DataTribe is barely three years old – but already the start-up studio has helped launch several companies that have the cybersecurity industry taking notice.

Based in Fulton, Md., DataTribe is the brainchild of three cybersecurity entrepreneurs who focus on turning ideas born in the defense industry into commercial success.

In the last 24 months, DataTribe has created 211 net new jobs with salaries averaging $135,000 a year. “That’s a real economic impact,” says co-founder Mike Janke.

DataTribe offers office space, expertise and, most importantly, capital to help entrepreneurs develop their wares. Its San Francisco satellite office offers access to West Coast customers, funding or new talent.

The company came out of discussions between Janke, a former Navy Seal and entrepreneur, and Bob Ackerman, CEO of AllegisCyber and a Fortune 100 cybersecurity executive.

“I’ve always looked for problems that weren’t being served,” Janke says. He was CEO of Silent Circle, a cybersecurity firm, when he and Ackerman invested in companies in Maryland that then moved to Silicon Valley.

Janke was convinced Maryland had the know-how, education, the research and experienced people to keep companies local.

So he and Ackerman tried an experiment, investing in Onyara, a new company founded by Joe and Steven Witt. They were interested in turning their experience in NSA and CIA into a commercial product.

It took off. “We barely had time to get the logos made,” Janke says.

The company sold six months later to Horton Works for $42 million and Steven Witt came on board as a co-founder of DataTribe. Horton Works made Fulton its East Coast headquarters.

DataTribe isn’t an accelerator, a mentor firm, or even an incubator exactly. Janke calls it a start-up studio.

Getting in is tough. “We saw 227 [companies] last year,” he says. “We chose four.” Each company receives up to $2 million in funding, office space and plenty of advice – on everything from business services to product development – from the brightest minds in the cybersecurity industry, Janke says. “Our staff of 12 embeds with them.”

For the most part, the companies’ CEOs are older with experience in places such as the National Security Agency or Sandia National Labs, working on ways to protect government technology.

“They realize, wow, everybody is susceptible to this,” Janke says, explaining that they use their expertise to build commercial versions of their products.

Janke says they look for good products, two or three generations ahead of other technology on the market. Most importantly, they expect entrepreneurs to remain focused on the mission.

“We focus on protecting American and North American and European and elsewhere businesses,” he says.
While other start-up incubators around the state focus on government contractors, “Growth is commercial,” he says. Customers range from Disney to Walmart though government institutions comprise about 10 percent of its customer base.

Cyberwire, still headquartered in the DataTribe’s offices, has become a top cybersecurity podcasting company with more than three million visitors, according to Janke.

For two years in a row, DataTribe-backed companies were named finalists in the prestigious RSA Conference Innovation Sandbox Competition. Re-Firm Labs was named one of 10 finalists in 2018. In 2017, EnVeil won second prize.

“We’re honored,” Janke says, saying the competition is a world proving ground that brings together the best innovators from around the world.

Dragos, which got the attention of WIRED magazine last year, grew from three employees to 83 in two years. Janke says it’s now worth $139 million. “That’s how hyper-growth some of these cybersecurity companies are.” Janke says.

Attila Security and Prevalion are two of the newest companies in the DataTribe incubator.

Attila’s CEO Gregg Smith jumped at the chance to join DataTribe. “I feel very fortunate that we’re part of the Tribe now,” he says. He’s grateful for expertise and the introductions to people who can help grow his company. “Why not take advantage of other people who’ve done it before?”

Smith, already an experienced cybersecurity expert who ran his own companies when he started Attila, knew Janke and Ackerman, a DataTribe co-
The company now employs seven but Hijazi expects to increase to 10 by the end of the year.

The success of DataTribe companies isn’t lost on other local business leaders. Janke says 50 of the world’s top commercial cybersecurity executives and founders – names of companies you know like Cisco and Shopify – have invested in DataTribe. “They have skin in the game here,” he says.

Ron Gula, the president/co-founder of Gula Tech Adventures, signed on as part of DataTribe’s brain trust and as an investor.

So did Rick Kohr, CEO of Evergreen Advisors, a Columbia-based investment banking and corporate advisory firm. Evergreen has offered its support and advice, even outsourced CFOs, to DataTribe startups. Kohr even invested in the first round of financing, dubbed DataTribe One. “I’ve had a chance to see inside,” he says. Kohr says companies need the four Ms – money, markets, mentors and management – to grow. With DataTribe, “they’re able to do that,” he says. “They know what to bet on.”

So far DataTribe is going gangbusters. “Yes, we’ve been blessed. We’ve been so successful,” Janke says. But he worries about the expectations. “We’re going to have a few ‘meh’ [companies] over the course of 20 years.”

For right now, the future is bright. And DataTribe is doing what it can to, as their slogan says, “give startups an unfair competitive advantage.”