

# Mark Klett in First Person

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Klett Consulting Group Inc. of Virginia Beach has been named the 2010 Virginia Veteran-Owned Small Business of the Year.

## Klett Consulting Group

We are an operations systems engineering small business. Klett is one of the fastest-growing systems engineering firms in Virginia. We have been in business for eight years.

The company is the lead on some major projects for the integration of the combat systems on the new aircraft carriers being built, new commanding control systems for the Navy and new program management support for the Homeland Security Department.

I went into this line of work because I saw that there was a void not only in the Tidewater area but in the industry for operational systems engineering to be able to rapidly develop solutions for the warfighter within a certain period of time.

I was frustrated, having served in the Navy for 20 years and having to work for different large defense companies and seeing that the technology was there but a lot of bureaucracy prevented it from happening. So I decided to go out on my own. Since we've been open, the business has grown about 85 percent each year and the demand is there.

This job for me has been a labor of love. I enjoy the challenges. I am committed to my customers and my people. I have been lucky that I have great folks working for me. Right now we have a little over 40 employees. Even in this tough economy, we still have been able to hire people.

## Service in the military

I was a surface warfare officer in the Navy and was stationed on four different ships. I primarily managed weapon systems. I also went to the Navy post-graduate school and received a master's degree in engineering systems technology. I've been able to apply that to the work I do today.

I've also had numerous jobs managing people. I'm still working today with many of the people that I met in the '70s in college and throughout my 20 years of service in the Navy. That is part of my network.

#### Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business Council

I'm one of the founding members of this council. We formed because we saw there was a mandate for 3 percent of all federal contracts to go to service-disabled, veteran-owned small-business companies like mine. This mandate has been in effect since 2004.

Only four agencies out of 24 have achieved this goal per the latest Small Business Administration's annual report. I testified last March before Congress about how those agencies could improve and obtain the 3 percent goals. A number of us in this area decided to stand up and make this council to help small businesses deal with the federal government better.

The federal government doesn't understand the full capabilities of small business and how agile they can be. In most cases they can offer more technical support than most large Fortune 500 companies. We can't build an airplane or carrier but there are small niches inside of those large programs that small businesses can deliver.

We have about 40 members in our organization. We're growing quite rapidly and expect more than 100 members around this time next year. The council is focusing on a number of things, including government in-sourcing, taking contractor jobs that support government organizations and in-sourcing them to the government, and fraud. Some companies are claiming that they are veteran-owned and they're not. Rep. Glenn Nye just held a congressional hearing on the matter. The Government Accountability Office did a spot check on service-disabled veteran companies and found that 10 out of 10 companies were fraudulent in their representation of themselves as SDVOSBs and had been awarded more than \$100 million in government contracts, per GAO report 10-108.

#### Strong supporter

I'm passionate about veteran-owned businesses and helping our veterans and wounded warriors getting out of the military find jobs. I've been fortunate to have this business and I want to give back. There are approximately 24,000 men and women getting out of the military every year. It's our duty to ensure that they have opportunities available for them when they get out. Our organization, along with Old Dominion University, recently won a federal grant to open the first local veteran business outreach center.

Just like most Americans out here, it's been difficult securing work. It's hard to find jobs in the Tidewater area. Before we founded the outreach center, the nearest one for veterans was in Pittsburgh. Now we have a center here where we can start programs to help veterans do some things.

## Award

I was very ecstatic and humbled by the award from the Virginia Small Business Development Center Network because I was the first business owner in Hampton Roads to receive this award. Considering the number of veteran-owned businesses in this area, I was pretty shocked that I was chosen. I hope that this will bring more awareness to other veteran-owned businesses in the Tidewater area and encourage others to do more. nib