



Introducing: Marine Robert Thiede of Fond du Lac, WI Our Next Veteran Hero to Receive a Harley and the Gift of Road Therapy

Having endured a rough childhood in Fond du Lac, Rob learned at an early age to depend on himself, provide for himself and to work for everything he had. He ran away from home at age 14, enlisted in the Marine Corps at 16, and lived with friends until graduation when he headed off to boot camp. He was looking to escape, find a family and become something better. While he found the brotherhood and purpose he hoped for...four years and four deployments later...he returned wounded, invisibly scarred, and haunted by the deeply invasive demons of PTSD.

In 2003, with the start of war in Iraq, and less than eight months in, Rob deployed to Iraq. Trained as a Heavy Equipment Operator, he prepared bases, cleared roads, and operated land-mine removing devices. He became an informal leader: training others and assisting many through the hardships of deployment. Life was raw, it was rough and uncomfortable— but to Rob it was family and it was purposeful. He carried on contentedly until tragically witnessing the suicide of a close Brother on base. *“Turn off your feelings. Move on.”, his superiors told him.* Rob tried, and inner turmoil grew. Missions became more tense as a vicious war raged within and around him. *Push it away.* Deploy again. Unknown assailants, rocket blasts, IEDs, and land mines at every turn. *You’re trained for this.* Mounting injuries, death, a friend he couldn’t save. *Don’t think about them.* Rubble, sand, garbage, heat and wind. Can’t sleep. *Deal with it.* Bombings, explosions and gunfire. And deployments continued. Build the forward base, clear the area and move position. *Do the job.* Innocent lives lost, so many bodies, sounds, sights that can’t be unseen. *Forget forget forget.* More anger, frustration and fear. Faces, cries, blood, destruction. *Push it down. Way down. Farther.* Smells, debris, smoke, burnings. *“Shake it all off and keep going” they said.* And he’s tried, every day of every year since.

Four years in and yet, he wanted more. Unfortunately, cumulative exposure to blasts and environmental hazards of combat left him asthmatic and prevented reenlistment. At age 22, transition was lonely and difficult: his brotherhood was gone, resources were nonexistent and he was inexperienced at adult civilian life. He found work and tried to move forward, but an unknown force kept pulling him down. Flashbacks, relentless anger, nightmares and apathy tortured him. He spiraled out of control and drank excessively, eventually becoming homeless and jobless, and considering suicide on more than one occasion. Somehow, in the midst of the darkest of times, he met his future wife, Char. She saw the goodness within, his selfless character and the man he could be, and patiently guided his change. Together they moved forward, developing new coping and communication skills. Rob was determined to not just survive, but to fight his demons and rebuild a life of value and purpose. They relocated back to Fond du Lac where he found work as a Corrections Officer at Taycheedah Correctional Institution and continues strengthening his resolve every single day.

Along the way he learned to ride. Trading his truck for a motorcycle, he quickly realized the freedom it provided. With every mile demons and pain were lessened, anger was released, and life refocused itself. Through riding, Rob realized his ability to help others. He leads efforts to acknowledge Veterans in his work place and hopes to begin working with Salute The Troops to influence support. No part of sharing his painful story is easy or comfortable for him, yet he is courageously stepping forward in an effort to find a better self, help others and raise awareness.

Rob describes his “piece of junk” as his main source of therapy: a 33 year-old unreliable Honda, held together with zip ties and duct tape. Crediting Rob for his tenacity to keep riding and his strength to push forward, Hogs For Heroes felt it was time he had a Bike that gave his soul the freedom to roll and the chance to rebuild a brotherhood lost.

We loved walking into the arms of our friends at Open Road Harley-Davidson again! Rob was emotional; and the ORHD team guided him in finding his perfect fit, stretched our dollars, and folded him into their family. A gleaming black 2017 Road Glide Special, with less than 1,600 miles on her, captured his heart...and ORHD has generously offered to open their doors to celebrate its gifting! Please join us **Saturday, May 4, 2019 at Open Road Harley-Davidson for our Presentation of Keys Ceremony from 11:00 -11:45 a.m.** as we change one more Veteran’s life!

