

STARS STRIPES

New broom sweeps clean

By Terri Barnes

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For the New Year, I bought a new broom. I took it home, ready to sweep my kitchen clean. I removed the plastic wrapper from the bristles and a card fell to the floor. I picked it up and read:

"Skilcraft ... created with pride by Americans who are blind for the brave men and women of our armed forces. We thank you for the sacrifices you make every day for the freedoms we enjoy."

I don't usually give much thought to the Skilcraft items I bring home from the commissary, from dish towels and cleaning utensils to kitchen gadgets and candles. The brand is part of my military life, and has been for as long as I can remember.

My Air Force dad usually had a pen, stamped "Skilcraft U.S. Government Property," in the pocket of his flight suit. My husband uses those pens, too.

The red, white and blue card that came with my broom made me curious about this brand name I've taken for granted and its relationship with the U.S. military.

Military members and their families use Skilcraft items at home, at work and even while deployed, said Mike Johnson, communications program director for National Industries for the Blind.

Scrub brushes at the commissary, blood pressure cuffs at the clinic and helmet inserts on the battlefield are among the Skilcraft products used by the military.

"What many people may not know," he said, "is that these products — and so many more — are made in America by people who are blind."

Skilcraft is not a company but a brand name for products made in association with the National Industries for the Blind, Johnson said. The trademark, for which 75 percent of the labor is performed by people who are blind, was created in 1952, but the partnership between the NIB and the military started earlier.

"In the 1930s, leaders in the blindness community came together and urged Congress to open up government markets to nonprofit agencies that produce products made by people who are blind," Johnson said.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed legislation in 1938 giving federal contract priority to those agencies, as long as products met quality and value specifications. During WWII, employees who were blind manufactured mops, brooms, mailbags and pillowcases for the U.S. military.

Military commissaries began carrying Skilcraft products in the mid-1950s, starting with dishcloths, doormats and clothespin bags. Johnson said the product line has grown to more than 650 items.

The government-issued Skilcraft pen was created in 1969 after the General Services Administration inadvertently purchased — from another supplier — millions of defective ballpoint pens, Johnson said. The GSA offered NIB the opportunity to supply the government with 70 million pens a year. The organization met the requirements, and military history has been written with Skilcraft pens ever since.

"The success of the pen project changed people's perceptions about what people who are blind were capable of," Johnson said. "In addition to working in a variety of manufacturing fields, people who are blind deliver knowledge-based services, including contact center support, supply chain services, website accessibility testing ... and others," he said.

Assistive technologies like computer software that translates print into speech and magnifies computer screen images and text allows employees who are blind to perform almost any job, Johnson explained.

The 1938 legislation has evolved into a government initiative called AbilityOne, which creates employment opportunities for people who have severe disabilities. The NIB and the Skilcraft brand are part of this program.

In 2009, the NIB became involved in the military community in another way, creating a program for wounded veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts to inform them about training, job placement and career opportunities.

"The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have created more injuries resulting in blindness than any conflict since the Civil War," Johnson said.

So now the Skilcraft brand is connected to the military on another front.

"What began as a steady supply of mops and brooms during World War II has grown to thousands of products," Johnson said.

"Today's war fighter takes more than a dozen of these products into combat, including uniforms, apparel, helmet pads, canteens and shovels."

And on the homefront in my military household, a new broom to sweep clean.

By the numbers

* From 1941 to 1945, people who were blind produced 21 million mops, 40 million pillowcases and 16 million mailbags to support the war effort in WWII.

* NIB is the nation's largest employment resource for people who are blind, with a network of 93 nonprofit agencies to employ more than 5,000 people who are blind in the United States.

* A Skilcraft pen contains enough ink to write a line approximately 1 mile long.

Veterans and wounded warriors interested in learning more about NIB, career transitions or career opportunities can contact Ned Rupp, Veterans Affairs Specialist - Wounded Warrior Program, at 703-310-0537 or nrupp@nib.org.