

**“Leveling the Playing Field: Examining the Landscape of
Veteran Owned Small Businesses” – 22 July 2024**

Good Morning

Thank you for inviting me to the committee hearing and allowing JetCo Solutions the opportunity to discuss the entrepreneurial spirit of veterans and the challenges we face as small business owners.

My name is Jon Tellier. I am a Veteran business owner and a soldier for life. My soldier journey began as far back as I can remember -- a young boy playing with green plastic Army men and keeping a scoresheet of Army trucks and jeeps I sighted during my annual visit to see my father at Camp Grayling in Northern Michigan.

Football allowed me to attend the United States Military Academy in 1985 – the same year Army beat Michigan State in the inaugural Cherry Bowl at the Superdome. Ironically, my journey began at the same leadership institution as my namesake - Jon Edward Bokovoy, USMA Class of 1957 and a friend my father served with in Vietnam. This learning experience was then followed by training at the Army's Airborne and Ranger School.

My first assignment was with the 3d Armored Division in Gelnhausen, Federal Republic of Germany where I was to witness the fall of the Berlin Wall and the curtailment of Communism. I also deployed to Iraq in support of Operation Desert Shield and Storm. I was very proud to participate in the offensive in response to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait.

I also had the privilege of defending America's freedom as a member of the 82d Airborne Division at Ft Liberty. We had

several two-hour recall notices and I exited active duty in the summer of 2000 after 8 moves in 11 years achieving the rank of Major.

Some might say this is where my journey stops, but actually a new chapter was forged. My transition from the Army was a blur. My boss insisted that I work 12-hour days up to my out-processing time forcing me to go on sick call in order to buy a suit for interviews.

I landed in Kalamazoo, Michigan and began working for a large, multi-billion-dollar company. After a divorce and a move to Grand Rapids, Michigan, I worked for a small manufacturer. In 2005, I was let go as the automotive industry took a dive.

Faced with six months of unemployment, \$214 dollars a week in subsidies, a kid in travel hockey, private school

tuition and no real job opportunities, I made a decision to start a business.

Echo's of "Are you crazy?" and "Do you know what you are getting into" to "Why can't you just get a normal job" were commonplace. In the early years, there were very few supporters.

After developing my business plan, I briefed the cadre at the Small Business Development Corporation (SBDC) – it went so bad that I almost decided to look elsewhere. Undeterred, I made the changes and updates and continued on my purpose of starting a business that would sell packaging supplies to the Department of Defense. Shortly afterwards, JetCo received its first order - \$14k to McAlester Army Ammunition Plant for ammunition bags. But, how was I going to pay for it since JetCo did not have a line of credit or any significant savings. Jim Feeney (previously, he had tried to hire me) told his staff to grant JetCo a small line of credit

and we were able to get our contracting officer, Susan Eva Wade, her bags on time.

Similar instances occurred with the Census Bureau, the United States Department of Agriculture, the Federal Prison Industries and at last count, today, over 248 different state and local government agencies.

My military training and experience was invaluable for problem solving and analysis. My mindset of “this fails in comparison to any patrol in the mountains of Dhaulagiri or blocking positions near Basra helped me get up and go out and compete every day.”

But I could never do it alone. My business partner/spouse compliments my strengths and weaknesses. PTAC (now known as APEX) was extremely helpful – same with the SBDC. VetBiz Central, NVBDC, NAVOBA and many more

organizations were instrumental in our early and continued success. It was and is truly a team effort.

Today, I believe I am living the American dream. I still worry about payroll, taxes, healthcare for our associates, the role of Artificial Intelligence in contracting and my 2025 marketing plan. I am glad that I was “fired” in 2006 and was forced to think creatively and start JetCo as a matter of survival – an accidental entrepreneur if you will. I am truly appreciative to all the programs, incentives and assistance we have received during our 18 years of business. In some way, I feel like today is payment for serving in the Army and protecting our freedom both in peace and in war – my hope is to pay that debt forward and that the next generation of veteran business owners share the same success we have and are afforded an even greater option of resources.