

SAVING OUR SOLDIERS Force Protection
founder Garth Barrett is out, but important
work goes on
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In the shadowy business of international warfare, Garth Barrett became known as Spider-Man. That's because if he put his hand up to a globe, an invisible web of contacts would spread over it.

He knew explosives, battlefield medicine and how to track a man on foot.

He chose a life of combat, first serving as an officer with the Rhodesian Special Air Service during that country's civil war in the 1960s and 1970s. From there he joined the South African forces.

Then, he saw a chance to capitalize on all he knew.

From a tiny office on the former Navy base in North Charleston, he launched a company a decade ago that would build mine-resistant vehicles and help change modern field combat for America and its allies.

On a recent afternoon, Barrett sat in a Summerville cafe, his gray-brown hair combed to one side and his cappuccino meticulously sweetened with three packets of raw sugar and one artificial substitute. Now in his late 60s, he talked about the battlefield coolly, the way an accountant might describe balancing his books.

"If you wanted to take down a bridge," he said, "you knew the charge used to do it."

That's just business.

What raises Barrett's emotion is recalling how he built and then lost control of a now-billion-dollar company, Force Protection Inc.

As he sees it, his dream to create machines meticulously designed to prevent war casualties became corrupted by newcomers in business suits who took his company from him.

And, he wonders, at what cost?

"The problems of the world are 10 times worse than when I was fighting," he said, alluding to the thousands of American lives at stake in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"We don't know where the damage is going to wind up."

Officer and scientist

A half-century ago and half a world away, Barrett met Vernon Joynt at the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research in South Africa.

An act of South Africa's Parliament had established the council in 1945 as a place where science savants such as Joynt could spend their days testing the laws of chemistry and physics.

As a boy, Joynt had thought it perfectly normal to create a large, explosive crystal and use it to blow a hole through his teacher's desk. In his world, that was the sort of shenanigans young men got into.

His father, an uneducated farmer, wanted him to study medicine, but Joynt chose what he found easy and fun. He chose math and science, because he liked to blow things up.

He was so good at it that he made it to college by age 15. At 20 he designed his first vehicle that, because of its shape, could protect a person from an exploding land mine. The technology relied on simple physics — a V-shaped bottom.

At the time, guerrilla forces had begun burying land mines to take out Rhodesian military trucks and kill the men inside. The Rhodesian Bush War would end with the creation of the country of Zimbabwe and the abolition of white minority rule, but white Rhodesians who fought to hold on to power, such as Barrett, viewed the guerrillas as extremists.

Barrett sought out the scientists at the council for help. He brought them field reports from the Bush War.

The dashing military officer told them about guerrillas killing his men with roadside bombs and mines. Joynt and the other scientists took the information from Barrett and others and translated it into military technology to save the Rhodesian troops by protecting their trucks.

They called their crew "the nuts and bolts committee" and worked to stay a step ahead of the guerrilla fighters. To lend some levity to their serious task, the scientists made bets for beer on what would keep the experimental trucks intact as mines ignited beneath them.

They filled tires with water to absorb the blasts. They added metal plates and hung sandbags off

the trucks. Finally, they developed the V-shaped hull that Joynt first designed at age 20, a concept that now gets credit for saving countless numbers of Barrett's men.

Barrett and Joynt would connect again in the early '90s during a mine-clearing mission around the electric power lines in Mozambique. Their careers crossed once more in vying for a United Nations vehicle contract in 2001, the year the U.S. launched the war on terror.

Later, Barrett and Joynt would find themselves in Ladson, working on a project that would change the odds of survival for America's combat troops. The V-shaped hull became the key to the Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicle that U.S. soldiers and Marines rely on today for protection from roadside bombs buried in Afghanistan and Iraq.

A perfect location

The military pulled out of the Charleston Naval Base in 1996, leaving it looking like a ghost town from an old Western movie. Abandoned buildings dotted acres of property that once glistened with military polish.

Local leaders knew that to restore the value of this waterfront land they had to attract businesses to the empty military buildings. Barrett was one of the few entrepreneurs interested at the time.

He had come to the U.S. from South Africa in the late '90s for a conference with the International Association of Bomb Technicians, where he met U.S. Defense Department representatives who preached one of America's key lessons from the Vietnam War: Almost above all else, the U.S. should never fall into a similar situation with young soldiers flying home in body bags from a far-off, widely questioned war.

Even without an active conflict at the time, Barrett was certain history would repeat itself. Years before terrorists would turn airliners into missiles and launch the U.S. into wars in the Middle East, Barrett knew America would need military trucks that could protect troops better.

Every time the military improves its technology, enemy forces work to counteract it.

"It's like a game of chess," Barrett said.

He built his first mine-protected vehicles in San Diego. When he needed more space, he looked to the East Coast.

In Charleston he saw cheap, available land near a port that shipped to the Middle East weeks faster than West Coast ports. He saw unemployed, nonunion laborers, trained welders from the old Navy base.

In 1999, Barrett and another man arranged, for virtually free rent, to take up a tiny office at the former base, just 100 square feet, in exchange for a little cleanup work.

Barrett told his new neighbors about the military vehicles he planned to build. One called a friend

on the spot to say, "You've got to hear this. It's the biggest load of bull ... I've ever heard."

Then in 2001, U.S. troops trickled into Afghanistan. In 2003 they poured into Iraq.

Barrett knew those terrains required wheels. They are sandy places, but they also are urban environments where tanks face major obstacles.

Barrett had developed an uncomplicated vehicle that would protect troops. His philosophy: "Get in the bloody thing and drive it."

He threw out the stylized drive train specific to military vehicles and substituted commercial truck parts that any mechanic could tinker with.

That's what had worked in the Bush War. Rhodesian soldiers couldn't afford to send their vehicles to specialty shops for every funny noise, and economic sanctions against the unpopular, white-ruled government made it tough to get military equipment and parts.

Barrett wanted a mine-safe vehicle that a soldier could swing into a Jiffy Lube and say, "Hey, this thing's making a funny noise. You mind taking a look under the hood?"

To prove his point to nonbelievers, Barrett once did just that, navigating a blast-protected vehicle into a GMC dealership in Washington.

"What the hell is that?" the mechanic asked. He peered under the hood and said, "Oh, God, this is a GMC."

Then he replaced the starter.

After a half-year in that snug office on the former Navy base, Barrett was ready. He brought the first vehicle over from his old operation in California to the storehouse across the street. After that, he hired South Africans to train a labor force used to working on the U.S. Navy's submarines.

For a time, each aspect of production stayed within the old base's network of buildings, where Barrett kept control over every step in the process.

The U.S. invaded Iraq in March 2003, and Barrett's vision became critical to the war effort. After America's swift victory over Saddam Hussein's army, guerrilla forces began fighting back with deadly roadside bombs.

And American troops started flying home in body bags when their Humvees blew up.

Suddenly, international eyes turned to MRAPs and Barrett's company, Technical Solutions Group, later renamed Force Protection.

'The Army you have'

Force Protection quickly outgrew its network of small buildings. In 2003, as the first Americans died in Iraq, the company moved to the former General Electric plant, a sprawling factory space on U.S. Highway 78 in Ladson.

There, 20 miles northwest of Charleston — across from the fairgrounds, around the corner from a western wear store and down the street from a mobile home park — workers build giant MRAP armored vehicles that redefined field combat and that the Pentagon credits with saving the lives of thousands of America's warriors.

Before MRAPs replaced Humvees, troops went out at night to scavenge metal and weld it to the bottoms and sides of their vehicles for any extra protection.

When a soldier at a town hall meeting told then-U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld about the makeshift armor and the need for safer vehicles, Rumsfeld famously dismissed his concern:

"As you know, you go to war with the Army you have."

With MRAPs in the field, troops no longer needed to jury-rig armor. Force Protection uses its V-shaped bottom to deflect the mines' blasts. To protect the MRAP from rocket-propelled grenade attacks on the sides, the company employs bar armor, essentially a cage around the entire vehicle.

Between 2004 and 2006, the company grew from 12 employees to 500 — among them, Barrett's on-again, off-again South African associate Vernon Joynt. With Barrett at the helm, the business captured multimillion-dollar military contracts.

A poster inside the factory shows Iraq's sandy terrain and a slogan, "Force Protection to the rescue!!!"

Outside, a line of Buffaloes, "Star Wars"-like behemoths, fill parking spots marked "SOLD." One, with a camera-equipped forklift arm that detects and scoops up mines, made a cameo appearance as the evil Decepticon Bonecrusher in the 2007 "Transformers" movie.

Letters come in from soldiers, their families and friends, thanking Force Protection for making these metal monsters. One of those writers, a young woman from Illinois named KaLeigh Kubatzke, credits Force Protection with saving her fiancé, Marine Cpl. Ryan Reidelbaugh.

Reidelbaugh, a blond man with a warm smile and a Midwestern accent, joined the Marine Corps after graduating high school in 2005. On his first tour his team leader hit a land mine in a Humvee. The three men inside died.

Even after watching his friends perish, Reidelbaugh chose to return to Iraq for a second tour. This time, he took the hit.

On patrol one afternoon, his vehicle struck a mine. It blew up the driver's-side tire and blasted a

gaping hole in the vehicle.

But he and his fellow Marines weren't in a Humvee. They were in a Force Protection MRAP. Everyone survived.

They were so safe that Reidelbaugh thought he had hit a pothole, and he asked his sergeant what happened.

Back home, his fiancée knew the drill. If what the military labeled "an incident" occurred, she wouldn't hear from Reidelbaugh for a few days.

She didn't worry when he didn't call. It was always someone else's unit.

Days later he told her his vehicle had been struck. She paused on the other end of the phone. A series of emotions hit — first the shock of the news, then relief to hear his voice, then a new fear.

Clutching the phone, Kubatzke asked, "Do you have your legs?"

They laugh about it now. The couple became engaged at the end of that tour and again live in Illinois where, after an honorable discharge, Reidelbaugh enrolled in college.

Boom and bust

As more Ryan Reidelbaughs survived previously deadly explosions, demand grew faster than Force Protection could supply.

By early 2006, the company had missed 98 percent of its vehicle order deadlines. And other companies began to compete.

Two former employees alleged that Force Protection cut corners in an effort to make delivery schedules, provided defective vehicles to the U.S. military, then fired them for complaining about it. Company officials denied the allegations but settled the lawsuit that followed.

By then, Barrett was gone. He had brought in outsiders, businessmen, to handle the growing demand, but he still wanted to follow the meticulous rules of his days at the old Navy base, when he controlled everything.

He disagreed with new company practices, but when he spoke up about it, he found himself alone. The outsiders had the power now.

"I had no option but to resign, because I became a whistle-blower," Barrett said.

He invited a few workers to join him for farewell beers at a Summerville tavern on his last day at Force Protection in August 2005. He thanked them for their service, told them he would build mine-resistant vehicles somewhere else and bought each of them only two drinks.

In typical Garth Barrett fashion, he figured that if he paid for more alcohol, he would be liable for their safety.

Barrett took out a newspaper advertisement seeking employees for a new venture, which would compete with Force Protection from its former Navy base headquarters. He formally incorporated Protected Vehicles Inc. about two months after leaving Force Protection.

His former company, meanwhile, balanced successes with setbacks.

Force Protection intended to double production in an effort to meet demand in 2006, but it also agreed to pay nearly \$2 million in the lawsuit brought by two former employees.

In early 2007, the company went public, meaning it sold stock to raise money. Hundreds of veterans, who perhaps felt a personal connection to their investment, called NASDAQ asking if they could come to New York's Times Square for the ceremony.

A few months later, Force Protection announced its biggest contract, a \$490 million deal with partner General Dynamics. But the company also had to file a restated financial report with the federal government.

That same year lawyers came after Barrett.

Force Protection's court filings alleged that Barrett and other former Force Protection workers used confidential information to start the new company, Protected Vehicles. Not only had Barrett lost control of the gutsy venture he turned into gold, but now the company's new leaders apparently wanted him out of the industry completely.

Lawyers for Protected Vehicles filed a countersuit, alleging that Force Protection interfered with the company's ability to win government contracts. Within months, Protected Vehicles went out of business amid a flood of lawsuits from suppliers claiming that the company owed them money.

"When you get a lawsuit, you can't get cash," Barrett said.

Protected Vehicles filed for bankruptcy in 2008, deep in debt. The company owed nearly \$16 million to the Marines alone.

In another slap at Barrett and his business, Force Protection made a failed bid to purchase Protected Vehicles.

Force Protection's own problems grew too. The company's outside accounting firm severed ties, and NASDAQ threatened to de-list its shares from the stock exchange.

In mid-2008, shareholders sued Force Protection, alleging that top executives, who had made tens of millions of dollars in stock trades before resigning, failed to warn them about delivery delays or a flawed accounting system.

A former Force Protection chairman, Frank Kavanaugh, had sold more than \$64 million in shares before stepping down in June 2007, according to court filings. Gordon McGilton, the company's ex-president who left in January 2008, had sold shares worth more than \$23 million, court records show.

Executives reassured investors about their confidence in Force Protection's future instead of disclosing information about company difficulties, court filings say. As a result, the share price continued to trade high.

Force Protection settled the lawsuit this year by agreeing to pay \$24 million.

Repaired, repositioned

Despite the financial and administrative turmoil, Force Protection continued to grow with the war effort. The company ballooned from 200 workers and \$10 million in business in 2004 to 2,000 employees and a \$1.3 billion operation just a few years later.

An Australian accountant, Michael Moody, stepped up from the board of directors to become chief executive in 2008.

He kept his public statements brief while steering through the wreckage, never glossing over the mess before him. Asked on a 2008 conference call with investment analysts about Force Protection's delayed financial reports, he said, "When we have an accurate (annual report), then we'll file it."

Under his leadership the company sought more international contracts, plus supply and repair services, to keep cash flowing in even when government contracts did not.

It worked.

Force Protection beat British companies and signed a \$280 million contract with the U.K. Ministry of Defence in December to make 200 of its lightweight MRAPs called the Ocelot. Force Protection is seeking an even grander deal with Australia for 1,300 Ocelots.

The company opened an office in Canada this year as it pushed for a contract with the country's Ministry of Defense for its Tactical Armored Vehicle Patrol.

Force Protection vehicles are so strong that they lose wheels and axles and simply return to strategically placed shops for repairs. Then they redeploy.

Originally, Force Protection's main role in the Middle East was to help supply MRAPs for the military, but that task has evolved as the company provides intensive repair and maintenance services on the battlefields.

Force Protection is so good at field repair that its first Buffalo remains at work in the Middle East

today.

Moody speaks candidly about the company's past shortcomings and optimistically about the future.

"It was clear to me when I first started that the company was in a crisis," he said. But with about 1,200 employees worldwide and the lawsuits settled, he said, "We're really getting to a point where all the issues are behind us."

Blow things up

Some of Force Protection's staying power can be traced to an unlikely place: South Carolina's Edgefield County, where the company tests its technology almost daily.

Turkey statues line Edgefield's town square, and a bronze statue of the late U.S. Sen. Strom Thurmond stands opposite the courthouse. The first is a nod to the fact that Edgefield is home to the National Wild Turkey Federation headquarters. The second honors the lawmaker who dominated the state politically for a half-century.

Twelve miles north, a group of men huddled inside a mine-resistant vehicle in a sand pit.

One man got on a radio, warning anyone nearby that a blast would occur in five minutes. After that time elapsed, he began a countdown to arm and detonate a charge they built on site.

The explosion shook the MRAP. It also likely shook churches, trailers and a few turkeys within range of the 300 acres Force Protection uses to test vehicles against ballistics.

Keith Williams, who sold the range to the company and works as its operations director, is a retired Navy Explosive Ordnance Disposal technician and an Edgefield local. His father grew up with Thurmond.

Before Force Protection, Williams ran this place as a test facility for government labs and private industry, doing everything from developing chemical warfare detection tools to growing plants that glow in the presence of explosives.

Williams steered a red King Ranch heavy-duty pickup truck over to the sand pit to watch as a small Force Protection team simulated a roadside bomb.

Employees engineer the same threats that kill U.S. troops in the Middle East to learn how to combat them. They test explosives four days a week, processing data from every blast.

Williams said it would take them six to nine months of navigating bureaucracy to get on a government range. By then, the threat might have morphed three or four times into something altogether new.

Force Protection didn't stumble upon Williams. Williams knew Barrett from working on a

contract in Mozambique and, of all the places in the world, Williams' test range happened to be a few hours away from where Barrett launched his company.

The men also share a mutual connection: Vernon Joynt, who remains Force Protection's most prominent scientist.

Williams met him years earlier while working as a Navy technician in South Africa. When Barrett brought Joynt on at Force Protection in 2004, the scientist urged company executives to buy Williams' site.

They did in 2007, the same year Force Protection sued Barrett.

Force Protection generated more than \$1 billion in orders last year. It signed a deal with the United Kingdom to make vehicles on foreign soil for the first time. And it looks now to Australia for even bigger orders.

As the U.S. draws down its war efforts, Force Protection officials stress that the terrorist threat remains and evolves and that the company will maintain its in-battle services while looking to develop vehicles for public safety departments at home.

Force Protection can fly an MRAP to the Middle East aboard a cargo jet from Charleston Air Force Base in about 17 hours. Force Protection executives like to brag that just about every C-17 leaving Charleston today takes off with an MRAP on board.

Garth Barrett and his wife still live in Summerville. He now works as a consultant for defense contractors but still can't shake his passion for developing mine-resistant vehicles.

He occasionally sees a Force Protection behemoth on television, out of focus in the background of a news story from Afghanistan or Iraq.

From his home a few miles northwest of the airbase and his former company, he can hear the roar of a C-17 as it flies away. He knows that its belly likely carries one of his MRAPs, ready for the next battle.

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About this story

This story was written from hours of interviews over the past year with company officials past and present, military officers and enlisted troops, scientists and mechanics. It also draws from court records, financial documents and government reports.