

To Store and Protect

NAVY VETERAN'S SHADOWBAG
ORGANIZES UNIFORM ACCESSORIES

BY EDITH G. TOLCHIN



Jim Gannon's ShadowBag helps military personnel store and protect their uniform accessory items.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF JIM GANNON

When Jim Gannon found himself out of uniform among his colleagues, embarrassment became the mother of invention. Although I've facilitated the manufacture of the ShadowBag for many years, this is my first time featuring the story of how the retired commander in the U.S. Navy Reserve developed the product for people in the military and other service careers, including police and firefighters.

Edith G. Tolchin: What exactly is a ShadowBag? Tell us about the two different styles.

Jim Gannon: The ShadowBag line of products are organizer bags designed to help military personnel store and protect their uniform accessory items. All the different services—including Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines and even civil service workers like police officers and firefighters—have a wide variety of uniforms, from working uniforms to ceremonial dress uniforms. Each uniform has different requirements for medals, ribbons, rank insignia and such. Add this up and there are a lot of different items and materials to keep track of—and some of these items are quite

expensive. So I came up with an organizer to securely store and protect these items, with a quick and easy way to look over your items and make sure you had all the items you needed.

We currently have two different styles: the ShadowBag Ultimate and ShadowBag Mini. These are designed to serve the different needs of the service folks. We started with the Ultimate and then developed a smaller bag (the Mini) at the request of our largest client, the Navy Exchange Services Command.

EGT: Tell us about your background and how this led to your invention.

JG: Well, that's a bit of an embarrassing story. I am a retired commander in the United States Navy Reserve. I spent five years serving on active duty and another 16 serving in the Navy Reserve, serving from 1985 to 2007 overall out of Norfolk, Va. I am a surface warfare officer by trade, meaning my training is in the Navy's surface combatant fleet. However, I served in a number of different commands in addition to Navy warships, from joint task force commands to emergency preparedness programs that assist FEMA (the Federal Emergency Management Agency) during natural disasters.

The Navy will send you to different schools to learn the specifics of your responsibilities. One of the traditions of the schools that you attend is to take a class photo. These class photos are usually taken while wearing a service dress uniform, and typically during class you wear a working uniform. Again, remember each of these uniforms has different insignia requirements. Prior to my invention of the ShadowBag, I kept these uniform items in a variety of places—namely in a shoebox, and some in a top sock drawer. So I took off for the training and left behind some of my key uniform dress ribbons. When it came around for the time of the class photo, I realized I was missing these items! There is nothing more embarrassing in the military than to be out of uniform amongst your colleagues. You might as well walk in wearing a dunce hat!

After that experience, I vowed that will never happen to me again. And I was going to figure out a way so I could keep all my items together, in one place, and make them easy to see.

EGT: Why is ShadowBag different than any other military accessories storage items?

JG: After the class photo incident, I began to scour the uniform shops and websites to find a storage bag to help me organize my uniform items. To my surprise, there really wasn't anything out there to fit my needs. When people see it they immediately say, "I need that." Some of the features we wanted to include were to have something that was small enough to be ready to travel, and we wanted to be able to easily check that all your stuff was there. We added a multitude of specialty compartments for the rarely used items that are properly sized for a custom fit.



“There is nothing more embarrassing in the military than to be out of uniform amongst your colleagues.”

— JIM GANNON

EGT: How did you get started in developing the product? Did you create a prototype, or have one made for you?

JG: We kind of backed into developing this product for market almost by accident, and really because of the encouragement by some of my shipmates. My sewing was crude, but it was the general layout of what we have today. I made custom-sized pockets to fit my gear and used a clear vinyl outer lining so I could see what was in the bag. I attached all this to a hanger and added some pockets.

I had most of my stuff I needed all in one place. It rolled up nicely and fit into a duffel bag or suitcase. I was happy and it almost ended there, until one day at work when we had a formal ceremony after working hours that required our service dress uniform. We all wore our working uniforms for the day and planned on changing into the dress uniform for the ceremony. As I was assembling my dress uniform, I pulled out my crude ShadowBag. Some of my shipmates saw me unfold it and saw all the uniform items neatly displayed and organized. Their excitement about my crude prototype gave me the motivation to pursue bringing this product to market in 2007.

EGT: Is ShadowBag Industries your own company? Have you thought of licensing out this invention?

JG: ShadowBag Industries is my own company in Fleming Island, Fla., where I live. I have an investment partner. We are pursuing other companies to include our product in their offerings. Our target market, as you might suspect, is military personnel and their families. Gaining access to the government markets and military exchanges can be difficult for small companies just due to the amount of requirements for vendor qualifications, not to mention getting the attention of the buyers. By working with a supplier already qualified and doing business with the government, it can help us expand our market and ultimately expand our product line.

EGT: Once you had your prototype, how did you manufacture this product?

JG: Once we decided to commercialize it, we needed to make a more workable model. We searched and found several garment prototype developers. This was a big help. It was a bit costly, but the expertise they provided in the development of the bag was

fantastic: things like proper sizing to fit standard material bolts and manufacturing techniques, all aimed at making a quality product with an optimized cost. It is this type of expertise that educated me in an industry I was not familiar with, and we ultimately developed a very professional prototype.

The other aspect of working with a prototype developer is gaining insight into bulk manufacturing of the product. It was through our prototype designer that I learned about sourcing agents to help gain access to the overseas manufacturing market.

EGT: Tell me about working with Asian factories.

JG: We looked at many different manufacturing avenues to get our products made. Based on our market analysis, we chose to work with the Asian factories. This was mainly done to allow us to bring a high-quality product at a competitive cost that would be attractive for the members of the military services. Even with the import duties and transportation, the other manufacturing options just did not allow us to enter the market at the price point needed to sell significant quantities of our product. Although our product was very unique and fit a specific need, we wanted it available to all service members at a reasonable cost.

So definitely, working with Asian factories was a big learning experience...as well as a leap of faith. You hear so much negativity in the press regarding Asian factories that I was a little hesitant. Having an experienced sourcing agent helped. There are a lot of reputable manufacturers and quality control services available to help build your confidence in the process. My sourcing agent, EGT Global Trading, is like having an Asian product developer/marketer on our staff. This assures our products are manufactured at a reputable and reliable factory.

EGT: Have you encountered any difficulties with manufacturing, importing, logistics, or fulfilling your orders?

JG: Of course! Probably the biggest issue is getting timely orders through the Asian factories. I hate to backorder any product. I want timely and rapid responses to my customers' orders. So understanding my market cycles and matching them up with product manufacturing is a big issue. The entire process includes pre-production samples to check compliance of design, followed up with mass-production samples, and then, quality inspections. All this adds time delays to product manufacturing. So you end up tying up a lot of capital to ensure you stay ahead on inventory. Then there are transportation and Customs that add delays as well. Now I understand the term "a slow boat from China." (Laughs.)

EGT: How did you come up with the name for the product?

JG: Most military members are familiar with a Shadow Box. This is a traditional gift one typically gets upon retirement from successful years of service at the many duty stations served. So a "Military Shadow Box" usually shows all the medals, awards, and duty stations at which one has served. It is typically a wood box encased in glass, so as one looks at the Shadow Box, he or she

can quickly see all the recognition that sums up a career of service. This was the inspiration for the ShadowBag name—only it's workable and flexible!

EGT: According to your website, "Every year we donate over one hundred bags for U.S. Navy Petty Officer and Chief Petty Officer promotion events." Is this a charity function?

JG: Yes, it is a promotional and celebratory event for the Navy Exchange. Every year, the Navy Exchanges worldwide have these in-store raffles to celebrate the sailors who have been recently promoted to Petty Officers or Chief Petty Officers. These are big milestones in the careers of these individuals. Part of the change in rank is the need for new and different style uniforms. The Navy Exchange stores have raffles at each of their locations that include uniforms, shoes, insignias, and one of our ShadowBags.

Even more prestigious than the above is that every year one of our ShadowBag Ultimates is included as an award to only four individuals selected as the U.S. Navy's Sailor of the Year. This is a yearlong competition to recognize the Navy's top enlisted personnel. This year's event was to be held in Washington, D.C., the week of May 8-13, and our bag was part of that ceremony! How cool is that?

EGT: Do you have plans to add to your product line?

JG: Yes. We have ideas for other storage bags designed for our military markets and have plans on the drawing board to expand into the sports market as well.

EGT: Do you have any words of wisdom or encouragement for novice inventors?

JG: Wow, yes, of course: patience and perseverance! You have to believe in your product; there will be setbacks along the way, late nights, and learning about things you never thought you'd need to encounter. There's the licensing, taxes, vendor qualifications, patent attorneys, and so on. As I said before, you need to believe in your product or service, develop a realistic plan, then set aside some money and time and go for it! Our big break with the Navy Exchange came unexpectedly. We tried and tried to sell them our product with little success, and then someone saw our product at a kiosk we rented during the holidays. That person loved our product so much and said it needed to be in the Exchange and not in a kiosk. Before you knew it, they couldn't get our product in their store fast enough. ☺

For more information, visit www.shadowbag.com.

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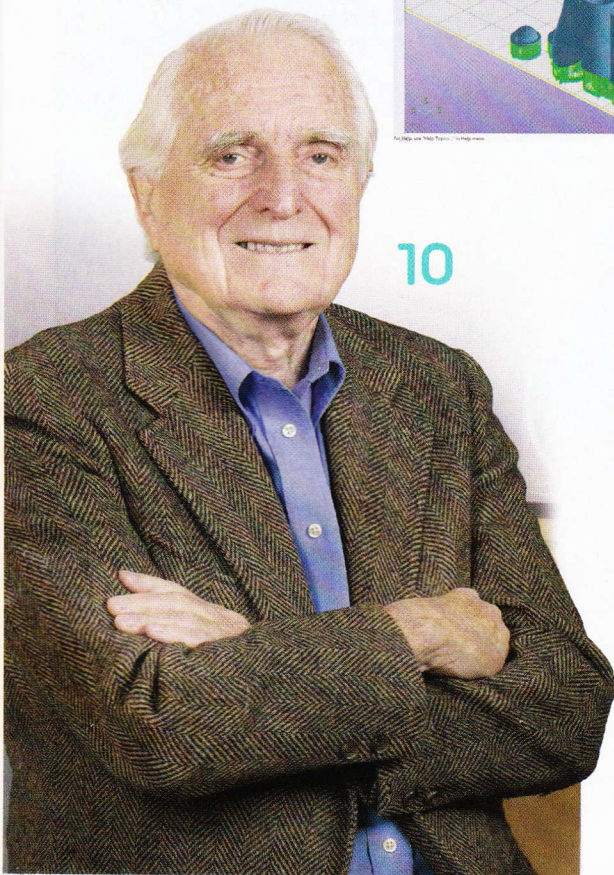
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