A Clearer Direction

Conversations with Vets to Drones and MMEC helped AcreWatch's veteran leader find a focus for his business.

VETS TO DRONES

By Andrew Langholf, Vets to Drones Public Affairs

Jon Shawhan's company had many possible directions. What it needed was focus.

The AcreWatch CEO and chief pilot credits conversations with Vets to Drones (VTD) and the Midwest Microelectronics Consortium (MMEC) for helping him narrow his focus. He came away with a clearer sense of the company's place in autonomy.

"We were focused on a lot of different things," Shawhan explained. "We didn't really have a niche."

He added that the network's knowledge and experience "helped me understand that autonomy was our focus."

Shawhan had served about eight years as a Navy Seabee construction mechanic before moving through several types of work and into technology. When he connected with VTD and MMEC, he was seeking work he enjoyed and the camaraderie he remembered from his service. A business niche was part of that search, along with a sense of belonging.

Through the partnership, he spoke with members who brought diverse skills and perspectives on the industry. He could ask about the technology, hear feedback, and consider what would work for AcreWatch. He described those exchanges as the most valuable part of the experience.

"They all brought different skill levels and understanding of the industry," Shawhan noted. "Because of that, they were able to provide advice that was very helpful to me."

Those conversations helped him learn where to find information and how his company could serve the market. For a business that had been pursuing several possibilities, that advice helped him decide where to focus its efforts.

For MMEC, those connections are part of a broader effort to strengthen U.S. microelectronics capabilities. The consortium brings together industry, academia and government, including manufacturers, researchers, technology providers and startups.

As MMEC CEO Dr. Matt Casto explained, the goal is to lower barriers so businesses can "bring what they're best at to solving the problems."

Vets to Drones founder Chris Lewis encourages veterans to look beyond operating a drone and consider the other problems they could help solve. His experience in a laboratory after his military service led him to examine the aircraft's technology more closely.

Casto sees value in what veterans already know about operating and supporting equipment. Their experience with how technology performs in practice, he explained, offers a perspective that can differ from its design in a laboratory. Drones and autonomous systems offer a tangible introduction to the microelectronics behind them.

Keeping people's skills current is part of that work. April Vanover, MMEC's workforce development director, emphasized that technical preparation, adaptability and communication must develop alongside technology.

"As these advanced technologies are being introduced into our world," Vanover said, "we need to have the talent walking alongside them."

For Shawhan, the military habit that carried over most clearly was commitment. He links it to his desire to help other veterans enter the industry and to his willingness to continue learning.

"I really strive for that commitment," he said, "to help fellow veterans become part of this industry."

He urges veterans considering a similar path to follow through on their interest.

"Don't just talk about it," Shawhan urged. "Be truly committed to it and learn what you can. Always learn."

He also acknowledges that he underestimated the importance of networking before entering the industry. Having other veterans and organizations to turn to for information proved more valuable than he had expected.

"If it wasn't for the networking," he reflected, "I wouldn't be where I'm at today."