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**HELPING VETERANS
THROUGH THE
ART AND SCIENCE
OF AVIATION**

COVER STORY

WARRIORS IN NEED – AVIATION INDEED

AN INTERVIEW WITH WARRIORS IN NEED PRESIDENT BEN INGRAM

By Annamarie Buonocore

Here at *In Flight USA*, we are proud of the work we have done with veterans. The talented men and women who have served our armed forces often enter the field of aviation and contribute a great deal to our industry. We are proud to have featured stories about such veterans in the past, and we feel that there is no better way to kick off 2024 than to focus on an organization of veterans helping other veterans transition into civilian life. We are all aware that aviation faces some challenges, including a pilot and mechanic shortage, and working with organizations such as Warriors in Need is a great way to find talent for the industry. Ben Ingram, a veteran himself, is running this organization and also runs a Southern California-based aircraft cleaning company in support of this new nonprofit. He understands both aviation and veterans very well, and he has shed great light on how veterans can give aviation a wonderful future and how aviation can provide them with lucrative



Ben Ingram of Warriors in Need

opportunities and job security for years to come.

In Flight USA: Why is your organization called Warriors in Need and how long have you been around?

Ben Ingram: Yes, we are called Warriors in Need because we help veterans who are transitioning into civilian life after their time in the service. We have been working on putting this organization together for over a year, but we officially

launched Oct. 1, 2023. So, we're very new.

IFUSA: Why did you want to start an organization to help veterans in need?

BI: To give you a little background, I am a Marine veteran. A little over two years ago, my friends and I lost a really good friend who was a Marine to suicide. In short order, raised nearly \$10,000 for the family. We began to think that if we could do that in just a few weeks, what could we do with the rest of our lives. We



Warriors in Need helps veterans transition, often through aviation, into civilian life.
(Courtesy Warriors in Need)

began to wonder what we could do for these wonderful men and women who are the best this country has to offer as they transition from military service to meaningful work here in the civilian sector. We were especially concerned about

Continued on Page 10

Cover Story

Continued from Page 4

this high rate of suicide among veterans. I am not an expert on the numbers, but through other organizations, I have learned that 20 percent of suicides each year, and there are close to 40,000 suicides in this country, are veteran suicides. Veterans only make up six percent of the population, so it is very lopsided. Our mission is to help transitioning veterans with the many challenges that come with transitioning into civilian life. Aviation is really important to us because it is an industry that can give these veterans hope, a place where they can use their experience and be appreciated. We want to bring down these high suicide rates and offer resources for veterans who might be suffering from injuries or emotional darkness. We want to give them a place to go when they're struggling.

IFUSA: Are you the founder?

BI: I am the founder, but there are others involved as well. My family has been very supportive of all of this from the beginning. I have a lot of friends involved, but I am spearheading this operation. I am trying to recruit as many people as possible, veterans and non-veterans, to get on board. I am not comfortable just randomly asking people for money, so I am working to form a nonprofit charity where we can seek donations for our cause of helping veterans. I also own an aircraft cleaning company, so I am taking profits from that company to invest into the Warriors in Need charity. Our goal is to be a template for other companies and show them how to do this. I hire veterans in my own company, and I am partnering with my fellow Marine, Nick Matthews, who is a top name in aircraft cleaning and well-known in the Van Nuys area. Nick is my business partner and the Operations Officer for our cleaning company, G.H. Graham Custom Aircraft Detailing. He knows how to bring veterans into aviation jobs and help them to thrive in the industry. He has been in the industry himself for 30 years and brings a great deal of knowledge and leadership to the table. He has been able to find us many customers who really support our efforts and believe in what we're doing here. We plan to hire more veterans and help them use their experience in our company and branch out into other aviation careers. We plan to help them get into MROs, flight schools, and other organizations because we need some good leaders. Regardless of whether or not they have aviation experience before they come to us, they have invaluable skills that can only be learned in the military. We want to get our hands on these leaders, train them, and bring them into the aviation industry that is hurting for help right now. We're

gonna fill that gap with these veterans.

IFUSA: What services do you offer veterans once they come to you?

BI: Yes, we are working on a menu of services. We are looking to offer career and job counseling. We are partnering with the Wounded Warriors Project, and they offer resume services, job counseling, and various information. We are also working with several MROs, including Duncan Aviation, which is looking to put together a job fair for us in the spring of 2024. As far as jobs go, we look forward to becoming a conduit between the veterans and the Warriors for Work program and the MROs that need to recruit. We're basically a liaison between Warriors for Work and the MROs right now. We look forward to bringing veterans out to Lincoln, Neb. for this job fair that is going to happen in the spring at Duncan Aviation. For crisis and emotional counseling, we are partnering up with an organization called DAV (Disabled American Veterans). They have local chapters, and one of their officers is a good friend of mine out of Ventura County. We're working with them to create more crisis services. As maintenance professionals, we're very good at partnering with other organizations and managing resources both internally and externally.

IFUSA: Where does your personal interest in aviation stem from?

BI: I am a pilot and an aircraft mechanic. My aviation career started with the Marine Corp back in 1992. I signed up with an open contract and did not have any expectations but to graduate from Marine Corp bootcamp. I planned to come out on the other end a new man, and that happened. By the grace of God, I was routed into the air wing of the Marine Corp. I first became a mechanic and then a helicopter crew chief. I logged nearly 1,000 hours flying in a CH-46 helicopter for the Marine Corp. I was deployed all over the world. I have been to Africa, Southeast Asia, the Gulf. I really developed some great skills and qualities that I was able to leave the Marine Corp with. To my fortune, the MOS (job) I held gave me authorization to take my A&P exams, so I did. I have been a mechanic since 1997. After the Marine Corp, I worked for Martins Aviation in Santa Ana, Calif. From there, I started climbing the ladder. Shortly after I started working there, I was taking care of several business jets. After six or seven years at Martins Aviation, I decided to go into business for myself and really get in the frying pan. I started a small aircraft management company. I started to expand my own services through my

Continued on Page 13

Cover Story

Continued from Page 10

experience and education. I had Falcons, Gulfstreams and Citations under my care. I just built up the ladder from there. A couple of notable resume items would be: after 9/11, I was eager to get back into the Marine Corp. Unfortunately, I am disabled, so it was a little more complicated. That was when I got into the Navy DOD for civil service. I started to fly the P-3 Alliance and became part of an aviation photography team. We worked closely with the Missile Defense Agency and the Air Force. We photographed their rocket launches out of Vandenberg Air Force Base. Some of the most memorable work was what we did with NASA with their Hypersonic Measurement Team. We actually got to work with the space shuttle before the orbiter was retired. We used special telescopes to image the space shuttle at speeds as high as mach 22. NASA provided a special sensor which was mounted on our telescopes. The sensor was spatially, spectrally and thermally calibrated to collect quantitative data to better understand heat shield damage and the possible effects on the shuttle. There were a lot of lessons learned there, and I can apply those lessons to the work we are doing with Warriors in Need.

IFUSA: What kinds of planes do you service in your aircraft cleaning company?

BI: We have mostly business jets in our lineup. We work in the Van Nuys and Burbank area. We clean interiors, exteriors, and we have specialty services that include special coating and paint sealants. We specialize in interior carpet and upholstery. We have silks and other special materials and also state-of-the-art equipment, the best in the industry. We have the best and most capable people working for us, as well. To put that in perspective, even some of our competitors call us for some of our specialty services. We strive to be the best, and we look to hire veterans. We look to help support them and become a stepping-stone to other areas of aviation such as maintenance and piloting.

IFUSA: Do you like being in the Van Nuys and Burbank area?

BI: Yes, I do. Van Nuys probably has the most business jet traffic on the West coast if not the entire country. Between the two airports, there is a lion's share of business aircraft that need cleaning services. There are a lot of customers, and there are good maintenance organizations here too. Western Jet is here. It is a very large facility, and they send us in the 20s of aircraft to work on at a time. There's a lot of business here. It's a great vocation to be in. There is so much history here at the Van Nuys Airport; Clay Lacy

Aviation and Gulfstream, as well as, the Condor Squadron with their T-6 aircraft. It's wonder here.

IFUSA: Which airplanes do you and your staff enjoy working on or flying?

BI: We actually have a 757 that we enjoy working on. I cannot divulge all of our clients here, but we get some pretty cool airplanes to clean and work on. The 757 is my personal favorite. It's just a really cool airplane and a really fun one to clean. It's a great client, and we're honored to be the preferred vendor for some of these clients.

IFUSA: Do you plan to offer any aviation-related courses to your veterans?

BI: I am so glad you asked that because yes, we plan to offer several courses to help the veterans in their careers. We really want to start a mentorship program where we can introduce veterans who are within the aviation wing within the military to those who are not. This could start giving them knowledge about aviation and the opportunities it provides. We can definitely do this on the maintenance side. Obviously the piloting side is a little trickier, we don't have the resources to become a flight school, but we can refer them to flight school partners. Maintenance is easy. I am a maintenance manager right now, and we have access to numerous aircraft. Our clients are on board with what we're doing. If we can help get them on the path through our partners West Jet and Standard Aero, that would make us very happy. There's a lot we can do. As you know, schooling through an accredited college is one path to becoming an aircraft mechanic, but there's also OJT (on the job training). Eighteen months of OJT can qualify you for your A&P license, as well some military service and experience can be applied. Some military aviation jobs meet requirements for exam authorization. We look forward to forming partnerships with the local colleges to provide access to that pathway. But we also plan to focus on OJT and getting these men and women directly into the MROs.

IFUSA: What are your goals for 2024?

BI: I am looking to put together a board so that we can sit down and have those discussions about what is next. There are a couple of events we are looking to put together. We are looking to do a 5K or 10K walk. There are a couple other shooting events we'd like to get involved with. Right now, we're really going to focus on getting the cleaning company well established, for which we're well underway. We would like to hire two veterans this year within our company and use all of the resources to make sure we are successful going for-

Continued on Page 14

Cover Story

Continued from Page 13

ward. Right now, we need to fortify and get a few new players in place to put together charity events. They need to understand the nonprofit space and lead the effort as we fortify the cleaning company and make room for new employees.

IFUSA: How do you go about getting new members?

BI: Right now, it's mostly word of mouth. We're working on a membership fee structure for the new year. We are working to obtain our nonprofit status. Then we will add memberships. We would like to sponsor a race team in the motorcycle racing industry. We have some roots there. Before Warriors in Need became a thing, we were using racing and motorcycles as a therapy for our veterans in need. I truly believe that the therapy of riding and racing kept my friend alive longer than he would have been. We can learn from that. We know

this industry is very therapeutic, enticing, and exciting for veterans. We hope to advertise through sponsoring a race team and recruiting new members in that way. We're partnering with Legacy Aviation. They enjoy sponsoring our events, and events are a great way to bring in new people.

IFUSA: How can our readers help your cause?

BI: We have a link for donations to help us as well as the Wounded Warrior Project. It's a great organization. I have donated to them for years. Donations can be made online, and we'll have a website link set up soon. We are putting together tee shirts, hats, and merchandise that we can sell to generate revenue for our nonprofit. We take donations at events through our credit card terminal. All of this is in the works, and we look forward to telling you more about it soon.

IFUSA: Thank you.