

SkySong effort aims to aid veterans

Entrepreneurial program looks at military issues

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Ben Bronson is developing high-tech applications to give military troops on the ground what they need to be more effective and save lives.

Pete Chinnici has co-founded an online platform that allows military service members, humanitarian aid groups, their supporters, and civilians caught up in conflict zones to document their stories and relate to others.

A new effort by Bronson and Chinnici, veterans of the Iraq war, are among 20 student-led startups in the Arizona State University Venture Catalyst program, at SkySong, the ASU Scottsdale Innovation Center. The program began its second year July 1.

This year, program coordinators are stepping up their efforts to help military veterans begin new careers as entrepreneurs through the Rapid Startup School, a free evening program for students and non-students.

"We do have a military industry here, but it's an old military industry," said Gordon McConnell, assistant vice president of innovation, entrepreneurship and venture acceleration at SkySong. "We believe it's time to start creating the next generation, like the Israelis and some other countries have done, with these young, bright kids."

In September, the Rapid Startup School will include a new class aimed at providing guidance to defense startups. Veterans don't need to be affiliated with ASU to participate in the class, McConnell said.

For returning veterans such as Chinnici and Bronson, the SkySong effort is a welcome outlet.

"I've got the drive, the motivation, the professionalism and the ambition," Bronson said. "I've got the recipe, but I don't have an oven. This is the oven. Put a guy like me in this place ... and I'm going to excel."

Bronson returned home from Iraq in 2005 after an 18-month deployment. While struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder and a busy family life, he earned a bachelor's degree in communications at ASU and is now working on his business.

"I'm trying to provide solutions that answer the call for innovation from the voice of the customer, which is the troop on the ground, instead of doing some giant, top-down, 'Here's what the generals think we need' or what the U.S. Department of Defense says would be great," he said.

Bronson, who founded Asymmetric Warfare Solutions, said he has quite a few defense-related products on the drawing board, including one that would use technology to improve mine and explosives detection.

Chinnici served two tours in Iraq and returned home in 2009. He faced numerous struggles, including homelessness related to PTSD. That experience helped shape his desire to create AlphaStripe.

"When you get back, you have to re-adapt, and without having somebody to help you with it or to understand what you've been through, it's extremely hard to get back on your feet unless you have a strong determination," he said.

He co-founded AlphaStripe with Eli Chmouni, Dawne Flannigan and Nick Oliver.

"This is a collaborative product to not only help document history, but to allow people to tell their story, get it off their chest and interact with other military members, so they can understand," Chinnici said.

Two of AlphaStripe's co-founders are ASU students, and Chinnici plans to enroll. In the meantime, the business keeps him busy, and the co-founders have big plans to make the platform available to as many people as possible while generating revenue in the process.

"We'd like to eventually take it global, where we can essentially have both sides of a conflict sit down on our platform and be able to tell their stories, and understand why they were fighting each other ... just the emotional understanding of conflict and why conflict continues to happen time and time again with the human race," he said.