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A scholar and a veteran

Scholarship helps A.C. resident resume education after Iraq

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ATLANTIC CITY — Whenever he starts something new, Matt Thomas waits five days. That's when something usually happens.

Thomas, 25, started his Army basic training Sept. 6, 2001. Five days later, planes crashed into the World Trade Center towers and Pentagon.

Thomas eventually was sent to Baghdad. His company arrived April 2, 2004. On April 7, their vehicle was hit by a roadside bomb. Luckily, no one was seriously injured. But they were all hit by shrapnel and received Purple Hearts.

"Whenever I start something new, I count to the fifth day and kind of brace myself," Thomas said.

But things are good now. The lifelong Atlantic City resident is back on the beach that he loves, working full-time as a lifeguard. He's also a full-time student at the Art Institute of Philadelphia and is getting some help from a scholarship he recently received for his service.

The Horatio Alger Veterans Scholarship honors veterans while helping them pursue higher education. Started in June 2005, more than 1,400 scholarships have been awarded in the five military branches. Thomas also was chosen as one of 20 scholarship winners in the country to share the story of his service in a compilation the Horatio Alger Association is publishing.

Thomas, a 2000 graduate of Atlantic City High School, had already gone through a

year of college when he decided he needed some discipline.

"I wanted to see the world and sort of challenge myself," he says.

Inspired by the story of his cousin who started out a troubled youth but — thanks to his service as an Airborne Ranger — is now a successful lawyer he decided to join the Army.

Thomas had no idea he would go to war, but after the Sept. 11 attacks, his group kept being prepared for the inevitable mission. But no matter how many times they were told they would be the "Boys of Baghdad," it didn't seem real.

"We didn't really think about it," Thomas said. "You don't fully realize that it's real until you're on the plane heading to Kuwait."

Thomas got his adventure, and then some. His year in Iraq changed his life.

"After being in Baghdad for a year, you come back to America and realize, 'Wow, this is the greatest country on Earth,'" he said. "We have so much freedom. You don't have to worry about roadside bombs blowing up beside your house or a suicide bomber coming into a restaurant."

Now, he has the focus he felt was missing his first time at college.

"School is a piece of cake; All I have to do is go to class and study," Thomas said. "It's definitely better than being in 104-degree weather wearing 50 pounds of gear."

He goes year-round to the Art Institute in Philadelphia,

where he is studying Web development and Web design. Thomas has a 4.0 GPA and is shooting to be No. 1 in his class when he graduates in September 2008.

Until then, he's enjoying his summer back on the beach where he grew up, and appreciating the education his service gave him.

"Joining the Army was the best thing for me," Thomas says. "It really puts life in perspective for sure."

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Thomas went to college for a year before joining the Army. He says he wanted to challenge himself.



Staff photo by Ben Fogletto

After serving in the military in Iraq, Matt Thomas is back home working as a lifeguard at Mississippi Avenue in Atlantic City and attending the Art Institute of Philadelphia with help from a Horatio Alger Veterans Scholarship.