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## Farming and Veterans - Why Agricultural Programs Resonate with Returning Combatants *Keith Tidball*

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### Abstract

Farming is one of the oldest professions, probably about as old as soldiering. Historically, the two were often interlinked, even in the recent story of the birth and development of the United States. It's no wonder that soldiers returning from the last ten plus years of warfare in the Middle East are turning to farming as a route to reintegration into civilian life. However, questions exist as to why exactly some choose this route. This article describes motivations and values affiliated with veterans' resonance with agricultural programs, from the perspective of the author, who is himself a veteran, a farmer, and a researcher in the field

Keywords: Agriculture; Farming; Veterans

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### Introduction

Farming is one of the oldest professions, probably about as old as soldiering. Historically, the two were often interlinked, even in the recent story of the birth and development of the United States. It's no wonder that soldiers returning from the last ten plus years of warfare in the Middle East are turning to farming as a route for reintegration into civilian life. However, questions exist as to exactly why some choose this path. I have both personal and professional perspectives on this, as I left Washington DC and the aftermath of 9/11 to start a fresh life on a farm, and so have many of my friends. There is also growing scientific literature on this, and I am hopefully [contributing](#) to it. But here, I will speak frankly and in lay terms, not as a researcher only, but also as a veteran and a farmer. What follows are the reasons I think returning combatants are turning to farming.

### Sense of Purpose

Veterans returning from combat and veterans who served without deploying to combat zones, often struggle with a dawning awareness of a lack of purpose or direction. It is difficult for some to transition from the very clear guidance of "your job is to close with and kill the enemy, so that you and your brothers and sisters will protect the innocent and neutralize terror and those who seek to spread it," on one hand, to "thanks for your service – good luck" on the other. It's a transition from a clear meritocracy to a fuzzy free-for-all. But all of us, whether we served in theater or behind the scenes, took an oath to protect and serve – most of us feel that that oath never expires. Veterans leave military service with a desire to continue doing something meaningful that will have a positive impact on the community around us. We know our training makes us effective, that we are mission-minded and have a powerful work ethic, that we are not risk-averse and that we have mental and physical powers of endurance and perseverance.

Farming is perhaps the ultimate meritocracy. Personal responsibility, action, discipline, and integrity are the fundamental ingredients of any successful farming effort. One *must* do the daily basics when livestock, when lives are involved. One *must* pull weeds, cultivate soil, prune, maintain, or the crop will be overrun, the mission lost. One *must* maintain equipment. One *must* maintain a high level of readiness for "go-time" – that good stretch of weather for planting, making hay, or harvesting, which has a narrow window of time. Veterans resonate with these similarities to military service deeply and find an analog for thriving in this environment.

### **Reward System (With the Unexpected and Risk)**

The meritocracy mentioned above appears here. The rewards of daily tasks done right are tangible. There will be fruits, vegetables, and grains, meat, milk and eggs. There will be forage and fiber. And there will be no small amount of risk to obtain these rewards. There are not colorful ribbons and medals, but the fruits of our labors are colorful and trigger an intense burst of gratification. There will be setbacks, and uncontrollable variables that will require intense resolve and resilience. It might look as if all is lost, and then we hang on and prevail with a calf, a cutting of hay, a crop wrested from a droughty summer. And we quietly take stock at the end of the day, knowing only a few will take note of this small battle won, but many will unknowingly benefit. We may look to our flag flying on our farm, bathed in a late summer sunset, and smile at the irony of Taps, now sounding to the tune of cows settling in for the night, horses making their last vocal contacts with each other from their stalls, or the wind through the field or orchard. These taps are about life, and our efforts to intimately take part once again.

### **Independence, The Fight for Independence, and Self-Sufficiency**

To receive the rewards requires a daily gut-check, a gritty independence and resolve. I remember the first time I heard Paul Harvey's 1978 [speech](#) on what makes a farmer. This was a speech delivered to the Future Farmers of America delivered in Kansas City, Missouri. Paul Harvey's vision of a farmer is heroic, even iconic. I thought to myself as a young boy, "I want to do that ... do I have what it takes?" Later, similar media messages about patriotism, "The few, the proud," "Be all you can be ...," formed new challenges for me. Then, as now, I felt that they were calling on similar impulses. It was about the responsibility of freedom, that we as Americans had a *duty* to be self-sufficient, to be under-stated and self-reliant. To have the stuff required to stand and be counted, but to never give our sacred liberties away. The farming culture retains this. Farmers and ranchers the world over are known to be some of the most cantankerous, fiercely independent types to walk the land.

Today, many veterans resonate with the local sustainable food movement. They believe, and I count myself among them, that corporate agriculture and its lobby are in some cases restricting our rights to know what is in our food supply and to know the environmental costs of agricultural production methods. Some veterans fight to liberate our local friends and neighbors from misinformation and lack of transparency and accountability about our food. This fight is a good fight, and consistent with our military oaths. For many, it is also a way of acting upon the many realizations that dawn upon a young man or woman in a combat zone, or in a foreign country, realizations about one's own country, one's own assumptions about consumption – from food to factory-made automobiles.

Farming allows the farmer to make his or her own choices – what to plant and when, what technologies to use or avoid, what alterations to the landscape should be employed, and so forth. The farm provides the possibility of a landscape scale project where the result of those personally owned choices will be personally owned consequences. We, those of us that have served, crave that, and it is a part of the independence and self-sufficiency equation that makes farming attractive.

### **Competency Requirements**

Farming requires know-how and technical competence. Everything from the most basic soil manipulations, horticultural knowledge, technical expertise as needed to read field manuals, operations guides for everything from roto-tillers to tractors, basic veterinary medical skills, the list goes on. Farming requires the farmer to be a living Swiss-army knife. This is analogous to many military occupational specialties, especially in the combat arms, where being an expert does not mean

knowing a lot about one thing, but instead being a jack-of-all trades. Competency builds personal confidence. Often veterans miss the feeling of being competent and confident, and farming can be a great way of recovering that.

### **The Therapy of Living Things**

We humans have a natural affinity for other life. I have written about that in the scientific literature a fair bit (see Tidball 2012, for example). Veterans who are struggling to reconnect can often find “handholds” in interactions with other life – plants, animals, and entire landscapes defy the darker notions of futility and death in their vibrant, incessant, steady march of living as hard as possible. Even the weeds are insufferable in their living! Farming enables one to surround him or herself with this cycle of living, and to become an integral part of it rather than a spectator. This kind of engagement and reintegration with the larger community, the community as Aldo Leopold (1949) described it, which includes all the life around us can be a powerful antidote to the isolation of the digital world, especially as experienced by some veterans through prescription drugs and self-medication. Studies show that engagement with life and nature (and I think farming is natural) reduces anxiety, rumination (Bratman, Daily et al. 2015), and a host of other benefits (Tidball and Krasny 2013).

Policymakers and institutions are beginning to understand and appreciate the importance of farming to veterans and their families. The [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#) is “looking to military veterans across the country to fill the roles that keep America’s food supply safe and secure, preserve and strengthen rural communities, and restore and conserve the environment.” Land grant institutions and their cooperative extension systems are following suit with programs such as FarmOps and not-for-profit organizations such as [Growing Veterans](#) and the [Farmer Veteran Coalition](#) work to recruit and engage veterans at the community level. Other organizations, such as [Veterans to Farmers](#) and [the Center for Rural Affairs Farmer Veteran Project](#) provide personalized professional assistance and counseling on farm production, business, financing, and more. All of these groups want to ensure that veterans looking to return home or start a new career on a farm or in a rural community have the tools and opportunities needed to succeed (Brown, Besterman-Dahan et al. 2016) .

Like other forms of outdoor recreation and engagement, not everyone is cut out to farm, or wants to. But many do, and the benefits for those that so choose are being discussed in the popular media increasingly. I am attempting to catalog these stories that document why farming is appealing and healthful for vets as a part of my work at Cornell University, where I conduct research and outreach regarding the therapeutic qualities of a host of outdoor activities as experienced by veterans, service-members and their families, and even disaster survivors. I find this work incredibly rewarding, because I see that this work influences greater investment in these kinds of activities for those who can benefit most. But when push comes to shove, it’s the mistress that is my farm that has saved my life more than once, and for the reasons above, and likely others, I am hers as long as she will have me.

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### **Author Bio**

Keith Tidball, a farmer, avid hunter and angler and licensed NY State Guide, enlisted in the Michigan National Guard in 1990 as an E1 Infantryman, 38th ID. He was selected for Officer Candidate School, which he completed in 1993 at Fort Knox. He served as an Infantry platoon leader until receiving a career-ending eye injury. Despite the injury, Tidball continued his service by becoming an International Affairs specialist in the Foreign Service (USDA/FAS/ICD), where he

served as a Subject Matter Expert in natural resources management in conflict and disaster settings throughout the world.

Today, Tidball serves as Assistant Director of Cornell Cooperative Extension for Veterans, Military Families, and Disaster Education, and as a Senior Extension Associate in the Department of Natural Resources, where he conducts research, extension, and outreach activities in the area of ecological dimensions of human security. Tidball also volunteers as a member of the Brigade staff (S3 Plans and Operations Officer) of the 10th Area Command, New York Guard and is a life member of the American Legion. He serves on the board of directors or advises numerous not-for-profit organizations serving veterans, to include Trout Unlimited New York Veterans Service Partnership, Rivers of Recovery, Wounded Warriors in Action Foundation, and Higher Ground Sun Valley.

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