

Veterans in Agriculture

EP 24: Farms, Food and You Podcast

[Music]

Dee Shore [00:06]

What do George Washington, William Henry Harrison, Lyndon Johnson, and Jimmy Carter have in common? Of course, they were all presidents of the United States. But they also shared a couple of other things: They were among several presidents who served in the military, and they were also farmers.

Recently, like these former presidents, more veterans are exploring their options in agriculture.

I'm Dee Shore of the NC State's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, and in this episode of Farms, Food and You, veterans discuss their experiences in farming and homesteading and talk about a program designed to help those who've served our country pursue agricultural careers. They also share advice about entering agriculture for others who've served our country through their military service.

[Music]

Dee Shore (01:07)

In recent years, there's been rising interest in the role that military veterans can and do play in American agriculture: For the first time ever, the USDA found in its 2017 Census of Agriculture that over 10% of farmers in the United States have served in the Armed Forces.

That's over 350,000 men and women in the United States, with nearly 9,000 of them in North Carolina. And the market value of their agricultural products totals nearly \$42 billion.

With the average age of a U.S. farmer rising to about 58 and the possible need for need more farmers to meet the world's rising demand for food and fiber, many see a role for military veterans.

Veterans are noted for bringing to agriculture traits cultivated in the military: things like a sense of duty, responsibility and accountability, plus organizational skills, discipline and the ability to problem solve quickly and creatively.

Samantha Manning is a veteran, a farmer and a military liaison with the Soldier to Agriculture program in NC State University's Agricultural Institute. Here's how she put it:

Samantha Manning (02:30)

The veterans are such a good fit for agriculture just because of that purpose-driven, mission-driven mindset that we get from military service. And we all -- if you didn't have it before you joined the service, you get it while you're there -- really have a desire to make a difference. To make a positive difference, whether that's in our community volunteering, which I do quite a bit of that, and especially in our careers.

And I think agriculture really provides that for a lot of our transitioning soldiers and veterans, and they're looking for something that they can feel really good about doing -- that helps the community and helps their family.

A lot of folks get into this because they want to be able to provide food for their family, and then they see a greater opportunity. And they just fall in love with whatever facet of agriculture they are interested in.

Dee Shore (03:22)

Robert Elliott, Manning's colleague in the Soldier to Agriculture program, agrees. But his motivation to become a farmer was different. He grew up on a large farm in Louisburg, but his return to that farm, as he tells it, could be summed up as desperation.

A knee injury brought Elliott's career as a helicopter mechanic in the Marine Corps to an end after five years of service. Then he took a job as a contractor for the military. After 10 years, he and the rest of those working in his shop was laid off. He tried engineering school but didn't make the grade.

Robert Elliott (04:02)

Eventually, lack of jobs and failing out of school and all of that stuff, along with a very rough transitions to civilian life, led me into farming. And it seemed to be pretty much the only option for me left that was out there with what little bit of land that was left available on the farm for me to work with.

I've farmed 40 acres total with pastured livestock – with hogs and chickens and turkeys – and experimented with different crops and niche markets and mushrooms and stuff like that. And I wound up doing relatively well with it because I applied a lot of newer business ideas and really focused on the business aspect of farming – and then what is actually working and what is not, financially, and cutting out the financial detriment to the farm operation.

Dee Shore (05:01)

Pretty soon, Elliott was being asked to speak about his experience as a farmer who'd been in the military. The media started calling, then veterans with interests in agriculture.

Robert Elliott (05:12)

Over time it led to so many veterans that I was working with that I realized I would rather work with veterans and teach them the basic things that I know and show them the trials and errors and save them from some of the errors that most beginning farmers have or start bridging the gap between ag and the military and show a path into it for veterans.

Dee Shore (05:38)

Then there were awards, and he was asked to join the Agricultural Institute. Working under institute director Elizabeth Wilson, he created a joint program with Fort Bragg, an Army base in Fayetteville.

The Soldier to Agriculture program was the first of its kind in the country, bringing professors from NC State to the base to introduce the field of agriculture to veterans and soldiers who have transitioned or are transitioning to civilian life. Since 2017, some 250 people have been through the program.

Robert Elliott (06:18)

We see every single class, a huge percentage, if not almost the entire class, they come in with a preconceived notion and idea of what it is they want to do. And by the time they leave, that has changed completely. Folks are not being given the full story of what you're faced with when you come into farming.

Dee Shore (06:41)

Elliott says the Soldier to Agriculture program gives them a more realistic picture, as well as an understanding that agricultural careers aren't limited to farming.

Robert Elliott (06:52)

They don't understand that it's more than just cows, chickens, turkeys, ducks and vegetables, or there's horticulture. There is gardening. There are landscape designers.

Precision agriculture is one of the biggest things that we've got coming up – that we're going to see an industry built around the use of GPS and wireless internet. If we do ever get to the point where we've got good internet in rural areas, we're going to see that that industry just explodes with growth.

... There's a place for marketers. There's a place for accountants, and so forth and so on. And these are things that veterans are not considering because they are not exposed to it – they don't have a clue that it even exists.

Dee Shore (07:35)

The Soldier to Agriculture program is designed to give aspiring farmers a peek into these opportunities. But Samantha Manning says it delivers even more:

Samantha Manning (07:46)

These soldiers and veterans have a network, and now they have a renewed sense of purpose and mission. When they finish the Soldier to Agriculture program, many of them are looking for careers in agriculture and so that's a big boost to North Carolina's economy, as well, as all of these veterans and soldiers staying in North Carolina and becoming a part of the biggest industry in North Carolina.

Dee Shore (08:09)

Elliott said he wants the program to grow but stay true to its mission.

Robert Elliott (08:13)

What we are trying to do is the core of our mission is, at the end of the day, "Have we done the best job that we can do to point the veterans in the right direction and give them the resources and information they need to make the appropriate decision that's going to lead them down to a productive and successful path in agriculture?"

And it's become a wild success, It's looking very bright for the future. We're not just helping veterans get to NC State or to find a job in ag or start their own farm or whatever. We're ultimately giving them a network of veterans that have been through this.

Dee Shore (08:50)

David Rich is part of that network. He served in the U.S. Air Force for 21 years. As an anti-terrorism specialist, he traveled the world helping set up military bases. He had fond memories of working on farms as a kid in New York's Hudson River Valley, Today, he's homesteading near Sanford, with thoughts of one day launching a business building farms in shipping containers and getting them to urban deserts, disaster zones or other places where people are hungry. A few years back, he was in the Soldier to Agriculture program.

David Rich (09:28)

The interactions are great. When you're in the military, you're housed together and live together. And you get used to it. You miss seeing your close friends that you can trust, that if you need them, they're going to be there. Like, I still talk to some of the people that were in our class, and you still have your interaction and camaraderie for a while when you're in the class and then with people afterward.

Dee Shore (09:48)

Like Rich, Tenita Solanto didn't come to agriculture from a traditional farming background. After leaving the Navy in 2004, she earned a college degree and began information technology work in the corporate world. She then started her own web design and social media marketing business.

Solanto decided to become a farmer after attending a conference where she was talking to producers about how incorporating IT and business administrative services into their business.

Tenita Solanto (10:21)

When I went to the conference I started learning about farming. I learned about something that was called urban farming, which I'd never heard about before, and that really caught my eye. Literally that day when I went home, I started trying to learn more about farming and begin the process of teaching myself about how to farm.

Dee Shore (10:40)

Solanto says that what she heard about the aging farming population and the need for healthy, fresh foods motivated her.

Tenita Solanto (10:48)

It just spoke to me that this was something that I wanted to do and help my community to be able to grow fresh foods. After that, I started Green Panda Farms in 2016. I literally lived on one acre of land in Raleigh, and I started an indoor farm because it was going to take too long for me to convert my backyard lawn into a farm. So I had a spare room in my home, and I converted that into a grow room.

Dee Shore (11:17)

Solanto now has a farm in Siler City where she produces microgreens. They are the stems and first two leaves of vegetables that are often used in salads. She plans to expand her indoor operation to include hydroponic production. In hydroponics, plants are grown in water rather than soil.

For other veterans considering agriculture, Solanto offers a couple of pointers.

Tenita Solanto (11:44)

The advice I would give another veteran that is interested in going into ag is networking. That's probably the number one thing that has helped me along this is going out and talking to others, connecting with their FSA in their local neighborhood and learning about the programs there. And I would like to say research. Online, it's a vast amount of information on there. You can learn – research, find someone who's growing a similar crop that you want to grow and perhaps talk to them as a mentor. So that would be my advice.

Dee Shore (12:18)

For those who don't know, the FSA is the Farm Service Agency that locally delivers USDA programs and Services to farmers. Some of those programs target veterans.

Each of the four veterans I talked to for this episode came from a different perspective, but they all say that food production has made a difference in their lives:

- Samantha Manning has not only created a farm that uses sustainable, organic and regenerative practices to grow produce, she's also launched a career in agricultural education.
- David Rich feels a sense of security growing his own food.

- Tenita Solanto is using the leadership skills that she gained in the military to create a small but growing farm. She's also spreading the word about agriculture's contributions to society by speaking with school children.
- And Robert Elliott: He's gained not only a career as a teacher and mentor for other veterans exploring agricultural careers but a purpose in life. He says that during the transitional phase after he left the military, agriculture saved his life.

I'd like to thank Robert and our other guests -- and all the veterans in agriculture who've both protected us and helped keep us clothed and well-nourished.

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Dee Shore (13:53)

Thanks for listening today, and we hope you'll join us again for the next episode of Farms, Food and You. To learn more about the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and our podcast, visit go.ncsu.edu/farms. While you're there, share your thoughts. We'd love to get your ideas and to hear what topics you'd like for us to explore in the future.

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