

General Raymond A. Thomas III, 11th Commander of the U.S. Special Operations Command

The Dedication of Our Servicemen and Women and How to Meet Their Legal Needs

[Link to Video](#)

00:00- 00:15 Voice-over Introduction by Supreme Court of Texas Justice Brett Busby:

00:15 (Justice Brett Busby) I now have the pleasure of introducing our distinguished guest speaker, General Raymond A. Thomas, III. General Thomas is a highly decorated officer and the 11th Commander of the United States Special Operations Command headquartered at MacDill Air Force Base in Florida.

Before assuming command of Special Operations, General Thomas served as the Commander of the Joint Special Operations Command in Fort Bragg, NC. His other assignments as a general officer included service as the Associate Director for Military Affairs at the Central Intelligence Agency, Commanding General of NATO's Special Operations Component Command in Afghanistan, Deputy Commanding General of the Joint Special Operations Command, and many more.

The General is a graduate of the United States Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and the Naval Command and Staff College in Newport, Rhode Island. He's a native of Philadelphia and attended the United States Military Academy at Westpoint, New York, where he was commissioned as an infantry second lieutenant upon graduation.

General Thomas and his wife, Barbara, have two sons, both of whom are also United States Military Academy graduates. General Thomas retired in May 2019, and retired ah resides with his wife in the Tampa Bay area.

He's currently serving as Chairman of the Special Operations Warrior Foundation, as well as on boards and advisory positions in the Venture Capital and Artificial Intelligence fields.

General Thomas, thank you for dedicating your time to honor and support our Texas veterans.

1:34

General Thomas:

Good morning from Tampa, everyone, and good afternoon, or evening wherever and whenever you're viewing this session.

I'm very disappointed we're meechi-meeting virtually instead of in person. I was looking forward to traveling back to the great state of Texas, to be there for your 2020 Champions of Justice Gala benefiting the veterans.

For those of you who I'm meeting for the first time, my name is Tony Thomas. Almost exactly a year ago, 29 March of 2019, I relinquished command of the greatest special operations organization in the world, *The United States Special Operations Command*, and retired after thirty-nine years in service.

I know that might sound a little haughty, *the greatest Special Operations Force in the world*, but I actually used that line in testimony to John McCain in the Senate Arms Services Committee before he passed away to see if he'd challenge me- and he didn't. He knew the men and women of Special Operations Command backed that claim up every day in about eighty countries around the world, doing our nation's bidding.

You should be proud of your Special Operations Command as well as our other tremendous soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, and coastguardsmen who keep this nation safe. In fact, right now, while we're all hunkered down at home dealing with this pandemic challenge, thousands of our service members are around the globe, dealing not only with that challenge but their day job of defending us and our way of life. I'd ask you to keep them in your thoughts and prayers.

You may be curious how I got linked to this event. (pause) It was at the invite of my friend and mentor, Admiral Bill McRaven, an iconic Texan who I worked with and for over many years, including as his second in command in the mission that killed Osama bin Laden. (pause)

I didn't make my bed this morning but don't tell *him*.

3:46

As I mentioned, I gave up command and retired a year ago and was faced with the immediate dilemma of trying to figure out what I wanted to do when I grow up. I'm still trying to figure that now. (pause) My British counterpart, their director of special forces got very melodramatic about the whole transition. He said [affected British accent], "Tony, my dear friend, relinquishing command of such a revered position reminds one of the expression [end accent], 'Peacock to feather duster.'" I resigned myself at the very moment that I wasn't going to be some feather duster, so I got busy and up until recently, I was taking advantage of spending more time with our grandkids. We have four.

Transition after military service is a very individual experience. Mine has been no different. I've been blessed by lots of opportunities and so far I've been able to pursue a diversified approach including a couple of advisory positions with Venture Capital and Artificial Intelligence firms. But the most satisfying activity I do is serving as the Chairman of The Special Operations Warrior Foundation, with the mission of providing full scholarships to the children of our fallen warriors. Three hundred and seventy-seven graduates so far, one hundred and fifty-three in school currently, and seven hundred and twenty-three to go.

Last year I onboarded to one company in New York City where I advise a young CEO for an Artificial Intelligence Company. He's my youngest sons' age. I tried my best to dress down for the occasion. I was recalling that Robert De Niro movie about being an intern, knowing that my workmates were a bunch of very young data scientists, software engineers, and the like.

Picture me casual, white button-down shirt, black pants, and hiking shoes. I entered and immediately realized that it doubled or tripled the median age of the company. I also realized that I was still very overdressed, so now I'm investing in some really, really good hoodies so I can fit in better.

Oh, I forgot to tell you where I work in New York City. I work at One World Center on the eightieth floor. Hallowed ground. Folks, where my current office is, would have seen that horrible sight of United Airlines 175 inbound at their eye level on 9-11 before it struck the South Tower. That same floor, in fact, the entire building is now empty from Covid-19. We certainly live in interesting times, the pandemic being only the latest challenge.

My sons are both West Point graduates, nine--2007 and 2008 respectively. And upon their graduation over a decade ago, they were inclined to say, "Dad, you had it easy when you were commissioned back in 1980. It was a much simpler world, just us versus the Soviet Union, against the backdrop of mutually assured destruction." Arguably, they weren't wrong.

7:14

Our recent national security strategy and corresponding national defense strategy state five current and enduring threats for the future in the form of Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, and violent extremists, every one of which is active today. Throw in cyber, bio, nuclear, space, artificial intelligence and the world is more dangerous than ever.

Interestingly, everywhere I visited over the last two years of my command, every senior leader with whom I engaged would ask one thing, it was universal. They asked and in some cases begged, "Please stay engaged. Please continue to lead. We need the United States."

I'm here today to speak on behalf of the Texas Access To Justice Commission, so thanks to them for the opportunity to do so. The leadership of the Commission asked me to start by thanking all of you for staying tuned in for this event. It would have been easy just to walk away.

So, on behalf of Harry Reasoner and the members of the Commission, thanks for supporting this event, but more importantly, thanks for supporting a very worthwhile cause. Thanks as well to the Texas State Bar who underwrote this event so that one hundred percent of the proceeds would go directly to deserving veterans.

8:46

Almost without exception, our service veterans love what they're doing, but as they transition back to the civilian world, they have some very practical challenges. Getting a job, finding a home for their families, and putting their kids through school.

The vast majority of them are extremely proud and vibrant human beings who want to contribute in society, just like they did in the armed forces. Some of them are returned worst for the wear and tear and have special needs and requirements. That's where this effort and this Commission plays significant role.

The civil legal services gap for veterans, military personnel, and their families is well established and recognized. Veteran legal aids-aid needs consist primarily of three categories: family, unfortunately,

divorced and/or child custody, a myriad of customer issues or consumer issues, and veteran's affairs. I recently navigated the veteran's affair experience. It puts the rock in bureaucracy.

Texas has the second largest veterans population in the United States, 1.6 million veterans, second only to California who has 1.7 million vets. Of the population, only twenty-nine percent, about four hundred twenty-seven thousand individuals report having a disability and are eligible for VA funds. Let me put that in sharper perspective. They are eligible to receive VA benefits in the form of disability or funds to the tune of seven billion dollars in benefits.

10:34

Texas is slightly ahead of the national average which runs about twenty-three to twenty-four percent, it is also comparable with other large states. California, twenty-five percent, Florida, twenty-four percent, and in New York at a dismal seventeen percent.

The good news, nearly nine thousand Texas veterans received legal assistance over the past year, but we can do much better. (pause)

Legal aid helps veterans with a whole host of issues that they face once they return home. When a legal aid lawyer is involved, veterans are able to receive their medical and disability benefits faster than if they attempted to navigate the system on their own. This means that veterans can start receiving access to their medical and psychological care that they need in a more timely manner for injuries and stress related to what they witnessed during their service. They can focus on getting well instead of figuring out the VA system.

Legal representation is often crucial to low income or disabled veterans seeking benefits to which they are legally entitled by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs. To help address this situation, Texas needs qualified lawyers and advocates to assist these veterans in acquiring the federal benefits they deserve. Training lawyers to effectively engage vets is a valid aid requirement and requires additional funding that is specifically dedicated to training and supporting counsel addressing VA benefits issues.

Legal aid helps veterans and their families with a multitude of housing issues. Veterans often have difficulty securing and maintaining housing which caters to their disabilities. Some landlords refuse to accommodate the physical disability needs of our veterans that are protected under the Americans With Disabilities Act.

Let me provide an example of one of your Texas veterans named Mary. Mary suffers from pros/post-traumatic stress disorder and lupus. When FEMA denied her housing assistance after Hurricane Harvey, she was not able to afford repairs on her own. Her housing situation aggravated her health conditions and she became bedridden and eventually, homeless. Fortunately, legal aid intervened on Mary's behalf. Her attorney found that FEMA's habitability standard did not account for the needs of individuals with disabilities and subsequently filed a complaint with the Department of Justice based on FEMA's denial of responsible accommodations.

Legal aid also helped Mary find new housing and get her back on her feet. She now runs her own nonprofit to help foster children, a cause dear to heart as she was a foster child as well. Governor Abbott has ever asked Mary to serve on his task force focusing on disaster issues affecting elderly persons and individuals with disabilities. None of this would have been possible if she had not been able to get assistance from legal aid.

13:45

The bad news: Texas ranks near the bottom, maybe the bottom, in access to civil aid legal aid lawyers. Unfortunately, there is only one legal aid lawyer for every seven thousand Texans who qualify for their help. When you compare that to that fact that there is one private lawyer for every four hundred eighty-six Texans in the state, it's a pretty stark picture.

Even though legal aid organizations help more than one hundred fifty thousand low-income Texas families each year with their civil legal needs, they are only able to meet about ten percent of the legal needs of low-income people in the state. To qualify for legal aid, typically a person's income must be one hundred twenty-five percent of the Federal poverty guidelines. For a single person, that means he or she can't earn more than \$15,959 per year in gross income or \$1,329 a month, for a family of four, not more than \$32,750 per year, or just over \$2700 per month.

Vets struggling with post-traumatic stress, not always--but sometimes disorder--from the modern era have only cast an illuminating light on those who preceded us, our Vietnam veterans who had little to no support infrastructure in place. If you consider the confused discussion and approach to PTSD to date, imagine what it will entail in the post-COVID-19 era.

Money and resources is a key part of the effort. This Gala has raised over four million dollars over the last ten years and over this last year, Texas legislated three million dollars to help. But the practical follow on challenges are:

How do we identify veterans who need help? Veterans have lived and formed what some describe as a tribal affiliation. They're inherently distrustful of those who haven't shared their experience.

The other challenge is how to link vets with the assistance available. Google "Veteran's Legal Assistance". I just did today. You'll find a morass of some good and not-so-good organizations.

Veterans and military families face significant barriers in --accessing legal services to address their civil legal problems. The testimony of veteran's advocacy organizations shows that civil legal services are one of *the* most sought out categories of services for our veterans. Advocates additionally testify that the close relationship between veteran's unmet civil legal needs and homelessness and economic instability.

16:34

The data on the civil legal services gap for veterans is overwhelming and conclusive. For example, the Legal Services Corporation's report found that seventy-one percent of households with veterans or

other military personnel have experienced a civil--a legal problem in the last year. They faced the same types of problems as others, but thirteen percent also reported problems specific to veterans.

Notably, twenty-one percent of respondents of households with veterans or other military personnel had six or more civil, legal problems in the past year with common areas including health, consumer, and employment. Among those surveyed in the report, eighty-five percent of respondents reported that they have personally experienced a veteran's issue within the past year, reported that the civil legal problem had a substantial impact on their lives, the most of any civil legal category. Notably, the report concluded that low-income veterans and other military personnel received inadequate or no professional legal help for eighty-eight percent of their civil legal problems.

The significant poverty rate among veterans makes this lack of access to civil legal services especially troublesome. Other studies have likewise concluded that there was a significant civil legal services gap for veterans. U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs survey data also conclusively shows that veteran's civil legal services--needs urgently war-- needs urgently warrant expanded resource.

Access to expert legal services is life-changing for low, moderate-income veterans with civil legal problems. Securing VA benefits for eligible veterans increases household incomes and reduces local and state expenditures of public benefits. (Pause)

18:32

I'd like to conclude by thanking you again for supporting such a worthwhile cause. Again, I'm sorry that I'm not in there in person to do so. Among the positives coming from the current Coronavirus crises, and I believe there have been a few positives with the many hardships, is that it has re-enforced the benefit of focusing and pulling together, especially for those less fortunate or in need.

Books and articles have been written about it, but nothing feels better for most human beings than to take care of others. I'd ask you to please follow progressively in your respective communities to identify those in need, especially your veterans, and encourage them to leverage the help offered by their fellow U.S. citizens.

Your organizers have my contact info, so if there are any areas in which you want to follow up or ask questions, please feel free to reach out. Harry warned me about what it might--what I might be setting myself up for, but there's nothing the delete button can't handle.

Thanks again for your generosity and support of our veterans. I wish you all continued good health and pray that God continues to bless our great country. Thank you.