

One to One Interview



THOMAS RUCKER

New Tideworks president **Thomas “T.J.” Rucker** tells **Emmanuel Mair** about his mentor and his unusual hobby

» **What did you aim to do following your degree in computer information systems?**

It was the dot.com days. Employers were competing heavily for IT graduates. I was at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington and actually aspired to continue with school, but you can only do that for so long before you start running out of money.

I had reached out to Mike Schwank, my predecessor at Tideworks, based on a conversation with some family friends about SSA Marine. I interviewed with Mike and we hit it off well. We had a lot in common. The lure was this idea of coming over, training and being deployed to Panama for a couple of years to help out a high-growth terminal. I had an opportunity to make a mark on a company at an important site. I liked the idea of owning that piece.

» **How rare is your career path?**

I think it's very unique and, frankly, I can't think of anybody else at least in our organisation who's done it – who's started

in IT and gone to operations. In our niche industry, you normally find the opposite. I started in IT and migrated to software, then migrated back to operations and back to IT and software. I got rounded out backwards, I guess.

What you see with a lot of folks is that they have a base in operations which contributes greatly to their understanding of this industry and their ability to operate efficiently. It does take some time for folks to come up to speed with domain knowledge.

» **Tell us about your relationship with Michael Schwank.**

I would describe Mike as almost a second dad. I've learned an incredible amount from the guy. He hired me, he was my mentor for a long time. I still talk to him often and he provides great feedback.

He basically started Tideworks from scratch and led it for 18 years. Tideworks has a large Mike Schwank fingerprint on it and a lot of our success can be attributed to the team Mike built and worked so hard to develop. I feel very fortunate to step into the role and have the opportunity to contribute to Tideworks' next phase of evolution.

» **How did it feel to take over from your mentor?**

It's humbling. You'd like to think that you could reach your mentor at some point – intellectually or performance-wise. To be offered the position like this within a group of my peers is humbling, as there are a

lot of capable people within Tideworks, Carrix and SSA that could have led this group.

» **What do you like to do in your free time?**

I'm primarily a family guy. I've been married for 15 years and have an eight-year-old and a 13-year-old boy who are the centrepiece of my home life.

My hobby is making knives, which might sound a little bizarre. I learned it from my dad, who has been a custom knife-maker for many years. I've made custom knives for about 12 years for a small set of clients. It's a lot of fun. Over the years, I've built out a few shops.

We have found that many people have some childhood connection or passion about a certain style or type of knife. They go to great lengths to describe what they want. Sportsmen, hunters, fishermen, collectors – they all have a tendency to be very artistic and passionate about what they want it to look like. We work with them from the beginning to the end. It can take up to four hours or two to three weeks to produce one of these knives, depending on the quality of knife and the materials.

The process of making a knife counteracts some of my personality faults. It's a funny thing because most people will probably tell you I suffer from an acute lack of patience. I tend to want to get things done quickly and move on to the next. But knife-making forces me to plan and have patience with the process, ensuring that each step is followed. Within the multiple-hour timeframe that it takes to build one of these, if you mess one thing up, you risk having to throw it away and start over. Most importantly, it's fun to see the expression on the client's face when you finally deliver it.

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