



From grunt to Harvard student to tech entrepreneur: An Army Ranger's journey

By Shruti Bhatt

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Blake Hall, CEO of ID.me and former Army Ranger. (ID.me)

Blake Hall was destined for military service – his grandfather fought in World War II; his father was an Army colonel; and after 9/11, Hall felt called to put on the uniform.

But when time came for Hall to transition back to civilian life, Hall blazed an unexpected

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Hall, a recipient of two Bronze Star medals, began his service in the Army in 2004 as a second lieutenant in the infantry and later attended ranger school. He also served as a battalion reconnaissance platoon leader where he led 450 combat patrols through Iraq without any casualties in his platoon.

Hall decided to leave the military in 2008 after feeling like he wasn't making the impact he hoped to.

"I felt frustrated with the lack of strategy and thought that I would make a bigger impact in business where I can have a team and solve practical problems," Hall said.

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if he applied to Harvard. “He told me to apply to the best of the best if I’m going to do this.”

So that’s what he did.

“Harvard accepted me, which was great, but I struggled initially,” he said. It was hard for him to find a sense of purpose after leaving the military, but Hall said being at Harvard and following his entrepreneurial passion helped him overcome those struggles.

Hall didn’t plan on being a tech entrepreneur or working in the digital arena. While attending Harvard, however, he noticed companies that were trying to give benefits to veterans had an elaborate and tedious process to verify the veterans.

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“Microsoft was doing e-learning vouchers for veterans but they asked veterans to bring in identification paperwork” establishing their veteran status, Hall said. He noted the irony in Microsoft having to resort to old-fashioned stacks of paper to approve vets for high-tech digital training.

“These companies were trying to verify vets on their own and it was a hassle,” he said.

“We decided to do PayPal for digital identity where we can tie identification and verification together in one place.”

part of groups like first responders, the military, students or teachers.

Based in McLean, Virginia, ID.me employs nearly 200 employees and is used by more than 6 million individuals and 200 partners, including federal agencies, health care organizations, nonprofits and retailers.

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Having a good mentor was crucial to Hall's successful transition. He worked with Kelly Perdew, who took Hall under his wing and helped him learn more about entrepreneurship.

Perdew, also a veteran, is the co-founder and managing general partner at Moonshots Capital, a venture capital firm that invests in early-stage tech companies and leans more to those founded by veterans.

The two met after David Tisch, an investor in Hall's company, met Perdew at a seed investing event in New York in 2010. Tisch told Hall he thought Perdew would be a great mentor to him.

"Blake talked to me and flawlessly executed what he wanted to do with his company," Perdew said. "We had six to seven phone calls over the course of two months before I

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Perdew said one of the qualities he admired most about Hall was his ability to quickly implement changes to his initial business plan. “There were some flaws in his plan but I as I would suggest fixes, he would immediately talk to his team and make those changes.”

ID.me started out as TroopSwap, which was exclusively for service members and veterans to receive benefits. TroopSwap became ID.me in 2013 after creating verification services for teachers, students and first responders.

“We started with vets but we reached out to nonprofits and learned that verification was not just a problem for the military community but it was affecting groups like students and first responders as well.”

Hall said being in the military taught him the qualities of great leadership, and the experiences are what helped him become successful in his business.

“I don’t think there is any other institution that would have taught me responsibility and leadership. I learned how to work with a team under hard circumstances and this translated to my business.”

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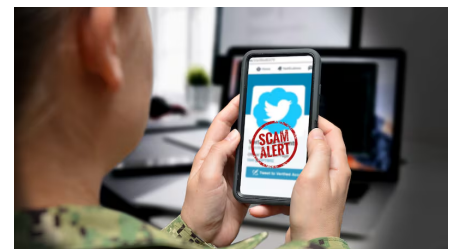
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