The day that changed Erik Dimmett’s life forever started out just like any other day during his tour of duty in Iraq. After being stationed in the Mediterranean and Persian Gulf, the naval bomb technician had been sent to Iraq in February 2006, and it was there that a routine procedure four months later went terribly wrong.

Dimmett and a fellow bomb technician were taking a break from their usual duty of route clearance, which involved driving around in search of improvised explosive devices. Instead, the men were moving ordnance on base when a piece of it detonated. The other technician was killed instantly, and Dimmett, 15 feet from the blast, suffered severe burns across his body, including on his eyes. Dimmett, who would spend the next year in recovery and physical therapy at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, eventually lost his left leg to infection. His military career was essentially over, and he was burdened with a simple question: What now?

“I honestly didn’t know what I was going to do,” he said. “Then there was this guy in physical therapy, and we spoke for a while, and he kept mentioning this book called Rich Dad, Poor Dad [by Robert Kiyosaki]. The book talked a lot about being a business owner and taking things into your own hands, and I was intrigued.”

A few weeks later, Dimmett’s wife returned from her regular meeting with other wives of
1. Guest entrepreneur and speaker Greg Businelle ’90, CEO of Businelle LLC, addresses the EBV veterans, including John Reed (right). Reed hopes to launch a working ranch in Texas for veterans with disabilities and their families.

2. Bryan winemaker Paul Bonarrigo ’76 explains his craft and the rigors of small business ownership to the would-be entrepreneurs in the EBV program.

3. Disabled Army veteran Orlando Castaneda of Arlington listens to a lecture during the EBV program. Castaneda hopes to take the knowledge he gained and apply it to a customizable art venture he is calling Gaijin Global Artist Products.

4. Program participants Toni Williams of Dallas and Anthony Moralez of Las Cruces, N.M., enter for the commencement ceremony under a saber arch formed by the Ross Volunteers.
wounded service members with news of a program called the Entrepreneurship Bootcamp for Veterans with Disabilities. The program, aimed at training disabled veterans in entrepreneurship and small business management, had just finished its pilot run at Syracuse University in 2007. Dimmett knew immediately he wanted to apply to the bootcamp, which in 2008 was expanding into a consortium of schools: Syracuse, UCLA, Florida State and Texas A&M.

‘THIS IS WHAT WE DO’

Richard Lester, executive director for Mays Business School’s Center for New Ventures and Entrepreneurship, heard about EBV during a trip to Syracuse in October 2007.

“This is a Texas A&M project,” Lester said. “This is what we do. This is really about all of the values A&M has—leadership, respect and service. I contacted Syracuse, talked to them and in February [2008] they had decided to expand the program and were looking for other schools to join in the consortium.” After pitching the idea and getting approval from then-interim dean Dr. Ricky W. Griffin, Lester called Syracuse: A&M would host its own EBV that coming August.

Each EBV is designed as a three-phase program, Lester explained. First, participants work from their own homes with self-study curriculum and online assignments to develop their own business ideas. Phase II is an eight-day intensive residency at one of the four EBV universities. Participants engage in workshops, one-on-one mentoring and other lessons to create and finalize their business plans. Finally, Phase III offers participants a year of support and mentorship from their university as they launch their businesses.

Each school is responsible for creating its own residency program, Lester said, doing what they feel is in the veterans’ best interests. And for its first EBV, Texas A&M opened its doors to 18 veterans from across the country, with disabilities ranging from traumatic brain injuries to burns. Sixteen of them completed the program.

“They came in on a Saturday,” Lester said. “We start out Sunday morning teaching them about entrepreneurship. We spend about seven hours in class, and then that night we start working on their business plans.”

Each veteran brings a business idea—selling tennis shoes, starting a ranch for disabled children, creating a real estate venture in South Texas. And then those ideas are developed each day, as the professors dedicate a day to each of several different business competencies: accounting, finance, marketing, leadership, management. After class is over each day, the veterans work on that portion of their business plan in the Mays computer lab—at least they do until closing time at 10 p.m., when Lester was forced to kick many of the eager veterans out of the lab.

Perhaps the best part of EBV, Lester said, was the various aspects that made the experience uniquely A&M. There was the trip to Messina Hof, a Bryan winery that began as a small business in the 1980s, and the many talks from A&M former students-turned-entrepreneurs. There was the program at the Sanders Corps Center, where veterans had the opportunity to meet current Corps of Cadets members and hear the Singing Cadets. And finally, there was the graduation ceremony, held at the George Bush Presidential Library and Museum, funded by The Association of Former Students and presided over by Texas Governor Rick Perry ’72. And each veteran entering the commencement ceremony walked through a Ross Volunteer saber arch to get the completion certificate.

“A few of our folks had been military all of their lives, and they get disabled, their service has ended, and they need to do something,” Lester said. “That’s why we did it—and they came back with a huge appreciation out of residency.

Sixteen of the 18 participants graduated from the 2008 Entrepreneurship Bootcamp for Veterans with Disabilities.

Texas Governor Rick Perry ’72 congratulates participant Natasha Espinoza of Dallas at the EBV commencement ceremony.

Students attended lectures on different aspects of business ownership throughout their week of residency.
for Texas A&M. A lot of times, I heard a few of them say that they had no idea a place like this even existed.”

**A SECOND CALLING**

Being a Marine was the greatest experience in Toni Williams’ life, a career she planned to pursue until she retired. Williams enlisted in 1994 and spent the next several years in a job that she couldn’t believe she was getting paid to do. But an explosion in February 2002 burst Williams’ ear-drum, and she found herself honorably discharged from the military job she loved.

“I went back to school, worked for the Texas Veterans Commission,” she said. “One of the vets I worked with was a substitute teacher and encouraged me to look into teaching.”

After enrolling in a teaching certification program near her home in Dallas, Williams began working at the Dallas school district. She was content with her job but thought she wanted something more. That was when she heard about EBV from a Brooke Army Medical Center representative. After working in education and having her own ideas about how to run a school, Williams immediately applied and was accepted into A&M’s program.

“I knew what I wanted to do, but I didn’t know how to get there,” she said. “I want to open schools for inner-city kids, kids from low-income neighborhoods and kids with special needs. [EBV] helped me define and focus in on what I want to do and how to go about getting there.”

Williams came to Aggieland with a little idea—an idea that she said grew in leaps and bounds during her eight days of residency.

“I just got so much out of it—business plans, advertising, networking, financial plans,” she said. “As a business entrepreneur, you couldn’t ask for a better program.”

And it is because of EBV, Williams said, that she and her business partner are planning to open their first school in May 2010, a beginning of what she hopes will spread to low-income areas in and outside of Texas.

It is because of stories like these that A&M will organize its second EBV this year, Lester said. The program operates solely on sponsorships and donations—the Houston Livestock Show & Rodeo led the sponsorship for the 2008 and 2009 camps—with lodging, travel and food expenses for the residency totaling about $5,000 per veteran. But after seeing the changes in those involved in EBV, Lester said, he wishes there was a way to reach as many veterans as possible.

“Two things fundamentally happened,” Lester said. “One, everyone on our end got a significant appreciation, if they didn’t already have it, of what these folks had sacrificed for our country. And two, from the veterans’ standpoint, they came away with an appreciation for what Texas A&M is and with that appreciation, they became 16 or 18 of the most proficient voices we can have out in the community. They left with deep gratitude of what we do. It was a win-win all around.”

**NEW BEGINNINGS**

Eric Dimmett wanted to ease the job-related struggles of bomb technicians like himself—during his time as a technician, it was often hard to get high-quality supplies he needed, when he needed them. Knowing he wanted to utilize civilian supply companies for military bomb technicians, Dimmett traveled to Aggieland as a part of EBV.

“This wasn’t going to be someone else’s productivity, it was my own,” he said. “If I can come up and provide something to the customer, then I’d be productive and I’d make money because I’d made something the customer wanted. I enjoyed that idea. It was up to me to make headway and have that business stride.”

And after earning his certificate of completion from A&M’s EBV, Dimmett is well on his way to fulfilling his business dream. He has taken more classes to prepare himself for the rigors of business ownership, contacted supply companies, learned how to make his business accessible online and has compiled a list of supplies the technicians need. And after a little more preparation, he hopes to launch his business soon.

“At [EBV], you learned along the way, hit a couple of roadblocks here and there,” Dimmett said. “But the insight into the different aspects of business helped change my mindset after that one week. I’m going to provide this service, and I’m going to make it the best it can be.”

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