

# Dan Frank

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## A Perfect Landing

Landing a jet on the narrow deck of an aircraft carrier is among the most challenging skills a navy pilot must master. These carriers have four arresting wires strung across their decks—cables woven from steel wire that the pilot aims to snag with the tailhook attached to the plane’s tail, thereby bringing the aircraft to a stop.

If the pilot flies in a little too low, the tailhook catches the two or one wires. If it’s too high, it catches the four wire, or none at all. And if the pilot lands the jet perfectly, the tailhook catches the three wire.

As the CEO and Founder of Three Wire Systems, LLC, Dan Frank named his company in the spirit of this perfect maneuver. “I ended up starting the company after mounting frustration from working in corporations, as many entrepreneurs do,” Dan explains. He was in California working for a number of different software companies, none of which seemed to mirror the company culture and commitment to excellence and innovation that he craved, when he decided it was time to strike out on his own.

At the time, he had had a number of discussions with a friend doing government contracting in Washington, who told him about 8(a) companies and special federal programs for veteran-owned and service-disabled veteran-owned businesses. He then discovered that the state of California had similar veteran business programs, so he decided to pursue a career as a state and federal contractor based out of California in 2004. Dan quit his job and began consulting with smaller companies around the Sacramento and Bay Areas, learning more about the government marketplace each day.

A year later, he launched a company focused on federal contracting in the services sector, flying back and forth between California and DC. Within a year of that move, however, he and his wife decided the business would only

flourish if they relocated to Washington. “I don’t consider myself a risk taker; I’m a fairly conservative guy,” he acknowledges. “But Sacramento is a relatively small town, and I had no space left to grow. In reality, it was my wife who had the guts to push for this. I don’t think I would have done it without her encouragement because I tend to look at things from a more pragmatic standpoint.

“I can still remember leaving Sacramento to drive down and see my parents in LA,” he continues. “We took a flight out of Long Beach airport. My son was six at the time, and my wife was pregnant. She carried a small peony with her on that JetBlue flight all the way to Washington and planted it when we got to our new home. It’s still flourishing today.”

The peony was, in a sense, a manifestation of the fledgling business ideas he himself was carrying with him on that flight and would plant when he arrived in Washington. Venturing on new terrain, the Franks had \$100,000 to use in the sustenance of their family and the launch of Dan’s business. They moved into their house in June of 2006, began the paperwork for his business in July, and opened the doors in September. With that, Three Wire Systems was born.

“Once I started the company, I had to decide what I was going to do,” Dan laughs. “I thought I knew about business from my years of previous corporate experience, but it turned out I knew nothing; instead, I had been narrowly focused on revenue generation and wasn’t exposed to anything else. I didn’t learn about business until I actually jumped in and started my own. Can entrepreneurship be taught? It seems to me that you have to do it.”

Dan refers to those early months, from September 2006 to March 2007, as “the dark days”—a time when he was subletting a cube from



a friend's office and trying to forge his path forward. "I would come in each day and ask, am I using my time efficiently? Am I doing the right thing in the limited amount of runway that I have?" he recalls. "I never lost focus. I was obsessed—not with a worry about failing, but with an excitement about winning. I got up every day and focused on making connections. It's a treadmill you resolve to get on and stay on."

Fortunately, the pieces began falling into place. A friend needed a developer for a specific program for a government contract, so Dan found someone with the requisite skills and was able to take on the work as a subcontractor, earning around \$30 thousand by the end of 2006. "Luck is the intersection of preparation and hard work, and that's what I aimed to accomplish," Dan recalls. Three Wire then received its GSA Schedule 70 within six months of opening—a rare feat for new contractors—and was also awarded a SEWP Contract, a large government-wide acquisition contract to procure IT equipment that has exceeded \$10 billion in the last five years. "That was a real game changer for us in the beginning of 2007," Dan recalls. With that, the products and services lines of the business began to evolve.

Also in 2007, a large prime contractor approached Dan about a veterans outreach program in behavioral health. Though a veteran himself, Dan knew nothing about behavioral health, but that didn't deter him. "I decided to bid with them, and we won," he says. "Taken together, the alignment of all those great opportunities is what really launched us."

That contract developed into one of their main lines of business, VetAdvisor. The program harnesses technology to provide behavioral health and wellness coaching for military veterans within the VA. VetAdvisor has grown from a simple telephonic program focused on behavioral health to now encompass the three additional key areas of wellness, finance, and career development. "From a holistic point of view, all these categories impact veterans in unique ways," Dan points out. "We've become the experts and navigational advocates in helping veterans from a coaching perspective, aligning them with our resources or directing them to the right government or private sector programs if we can't help them." Thanks to these successes and the bright future that lies before it, Three Wire employs a team of around 80 today, with a headquarters in Falls Church and a

larger office in Ebensburg, Pennsylvania, and with representation in Colorado and Texas as well.

With the dual themes of military service and entrepreneurship so prominent in his own life, it isn't surprising that these currents run deep through his family history as well. His grandfather, a Jewish businessman who owned an animal feed lot in Germany and served in the German Army in World War I, was forced out of the country in 1938, venturing to America by way of Ellis Island and then making his way to Chicago.

Growing up without much, Dan's father developed a strong drive to make his own way in life. He was drafted in the Army and was about to be shipped to Korea when, at the last minute, he found out the Army was looking for computer programmers. He was a mathematician, so the military instead sent him to the first programming courses in the Army, affording him his training in computers. He later worked for several early technology companies and then left the corporate world in much the same way his son would many years later. "He was pretty forward thinking because, at that time, everyone was focused in hardware," Dan explains. "Most people didn't think of software as the value add. They were the first independent software vendor, providing software for IBM and its competitors."

Dan was born in California and came to the East Coast at a young age. His mother was an artist and part-owner of the Spectrum Gallery in Georgetown in Washington, DC, at the height of the 1960s art movement. "I would hang out at her art gallery in the evenings, and I remember seeing the black light shops and the Jimi Hendrix and Andy Warhol pieces that were so characteristic of the time."

As a kid, Dan was more interested in sports and flying than he was in his father's businesses. "It was always my dream to be a pilot," he recalls. "My father traveled extensively, and I remember being fascinated by the planes whenever we dropped him off and picked him up from the airport." Though his first jobs were refereeing basketball, football, and baseball events for ten bucks a game, and then washing cars, he pursued his passion for flying when his family returned to California by getting a job at the airport, where he washed and fueled airplanes through high school and into college. He then became a lineman, driving a fuel truck for several

summers at a big general aviation airport in Southern California and at a flight school, which afforded him discounts for flight lessons.

Dan attended college at San Jose State and earned his degree in aeronautics and then embarked on what would become an eight-year active duty journey with the US Navy. His father served in the American Army. With a sister serving in the Israeli Army, an Uncle who served as an OSS Agent in World War II, and a maternal grandfather who served in the American cavalry, it was a natural move, yet he doesn't take the experience for granted. "I consider myself especially fortunate to have applied to the military at a time when President Reagan was building it up," he affirms. "I didn't have the highest grades because I studied hardest only what truly captivated my interest. Still, I was willing to put all my eggs in one basket, assuming that I would make it in the military. I was not going to fail. If I was going to leave, they would be carrying me out of there on a stretcher."

In the Navy, Dan was afforded the opportunity to travel all over the world. "I was always fascinated by carrier aviation," he emphasizes. He earned a masters degree from Embry Riddle Aeronautical University during his service and authored a thesis on opening a flight school in Honolulu. When he finished active duty, he then entered the private sector.

After working at KPMG, he took a job with Sterling Software, where he had the opportunity to spend three years in Europe as an expatriate based in both Paris and Brussels, managing European, Middle Eastern, and African affairs. Sterling was then acquired by Computer Associates, so he transitioned over to Serena Software and then to a small software company called Unify. "Those were good companies, but they also had their drawbacks," he remarks. "I took the negatives I saw within those environments and tried to create the opposite in Three Wire."

This diverse expanse of experience has led Dan to develop and embrace a leadership philosophy that differs tremendously from leadership in the military, which was very command-and-control and relatively homogenous in terms of approach. "At Sterling, I began to pay attention to the differences between personality profiles, picking up on the best way to approach and manage people based on those differences,"

Dan points out. "Learning how to approach people based on how they color their world is a key aspect of leadership, because only when you understand them in this way can you truly connect with them. Leaders are not there to motivate people; they're there to create an atmosphere where people can motivate themselves. And that is based on understanding and mutual respect."

Operating with the deeply held belief that people respond to being heard and feeling that they're valued, Dan aims to ensure that his employees have fun while they're here at work. Giving back is an important aspect of the company culture as well, and since most of Three Wire's employees are veterans, that passion about giving back is innate. "What goes around, comes around," Dan avows. "What you give, you get. I didn't truly understand this until the past five years or so. If you approach your life—business and personal—in terms of what you can give, you'll get back in spades. It may take years, but it works. Approach people with, 'How can I help you? What can I do for you?' It pays off."

In advising young entrepreneurs entering the business world today, and when he speaks at the Youth Leadership Foundation to help inner city kids learn leadership skills, Dan stresses the importance of perseverance. "It's really about not giving up, applying yourself, and making mistakes," he explains. "We're lucky to be in a society where mistakes are actually seen as badges of courage in many ways. If you've never made a mistake, you've never really tried."

In making these mistakes, however, Dan emphasizes that one should always strive to do your best, even if you happen to be at an entry level job or internship at the very bottom of the ladder. "Whatever you're doing, do the best you can, and somebody will notice," he says. "People will be watching for the superstars. The guy you're working for could be your next mentor, and all they need is to see who you really are and what you're capable of. Make sure you're striving for a perfect landing—for that three wire—and you'll find that aircraft carrier stationed in bigger and better places each time you come back down from flying high."

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The logo for Bernhardt Wealth Management features the word "BERNHARDT" in a large, serif font, with a horizontal line underneath it. Below the line, the words "WEALTH MANAGEMENT" are written in a smaller, sans-serif font. The entire logo is set against a background of a dense, repeating pattern of small, light-colored geometric shapes.

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