

# Veterans connect on new website

## ArmedZilla makes debut after updates

By Rebekah L. Sanders  
The Arizona Republic

Mike James never talked much about his experiences in the Navy, even to his wife.

Few friends in the Valley could relate to the tense moments he spent operating anti-aircraft missiles from a Pacific warship in the Cold War's final years.

But two decades later, the 47-year-old James feels a tug to find other veterans who understand.

That's why he signed up recently to test a new "Facebook" for the military.

The social-networking website, called ArmedZilla, rolls out fully today.

Created by an Iraq war veteran from Arizona with seed money from Silicon Valley investors, ArmedZilla aims to become the largest online community for veterans, their families, friends and groups catering to the military.

An older generation may have pulled up a bar stool at the American Legion post to trade war stories with friends. Today's vets log on to their laptops.

The site worked for James, who became a Glendale software developer and stand-up comic after the Navy. He found one former shipmate among the 700-plus early adopters of ArmedZilla and thinks more will pop up as the site develops.

"A lot of times you feel alone in your experiences," said James, who recalls nightmares in which, stuck to a hurtling

## ArmedZilla

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missile, he would come face to face with the enemy and see a framed photo of the Soviet pilot's family in the cockpit. "There were a lot of intense things that were never really addressed."

With ArmedZilla, he said, "I can find people I can relate to... It's a common bond."

The idea for ArmedZilla came to 29-year-old founder David Johnson several years ago.

He moved home to Phoenix in 2005 after three tours in Iraq as an Arabic interrogator with the 10th Special Forces Group.

Once out of the Army, Johnson enrolled at Arizona State University and tried to make friends among college students.

"That's when the disconnect hit me," he said, feeling different from other civilians.

Slowly, Johnson met fellow veterans in his classes. One told him of the high number of veterans in Arizona. It's about 500,000.

"I thought, 'I only know 10 of them,'" Johnson said. "It just didn't feel right."

He searched for an online military community but found only limited websites. So he started his own.

ArmedZilla had a rocky beginning, with little money and a site that wasn't fully functional. Then Johnson met seasoned technology investor George Weiss, a Valley resident and chief executive of Beechtree Capital.

Weiss put in cash and encouraged Johnson to travel the country, courting investors, hiring top engineers and touting the site everywhere from the Pentagon to venture-capital summits.

Soon, Johnson had attracted money from people like Jim Flach of Accel Partners, an early backer of Facebook, and formed a 15-person company.

The revamped site, with much more to offer, debuts today.

Like Facebook, ArmedZilla

allows users to create profiles, search and send messages.

But unique features are designed to promote connections among the military.

Veterans create timelines of their service for their profiles, fleshed out with units, ranks, training schools, descriptions of duties and photos.

Then ArmedZilla's algorithms mine the data for connections, showing veterans other users who served in the same places.

Clicking on profiles brings an array of other connections. A mom of a Marine could click on her son's unit to find moms of his comrades. Employers could click on a rank or specialization to find veterans with skills relevant to their job openings.

Meanwhile, civilians who join the site select how they are connected to veterans, with choices like "a relative served in the military."

Businesses and organizations also can create profiles but must have something to offer veterans, from Disneyland's military discounts to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The site aims to generate revenue from these groups that pay for pages and targeted advertising.

It can be daunting for veterans to identify the right resource from a vast array of charities, government programs and businesses aimed at the military, Johnson said. ArmedZilla makes it easier.

A veteran may write in his profile that he was injured in an explosion. Later, he'll see promotions for a prosthetics company and a wounded-veterans support group in his city.

That same company or support group could also offer a weekly Web chat or video cast on its page.

Chandler real-estate broker Shivani Dallas is banking on ArmedZilla connecting veterans to her business.

Dallas' niche is helping military families with VA home loans and short sales. It started when one soldier stationed in Afghanistan recommended her to another.

She hopes such referrals will only multiply once her services are advertised on ArmedZilla.

"It's given me a platform for more exposure," said Dallas. "If this can offer (veterans) some avenues of connection, it's huge."

Social-networking sites for special-interest groups can be successful, experts say.

Web developer EnderTech near Los Angeles has built communities for artists, hospitality workers and college freshmen, project manager Avery Potter said.

"Facebook just caters to everybody," he said. "So when you have something like ArmedZilla, you're going to want to focus all of your energies on making those connections through a specific demographic."

The military population is large enough — but also specific enough — to sustain interest in a site if the features are useful, he said.

ArmedZilla's biggest challenge will be creating enough buzz to attract users quickly, said digital strategist Robby Berthume of North Carolina branding agency Woodbine.

"The snowball effect is absolutely critical to a new social network," he said.

For instance, Google generated demand for Gmail and Google+ through its invitation-only strategy.

The key, Berthume said, is to develop ambassadors "to build a tribe around your social network."

Though ArmedZilla won't restrict early membership like Google, its marketing will be limited initially to Texas, California and Arizona, where the military communities are large and ArmedZilla has outreach coordinators, Johnson said.

He thinks the startup will take off once veterans hear about it.

"When I got out of the military, I needed something like this," Johnson said. "We do have a lot of challenges, but we have a lot of people rooting for us."