



R. Riveter: Military Spouses Sewing the Seeds of Entrepreneurship

By Tommie Ethington

USAA MEMBERS Cameron Cruse and Lisa Bradley met in Georgia in 2011 while their husbands were serving in the Army. As running buddies, they often discussed the hardships of finding employment as a military spouse.

“When you move around as much as we do, you start to become overeducated and underexperienced,” says Bradley, who has a master’s in business administration. “Being a military spouse lends itself to entrepreneurship because you need to be able to hit the ground running — it’s the same with starting a business.”

They founded their handbag company, **R. Riveter**, in 2011. In a converted attic, they began making stylish bags from recycled military tents using a 45-year-old industrial sewing machine. Three years later, after a successful Kickstarter campaign, they have opened a brick-and-mortar store in Southern Pines, North Carolina. Today, they churn out 150 bags in three weeks with the help of military spouses across the country working in all areas of their business.

“Our marketing is done by a military spouse; our sales team are military spouses; even the models in our pictures on the website are military spouses,” Bradley says. “Of course, our largest base of R. Riveter is made up of the women who are actually constructing the products.”

The founders recognize that military spouses lead busy lives, so they source all the materials for bags, keep designs simple and use an assembly line method of production for the bag builders, known as Riveters.

“There will be one Riveter who cuts all of the leather parts, one who hand-dyes the canvas and one who sews everything together,” Cruse says. “One bag can have parts that come from five different states, and there can be up to 15 different women who have contributed to its creation.”



Displays at R. Riveter’s flagship store in North Carolina showcase the craftsmanship of the handbags and dopp kits. All items are made from recycled military materials, such as canvas tents, wool blankets and old uniforms, and each product comes with a yellow tag, signifying support for the military.

Bradley and Cruse also understand military spouses’ need for mobility and flexibility.

“By the time I moved away from Georgia, we had only been running the company for nine months — enough to have a business baby,” laughs Bradley. “Last year, we had two PCS moves and two kids all within a month of each other, so we understand that Riveters are mothers and wives first.”

In addition to providing a source of income, R. Riveter empowers military spouses, much

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like its namesake, World War II icon Rosie the Riveter.

“We really identified with Rosie the Riveter because we felt she represented the community woman who stood up and helped her country during wartime,” Bradley says. “We’re standing up to help the American economy and a really amazing community of women. We wanted to be able to create American jobs and help the military spouses who give up a lot to protect our freedom.”

They also draw inspiration from military history when naming their bags. Their Academy Collection sources materials from West Point, while their Reveille Collection is named for the bugle call that signifies a new day on military bases. Many of their bags are named after former military spouses.

“A lot of the names — such as Grant or Lee — you’ve probably heard, not knowing the amazing woman who stood behind the man,” Bradley says. “We’re a long line of military spouses. We certainly weren’t the first, and we won’t be the last, but R. Riveter connects us.”

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