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VC NOTEBOOK

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Venture Capital: Better armor is a personal mission



By JOHN COOK
P-I REPORTER

LIKE MANY Americans, Christina Lomasney believes that U.S. soldiers deserve the absolute best when it comes to protective body and vehicle armor. Her desire just runs a little deeper.

After all, three of her five brothers serve in the Marine Corps.

Whereas many military family members have raised concerns about the inadequacies of armor that the troops have taken into battle, Lomasney and her seven-month-old startup, Modumetal, is actually in the position to do something about it.



Andy Rogers / P-I
Engineer Leslie Warren works Thursday in the lab at Modumetal, a seven-month-old startup that seeks to develop lightweight armor for the military.

A physicist who trained at the University of Washington, Lomasney is developing a lightweight but durable metal that, if successful in ballistic tests, could replace the rolled homogeneous armor steel typically used in combat vehicles.

"I have every confidence that it is going to hold up," Lomasney said this week as she sat in a stained white lab coat in her Fremont offices overlooking the Northlake Shipyard. She later added, "I have personal motivation to see this happen."

Others do, too.

Modumetal recently landed \$800,000 in financing from Second Avenue Partners and angel investors, with an option to double that amount. If all goes as planned, she hopes that the metal -- which the company "grows" in a neon green liquid using iron, nickel and other materials -- will be added to military vehicles some time next year.

The company received a boost toward that goal earlier this month when the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, the research arm of the Defense Department, chose Modumetal to participate in its Armor Challenge.

Eventually, the company wants to have the metals, dubbed nanolaminate alloys, as a core material in automobiles and aircraft. That could make them lighter and more fuel-efficient.

Lomasney, a project engineer at The Boeing Co. from 1996 to 1999, still keeps a hand-written note from Alan Mulally in her office. That connection could prove useful now that the former Boeing executive is chief executive at Ford Motor Co.

In fact, it was co-founder John Whitaker's desire to build a lightweight, fuel-efficient "personal mobility unit" that originally led to the inspiration for Modumetal. An affiliate professor in chemical engineering at the UW, Whitaker -- who says he has "issues with cars" -- started brainstorming on bus rides about a more environmentally friendly way to transport people.

Whitaker hopes Modumetal's patent-pending technology will be used to create consumer vehicles, but for now the company is focusing on the most pressing need: military applications. That need hit home for Lomasney after discovering that her youngest brother, who returned last weekend from a 10-month tour in Iraq, carried 32 pounds of body armor during his recent deployment.

"Thirty-two pounds is a lot of weight," Lomasney said. "So, he said: 'If there is anything that you can do to make this lighter, I would be grateful.'"

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