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LIFE AFTER WARTIME

For lifelong military man, civilian life comes as a welcome challenge

BY JOSHUA H. SILAVENT

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RENO — After 29 years in the Army, Cornell Irons looks the part of soldier: tall, muscular, with a square jaw and focused expression. But the lieutenant colonel speaks with a sincerity that belies his physical sternness. It serves him well as a new businessman transitioning to civilian life.

Irons, 48, joined the military as a teenager to prove to a friend that he could pass basic training. It was an unusual beginning, but the decision to meet that challenge opened a swath to success. He would go on to earn a master's degree, enlist in active-duty service, climb the ranks of the military hierarchy, have two daughters, make lasting friendships and serve with distinction in Afghanistan.

The days in uniform,

however, are coming to an end for Irons. He is currently on "terminal leave" from the Army and will officially retire on Dec. 31.

A new challenge now awaits the lifelong military man.

"I felt that I had gotten and hit every job I could do in the military," Irons said.

He passed up a lucrative six-figure contract from a private firm to return to Afghanistan this year in order to stay at home with his children. So, having earned his full pension and benefits after completing 20 years of service, Irons began to consider options outside the military.

"I've always thought about being an entrepreneur," Irons said.

He researched several franchises, mapped out fees and revenue predictions and finally settled on Charley's Grilled Subs, a



Tribune/Dan McGee

Cornell Irons, who is retiring from 29 years in the Army in December, has opened a new Charley's sandwich shop located in the food court at Meadowood Mall. Irons hopes to open more locations in California during the next year.

fast food sandwich chain based in Columbus, Ohio. Irons bought and opened his first store at the

Meadowood Mall in Reno just a few weeks ago and intends to open several more locations in California

during the next couple of years.

"I'm trying to set myself up for my next

retirement," he said.

Despite a few minor

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CHARLEY'S

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frustrations, Irons said he is making the transition from military practice to private practice with relative ease, even if he does work 12-hour days.

Irons lived off base during most of his years in the Army, and he believes this fact, coupled with the duration of his service, actually benefited him when it came time to leave the military.

But for many veterans re-entering civilian life after years of service, particularly when returning from combat zones, is fraught with risk and uncertainty. It can be difficult for them to adjust to a world without the structure and regimentation of military life.

"Some of that gets engrained in your psyche and you have to step back and say, 'OK, some people or some organizations don't operate the same way,'" Irons said.

He hopes his success as a businessman can be an example to other retiring and discharged soldiers.

Irons recommended that soldiers thinking about returning to civilian

life research their aspirations, set goals, stay prepared for changes and self-educate.

Importantly, Irons said, "Cut the cord. You got to know what your future is a year out."

Part of Irons' decision to purchase a Charley's franchise was based on the fact that he previously had been a patron of the restaurant and liked the food.

"You want to get into things that you're going to enjoy and want to participate in," he said.

Irons believes that soldiers entering the business world do so with certain learned talents that bode well for their success.

"We come with a different skill set," he said, referring to the leadership traits soldiers develop while serving.

The best piece of advice Irons said he could give to fellow soldiers was to "follow your dreams."

Having done so himself, Irons now finds satisfaction in the freedom of being his own boss and employing people in a down economy.

"I get some gratification from putting my own sweat equity into the business," he said.