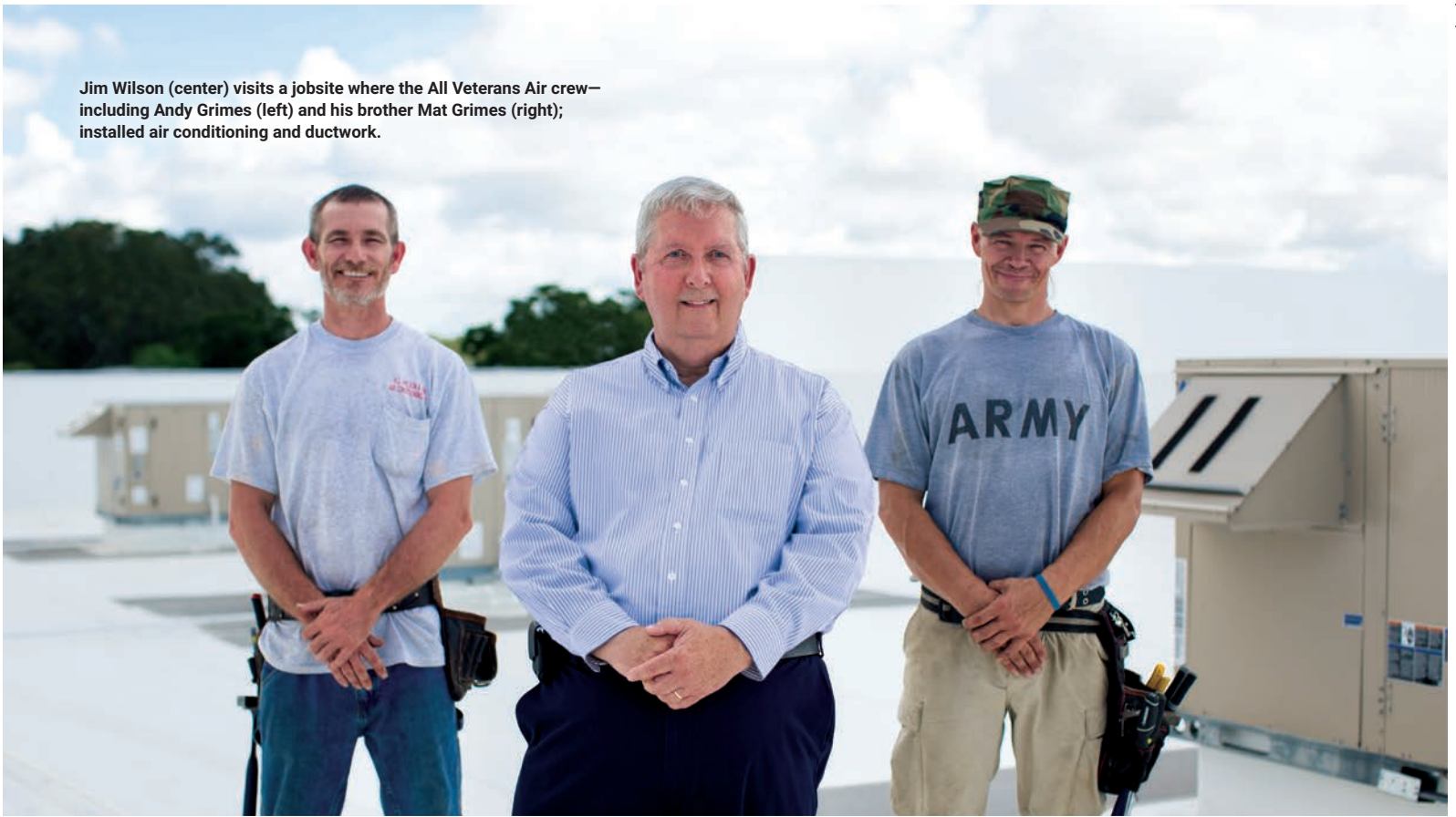


Jim Wilson (center) visits a jobsite where the All Veterans Air crew—including Andy Grimes (left) and his brother Mat Grimes (right); installed air conditioning and ductwork.



HIRING OUR HEROES IS A WIN FOR ALL

HVAC specialist helps fellow veterans through training and employment

by Steve Freeman

Military veterans—appreciated and necessary during their active service to our country—often find themselves directionless, untrained and unemployed once they return to civilian life. Harley “Jim” Wilson, a U.S. Navy veteran and Owner of All Veterans Air Inc., an HVAC contractor based in Lakeland, Florida, wants to do his part to change that.

Wilson works to help fellow veterans in central Florida obtain the training they need and acquire the jobs they want in the

trade sector. His own company’s name includes this mission. Although air conditioning and heating services represent just one trade where he currently supports working veterans, he plans to eventually offer vet training and employment in the areas of plumbing, electrical and construction.

“Veterans need this attention and support,” Wilson says. “The opportunities I provide are for the guy who’s been in the military for two to four years, who doesn’t know what comes next.”

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF ERIC TILLOTSON

According to figures from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Florida has 43,000 veterans who are unemployed (latest statistics from 2015). These findings are on par with the general unemployment rate for the U.S., but unacceptable to veteran advocates who believe post-military service should not result in joblessness. Currently, Florida has the 12th highest unemployment rate for vets per capita in the nation.

Wilson believes this vocational struggle is two-sided. Veterans need training and jobs while the trades need qualified and dedicated employees.

"Vets make great workers. They have good discipline, show up on time and are responsible. Every contractor I know—and I know a lot—needs workers, great workers," he says.

This ideal is backed by a thought leadership piece titled "Deliver Better Projects: Hire a Veteran," co-authored by

Charles G. Wendt and Todd Cole, respectively a Commissioning Program Manager and a Commissioning Specialist, at Sebesta Inc., a nationally recognized engineering firm and NV5 company. In their discussion on military personnel's collaborative and problem-solving skills in the building and construction space, they state: "One of the greatest skills that a veteran brings to the civilian world, particularly the building and construction industry, is his or her ability to work in a team environment to solve problems. Working as a team is ingrained in the military—and teamwork is essential to complete any project regardless of complexity."

All Veterans Air's General Manager Terry Gracie can attest that this statement is true. "I know that veterans are among the best employees to work with due to the dedication and commitment that our military instills in them," he says.



Veteran-turned-tradesman Mat Grimes (left) and Jim Wilson go over specs for a commercial space installation in Seminole, Fla.

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*-Jim Wilson,
Founder and Owner,
All Veterans Air Inc.*

A SALUTE TO EXPERIENCE

Wilson is uniquely qualified for this effort to work with veterans. He joined the U.S. Navy during the Vietnam Era in 1967 and served as a Radarman until 1970.

After his discharge he used the GI Bill to go to school for HVAC. He became a licensed contractor in 1977, then started his first company, H.J. Wilson & Sons Air Conditioning Inc. He also entered into the teaching profession during this period, working in several apprenticeship programs and schools.

Now, 46 years after he left the military, Wilson is semi-retired from his last teaching post at Everest College in Tampa, Florida. His knowledge of the HVAC trade combined with his credentials as an educator are equally impressive. He is a Certified Master HVAC Educator, the highest credential for the field in vocational training. Only a



Brothers Mat (left) and Andy Grimes hoist ductwork to complete a commercial air conditioning installation.

handful of specialty educators hold this qualification in the U.S.

Today he works full time leading his second business, All Veterans Air, which he launched in 2014.

NOT YOUR TYPICAL FLORIDA RETIREE

Wilson has long held a certain disdain for retirement. At an age when most traditionally retire, the industrious 66-year-old has remained active in the workplace.

“What am I going to do? Go play golf? I hate golf,” he jokingly says.

For quite some time, he noticed many vets could not commit to the months of time needed to obtain a formal vocational education—and some

were incapable of paying the usual \$15,000 for that training, even though vocational training and employment would better their situations.

So, two years ago, Wilson began purposely hiring and training military veterans at All Veterans Air, a small company with a staff comprised mostly of these dedicated American heroes.

CRITICAL MISSION OBJECTIVE

Wilson still wanted to do more, but knew he needed a broader scope. He anticipated more vets seeking his help—and not all would be interested in just the HVAC field.

He found a way forward, realizing that his firm—like many companies and

trade organizations—could offer apprenticeships instead of immediate employment. Acceptance into such a program means a person receives vocational training without the big bills that follow—and gets on a path to being hired in the process.

“We put up a billboard on the interstate offering free training for vets as long as they can pass a drug test,” Wilson says. The first handful of vets who signed on for the company’s internship program were eventually hired by Wilson himself.

Air conditioning is not the only training option that Wilson provides through this program. He has connections with electricians, building contractors, plumbers, roofers, and others who provide and help oversee work opportunities in other trades.

“One of the greatest skills that a veteran brings to the civilian world, particularly the building and construction industry, is his or her ability to work in a team environment to solve problems.”

-Charles G. Wendt and Todd Cole, Sebesta Inc.

"Some of these veterans tell me that they wonder what they'll do in life. I tell them they can come earn while they learn," Wilson says. Some of the apprenticeships will pay the men as they go through the programs.

Mat Grimes, from Tampa, vouches for Wilson's helpful career guidance. Grimes served in the U.S. Army as an infantryman in Kuwait for four years. After returning from his tour of duty, he found himself unemployed and underqualified for meaningful work. He certainly had no HVAC experience.

He met Wilson at Everest College, and while his journey did not include the apprenticeships advocated by Wilson today, he knew of Wilson's love for vets and his commitment to solid, results-oriented vocational education. Today, he works for All Veterans Air as a Commercial Installation Foreman.

"I'm grateful to God that I met this man," says Grimes. "He helped me out for any reason that I needed help." He adds, "A lot of businesses aren't hiring vets, but the truth is that we went out and served as patriots for our country, but are then told 'We're not hiring.' A lot of vets out there need help."



Army veteran Mat Grimes appreciates the opportunity provided by Jim Wilson to hone his HVAC skills while working at All Veterans Air.

SCOPING OUT FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

With an intrinsic desire to do more to help veterans obtain viable, rewarding careers in any trade, Wilson is currently developing a strategy that goes above and beyond simply providing employment. He plans to reach out to organizations like the Florida Refrigeration and Air Conditioning Contractors Association and his local Associated Builders and Contractors chapter to enlist their help to train veterans.

"There will be more veterans than only I can hire, so as I reach out to other contractors to hire them, I will seek a commitment from the contractors to send these people to their apprenticeship programs, and pay for it while they work for them," Wilson says.

Wilson embraces his new mission much like the military orders he received during his active service to the country. 🇺🇸

Author Bio: Steve Freeman is a contributing writer and communications management professional based in Pauls Valley, Okla.



Jim Wilson, Owner of All Veterans Air and a semi-retired educator, now focuses on helping unemployed vets find and obtain rewarding careers.