

# MY MILITARY EXPERIENCE

How two Green Industry business owners have turned their military service into private-sector success.



Daryle Johnson and his wife, Linda, attend PLANET's Renewal & Remembrance ceremony nearly every year with grandchildren.

## Daryle Johnson

CEO of All American Turf Beauty in Van Meter, Iowa  
Service: U.S. Army, 1954-1956

"I was 18. I'd worked one summer, gone two quarters to college, ran out of money and volunteered for the service. I spent 16 months in Korea. I got out when I was 20. They wouldn't let me buy a beer when I got back.

The G.I. Bill gave me a chance to complete college. That's a reason I went to the service.

I majored in agronomy [at Iowa State University] and went to work for Swift Agricultural Chemicals, a division of Swift & Co. that was large in the fertilizer business. I worked there in sales and management for 17 years. We marketed and sold fertilizers and pesticides to golf courses, lawn care people and farmers, so we were deeply involved with the Green Industry. At that time chemical lawn care was just starting. There

weren't any program chemical lawn care companies doing business in Iowa, so I started the first chemical lawn service business, All American Turf Beauty.

The first two years were difficult. We obviously didn't make any money. It takes a while to get started and you've got to stick with it. We started in 1976 and in 1983 we were an Inc. 500 company, one of the fastest-growing privately owned companies in the U.S.

We financed our expansion with our own profits. About every two years we would move into another market, when we developed enough money to buy the equipment and hire the people. We financed our own growth rather than getting huge loans. We had 67 percent compound annual growth over five years each year.

Anybody that's been in the service knows you have to have a certain amount of discipline. That's also necessary to start a business. It's not easy. You've got to stick with it and be disciplined or else it falls apart."

—As told to Sarah Pfledderer

### » WEB EXTRA

To read about L.G. Scott Landscaping & Tree Service, a Pennsylvania landscape business operated by a military family, visit the Web Extras section of [Landscape Management.net](http://LandscapeManagement.net).

## Brandy Prettyman

Co-owner, The Grounds Guys of Omaha, Neb.

Service: U.S. Army, 2001-2004; husband Dan Prettyman served in the U.S. Army from 2001-2007

"Both my husband, Dan, and I were in the Army. We're both Operation Iraqi Freedom veterans. We were both in Iraq for the initial go around in 2003. I got out during 2004. He came home in 2004 and went back out again in 2004. He pretty much did back-to-back trips.

When we got out of the Army we both went into government contracting. Last year we decided we wanted to do something different. We both knew we wanted to start a business but starting a business from scratch wasn't the way we wanted to go. We knew the VetFran program was available to us and we started looking at The Dwyer Group. The episode of "Undercover Boss" that Dina Dwyer-Owens was on featured The Grounds Guys. I said to Dan, "You like being outside, and I could run the business side of it." It was just a good fit. We created our corporation in March 2012.

Last year we started with just myself and Dan. This year we currently have 10 employees. During the summer we actually surged to 14. We have the Offutt Air Force Base grounds maintenance contract. We provide maintenance services for over a thousand acres. It's a \$1.4 million contract over five years. Dealing with a federal contract is never easy, but our experience helped us hone in on what was important and what needed to be done. We knew this is where our specialty was.

It has been an exhausting year, but it's also been very rewarding being able to run your own business and know you control how well you do.

The one thing about the military that prepared me the best to run a business was being able to roll with the punches. In the Army I wasn't in a leadership position; I was a specialist when I got out. You learn as member of lower enlisted to just roll with it. Learning how to diplomatically react to your [military] team leader or a drill sergeant is similar to reacting to a customer. You have to find a way to explain why you did what you did.

Another thing the military taught me is having a structure and knowing that structure. You really learn how to empower your subordinates. As an owner, you cannot control everything; it's the same as being a squad leader or platoon leader. There are so many tasks that have to be completed to keep the mission going. You can't do them alone. You have to depend on your team. One of the best lessons the military teaches you is it's not just about you. We either succeed or fail as a company."

—As told to Marisa Palmieri



Brandy and Dan Prettyman met in the Army; today they co-own a The Grounds Guys franchise.