

A new US brand is using flip flop manufacturing to bring jobs and income to areas affected by conflict under the concept of the 'unarmed forces'.

Shoemaking as a force for peace

Walking around a thriving bootmaking factory in a buzzing Afghan district of Kabul, US army consultant and former veteran Matthew Griffin was struck by how the hundreds of workers were supporting thousands of family members with incomes that were helping to rebuild districts ravaged by war. It was 2012 and after two tours of the country and subsequent postings representing government agencies in Africa in the Middle East, Mr Griffin and his colleague Donald Lee were becoming disillusioned. Speaking to the footwear workers, they saw that leftover leather and soles could be used to make flip flops, and spied a commercial opportunity.

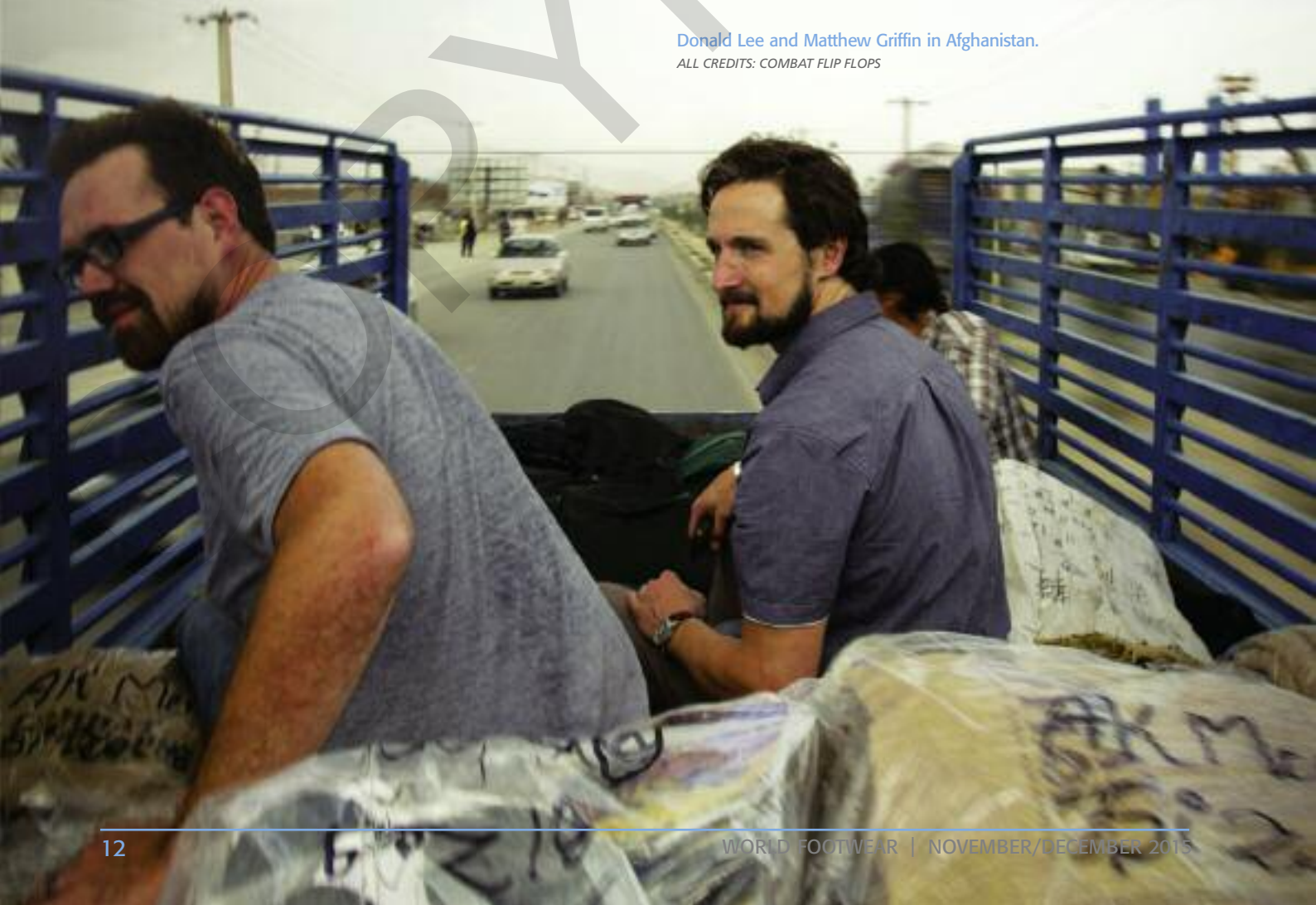
"The feeling of despair I had for all those years after my deployments and years in the military started to go away, replaced by a feeling that turned into action," he says. "The concept was simple: we were going to take military capacity that was established to manufacture tools for war in countries affected by conflict, and manufacture products for peace, and ship them all over the world and help people."

While the concept was simple, the logistics, to start with, were not. The initial idea was to source the flip flops from the factory that had provided the inspiration, particularly as it lost its combat boot contract when the government outsourced the manufacture to Asia. The first small production run was a success, so Griffin and Lee increased the order. However, doing business in a region still caught up in red tape and with complicated customs procedures proved difficult. The second run was rejected because of the quality of the materials from Asia, and a subsequent batch of materials got stuck on the Pakistan border. The factory then closed as "the war was ending", and the materials had to be redirected. "We ended up manufacturing our first 4,000 pairs in my garage in Issaquah (Washington State) from February to May 2013," Mr Griffin tells us.

They headed to Las Vegas-based footwear trade show Magic in search of partners. "As a first time vendor, we got a poor booth location and had little traffic. We used that down-time to source other footwear manufacturers and

Donald Lee and Matthew Griffin in Afghanistan.

ALL CREDITS: COMBAT FLIP FLOPS





The factory in Bogota had a local supply of high-quality leather and skilled workers in place to make the shoes.

found the Colombian section of the supplier tradeshow. We were impressed by the quality of materials, craftsmanship and pricing. Plus, the Colombians had a great vibe about them that made us want to work with their growing footwear industry."

The suppliers operated a factory in Bogota and had a local supply of high-quality leather and skilled workers in place to make the shoes, and the free trade agreement established between the US and Colombia in 2012 meant logistics were relatively simple. "It's a fantastic set-up because all of our materials are made within a short drive of our final assembly location. It's truly eased logistics, enabled rapid quality assurance along the entire manufacturing process, and minimised our carbon footprint."

'Bad for running, worse for combat'

With the flip flops supply chain up and running, the pair turned their attention back to Afghanistan. The income from the shoes allowed them to look into other avenues.

"Our motivator to return to Afghanistan was the same motivator that started this company in the first place. We quickly learned that Afghanistan does not have the ability to supply the materials for footwear: rubber production, tanneries, thread manufacturing, etc. Textile manufacturing jobs provide the shortest path to steady, long term employment. Knowing that, we focused on products that could be vertically integrated in Afghanistan: cotton and cashmere.

"After serving multiple tours in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, the shemagh (scarf) became an indispensable accessory. The Afghan products have a look, style and feel that we enjoy, so we started exporting products to round out our accessory line."

Through the search for a cashmere supplier and textile facility, they met a lady who had earlier negotiated (albeit unsuccessfully) with the Taliban on educating women and had set up several girls' schools. She was now running a textile factory making scarves and sarongs and Combat, the company name used by the founders, is now the only client. "Over the past year, scarves and sarongs have climbed to be nearly



Scarf sales support a women's school in Afghanistan, with each purchase paying for one week's schooling for one woman.

20% of our business and these sales support a local school, with each purchase paying for one week's schooling. Win, win, win."

So far this year, sales of scarves have funded 21 years of secondary education. The target for the end of the year is to reach 52 years.

Further opportunities to turn conflict into income presented themselves in the form of jewellery made from cleared landmines in Laos. Around 30% of the 270 million bombs the US dropped on the country during the Vietnam War are still in the ground, and families take scrap recovered from the landmines, melt it down and repurpose it. Each sale funds the clearance of three square-metres of unexploded ordnance. So far sales have helped clear 1,173 square-metres of land; by the end of the year the target is 2,000.

The next goal is to boost sales and grow the business to increase the impact on communities. "A full clothing, footwear and lifestyle brand that puts little girls through schools, clears regions of land mines, and rehabilitates veterans," envisages Mr Griffin. The flip flops' slogan: 'Bad for running, worse for combat' sums up the ethos: "The mission is to enable the mindful consumer to manufacture peace through trade." 



The original Combat design uses thick soles and leather details.