

Helmets to Hardhats
Building Industry Trust
BIT-22758
July 28, 2004
Version 2b

RETURNING WAR VETS FIND PLACE TO TURN HELMETS TO HARDHATS

Northern California's Building Industry Trust Backs National Construction Industry Training Program

When Curtis Ong of Danville left the 82nd Airborne after four years of duty that included a combat tour in Iraq, he found that he was being recruited again – this time by the Northern California Carpenters Union and unionized construction contractors. Today Ong is an apprentice carpenter helping West Coast Construction of Fairfield build a new elementary school in San Ramon. He turned in his helmet for a hardhat.

Ong's buddy from the 3rd Infantry Division, Chadd Visintainer, also started as an apprentice carpenter this summer. He is now an employee of McCarthy Building Companies, Inc., which operates nationwide, helping build a parking structure in downtown Fresno.

Just a month after completing four years in the Navy, Brandon Austin is working as a carpenter apprentice in Visalia, California. As a boy in Charlotte, North Carolina, Austin enjoyed construction work. He's now helping O.E. Micham Construction of Woodlake, California build a high school.

All three men entered the Northern California Carpenters Apprenticeship Training program through the national Helmets to Hardhats program. The program is supported in Northern California by the Building Industry Trust* (BIT), a joint labor-management partnership between contractor associations and the Northern California Carpenters Regional Council, which represents over 37,000 union members from thirty local unions. The Building Industry Trust (www.unionbuilt.net), whose mission is 'an organized approach to jobs and community' represents 46 Northern California counties and is supported by employer contributions.

Ong didn't think the skills he had learned for survival in the Sunni Triangle north of Baghdad were going to be transferable to civilian life, but he had learned much more than weaponry. The U.S. military services operate 300 schools, teach 10,000 courses and are famous for taking young people with a variety of educational experiences and success and molding them into highly motivated and self-disciplined teams. Discipline, responsibility and teamwork are required for work at large construction sites, which, like battlefields, have been likened to "organized chaos." The military also teaches web-based communication skills, and they enabled Ong to find his new career.

"I did a web search for jobs," Ong said. "Up came the Helmets to Hardhats website. It's a good program that gives you priority when you are

coming out of the service. I like the work and get satisfaction from seeing what I have accomplished at the end of the day.”

Ong recommended the program to Visintainer. Next to search engines, word of mouth is the leading reason more than six million people checked out www.helmetstohardhats.org in just over a year.

As a machine gunner with the Third Infantry, Visintainer had been with the first troops to cross the Iraqi border from Kuwait, and he was among the first to drive into Baghdad. Later his unit was assigned to patrol the dangerous city of Fallujah. Visintainer fully recognized the value of his training both in battle and beyond.

“There are parallels between the infantry and the construction site,” he said. “Both require hard work and dedication. You have a job to do, and it must be done. The Army teaches you listening skills and to pay attention to detail. I didn’t learn construction in the Army, but the team environment in construction is the same teamwork as in the infantry. It’s the same structure. You show up on time, and you work hard.”

About a quarter million people leave military service every year through retirement or declining to re-enlist. Visintainer completed his service in December 2003. He spent half a year mainly traveling before settling in Fresno, where his brother, Brett Visintainer, is place kicker for the Fresno State University Bulldogs. Visintainer and Ong had grown up together in San Ramon and stayed in touch. When Ong recommended Helmets to Hardhats, Visintainer went to the website, looked up the Fresno carpenters local and gave them a call.

“They told me I was the first person to apply for the program,” he said. “Once I applied for the program, a representative from the union immediately began seeking a job for me through the local carpenters hiring hall. He told contractors that I was very reliable and that both the national union and the contractors associations strongly supported recruiting servicemen into the industry. In two weeks I had a job.”

Austin spent his first 18 months in the Navy in school, emerging as an aircraft electronics technician. He maintained Navy aircraft in Puerto Rico and Coronado, and he also served as a Navy police officer. Austin met and married Californian Andrea Chapman when she too was in the Navy in San Diego. Andrea Austin completed her duty in Navy supply at the end of 2003 and was hired by SkyWest Airlines in Fresno. Austin started looking for work in the Fresno area even before he left the Navy.

“I attended a job fair in San Diego where the Helmets to Hardhats people were recruiting,” Austin said. “They directed me to the website, where everything is laid out very clearly. I applied for work at several websites and received some offers, but none of them was as attractive as the construction program. I did some home framing in high school and knew I liked the work. Once I applied, the program went very smoothly. I got out in June and had a job in July.”

The United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America (UBC) is one of 15 construction labor unions that along with eight employer associations

and the North American Contractors Association (NACA) founded Helmets to Hardhats. The construction industry has a goal of recruiting 1.6 million workers in the next five years, and people with military training are especially good candidates. The U.S. military trains personnel for more than 4,100 occupations. It places more people in more positions of significant responsibility at younger ages than any other organization. And, of course, there is the can-do attitude.

Helmets to Hardhats, also known as H2H, estimates the cost per candidate hired by a union through the program is only 20% of the average hiring cost for the construction industry. Education is one of the reasons. Enlisted personnel are required to have high school diplomas or GED equivalents to join the military, and more than half of the enlisted force has some college experience.

Construction offers many advantages for former service personnel. Union workers earn an average \$4.08 an hour more than non-union workers. While apprentices earn about half a journeyman's wage, the G.I. Bill pays a \$600 a month stipend during training. Many apprentices receive college credit for their courses and earn an associate degree in their trades. Both the work and the working environment are attractive to physically active people.

Since military members rank second only to college students in computer literacy, the H2H program is designed around the Internet. It is administered by the Center for Military Recruitment, Assessment and Veterans Employment, with a labor-management committee overseeing the board of trustees. Potential workers register on the website and provide details about previous work and military experience, education, personal information, career goals and geographic preferences. All veterans, not just those who have recently left the service, are eligible. A computer program matches candidates with employers or apprentice coordinators. A representative from individual unions or contractors contacts the veteran to assess the prospects of a match.

For carpenters, the new career begins with four years as apprentices in classrooms and laboratories and on-the-job training under a skilled "master." Their classes are free, and they earn wages and fringe benefits on the job. As journeymen they embark on a lifetime of continuing education for specialized qualifications and certifications, as well as to keep pace with ever changing construction technologies. These classes also are free.

Apprentices learn the historic and contemporary skills associated with construction, from hammer and saws to blueprint reading, layout, concrete work, structural framing, roofs, stairs and all types of interior and exterior finishes. In the classroom or yard, students lay foundations and build mock homes or erect office walls and scaffolding and do everything but pour the concrete for a freeway overpass. Then they tear the lab work down and go out on work on real structures under close supervision.

Carpentry involves many other skills as well. Millwrights are experts in the installation and maintenance of industrial equipment, machinery and instrumentation. Pile drivers construct heavy foundations and are experts in marine construction such as docks, piers and bridges. Some are deep-sea divers. Other specialties include acoustical installers, scaffold erectors,

shinglers and insulators. New technology includes locating foundations with the global positioning satellite system.

The Northern California Carpenters Training Centers are located in Pleasanton, Fairfield, Morgan Hill and Fresno and are a full-service training agency registered by the State of California. They comprise 160,000 square feet of space and offer 138 units of study in 92 programs.

Construction is tough, hard, dirty and challenging work. The people at a job site must be able to read plans, understand sequencing and anticipate what needs to be done next. They must know and follow strict safety procedures, to avoid accidents, and along with tool skills and safety, carpentry students learn responsibility. Some 3,400 people are currently enrolled in courses offered by the Carpenters Training Committee for Northern California at an annual cost of \$8 million.

* **The Building Industry Trust**, www.unionbuilt.net, is a joint labor-management partnership between more than 1,000 responsible builders comprising seven contractor associations and the Northern California Carpenters Regional Council, which represents over 37,000 union members from thirty local unions. The Building Industry Trust (BIT) represents 46 Northern California counties and is supported by employer contributions based on hours worked by carpenters and related trades.