

Racking Up Success

When an Iraq War veteran learned that he had to drive six hours to get his campaign medal, he started an online company that has helped more than 3 million fellow vets get their medals, too

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U.S. Army Sgt. Jared Zabaldo was serving as a military journalist in 2004 in Baghdad's Green Zone. Propelled by patriotism, he had enlisted a few days after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Three years later, he found himself in the middle of another terrorist attack, one of the worst enemy mortar assaults to hit the Green Zone that year.

"We were attacked with alarmingly accurate indirect fire in July 2004," said Zabaldo, who was serving with the Multinational Security Transition Command Iraq at the time. "Indirect fire with accuracy is a real dreadful experience because it feels like you're in a death lottery, and you're a number in the basket."

That summer, portions of the Green Zone where Zabaldo worked and lived lacked reinforced bunkers or sand bags, and personnel slept in soft-sided aluminum trailers with no protection. The enemy launched its attacks at night.

"It seems kind of embarrassing or silly in retrospect, but in reality the smartest decision I could have made in the split seconds I had to make then was to jump in the little wooden standup locker we all had in those trailers," Zabaldo said. "We were all just hoping for good luck that night, and that was really a kind of dreadful, helpless feeling. There were many attacks like that, but that was real accurate fire for once."

An Idea Forms for an Online Store

As an Army Reservist in Iraq, Zabaldo was often required to drive up to six hours to reach other U.S. military bases. His deployment also drove him to establish a successful online armed forces military medals provider.

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“Our company was started, very simply, owing to the fact that I had received an award for being in Iraq, but it was that common type of award that you never really tangibly receive, like the Iraq Campaign Medal,” Zabaldo said. “Everyone gets it on their paperwork, but if you really want it, you go to clothing sales to buy it.”

In 2005, a few months after coming home from Iraq, Zabaldo was in Oregon and did not want to make the six-hour roundtrip drive to Fort Lewis, Wash., simply for a medal and a ribbon. There were few options for him to purchase the award online.

“I wasn’t really able to get around that trip,” Zabaldo said. “And the idea for an online source for military personnel to obtain uniform items was born.”

Today, USA Military Medals, or USAMM, is an e-commerce armed forces superstore that has fulfilled more than 5 million orders for more than 3 million customers worldwide. It was founded in 2005 by Zabaldo and his brother, Nathan, as a reaction to an inconvenience. But that reaction led the Zabaldos to grow the military insignia powerhouse to 100 employees housed in a 25,000-square-foot-facility in Milwaukie, Ore.

“It was a real struggle building the business,” Jared said. “To grow an inventory is a tremendous burden on a new company. We got it all done, but it was always this feeling of a plane not having enough lift to make it over the mountain peak. You would dump just enough weight at the last moment and scrape the belly on the rocks and glide to the next one.”

Made-to-Order Ribbon Racks

That is no longer the case, and the company has seen steady growth since 2014. USAMM has 290,000 followers on social media and a virtual storefront (usamilitarymedals.com). The company also has 143 self-service kiosks located on military bases all over the world where service personnel can order and customize their ribbon racks. USAMM keeps about 30,000 items in its inventory, in addition to a robust supply of items employees manufacture themselves.

“We’re not just a superstore for uniform paraphernalia,” Jared said. “We’ve also become extremely well-known as the EZ Rack Builder people. We build made-to-order military medal and ribbon racks for customers. They have to be so precisely constructed with great care and attention to detail, and they are all one-offs, made-to-order. A military ribbon rack is like a thumbprint. No one is the same. Every time I see one out there being worn, I know there is a very high likelihood that we made it, and it always gives me a great thrill.”

The company embroiders garrison uniform nametapes and branch tapes, manufactures dog tags, engraves name plates and tailors military uniforms. Employees also build traditional slide-on military ribbon racks onsite.

While Jared's tour in Iraq consequently led him to establish USAMM, his experiences in the war zone also helped him form the company's culture. He credits his military service for much of his success.

"Military service and training is difficult and challenging, both mentally and physically," Jared said. "The benefits of that carry over into all follow-on challenges service members encounter later in life. That learned resilience has been highly useful to me in everything I've done in life afterward."

Veterans Add Value to Workforce

Although Jared hung up his boots and put away his staff sergeant stripes in 2012, as the company's CEO and president, he still believes a leader's responsibility is to his people, individuals he considers partners, not subordinates. And veterans, he adds, are an integral part of that group.

"I think it's very important for all companies to employ veterans because so often they have a life perspective that just adds so much to the work environment," Jared said. "They're like checks on unreasonableness, if you will, especially combat veterans. A good veteran presence can introduce a more accurate glimpse of the world and be a stabilizing factor on people that maybe don't have that real-life experience yet."

Entering his 14th year in business, Jared says the key to business is keeping customers happy.

"Always concentrate on that, and you'll figure out the rest as you go," Jared said.

*This article is featured in the January 2020 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by Steve Alvarez, a VFW Life member at large. A retired Army Reserve officer and Iraq War veteran, Alvarez is author of *Selling War: A Critical Look at the Military's PR Machine*.*