



Sign in

Join now



Ritchie Thomas revisiting the Center for Civil Rights and Human Rights in Atlanta

The Army taught him rare skills. Why couldn't the civilian sector see that?



George Anders | Follow

2,195 636 0

After six years in the [U.S. Army](#), [Ritchie Thomas](#) felt sure he could glide into a great corporate job. The Army had taken a raw 18-year-old and turned him into a military success on all fronts: a top-secret security clearance; a commendation letter from a brigadier general, and a key role as an encryption specialist helping Special Forces soldiers rescue POWs in Colombia. Everyone from his parents to his Army buddies told Thomas: "You're guaranteed."

Then came a rude awakening. Shortly after finishing military service, Thomas began taking his case to civilian employers throughout the Atlanta metro area. He struck out every time. When he showed up in person, nobody cared about his military credentials. Even his formal black suit failed to impress; it tagged him as a stranger with no idea about today's dress codes. He was a man adrift, struggling to connect with a world that didn't understand him.

"I didn't know what I was doing," Thomas recalls. "I handed out 50 of the worst resumes you've ever seen." He switched his focus to online job ads, and that didn't go any better. Desperate for any kind of work, Thomas took a humbling step backward. Abandoning his goal of continuing as a manager on the cutting edge of information technology, he accepted a job pulling wires for home-security systems and swapping out printer cartridges. It paid just \$14 an hour.

Down but not out, Thomas has battled ever since to get his career back on track. Today, he is deputy director of IT at the [Georgia Municipal Association](#). He drives a red Mercedes. He enjoys his own office and a team of people that reports to him. But the jitters of those earlier stumbles never go away. "It was a nightmare," he recalls. "I hated every part of that first job. I felt so mediocre."

Listen to the six million veterans in the U.S. workforce, and you can hear similar versions of Ritchie Thomas's journey, again and again. There's a huge disconnect between the true skills developed in the military -- and what's recognized in the civilian job market. Military-honed leadership, teamwork and sense of purpose barely register. Instead, veterans find themselves at a disadvantage because some in-service habits, such as a culture of respect, can be seen as a sign of stiffness. Settling into a new workplace culture often seems harder than the job itself.

This is the story of veterans' fight for professional legitimacy. It's a crisis hidden in plain sight, involving quiet struggles that even friends and neighbors never see. It's also an ordeal that needn't persist.

Veterans who have prevailed are eager to share their hard-won tips, so the civilian career journey for the next cohort can be easier and more successful.

On the surface, everything looks fine. Just 3.2% of veterans are unemployed today, according to the U.S. Department of Labor. That's one of the lowest levels in the past 50 years. It's a better showing than the overall unemployment rate of 3.4%. For the past 13 months, veterans have been more likely to find jobs than their civilian counterparts.

The exact nature of those jobs, however, is another story. A [new analysis of LinkedIn data](#) shows that when veterans look for their first jobs outside the military, they are 70% more likely than civilians to take a step back in seniority. All told, veterans with college educations are at least 30% more likely than similar non-veterans [to be underemployed](#). In other words, they're working in low-paying, lower-status jobs that don't require their full educations.

[Timothy Murphy](#) knows how frustrating the under-employment gully can be. He spent four years in the [Marine Corps](#), becoming a squad leader and vehicle commander in Iraq. He learned how to lead people, how to work calmly in chaotic conditions, and how to keep delicate technology humming no matter what. But when he consulted standard "resume translators" for civilian-career advice, the results were mortifying.

"You type in the skills of an infantryman and you get absolute garbage," Murphy recalls. "You can be a delivery driver. That's about it. People don't know what to do with an infantry background."

Determined to find his own path after leaving the Marines, Murphy enrolled in the [University of Maryland](#) and completed a criminal justice major in just three years. But his hopes of joining the local police force were dashed when he kept being placed on wait lists for police-academy training that never cleared. To pay the bills, he briefly worked as a bouncer in a bar.

Murphy started over, taking masters' level courses on IT project management. Eventually those led to good jobs in IT. He's now an infrastructure engineer at [Radar](#), a well-funded New York software company. Along the way, he became known as the man who arrives on the job at 7 a.m. and keeps working into the evening, no matter what the posted hours might be.

"I felt about four years behind," Murphy explains. "I needed to do anything I could to catch up."

Call it work ethic or an all-out hunger for vindication. LinkedIn data shows that veterans keep pushing to overcome the snubs of under-employment. College-educated veterans are 39% more likely to be promoted into a leadership role than their civilian peers. Once veterans find the right employer, they tend to stay longer than their civilian counterparts, too.

In chaotic moments, when projects are in danger of unraveling, it's often veterans who go the extra mile to get things done. For Army-trained IT specialist [Amanda Lee](#), the moment of truth came just a month after starting her first civilian job.

It was the morning of her wedding day.

At 10:30 a.m., Lee got word that a ransomware virus had compromised her company's computer network. "It was crazy," Lee recalls. "My friends were doing my hair and my make-up while I was typing into an iPad," she recalls. Everyone kept telling her to let go, but she spent hours on her day off, repairing the damage and getting her company's computer network running again.

"I can't be the person who doesn't care," Lee explains. "I had to do it. It was my job."

* * * *

Partway through his Army service, Ritchie Thomas sets up a field antenna by the side of a dirt road in Honduras

When the photo on the left was taken in 2004, Ritchie Thomas was in his third year of Army service. Glance quickly at the picture and you'll see a 21-year-old soldier setting up a mobile antenna at the edge of a dirt road in Honduras. But take a closer look. Focus on his eyes.

That gaze! It's the intense stare of a young soldier on the most important mission of his life. He is resolute. He will not be stopped, even if this is just a training exercise. He has been preparing his whole

career for this moment.

Developing that steely grit was the military's greatest gift to Ritchie Thomas, and to countless other young men and women like him. Thomas might have been an unfocused 18-year-old when he enlisted. Within a military setting, he turned into a pillar of strength. After discharge in 2007, however, civilian life nearly crushed his resolve.

When I finally meet up with Ritchie Thomas, in his hometown of Atlanta, after weeks of phone calls and texts, he doesn't flinch as we start talking about the hard years. If anything, it's just the opposite. He wants to bear witness to the low points – and the scramble for something better.

"It's my 12-year journey," Thomas tells me. He's still piecing together the hows and whys that allowed him to win the hardest campaign of his life: re-establishing himself in the civilian world. As we start chatting in the sunny stillness of a museum atrium, he's eager to draw whatever universal lessons there might be from each moment along the way.

What was pay like in your first civilian job, I ask.

"I took a 50% cut in take-home pay," Thomas tells me. Goodbye, free military health care. No more housing allowances. In the military, he'd imagined that civilians earned much more than he did. Not so – at least not in the entry-level jobs he was finding. "When I got my first paycheck," Thomas recalled, "I looked at it and kept asking myself: 'Why is it so short?'"

Civilian work habits baffled him, too. "I didn't know you could call in sick," he recalls. Other workers' habits of going home at quitting time, even if jobs weren't finished, was jarring, too. Thomas stayed true to his training, working into the evening to get everything completed. No one else cared. "Being the last person in the building gets old pretty quickly," he confides.

In 2010, he left the home-alarm business behind and tried upgrading telecom networks instead, for a bump in pay. But as the economy worsened, his hours kept shrinking. With as little as 10 paid hours a week, "I was losing in every aspect of life," Thomas recalls.

He takes a deep breath. "I'd gone from being with Special Forces guys -- and protecting the President – to not even being in the room. You know, it's tough to come home to your spouse and say: 'Hey, I don't have much of a paycheck this week, or next week, or next month.' It's an ego-killer."

A few weeks later, Thomas enrolled in the engineering program at Atlanta's Southern Polytechnic, hoping an IT degree would open new doors for him. With the post 9/11 GI Bill, not only would his tuition be paid; he also would qualify for a living stipend of about \$1,300 a month.

"I could see that all the successful people in Atlanta had stickers on the backs of their cars, saying where they went to college," he quips. "I wanted to be one of those people. I came in with a valedictorian's attitude. This wasn't like high school, where all I cared about was football. This was different. I sat in the front of the class, every day."

College was tough. Thomas's math preparation was flimsy, and the first term, he flunked two classes. He was in his late 20s, struggling to keep pace with classmates a decade younger. In his second term, though, he earned his first A, from English teacher [Erin Sledd](#). "She believed in me," he recalls. "She kept me from quitting."

Even more important, Southern Poly brought powerful new civilian contacts. School leaders steered him toward an internship and then a full-time job with Atlanta's elite [Lovett School](#). "I was the IT jack-of-all-trades," Thomas recalls. He upgraded teachers' computers, managed the email system, got in-class videos working and more. He was back, finally, in a can-do environment where people appreciated his work – and where he could train others in how to get better.

"That was the first civilian job I was proud of," Thomas recalls.

Partway through Southern Poly, he decided to create a resume and career narrative that would let him rise higher. "I taught myself," he recalls. "Anytime there was a job that interested me, I would look at the top 25 LinkedIn profiles for that field. And then I'd study the way they presented themselves. I'd adapt my profile so it reflected what I learned."

Magically, even the routine elements of his job now sounded zestier. Military acronyms disappeared. Instead, Thomas talked about serving "2000 end-users," "authenticating performance," and "streamlining IT structure." He added in language about his passion for IT. Employers needn't wonder whether this former soldier could get excited about his job. And he added a lighter touch to his "About" section, letting people know he had survived three hurricanes and was a Falcons football fan. At last, Thomas's resume and his LinkedIn profile made him sound like the sort of person that should be getting hired for good jobs.

In January 2014, Thomas's next big break arrived. A giant new museum was scheduled to open in downtown Atlanta: the [National Center for Civil and Human Rights](#). Everything was just steel beams and bulldozers at the time. But the intended build-out was extraordinary. For the next 2 ½ years, the center needed an IT manager who could help turn blueprints into reality.

"I was shaking the first 30 days I walked in," Thomas recalled. But he projected the clarity, experience and dedication that center executives wanted. They chose him to bring the IT parts of the project to life. It was his job to help ensure that the video displays worked; that the interactive exhibits were glitch-free, and that something as jarring as a power outage wouldn't wreck the exhibits.

During my Atlanta visit, Thomas and I tour the center together. As we walk through a darkened tunnel on the ground floor, we're swept back into the era of civil-rights marches and protests. Martin Luther King is speaking on a giant screen to my right. Directly in front of me is a mural relating to the Selma, Ala., bridge crossing of 1965.

I'm taking it all in, when Thomas nudges me toward a series of lunch-counter stools on my left. On a darkened wall is a sign saying: "How long can you stand it?" Thomas invites me to sit down and put on a set of headphones. I do so.

Abruptly, it's as if I've been hurled into a segregated café nearly 60 years ago. Angry voices are shouting at me. The darkened wall has turned into a blindingly bright video footage of people pushing and shoving. It's incredibly vivid. I'm taking slow, deep breaths --enduring it, just as the real civil-rights activists must have done.

And then, terror.

My lunch-counter stool feels as if it's being kicked with incredible force. Everything is suddenly very unsteady. I might fall off. My heart is pounding and I'm gasping for breath. The simulation has become so real, so intense, that I involuntarily pull my headphones off.

The video stops. My seat is steady once again. I'm back in the museum, and Ritchie Thomas is next to me. The clock says I've lasted for all of 1 minute, 20 seconds.

It's easy for me to assume that Thomas himself brought this stunning experience to life, but he waves off my assumption. As he does so, he reveals a bit more about himself. When the center took shape, Thomas explains, all sorts of gifted technologists made each exhibit come to life. His role, as IT director, was to get the best work possible from everyone – and to keep the whole build-out going smoothly.

"Those stools were done by a 34-year-old guy who taught himself things you never learn in school," Thomas tells me. "[Jeremy Keith](#). A lot of people weren't sure he could do it. But I gave him a chance." As we walk through the rest of the museum, Thomas keeps telling me stories about the men and women who were on his team. He's proud of their technical ingenuity. He's proud, too, of the way he created a culture of careful audacity where they could thrive.

I'm starting to realize that Thomas is a coach at heart. He likes seeing other people succeed. He's got the sincerity, candor and drive to get other people succeeding in a big way. He's doing a lot of that in his current job, overseeing a team of IT workers at a municipal agency focused on helping Georgia's smaller towns and cities be more efficient.

All those leadership skills nearly got asphyxiated in his first civilian jobs. But Thomas is rebounding now. As we wrap up our time together, he talks about sharing his story with other veterans. Thinking about how far he's come from his first civilian job, he laughs and declares: "I'm the mediocre miracle." [LinkedIn data-insights specialists Dana Hagist, Mark Corey, Charlie Beagan and Nick Doulos contributed to this article.](#)

Published By



George Anders

[Follow](#)

What's it like to be a veteran, hunting for an appropriate civilian job? In a different universe, military-grade leadership and dedication would make the job hunt a breeze. But that's not the reality that the six million veterans in the U.S. workforce actually face. Resume achievements don't translate. Job interviews go awkwardly. And new LinkedIn data shows that many veterans end up short-changed, stuck in low-skill jobs that don't do justice to their strengths. Army veteran Ritchie Thomas has confronted all those obstacles. This is the story of his gutsy, decade-long comeback. #HireVeterans #veterans #InItTogether

636 comments

[Sign in](#) to leave your comment

Kathy Stein

Senior Attorney at Law Offices of Kathy W. Stein

2mo

Wonderful to read. Our veterans are amazing!

[Like](#) [Reply](#) | 1 Like

Melissa Boatwright (she/her)

Global Insights & Technology leader. Change agent. Team builder. Storyteller.

5mo

Hi all! We know many of you had lots of questions for Ritchie Thomas, so we've invited him to join some of LinkedIn's military employment advocates - Cory Boatwright, Sarah Roberts and myself - for a LinkedIn Live next week. Come join us!

<https://www.linkedin.com/events/understandingveteranemploymentandthetransitionjour/>

[Like](#) [Reply](#)

Jim Hearn

10mo

George - Sorry that I am late with this. From my experience, the biggest impediment to veteran hiring is mistakes in transposing their military experience for a civilian audience. I teach classes on resume writing and interviewing techniques (free). It is based on my reading of probably 5000 resumes and conducting/participating in hundreds of selection panels. My evaluation is that 10% are really good, 40% are OK and the rest are poor. Most resumes list jobs but say nothing about the quality of their work or accomplishments. Many don't address each stated knowledge, skills and abilities in the announcement. For the interview, almost no one does research on the organization. I find that when a candidate really does his/her homework for the interview, he/she almost always gets the job. Just some of my thoughts.

Jim

[Like](#) [Reply](#) | 1 Like


Nichole Reed

Transitioning Military Information Analyst | Watch Supervisor | Active Clearance

11mo


What a great post! I'm nearing a similar milestone to Ritchie in terms of military rank/success but I'm terrified of my upcoming transition into the civilian work force. I hope to move out of my niche career and into a new field without too much of a pay cut or having my resume ignored.

[Like](#) [Reply](#) | 1 Like

 LinkedIn User 11mo

Ritchie, this is awesome! Thank you for your service, example, and leadership!!

Like Reply | 1 Like

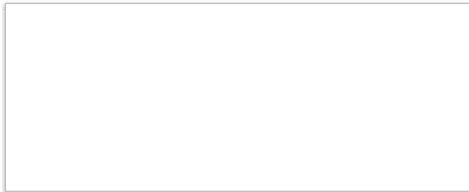
 Chirag S. 12mo
 Team Manager / Recruiting Lead at Antora Solutions

How vets can better adapt skills to civilian life, each and every day
<https://www.hfrnews.com/2019/11/how-vets-can-better-adapt-skills-to.html>

Like Reply

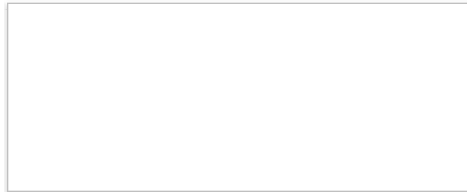
[Show more comments.](#)

More from George Anders [186 articles](#)



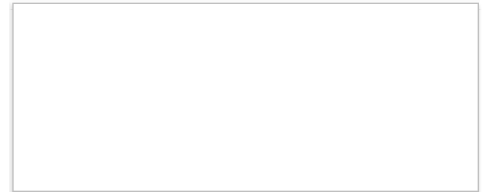
Where can veterans find top-tier jobs? These...

November 5, 2020



Confidence rallies to a pandemic-era high...

October 29, 2020



Small, overlooked -- and confident: 10 U.S...

October 22, 2020