was the way to go. Instructors at the bootcamp are in-industry and their curriculum changes with what's hot."***

Carly evaluated the jobs that she could pursue in the tech industry and thought skills in computer programming would set her up for success and at least get her foot in the door. As she considered how to get there, she realized coding bootcamps offered her that shorter term investment that a four-year degree didn't. Her research led her to a 90-day program, an all-women course at Hackbright in San Francisco, where she learned Python, one of the most widely-used

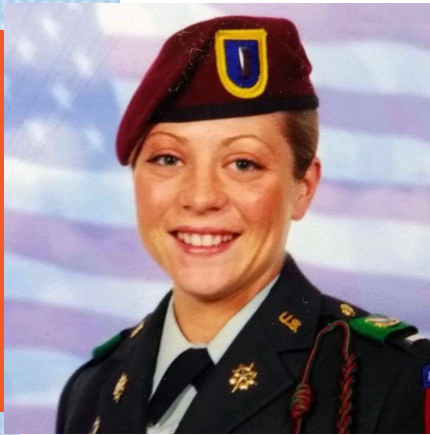
## ***For Carly, this jumpstart meant finding the ideal business operations role that valued both her engineering experience as well as relationship management expertise from her time in finance and the military.***

high-level programming languages. She found a culture of camaraderie among women who were also new to programming, where participants worked together and had each other's backs, that provided the environment she needed to succeed.

The bootcamp style allowed Carly to find a program that suited her desired skill set and personal needs. She did not have four years to go unpaid and provide for a husband and a toddler. She “was interested in learning the practical side of engineering first and, after speaking with people who had gone through bootcamps versus the four-year [computer science] degree, it seemed the bootcamp was the way to go. Instructors at the bootcamp are in-industry and their curriculum changes with what’s hot.” It was clear that a university experience wouldn’t give her the entirely hands-on approach she needed to jumpstart a skillset and a career change. And instead of four years of study without pay, she sacrificed only six months of pay—three months of learning and three months of job searching.

As Carly puts it, bootcamps provide an important option for those wanting to jumpstart their career in the tech industry, including veterans transitioning into civilian life. For Carly, this jumpstart meant finding the ideal business operations role that valued both her engineering experience as well as relationship management expertise from her time in finance and the military.

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# RaeAnne Pae

Army Veteran

Client Solutions Manager,  
Financial Services

Facebook

When RaeAnne, an intel officer in the Army, got out of the military in 2012, she never envisioned herself working at a tech company like Facebook. During her time in the Army, she had been a company commander managing 100 people, and deployed to both Afghanistan and Iraq where she analyzed data to inform operations on the ground. Up until that point, Facebook had played a different, but crucial, role in her day-to-day life: while she was deployed in Afghanistan, it was the lifeline between RaeAnne and her husband, who was serving in Iraq.

After leaving the Army, she and her husband made the move from Kentucky to New York City, where he could attend business school using his GI benefits. RaeAnne started at an event marketing job at the New York Stock Exchange. As she worked with client companies going public, she was particularly excited by her tech startup

clients, such as LinkedIn and Twitter.

When she and her husband moved to Silicon Valley in 2014 for his new job at LinkedIn, her next career move wasn't clear, but she came across an exciting

opportunity. The COMMIT Foundation, a non-profit that helps veterans transition to the civilian workforce, offered to cover the \$12,000 tuition for an immersive training program for people who want to work in startups. She took

the opportunity as a chance to build relationships with employers in the tech industry, understand startup culture, and strengthen her skills in sales and business development. However, "Without the scholarship, I couldn't have afforded paying \$12,000 and not earning an income for 12 weeks," she says.

The Tradecraft program gave RaeAnne the foundational skills she needed, but it also took a friend championing her from

***"Without the scholarship, I couldn't have afforded paying \$12,000 and not earning an income for 12 weeks."***



the inside, some coaching sessions on the Facebook sales pitch and business, as well as several exchanges with multiple recruiters at Facebook to finally land a position. It wasn't easy: "Not a ton of vets were being hired at the time." Many recruiters don't know how to translate a veteran's resume, and they may not want to take a risk on a candidate. Her friend at the company had to work hard behind the scenes to interpret RaeAnne's military background for recruiters and hiring managers in terms, skills, and experience they could understand and translate into a sales role.

Now she is in a position that draws on her experience old and new. In the military, RaeAnne was required to analyze data, paint the current landscape, and infer appropriate decisions for senior commanders. Facebook requires that she fulfill similar responsibilities, but with a focus on optimizing advertising campaigns and advising decisions for startup clients to help grow their business—emphasizing, as the military did, the importance of teamwork and camaraderie along the way.

***Her friend at the company had to work hard behind the scenes to interpret RaeAnne's military background for recruiters and hiring managers in terms, skills, and experience they could understand and translate into a sales role.***

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# Sonny Tosco

Army Veteran  
Founder and CEO  
Limelight

Sonny Tosco sounds like a typical Silicon Valley tech entrepreneur. He grew up in the Bay Area, has an engineering degree from a good school and a strong entrepreneurial spirit. However, his network and story differ from other Silicon Valley rising stars: he is a West Point graduate who was deployed on three tours of duty before launching his business.

Sonny graduated from West Point in 2006, where he studied systems engineering. After graduating, he was deployed on three tours of duty as an Army Captain: Bahrain in 2008, United Arab Emirates in 2009, and then finally back to Bahrain during the Arab Spring in 2011 as an Army chief of operations, overseeing nearly 200 troops.

All the while, Sonny dreamed of starting

his own business upon returning from duty. Initially, he contemplated pursuing an MBA, thinking it would be the best way to learn the business skills he required. However, by the end of his second tour, he recognized the degree may not be worth the time commitment. "When I was in service, I always had an entrepreneurial drive, and I didn't want to be sidelined for two years. I wanted to be in it already," says Sonny. Instead, he started reading all of the publicly available materials from Stanford's MBA program.

***These experiences provided him with opportunities for finding mentorship, building a strong and supportive network of likeminded individuals, and learning negotiating skills.***

Upon returning to civilian life, Sonny took a sales job at a publishing company. He was unsatisfied with his work and still eager to build his own venture, but realized that despite being in the Bay Area, just miles from Silicon Valley, he lacked a network of like-minded and tech-focused entrepreneurs.

In an effort to build these relationships, Sonny started attending networking events, up to four a week, including the Lean Startup Conference and TechCrunch's Disrupt. These experiences provided him with opportunities for finding mentorship, building a strong and supportive network of likeminded individuals, and learning negotiating skills.

At one tech event, Sonny met his future chief technology officer, a highly experienced mobile developer with extensive startup experience. Finding a technical leader was key, because Sonny lacked the financial resources to pursue the coding education required to build an app on his own. Most programs covered by GI benefits would take years to complete.

The two of them began to develop the idea for what would later become Limelight Mobile, a social app that allows users to request real time images from others anywhere in the world. The idea was inspired by Sonny's experience in the army; he'd enter conflict areas with incomplete and sometimes inaccurate reports of ground activity. Yet he knew that information was available through the power and connectivity of mobile phones. The company officially launched in April 2014, and in just over a year, Sonny has hired five full-time employees.

***But as Sonny says, "There's no clear path from idea to VC funding." The path of an entrepreneur can long and winding.***

But as Sonny says, "There's no clear path from idea to VC funding." The path of an entrepreneur can long and winding. As a soldier, he had gained a wealth of knowledge and formal training from his employer.

But as an entrepreneur, he turned to his community—the events and the people he met gave him the crucial tools he needed to grow a successful business.

For now, Sonny is focused on growing his company and making a name for himself in the startup world. And when his now two year old son is old enough, he looks forward to learning to code with him.

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Engine is a technology policy, research, and advocacy organization that bridges the gap between policymakers and startups, working with government and a community of high-technology, growth-oriented startups across the nation to support the development of entrepreneurship. Engine creates an environment where technological innovation and entrepreneurship thrive by providing knowledge about the startup economy and constructing smarter public policy. To that end, Engine conducts research, organizes events, and spearheads campaigns to educate elected officials, the entrepreneur community, and the general public on issues vital to fostering technological innovation.

To learn more, visit <http://engine.is>.



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