

## **Connecting Veterans to Horticulture**

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### **Summary**

Agriculture, the green industry and horticulture can help returning veterans integrate back into civilian life with productive careers. Likewise, the human talent and skill-sets that veterans offer can be a great employee resource for the green industry. After 15-years of service, veteran Robert Elliott returned to his family farm and developed a profitable small farming operation. Suicide is the second leading cause of death in the US military. His success ("*Farming saved my life*") – the story of a veteran finding peace and a life worth living with real purpose - brought a flood of veterans to Robert's doorstep to learn how to become farmers. Robert began working with veterans across the country and developing programs for those interested in agriculture. He also continued with his own education, pursuing a B.S. in Biological and Agricultural

Engineering with a minor in Horticultural Science at North Carolina State University (NCSU). Lis Meyer of NCSU not only introduced him to the possibilities of plant propagation as a science, but also career opportunities in the nursery industry. One of the initial programs Robert started in his efforts to connect veterans with agriculture, which first involved Lis - was the Soldier to Agriculture Program (STAG) at NCSU. Robert went on to also start the Veterans Farm of North Carolina (VFNC), which provides consultation and training to veterans and transitioning military on agricultural production methods of all scales and sizes. Its newest program is a six-month, hands-on farm training program known as the Veterans Agricultural Training and Education Program (VATEP).

## **INTRODUCTION**

In North Carolina, agriculture (including the nursery industry) is the number one source of income for the state, followed closely by the United State military. While historically there was much overlap between the farming and military populations - not only in NC, but in the US as a whole - these two career paths began to separate - following the passage of the GI Bill at the end of WWII.

Robert Elliott started out following a similar path of many in the U.S. armed forces. He grew up on a large, commodity crop and livestock farm in Franklin County during the late 1980's and 1990's. Seeing his family struggle to keep their farm afloat, Robert had no desire to continue in agriculture. As an 18-year-old, he joined the U.S. Marines. He was honorably discharged due to an injury after five years in the Marines, after which he worked with his same unit as a Department of Defense (DoD) contractor for an additional ten years. Following being laid off from his contractor position, Robert's story diverged from the typical narrative of

separation between military and agriculture - as he returned to his family farm in North Carolina. He turned the farm into a profitable small farming operation based on niche pork. His success began to attract media attention.

Robert was interviewed about how taking to the land and farming helped him cope with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) – and avoid becoming a post-military suicide that many veterans succumb to. Suicide is the second leading cause of death in the US military <https://deploymentpsych.org/disorders/suicide-main> . When a veteran returns home, they lose their entire support network, and it is one of the most challenging things they face that can ultimately lead to a hopeless view on life. A quote from Robert's interviews hit home to many veterans that read his story: "*Farming saved my life.*" The stories of a veteran finding peace and a life worth living with real purpose brought a flood of veterans to Robert's doorstep to learn how to become farmers

He began working with veterans across the country and developing programs for those interested in agriculture. He also continued with his own education, pursuing a B.S. in Biological and Agricultural Engineering with a minor in Horticultural Science at North Carolina State University. In 2019, Robert enrolled in a plant propagation course taught by Lis Meyer, a senior lecturer in the Department of Horticultural Science. This class introduced him to the possibilities not only of plant propagation as a science, but of the nursery industry.

Lis Meyer, in turn, had seen a steady increase in veteran enrollments in her classes and programs since she first began teaching in 2010. At any given point during the past five years, at least a quarter of the students enrolled in the Undergraduate Certificate Program in General Horticulture, which she coordinated, were veterans or veteran spouses. Having observed the strong work ethic, superior problem-solving skills, and enthusiasm for learning that these veteran

students brought to the classroom, Lis was happy to accept Robert's invitation to teach plant propagation sessions as part of the Soldier to Agriculture Program (STAG) which he had started at Fort Bragg through the NC State Agricultural Institute. This partnership opened the door to a whole new world of possibilities both for the veteran students eager to learn more about horticulture and for the field of nursery production - as we search for the next generation of leaders for our industry.

### **SOLDIER TO AGRICULTURE PROGRAM (STAG)**

One of the initial programs Robert started in his efforts to connect veterans with agriculture, and the one in which Lis first became involved, was the Soldier to Agriculture Program (STAG) at North Carolina State University (NCSU). While developing a connection between the military and NC State's Agricultural Institute (AGI), a request from the Fort Bragg Transition Assistance Program (TAPS) officer was made to Robert and Dr. Elizabeth Wilson, the director of AGI. Many of the 750 soldiers per month that were exiting the Army into the civilian world from Fort Bragg were looking for a program that would help them learn how to start a farm. TAPS is a program within the Army that exists to help soldiers find a smooth transition into the civilian world.

STAG is placed within the Career Skills Program (CSP) of TAPS. CSPs is a relatively new program developed by the Department of Army to reduce the unemployment benefits paid to veterans once they exit the military. Research showed that soldiers were not prepared adequately nor timely enough to acquire a job immediately upon exit. The CSP model offers corporations from many industries an opportunity to come to Fort Bragg, acquire office and classroom space, and gain direct access to transitioning military personnel that could be released from their unit temporarily to be recruited by these companies and train for jobs while in their

last 180 days of active-duty service. Upon completion of the CSP of the soldier's choice, they would have a job waiting on them once they fulfilled their contract term in the Army. STAG became an extremely popular CSP with Fort Bragg, and now, across all branches of service. STAG is regarded by TAP staff as, "*The most sought-after transition program on Fort Bragg.*" To date, there have been 26 total cohorts with 290 graduates - and there is a waiting list of over 490 interested in attending the class.

STAG is typically an in-person class that runs Monday through Friday for six weeks from 09:30-13:00. Since March of 2020, the course has been completely online due to COVID with the only exception being optional, COVID-compliant tours on farmer veteran operations in the area. Lis has taught one to two-day plant propagation sessions as a guest instructor with STAG since 2019. During these sessions, STAG students learn and get hands-on experience with the basics of greenhouse mist systems, cutting propagation, grafting, bulb scaling, and much more (Fig. 1). They are also introduced to various facets of the nursery industry, including professional organizations like IPPS (Figs. 2, 3, and 4)

### **VETERAN'S FARM OF NORTH CAROLINA (VFNC)**

Robert also built the Veteran's Farm of NC, Inc. (VFNC), a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization dedicated to assisting veterans and military personnel/unit commands with consultation, training and education, equipment usage, and land acquisition (Figs. 5 and 6). Founded in 2014, VFNC began to bridge the gap between the military and agricultural communities. VFNC works through five main programing areas: recruitment, consultation, networking, education and training, and Infrastructure.

VFNC recruits interested veterans both in and out of the service and exposes them to all of the opportunities agriculture has to offer. Veterans learn that the agriculture industry has many

desirable career opportunities. Recruiting also means educating a veteran before they start farming to develop the skill-sets, have a plan, minimize risks - and the foundation to develop an economically successful business. The VFNC helps create best management practices (BMPs) through education based on past experiences and real knowledge - from experienced members of agriculture-related industries.

VFNC provides consultation and training to veterans and transitioning military on agricultural production methods of all scales and sizes. Its newest program is a six-month, hands-on farm training program known as the Veterans Agricultural Training and Education Program (VATEP). In short, VATEP will have the primary models of agriculture that most farms engage in today - on a newly acquired 53-acre parcel of land in Cameron, NC. Participants in the program will have the opportunity to work with each production model such as beekeeping, livestock, greenhouse/horticulture, agronomy/field crops, pasture management, forestry, hydroponics, indoor food production, and much more. This program is partnered with Fayetteville Technical Community College and students will complete online coursework in a variety of subjects with hands-on, practicums to be completed on the farm (Fig. 7). Upon completion, participants show proficiency in all business requirements a farm requires by practicing those principles on the farm with guidance. Many more benefits for veterans will be available from VATEP and an extended program guide is available for those with interest in the program.

VFNC has built a network of over 500 farmer veterans and links them to critical resources in NC. VFNC believes that collaboration is the only way farmers can succeed. VFNC also assists veterans with acquiring lower cost land and equipment rental. VFNC accepts financial donations, and gifting of agricultural and general construction equipment, as well as

infrastructural items (Fig. 8). These items are available for veterans to use in NC. We currently maintain an inventory of over \$200,000 in equipment including tractors, implements, trailers, a truck, freezers, other equipment - and much more. These items are heavily utilized. This initiative is instrumental in assisting a farmer with their endeavors and sometimes can be an absolute game-changer for a farmer that cannot afford the tractor but stands to greatly multiply their production and revenue by using it for a few days.

VFNC's mission is, "To give veterans a new mission and America new farmers."

## **IPPS INVOLVEMENT**

In January 2020, the IPPS Southern Region of North American executive committee unanimously voted to extend free student memberships to those enrolled in the STAG program. This decision was an excellent first step in bringing together two groups of people who have much to offer each other. We look forward to seeing this relationship grow and prosper in years to come, as IPPS members - to "Seek and Share" the collective knowledge - with veterans who wish to become colleagues. It is a win-win for all with the career opportunities the green industry offers veterans, and the human talent that veterans can bring to the nursery profession.



**Figure 1.** Students learning how to graft ginkgoes (*Ginkgo biloba*) in the Soldier to Agriculture Program (STAG) at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina.





**Figure 2.** A veteran and former Soldier to Agriculture Program (STAG) student with his family at a holiday houseplant sale held to support the program.





**Figure 3.** Lis Meyer, Robert Elliott, Samantha Manning, and other Soldier to Agriculture Program (STAG) participants at a holiday houseplant sale held to raise funding for the program.





**Figure 4.** Soldier to Agriculture Program (STAG) students visiting the Fox Greenhouses at North Carolina State University.



**Figure 5.** (top & bottom) Robert Elliott, Veteran's Farm of North Carolina (VFNC) and Soldier to Agriculture (STAG) Program.





**Figure 6.** (top) Robert Elliott and (bottom) Soldier to Ag (STAG) Program logo.



**Figure 7.** (top) Samantha Manning, Robert Elliott, Robert Stalter, and Estela Walker from the Agricultural Institute. (bottom) Brent Hardy, former Soldier to Ag (STAG) student, Captain, US Army.



**Figure 8.** (Top) Command Sgt. Major Jason Stanley, Retired US Army, past Soldier to Ag (STAG) participant. (Bottom) Veterans at Veterans Farm of North Carolina accepting a tractor donation from Kubota Tractors.