

IRAQ VET CREATES APP THAT CONNECTS



BY STEPHANIE A. WILKEN

Photos courtesy Sam Meek

Missing his unit after leaving the Marines, this developer created an app that reconnects those who served in just a few clicks. As a VFW member, he knows the importance of offering this introductory free service.

Staying in touch after leaving the military can be difficult. Years go by, families move—but one thing remains: the memories of time served together and the unforgettable bond shared with comrades. One VFW member created a way to stay in touch, and it's as easy as picking up a cell phone.

Sam Meek is a Marine veteran who served as a nuclear biological and chemical defense specialist during two tours in Iraq, in 2004 and 2005. At 31, his résumé now reads founder and CEO of a company called Sandboxx. And through an app by the same name, Meek and his team use modern technology to help veterans and active-duty troops alike connect, helping foster those important relationships.

The app, which allows users to connect socially as well as send postal mail to active-duty troops, launched for iPhone in November. “We felt that launching on Veterans Day was just a very special thing for us to do,” Meek said.

STAYING IN TOUCH

Available for both iPhone and Android, it just takes a few moments to create an account. After that, just a few clicks and you're able to enter information that will connect you with as large of a population as your unit or as few as your platoon with a feature called Chatboxx. There, you can send messages, post pictures, and more.

Your connections' activity shows up in a newsfeed, where you're able to see what they're up to now.

"Sandboxx is free to download on iOS and Android for connecting and finding the units you served with," Meek said. "To send someone a letter, we give everyone their first one free, then charge \$1.99 for each after. This covers the cost of the paper, the return envelope, the technology and the two stamps. We are seeking to make the letters a free service in the future.

"Sandboxx generates revenues from our letters at this time," he said. "We will be releasing other features later this year that will have a revenue component to them." Meek said the social component of the app, where you connect with others, will remain a free service.

At any given point during someone's military service, there are many, many connections made. "Every single point that you stop on that timeline, you also have that structure chain of command above or below you," Meek said. The app allows users to choose just how broad or narrow of a scope they'd like to use to connect.

"Whether they want to reach out to a company of men and women who they served with or just the four-man fire team that was a very tight, cohesive unit, we allow veterans to connect in a unique way," he said.

It can be a morale booster to stumble across old buddies. "It's like you lost your dog for two years, and you're walking through the park and he runs up to you with a ball in his mouth," Meek said describing the feeling of reconnecting.

"Being able to reach out and talk about the funny things that happened in the barracks or the sad things that happen while you're deployed, you can laugh about those experiences and cry about those experiences together. There's nothing that replicates the feeling we get when we reconnect with those we've been with in great and bad times."

Meek, a member of Post 2460 in Washington, D.C., said he wanted a way to share all the memories you create while serving. "You go through so many good times with these men, personal struggles, funny moments, you name it," Meek said. "They are truly like your brothers, and I wanted to be able to re-connect, chat and



Through the Sandboxx app users are able to send a letter to an active duty member of the military. The letter comes with paper and a self-addressed stamped envelope.



Sandboxx creator Sam Meek

reminisce with them specifically, but I couldn't remember all of their names, just their characters and faces."

IDEA IN THE MAKING

Sandboxx grew from an idea sparked in 2011. After working several jobs and going back to school for his degree, Meek ended up working on Wall Street and missing the Marine Corps.

Retired Marine Gen. Ray L. Smith, a Vietnam vet and life member of Post 1503 in Woodbridge, Va., and Bob Russell, father of a Marine veteran, called Meek with an idea to help create a better family readiness program.

"That's when the light when on," Meek said. "I thought back to when I was just back from Iraq laying in my barracks. I was actually setting up [a social media account] so I could stay connected to my fellow Marines. After setting up my profile, I remembered thinking to myself, 'I wish there was a better way for me to reconnect with all the guys I

have served with in the past.'"

But users don't have to be veterans. Friends, family and active duty service members can join the community, too. In addition, there's a component called Mailboxx that lets you send mail to active-duty personnel that includes 1,000 characters of text—even insert a photo all from your phone.

From boot camp to deployment, getting mail is a crucial part of your service experience, Meek said. "These moments when you're off the grid are really hard, and being able to hear from your mother, your uncle or girlfriend, there is no greater satisfaction than receiving mail when you are off the grid," he said.

"It is at the culmination of the day—hands down what you look forward to most. The letters from home are really what keep us going and motivated." And it's easy for loved ones to send them using the app. "When you're in traffic, in line at the grocery, you can send off that love note with just a couple clicks," Meek said.

When the service member receives the mail, it comes with an attached envelope with pre-paid postage along with an attached sheet of paper for writing the return letter. "You don't always have a stamp and an envelope in your pocket," he said. "You can return your note back to your loved one right then and there and hand it right back to the mail clerk that gave it to you."

RELATING TO PEOPLE

As for the unusual spelling of the name "Sandboxx," Meek said the idea of sharing and relating to people came from the sandbox you play in as a child. There's also the sandbox of training or deployment. "Through these two sandboxes, we've built who we are as people—that's why there are two 'x's," Meek said.

It's still a small company, but it's growing, and many members of the Sandboxx team are veterans. And those who aren't are in some way connected to the military. "Almost everyone on the team has a connection to the military," Meek said. "Everybody truly understands what we're trying to do."

For more information about the free aspects of this service, visit <https://www.sandboxx.us/>, Apple's app store or Google Play. ★

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