

## COMMENTARY

## Prosthetics maker was own inspiration

Retired columnist Mike Harden writes a Sunday Metro column.

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MOUNT STERLING, Ohio — When the wheels of a train took William Arbogast's legs, no one was around to summon for help. Arbogast, a 21-year-old railroad brakeman, had been working between a pair of rail cars when the train suddenly jerked into motion. With one leg severed above the knee and the other just below, he dragged himself to a rail-yard shack that he set afire, praying that the blaze might attract attention.

Not many businesses are born of such a horrific incident, but out of Arbogast's worst nightmare emerged a Mount Sterling company — now 101 years old — that today is more likely to assist a victim of an Iraqi roadside bomb than a railroad accident.

Arbogast started Ohio Willow Wood Co. in 1907 because he was not satisfied with the ill-fitting prosthetic legs he was issued after his accident. With a woods full of willow trees on his Ohio farm, he didn't make the figurative better mousetrap but rather a better way to get around for its survivors.

A decade after Arbogast began his business, Americans would become familiar with places such as Belleau Woods just as they later would come to know Guadalcanal, Heartbreak Ridge, Khe Sanh and, now, Fallujah and Ramadi.

The amputees of this nation's far-flung battlefields who might have died in World War I began surviving at much higher rates as mobile surgical units and speedier medical evacuation became prevalent. A 2007 U.S. Department of Defense survey found that, in Vietnam, for every two combatants wounded, one was killed, but in Iraq, nine battle casualties survive for each one who does not.

Ryan Arbogast, the fourth generation of his family at the helm of Ohio Willow Wood, has an added theory about why so many in Iraq survive their wounds: Many are victims of improvised explosive devices, he said. "The heat of those IEDs cauterizes the wound in such a way that the victim doesn't bleed out and die."

He or she returns to the States to be outfitted with a prosthesis of Kevlar or carbon fiber, along with an anatomically correct "foot shell" that fills a shoe.

To suggest that Ohio Willow Wood makes its living, primarily, off victims of the conflict in the Mideast would be a misrepresentation. Seven out of 10 of the 135,000 new American amputees who emerge each year are victims of disease — usually diabetes.

But war helps.

"It's a big market," said Tami Beatty, the company's sales and training associate.

Most of what the employees do is anonymous. Despite the occasional customer's request that a NASCAR, football-team or Harley-Davidson logo adorn their prosthesis socket, most people don't show off a new foot in the manner they would a new Mercedes. Still, Ryan Arbogast couldn't help but notice that a wire-service photo of a female veteran presenting a wreath on Veterans Day showed her wearing artificial feet his company had made.

The feet were carbon fiber. The company made its last wooden prosthesis eight years ago, though it is wedded in perpetuity to the Willow Wood name. It reminds folks that the founder was also his own first customer.



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MIKE HARDEN



**OHIO WILLOW WOOD**

A Willow Wood prosthesis socket with an OSU logo