

THE MEASURE OF A

Woman

Combat-wounded
Army captain
makes her name in
defense contracting.

Twenty-eight-year-old West Point graduate Dawn Halfaker has taken her company from zero to 100 in less than three years. In January 2006, she launched Halfaker and Associates, LLC, a Washington-based company that develops and installs high-tech national security, communication and force-protection systems for the federal government.

Today, the company Halfaker started with a line of credit, a military clearance and a mind for details is on track to more than double its 2007 revenues, surpass the 100-employee mark, and prove to the world what a combat-wounded veteran can do as a defense contractor.

A member of The American Legion Small Business Task Force, the former starting guard for the Army women's basketball team has appeared in the pages of magazines ranging from *Vetpreneur* to *Cosmopolitan*. She recently spoke with *The American Legion Magazine*.

Q: Can you describe your experience in Iraq?

A: I deployed in February 2004. I went to Kuwait and then into Iraq a couple weeks later as an MP. I was a platoon leader at the time, so I had about 32 soldiers I was responsible for, about 45 minutes north of Baghdad.

I was wounded June 19, 2004, by a rocket-propelled grenade. We came around a corner and got hit with an RPG. I was in the first vehicle in the convoy. The rocket-propelled grenade went straight through the front of the vehicle and down my right side. It took off my arm and gave me some other nasty injuries. It left me a little bit lifeless there in the truck. Luckily, my driver was still with it. He basically got us out of the kill zone and took us back to the police station. There was a squad leader in the vehicle, as well, who lost his arm. Very similar injuries.

Q: You went from the field hospital in Iraq to Landstuhl, to Walter Reed, and you were in a coma. Then you woke up. Do you remember regaining consciousness?

A: You wake up, and you don't understand what's happening, what's going on. I didn't understand why I wasn't with my platoon. They told me I'd lost my arm. I didn't know. That was a crucial point in my life, no longer having an arm. From that point on, it was all about getting better.

Q: Now you wear a business suit. But you don't use a prosthetic arm. Why?

A: I have three of them. I don't wear one by choice.

Q: You've had a lot of business success early. To what do you attribute that?

A: I would not say I am naturally an entrepreneur. I'd say I am naturally someone who just wants to carry on and endure. I had some unique opportunities to do some consulting, based on my experiences in Iraq and some other things I had been through. There were some opportunities with government agencies, but to make them work, really, I had to form my own company. So I got my first contract and did some consulting. I was the only employee. Other opportunities came up. So I had a chance to start a business and take it to the next level.

Q: Your business is somewhat difficult to describe, let alone excel at. What was it like to go from

military police officer to defense researcher and force-protection system developer?

A: It was a shift in the sense that I wasn't a researcher, but I know what information commanders need to make decisions. I can bridge the gap from tactical to operational, based on my experiences. I knew what soldiers needed to fight. But it was a huge learning curve just understanding the industry, government contracting, research.

Q: Where is your work being deployed?

A: Actually, a lot of our innovative work is with the Navy right now, setting up operation centers around the world, but mainly in the continental United States, basically bringing the Navy to the operational capacity that the Army has had for some years. An operations center has to do with flow of information. What does a commander need to make a decision? We have all the Navy regions talking to each other and all the information flowing to a central point.

Q: Do you foresee any of your systems put to work in the war zone where you were hit?

A: We have a couple of contracts right now that do necessitate travel overseas. It would be interesting for me, personally, to go back to Iraq. I might have mixed feelings, but I would love to go back.

Q: You are now helping other disabled veterans learn how to obtain federal contracts, as required by law. Did you, yourself, know about the opportunities in federal contracting for disabled veterans when you broke into business?

A: Once I got into the world of government contracting, I got smart very quickly about the availability of programs for veterans. I think the veteran program is very important.

Q: And you make a point of hiring veteran employees.

A: One of the things our company is committed to is hiring veterans. We are 85-percent veteran right now, and we intend to stay that way, if not more. Specifically, we are hiring wounded veterans. That's a mission very near and dear to my heart. I'll let a job sit open as long as I can, if I decide I need to put a wounded warrior in that spot. We balance our passion with our bottom line, and it's worked so far.

— Jeff Stoffer