INVESTORS & OPERATORS

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COVER STORY

How PE Hires *Special Ops Veterans* for Chief of Staff Roles

Andrew Nelson left 3rd Ranger Battalion for a Chief of Staff seat at a PE-backed waste platform. His path through the 51 Vets network is becoming the model.

Based on Investors & Operators Ep. 150: Andrew Nelson, Waste Eliminator
Hosted by Jordan Selleck, Co-CEO of 51 Labs & Founder of 51 Vets

Jordan Selleck
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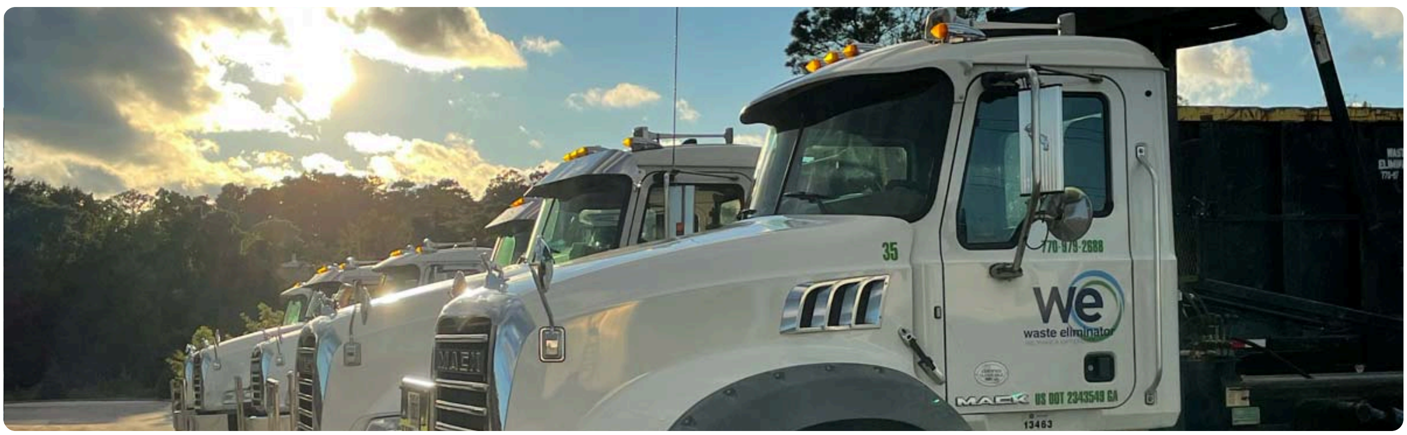
FROM A STRIKER IN SYRIA to a Sandy Springs office park, selling mulch over the phone. For Andrew Nelson, that trip took eight weeks.

No transition program. No soft landing. Six years in 3rd Ranger Battalion, five deployments, and then an Oldcastle APG cubicle, selling building products to homebuilders.

Today, Andrew is Chief of Staff to the CEO of Waste Eliminator, a fast-scaling sustainable waste platform owned by Allied Industrial Partners. He runs strategic initiatives across a company that's completed nine acquisitions in five years, and he applies a Ranger framework to every project on his desk.

His story is more than a transition. It's a template.



The Ranger

Andrew grew up in Huntsville, Alabama. He enlisted out of high school and spent six years in 3rd Ranger Battalion at Fort Benning (now Fort Moore), Columbus, Georgia, never leaving the same platoon. Five deployments: two to Syria, one to Iraq, one to Afghanistan, and the Kabul evacuation in 2021.

The decision to leave wasn't forced. He was good at the job, and he knew it. Staying, he realized, would have been the comfortable choice, and comfort wasn't what drew him to the Ranger Regiment in the first place.

> *"I thought I was going to do it for 20 years. But by year six, I felt like I had accomplished a lot of what I had come to do and was really excited looking for that next challenge."*
>
> — ANDREW NELSON

Eight Weeks and a New Identity

Andrew's transition was abrupt by any standard. From the moment he decided to leave to the moment he needed to be in a chair at a new job: eight weeks.

He landed at Oldcastle APG, a subsidiary of CRH, the global infrastructure company. A Fortune 500 environment that felt completely different from the Ranger Regiment.

In the Ranger Regiment, when a task came down, nobody went home until it was done. Didn't matter if it took one hour or fifteen. At Oldcastle, Andrew would finish an assignment, look up, and see people heading home for the weekend.

The adjustment was harder than he expected. So was the imposter syndrome.

> *"I remember sitting in that office in Sandy Springs and feeling like I was on a mission somehow to infiltrate this. I had not turned off being a Ranger yet."*
>
> — ANDREW NELSON

Looking back, Andrew realized the transition had been rushed. He felt like there were still gaps to close, so in 2023, he enrolled at Goizueta Business School to earn his MBA.

The 51 Vets Connection

During his MBA, Andrew interned at EY-Parthenon and earned a return offer. Then start dates got pushed back, not months but years. He needed to fill the gap.

A fellow 51 Vets member had landed at Waste Eliminator through the network and made the introduction. Andrew started in June 2025 and within months had stepped into the Chief of Staff role, forgoing consulting altogether. "Having that network of guys one to five years in front of you is invaluable," he says.

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Inside Waste Eliminator

Waste Eliminator is the platform investment of Allied Industrial Partners, a lower-middle-market PE firm with $1B+ in AUM, focused on non-tech industrials at $5–30M EBITDA.

Allied acquired Waste Eliminator in 2021 and has completed nine add-ons since, including Happy Haulers (Jan 2026), FC Sanitation, Enterprise Landfill, and Unlimited Disposal, building roughly ten operating locations along the I-85 corridor from Greenville to north Atlanta. Clients include Mercedes-Benz Stadium, Emory University, and Coca-Cola.

What a Chief of Staff Actually Does

Andrew's description of the role is characteristically direct: "The majority of the role is communication and accountability." The CEO and C-suite set strategic targets. Andrew's job is making sure they actually get done, across inventory systems, M&A targets, joint ventures, billing, and process build-out, in a corporate office of four or five people.

> *"A lot of execution falls through the gap via the lack of communication on a day-to-day basis. There's not a clear owner. There's not a time when something needs to be done."*
>
> — ANDREW NELSON

THE BRIEF: COS

Part strategist, part project manager, part accountability enforcer. The CoS sits next to the CEO but doesn't own a single function. They work across operations, finance, HR, and M&A to make sure strategic initiatives actually ship.

In $5–30M EBITDA companies, the CoS isn't a luxury, it's structural. With four or five people in the corporate office and a PE hold-period clock running, someone has to hold the line on execution. Most large companies pay consultants to do this. Lower middle market companies hire one person.

Task, Condition, Standard, Time Hack

The framework Andrew reaches for is drilled into every Ranger. The version that runs his desk is shorter, just Task and Time Hack, with one rule on top of both: without a time hack, projects run forever.

THE RANGER FRAMEWORK

TASK	What specifically are you asking someone to do? One owner. Unambiguous.
CONDITION	What's the broader situation? Context that affects execution.
STANDARD	What does "done" look like? The quality bar, said out loud.
TIME HACK	When does it need to be done? A mutually agreed deadline.

Why the Lower Middle Market

Andrew has now spent time at both ends: a year at a Fortune 500 conglomerate and almost a year at a PE-backed lower-middle-market company. He doesn't equivocate. The appeal, he says, is structural.

PE-backed companies run on a shot clock; hold periods create urgency. Thin corporate benches create breadth. In the industrials space, where line managers might have come up driving trucks, the culture felt familiar to Andrew.

As Jordan Selleck puts it on the Investors & Operators podcast: "that sense of urgency accelerates all these different projects."

THE BRIEF: LOWER MIDDLE MARKET

IMPACT	"You see the outcome of your work on a day-to-day basis."
SPEED	PE hold periods demand urgency. The tempo aligns with a military mindset.
BREADTH	Four or five people in the corporate office means you touch every function.
CULTURE	"A much grittier environment." Industrials feel familiar to veterans.
TRADE-OFFS	Less structure. More trial and error. For builders, that's a feature.

THE THESIS

The Talent Pipeline PE Is Missing

The special operations community produces leaders who are goal-oriented, team-driven, comfortable with ambiguity, and built for execution under pressure. Translating that to portfolio-company leadership, especially in the lower middle market where resourcefulness matters more than pedigree, is direct.

What veterans often lack is the technical financial toolkit. Andrew is candid: "It's not their soft skills. It's not their ability to work with people. It's their ability to know the numbers."

The MBA closes that gap. Post-9/11 GI Bill and Yellow Ribbon coverage takes most of the financial friction out, and the pipeline is opening: military applications to one-year MBA programs more than doubled in a single year.

For PE firms, the math is plain: a ready-made pool of high-performing, mission-oriented operators at a fraction of the cost of a consulting engagement.

4% → 9%

More than doubled. Military applications to one-year MBA programs, 2024 to 2025. *GMAC Application Trends Survey, 2025.*

> ***The pipeline exists. The question is whether the industry's GPs and operating partners are using it.***

Getting Connected

51 Vets exists to connect private equity and veteran talent. Founded by Jordan Selleck in 2019, the nonprofit has grown to 500+ members from the Navy SEALs, Army Special Forces, Ranger Regiment, MARSOC, and military aviation communities. Andrew's path to Waste Eliminator ran directly through the network. That's not an accident. That's the model.

Learn more at 51vets.org

Based on Episode 150 of the Investors & Operators podcast, a 51 Vets special edition.
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