



HELMETS TO HARDHATS

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Joe talks to us about how a boilermaker turned international union leader founded an organization to give back to Veterans for the sacrifices they make. Helmets to Hardhats connects Veterans with construction jobs, and employers with dedicated, hardworking employees.

By: Paul Harrison



“The problem we have in Canada is that a lot of people don’t think about our Veterans the way they should. Most people think about Veterans on Remembrance Day. They think: ‘a Veteran? Oh my God! That’s an old individual. That’s World War II, Korean War, that kind of thing. They don’t understand that a Veteran is somebody who has served in uniform, and they could have served for 5 years,

10 years,

15 years,

but they’re still a Veteran.

The average age that we place a veteran into the construction industry is 32-34 years old. So, they’re not old people. These people have served their country, and now they’ve decided to have a new chapter in life and they’re going in a different direction; they have a whole working career ahead of them. So, we talk to them about the construction industry

...and we get them into an opportunity.”

JOE MALONEY



Helmets to Hardhats Canada, Part 2: The First Decade

Joe Maloney reflects on the past decade, while preparing for the next.

Election day came and went. The Conservatives finally had their majority government (in May of 2011). They quickly passed their budget; H2H was given \$150,000 by the federal government. The Government of Ontario quickly matched this gift; Alberta followed with the same amount, and New Brunswick with \$50,000. Knowing that their application program would be online, this initial seed money was used to develop the H2H website and the application apparatus. Joe Maloney explains: “Helmets to Hardhats is a web-based program, where Veterans or reservists can register from anywhere in the world and we double-check their credentials to make sure they are a Veteran or a reservist. Then they register with us.”

With the website complete, the private sector quickly took note of what H2H was doing, and generous donations poured in from construction companies and unions. Maloney recalls: “Trans-Canada Pipelines committed \$1 million to us. The General Presidents’ Maintenance Committee, which consists of employers and construction unions, who do supplemental maintenance around the country at big industrial facilities, committed \$800,000. A lot of the unions and employers came in with amounts of \$50,000, \$20,000. That got us rolling.”

Maloney further expands on this foundational time for H2H: “Once H2H took off in Canada, people realized ‘let’s get behind this thing now.’ And Veterans Affairs Canada is behind us 100%. Every government we talk to is behind what we are doing. Some are able to support more than others, financially speaking.” He continues: “But the thing is, industry supports us. And it’s the employers and unions who hire these folks and bring them in; they support this program.”

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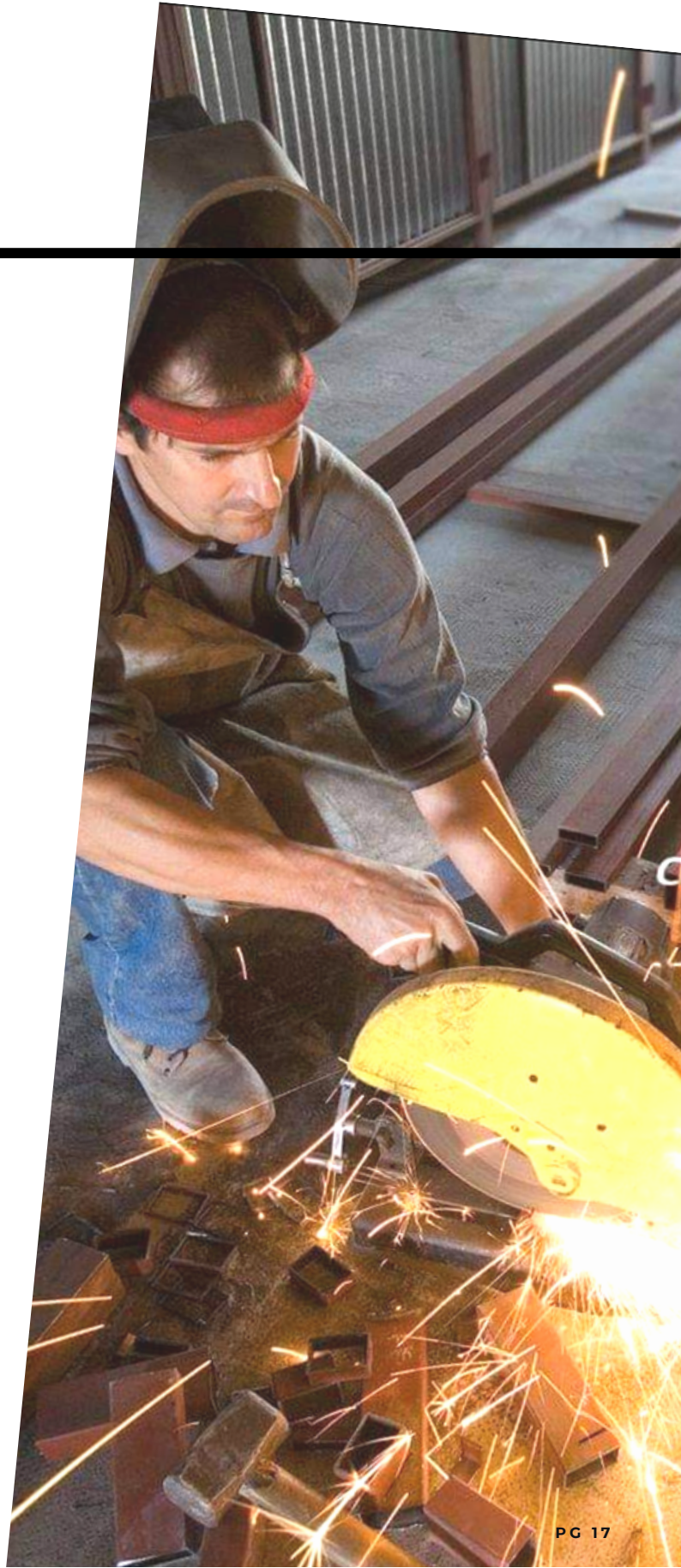


VETERANS'

SKILLS

H2H was soon referring roughly 200 Veterans and reservists each year to various employers and apprenticeship programs across Canada. Unions and employers alike were elated to receive skilled tradespeople to meet the ever-increasing demand in the industry. In addition, Veterans came with skills and attitudes that made, and still make, them sought-after commodities.

Many leaders in the construction industry can testify to Veterans' unique qualities. Ron Balzer, president of Balzer's Canada Inc., notes that "Veterans are very aware of the entire scope of the work that they are doing. They are not just filling in time to get a paycheque. We find the vets don't need the same type of training either. Sure, they are going to need skills-training. I'm talking about other things: self-discipline, eagerness to be on the job site, they are there on time and ready to work, they are accountable and great in a teamwork situation." Mary Keith, VP of communication at Irving Shipbuilding, holds that "[Veterans] bring a tremendous discipline and skill set to the work that we are doing." And Bryan Bedard, operations manager at Canadian Base Operators, argues that military training gives Veterans a certain competitive edge over civilians.





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But the life-long boilermaker knows the value that Veterans bring to the workplace better than anyone: “First of all, Veterans show up in the morning.” Maloney jokes, before adopting a sobering tone: “Veterans come with a good work ethic. They bring leadership skills and know how to work in a team environment and take orders. And they are mentors to others. Veterans are not afraid of putting in a good day’s work. They’re not afraid to work with hand tools, they’re not afraid to work in the air or in confined spaces. A lot of [construction work] is like the military life, so [Veterans] are just transferring their skills out into the construction industry.”

It comes as no surprise that employers and unions are so supportive of a program that gives so much back to them. Giving to H2H is not mere charity; it is an investment in the future. For this reason, the unionized industry was in no way resistant to helping H2H place Veterans in jobs. Maloney, a qualified union leader himself, explains: “The Veterans that join these trades are advancing very quickly because of the leadership and quality they bring with them. So, there is no hesitation from the unions to take these folks.” Maloney adds: “The unionized construction industry is very patriotic. They support our military 100 percent.”





Building on what they have been doing for years, H2H is now working to prequalify Veterans in various safety disciplines, before referring them to employers. This adds further incentivization for employers and unions to hire Veterans. Joe explains that, this way, “when Veterans show up at the employer’s job site, they’ve got WHMIS, fall arrest, confined space, working at heights...That saves the employer time and money to get that individual right on the job, pulling wrenches so to speak.”

Maloney expands on this newly developed prequalification program: “Thanks to the Ontario Government, through the Skills Development Fund, we are now embarking on a program in Ontario, in partnership with the IHSA (Infrastructure Health and Safety Association) to deliver this training to these Veterans around the province, who register with us.” The program will “have them ready to go.” H2H is relying on another bulwark for Veterans in this endeavour: “We’re doing it in partnership with the Ontario Legions. Right now, there are Legions in all these small communities around the province, and we are working with them to use their facilities to train these Veterans.”

Veterans, who have been through the H2H program, now not only bring with them the qualities they developed while in the military to the job, but also multiple safety disciplines. Joe says H2H is seeing increased interest because of this: “We work very closely on a day-to-day basis with all the building trade unions in Canada, and their employers, because the folks we refer to these unions normally start an apprenticeship program, depending on what skill level they are bringing in from the military. They may start as a first-year apprentice, a second-year apprentice or a third-year apprentice. Some of them (especially in the electrical fields) have challenged their Red Seal right off the bat because of what they learn in the military.” This is really the very essence on which H2H is built: that, as Maloney argues, “the skills [Veterans] learn in the military are transferable.”



BUILDING CAREERS FOR THE MILITARY



Unions continue to respond positively, telling H2H to “send us all [the Veterans] you’ve got. Because the last two you sent us were amazing.” Now, every two or three months, when unions take in new members, H2H requests that they save a few spots for Veterans specifically, and, as Maloney expresses: “it’s working out quite well like that.”

In fact, things are working so well that “unions and employers, who participate in the program,” Joe explains, “give us one penny per hour per collective agreement that construction workers work under. For every man-hour that is worked under an agreement, we get a penny.” With this money, H2H is able to keep the program running, and expand their existing operations.

For example, H2H is opening their program for management positions that unionized employers need filling: “Things like logistics, administration, scheduling, planning, estimating... they are not in a bargaining unit, they are not part of a trade, but they work for employers.” This is part of the direct-hires initiative that H2H is now offering to assist Veterans transitioning into civilian life even further. In addition, H2H is also accepting young people leaving the Cadets program at age 19, as well as finding job placements for resettled Afghan interpreters, who worked alongside the Canadian Armed Forces for many years. H2H also connects military spouses and dependents to job opportunities within the unionized construction industry.

All of this is in keeping with H2H’s prime directive to assist “every Veteran and reservist in the country.” Maloney states: “we don’t care what gender you are, what colour you are; if you are a Veteran, there’s an opportunity here for you.” Ultimately, H2H is here to lift “the stress off [Veterans’] shoulders. They know where to go [when they leave CAF]. It gives them opportunity...these young men and women we place in these trades...can take these skills with them anywhere in the country. If they want to open up their own business, if they want to go into management, or if they just want to work for an employer; they have all those opportunities.”

To be continued in issue 3

