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Lights On: From Africa to the US via China, American Light Works Flashlight Works Every Time

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By [Michael Goodwin](#) | Yahoo! Small Business Advisor – Fri, Aug 22, 2014 6:03 PM EDT

It's what you might call the "Primal Flashlight Experience."

It's midnight. Hurricane Katrina has knocked out power all over New Orleans, and you need to find your way to the bathroom of your FEMA trailer. Or maybe you're camping in a remote wilderness area of Glacier National Park, and a huge bear is strolling around just outside your tent. Or you're living in a refugee camp in Eritrea, your kid can't stop coughing, you're looking for the med-emergency tent, and you hear footsteps close behind you.

So you turn on your flashlight. And nothing happens.

Maybe the battery is dead. Maybe humidity has corroded the switch. Maybe the delicate filament in the bulb has burned out. Maybe, maybe, maybe. But for the moment, there's no maybe about one thing: You are at the mercy of the night.

We Make a Working Flashlight

Mark Bent is determined that none of these scenarios will ever happen to you again. Or to anyone who buys one of [American Light Works'](#) solar-powered, air-and water-tight, world-of-the-future flashlights. "We make a *working* flashlight," he declares, "and it works each and every time it's needed."

This former active duty Marine (and diplomat) with years of hands-on experience in Africa, has been selling high-end, never-fail, save-your-ass flashlights for eight years—ever since he built his first one in 2006. He did a lot of the R&D himself, with critical financial support from the [US Department of Energy](#), and the [Rockefeller Foundation](#). Those entities shared his concern about the lives of desperation lived by ordinary folks in places like Sudan, Afghanistan, and Eritrea.

American Light Works' executive team (all US Marines) feel that a reliable, affordable, source of light can make a huge difference in people's lives. Whether you're delivering babies in the middle of the night in a camp with no electricity, saving a rhinoceros from sudden death at the hands of a midnight poacher in Uganda, or trying to finish your homework off-grid in South Africa, you need to see what you're doing. And if a flashlight is your only source of light, it had better work. Every time.

It's Really Dark at Night

After Bent left the Marines he lived in Africa for almost 20 years, first with the State Department as a Conflict Resolution Officer, and then running an oil company in East Africa. As he was leaving Eritrea in 2005 one of the young men asked him if he could have Bent's solar-powered garden lights. "I said, 'Yeah, but you guys don't have gardens,'" Bent recalls. "And in that patient way that Africans have with dummies, he said, 'Mr. Mark, it's really dark at night.' And my head just clicked; the idea was fully formed."

Bent has served in a variety of live warfare zones, and has personally witnessed the terrible collateral damage to

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Safety and security for women and girls is a particularly huge issue. "Our lights allow a woman to go safely to the bathroom," he says. "If she hears a noise outside her tent she can turn a light on and hopefully identify the person. Refugee people tell me that quite often, if they can identify the attacker, it helps a lot.

"For us it's an inconvenience when a light doesn't work," adds Bent, "but if you're a mother in a refugee camp and you hear a noise outside, and you pick up that light...that's not an inconvenience, it's a big issue."

Beginning to See the Light

Bent decided he was going to use the latest technology—rechargeable batteries, solar panels, light-emitting diodes (LEDs)—to make an affordable, reliable lighting product that people could use to read at night...or deliver babies.

"There's a really great guy, [Evan Mills](#), at the [Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory](#)," he explains, "who's probably the world's leading expert on off-grid lighting. I just called him up. We started working together with the World Bank, and then one day the [Rockefeller Foundation](#) calls me up and says, 'We want to give you some money.' And I said, 'But I'm a for-profit,' and they said, 'Yeah, we know, but you do good stuff. What do you need?' Bent used the Rockefeller money to hire an ace engineer from New Zealand, a brilliant guy who designed not only the right LEDs, but the right electronic circuits to control the energy.

"We use absolutely the best components we can," Bent boasts. "We use [Dow-Corning](#), we use [Cree](#) LEDs, we encapsulate the solar panel—every single item is the best you can get. The inner compartment that holds the circuit board, which controls the energy flow between the solar panel and the rechargeable battery and the LED, we don't just make that water-tight, we make it completely air-tight. The reason we do that is if you put one of our lights outside in the sun, and say it's New Orleans in June, you're going to get a lot of humidity inside that compartment, but if no air gets in there no humidity gets in there either."

The Cadillac of Flashlights

The ALW Light only costs around \$25. And it delivers over two years of every-night use. It ought to practically sell itself, right?

"I thought it would be really easy," Bent laughs. "I've been in six wars, I've flown jets, I was in the Marines. I thought running a business would be simple. But it's so much harder than I ever imagined."

Initially he had the flashlights manufactured in China. Some were distributed directly in Africa. Others he sold through Amazon, Home Depot, and other high-end outlets.

People loved them.

"Going great after more than a year," wrote one happy Amazon user.

"The best solar flashlight we've seen," wrote another.

"The Cadillac of flashlights," wrote a third.

Unfortunately, building the lights in China became increasingly problematic. There were problems with quality, and problems with intellectual property theft. "Not only would they steal my designs," Bent complains, "they would steal the images off my web site."

At first Bent hoped his skills as a diplomat would help resolve the problem, but soon he was seeing flashlights that looked just like his



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company and another would pop up. It reached a point where I just couldn't do it any more."

Bent decided to move production to the States in 2012.

Once a Marine, Always a Marine

Bent has outsourced hiring at his new production facility in Virginia to [E-Tron Systems](#), a non-profit corporation that's reaching out to provide employment to injured veterans with TBI (traumatic brain injuries) and other intellectual disabilities—employment like building never-fail, save-your-bacon flashlights.

All of Bent's executives—what he calls "the C-suite"—are ex-military.

"Everyone in the C-suite are Marines," he says proudly. "Once a Marine, always a Marine. One of my OCS classmates, 100 percent medically disabled, is the President. The COO is an active duty Lieutenant Colonel, with three heavy-combat tours in Iraq. I'm the CEO, but before that I was in the Marines, and the State Department. I learned about the impact of energy poverty first hand."

Starting Again

Bent was hoping to have his new, made-in-USA flashlights in the stores by earlier this year but has had to push back to August 2014. Motivating his suppliers was a problem. "I'm pushing my people as hard as I dare," he laughs. "Not to be unkind, but being able to issue orders—and have them obeyed—is a highly underrated aspect of the Marine lifestyle."

Bent has several projects on his to-do list: water treatment using UVLEDs, and a solar-powered mosquito trap. But redesigning the ALW Light isn't one of them.

"A guy came up to me in DC last year," he recalls, "and said, 'If God gave you \$1 million, how would you improve your product?' I said, 'There's nothing on that light that I can improve. If there was, I would have already done it.'"

[American Light Works](#) also has a 'buy-one-give-one' program to allow customers to buy a light and simultaneously pay to donate a light to relief organizations working in areas where solar lights are very much needed.

