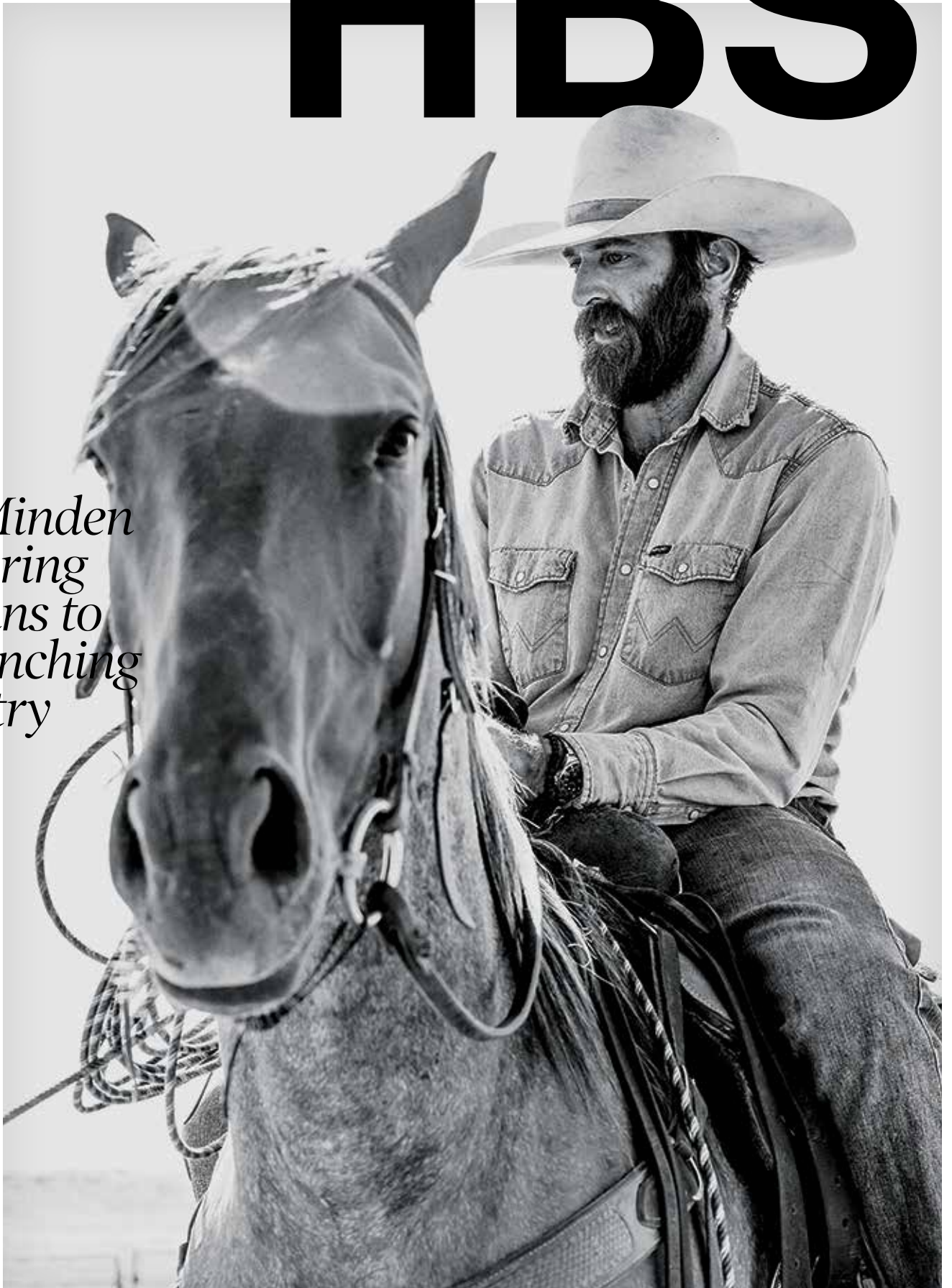


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Back at the Ranch

Veterans are hungry for meaningful work; the ranching industry is desperate for good help. Ben Minden's Bear Hug Cattle Company proposes a two-birds, one-stone solution.

BY JEN MCFARLAND FLINT



LEARNING BY DOING:

The Bear Hug Cattle Company travels annually to the ID Ranch, outside Sinclair, Wyoming, to help with the arduous task of rounding up and branding all the calves that were born in the last year.

THE SUMMER TRAINING PROGRAM AT BEAR HUG

Cattle Company starts truly at square one.

“The first day is about teaching the guys how to just be out here and not die,” says lead instructor Zach Aguilar, gazing out from under his broad-brimmed hat to the grassy rangelands of Wilsall, Montana. “Literally, they need to learn how to walk from point A to point B on a ranch without injuring themselves. Or the livestock.”

That was in early June. Ten weeks later, on a scorcher of an August afternoon, Aguilar and Bear Hug Cattle Company founder **Ben Minden (MBA 2023)** are celebrating four military veterans who are graduating from the program. Randy, Tristen, Tyler, and the other Tyler first spent four intensive weeks learning horsemanship, then another six weeks on cowboy fundamentals, from roping and doctoring cattle to ranch economics and pasture management. If all goes to plan, when they land their first job on a ranch and someone hollers at them to catch a horse or get the six-weight calves, these guys will know exactly what’s being asked and how to do it safely.

Minden founded the nonprofit in 2019, as a second act after his own military career. He’d gone straight from his New Jersey high school to West Point, then commissioned as an infantry officer in the Army. As a platoon leader in both the Ranger Regiment and 101st Airborne Division, he led deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. One day, while he was stationed at Fort Benning, Georgia, Minden happened to meet a cutting horse trainer named Johnny Daffin, who invited him to go riding. Minden had never been on a horse in his life. “I instantly fell in love with it,” he recalls.

Many veterans do. Working on horseback tends to resonate for people who’ve served in the military, Minden and Aguilar both say. Like the military, ranching requires resilience, a commitment to purpose and productivity, and a no-nonsense work ethic. Ranch hands also rely on one another daily and expect to work in all kinds of weather, much like soldiers in the field. It’s just rare that anyone would stumble into ranching the way Minden did.

“This industry is very, very difficult to get into if you didn’t grow up in it,” Minden says. “We’re bridging the gap for people who didn’t grow up around it or have the financial ability to intern, seeing that there is such a desire for veterans, specifically, to get into this line of work,” he says.

“When you’re in the Army, you have to be so focused that you don’t really have time to think about your career.

You keep doing what’s five feet in front of your face, until you have a minute to pick your head up and think about it.”

—Ben Minden

The program provides everything participants might need, from food, housing, clothing, horses, and saddles, right down to the spurs. Donors fund the majority of the operation, but Bear Hug also runs its own cattle outfit of up to 450 cattle and reinvests the proceeds in the program. Scaling the nonprofit up is a front-of-mind concern for Minden, who would like to see many more participate.

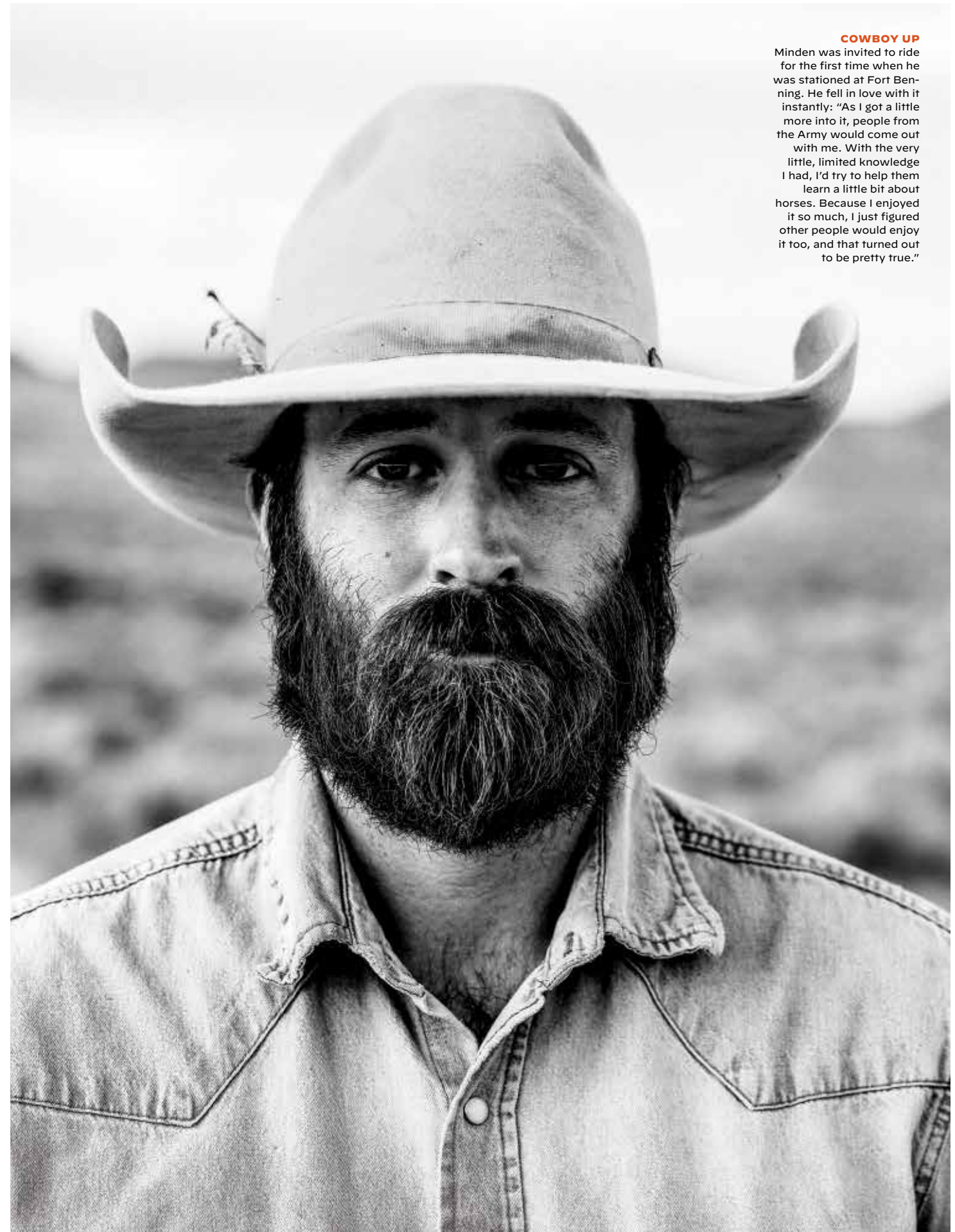
A huge part of the experiential value comes from visits they make to other outfits in Montana, Wyoming, and Colorado, for one or two weeks at a time. At each of these places, the ranchers graciously slow down their work to a pace that allows the Bear Hug crew to learn all they can about branding or whatever needs doing. The benefit runs in both directions: Because the ranching industry is experiencing a decline, “a lot of ranches have trouble finding honest, hard-working, trustworthy people to do this work, so whether we’re building fences or moving pallets of minerals or taking care of cattle, we try to give them a ton of free manpower. In return, we get a lot of knowledge and experience that’s super valuable,” Minden says.

As the sun sinks lower in the sky over the Bear Hug ranch on the closing day, Minden calls the guys over to the shade of the tack room porch. In front of a smattering of friends and family who’ve come out to honor them, Minden tells the graduates how proud he is of them and the work they’ve put in. One by one, they come forward for a handshake and a custom silver belt buckle.

By the time the sun rises again, Randy will be on his way back home to southeastern Oregon. He’s leaving with a job offer—and Roger, the horse he was paired with from day one. One of the Tylers is headed to Idaho, where he’ll work for

COWBOY UP

Minden was invited to ride for the first time when he was stationed at Fort Benning. He fell in love with it instantly: “As I got a little more into it, people from the Army would come out with me. With the very little, limited knowledge I had, I’d try to help them learn a little bit about horses. Because I enjoyed it so much, I just figured other people would enjoy it too, and that turned out to be pretty true.”



an outfitter in the fall and then cowboy through the winter; the other is sticking around to assist with Bear Hug's own cattle operation. Tristen is headed back home to Washington, where he'll learn how to build saddles until the next hiring season rolls around.

All of which is very satisfying for Minden, on multiple levels. "Yes, we are teaching someone how to get a job, make a living on horseback, and take care of cattle. But I think that's probably the least important part of it," he allows. The transition from military to civilian life can be a challenging time, he says. Bear Hug gives its veterans time and space to adapt to that—and an alternative to the desk job. "We've found that vets out here instantly feel plugged back into the kind of community that they've missed," he says. ♡

BRAND AMBASSADORS

The Bear Hug Cattle Company visits three other ranches over the course of the summer: the historic ID Ranch in Wyoming (pictured here), the Across Jordan Cattle Co. in Colorado, and Montana's Little Belt Cattle Company. The latter is run by former Navy SEALs who know what it's like to be veterans starting out in the agricultural industry without a lot of experience. That's especially important because vulnerability isn't a trait that the military encourages, and the veterans' ability to be vulnerable and ask questions is the key to their success, Aguilar says: "It's humbling to go from being an expert at what you do to a new environment where you literally don't know the first thing about how to succeed."





“All of us fell off our horses at least once this summer, so we’re 100 percent on involuntary dismounts. **If you’re not falling off, you’re not trying hard enough.**”

—Ben Minden

“This job wouldn’t be such a big responsibility if I were teaching civilians. But here I have combat veterans relying on me to facilitate a learning environment that will provide them a new outlook on life. **We’re all clear on what PTSD does to the mind and the heart and the soul.**”

—Zach Aguilar, Minden’s “head guy” and himself a military veteran

BASIC TRAINING

Tristen Ellison (below) had never been on a horse before June. The 23-year-old had gone straight from high school into the Army and served four years in the field artillery branch. When he got out and it wasn’t clear how to translate that into a post-military career, Ellison moved back home to Washington. He was scrolling TikTok one day when he happened on an ad for the Bear Hug Cattle Company. Once he arrived, he was paired with Gray, a big, powerful horse who’s blind in one eye. “If you would’ve told me two months ago that me and him would be where we are, I wouldn’t have believed it,” Ellison says.



“I hope people are able to look at this and not just see it as a cinematic version of what they think cowboying is. **This industry is dying quickly and in a hurry**, but at the end of the day we feed the world with what we do. I hope people see the good in this, for the veterans and the livestock.”

—Zach Aguilar

