



Introducing our 18th Recipient: Marine Sergeant Rick Erickson of the Wisconsin Dells, WI

The son of a Vietnam Marine, and grandson of a WWII Navy Veteran, Rick grew up with military pride, a love for his Country and a desire to fulfill his sense of American duty. Believing the Marines to be the toughest, hardest and best, joining the Corps was the only option he allowed himself to pursue.

Born in Madison, he spent his early life in the DeForest area. Later, his father worked for Saudi Aramco Oil Company, requiring their family move to Saudi Arabia for several years. Rick learned to ride dirt bikes in the desert for days on end, and played football and baseball while attending boarding schools back in the States. Having just completed senior year and evaluating his future, Rick was diagnosed with testicular cancer. Despite an immediate surgery, the cancer had spread and required chemotherapy. An almost equally heavy blow to the life he planned, the Marines would no longer take him until he was cancer-free for five years. Crushed yet determined, he waited out those five long years and improved his health, worked a landscape job and hung with friends. The devastation and anger of 9/11 only strengthened his resolve; and, when cleared of cancer in 2003, he enlisted at age 25 to do his part in service to our Country. One year later he was headed to war in Iraq for a six month experience that would forever change who he was and how he would live.

While Rick wanted the fight that Infantry would assure him, his high ratings set him on a different path: Artillery Scout and Gunfire Controller. After learning his expertise was a critical combat need, he voluntarily transferred Units and Bases to fill the deployment's position and left for Fallujah in June 2004, the deadliest area at the time. Upon arriving he was attached to a sniper team to spot and direct targets. It was also his job to call in artillery, mortar and air strikes; and he immediately went to work securing his base and removing threats. He quickly established himself within his new team as reliable, precise and efficient, and readily assumed additional roles and responsibilities to meet the demands of sustained combat. He kept his focus on the safety of his Brothers, and not on the growing personal turmoil his efforts were causing.

In November-December of 2004, after four months of daily life in the already intense war zone, the U.S. initiated "Operation Phantom Fury". It was the highest point of conflict against the Iraqi insurgents as Marines invaded Fallujah. It created the heaviest urban combat and the bloodiest battle of the entire war...and Rick was in the center of it all. The fighting was fierce and continual as troops cleared the city and endured house to house sweeps and fighting. Explosions, missiles and gunfire were constant. Hostile insurgents and unknown threats were at every turn, as were civilians, and Rick couldn't afford to let himself think of the fear, pain and loss surrounding him. He lived in primitive conditions of sand and rubble, and

worked both rough terrain and tight neighborhoods removing the enemy, with little regard for his own safety. He saw more Brothers than he can count injured, and killed; and, he carried on to prevent the loss of more, each one eating at him a little bit more. As if keeping his mind focused weren't hard enough, he gutted through the physical pain that invasive maneuvers, blasts and tactical demands permanently imparted on his entire body. His brain reeled and absorbed the traumatic effects of blasts and gunfire almost daily. Through it all he continued giving his best to those who depended on him. For his efforts in combat Rick was awarded a Navy and Marine Corps Commendation Medal with Valor and a Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal with Valor. And after the one month, two weeks and two days that the Battle For Fallujah raged, with it's end came Rick's departure home... and the start of his life-long battle with PTSD and his wounds from war.

Nothing had prepared him to return stateside. The war zone activity of just yesterday felt surreal on base; and, with no transitional support, few around him understood, or addressed, the magnitude of what he'd just been through. He struggled adjusting, internalized his conflict and silenced the blame and guilt they cultivated. Instead, he focused on training, treating his many physical injuries and building his family. While children added great pride and joy to his physical presence on the home front, his mind remained back in the desert's war zone. He turned to alcohol to numb the pain and anger; and rather than risk the stigma of mental health support on base, he further ignored the demons knocking at his door. He finished his four years under contract and moved back to Wisconsin, proud he'd done his part to serve his Country.

Once home, and with the support of family, Rick resumed care for his physical needs and underwent surgeries and treatments for shoulder repairs, knee and ankle injuries and degenerative joint and disc damage to his back. Headaches and irritability from his multiple TBI's complicated his days, but he pressed on for his family. He also continued drinking; and his emotions spiraled and relationships strained. He struggled holding a steady job and his marriage deteriorated to the point of divorce; and then he spent years fighting to win the primary placement of his daughters. He moved in with his parents to begin putting his life in order and realized his excessive drinking and depression were taking a heavy, critical toll. With his mom's support, he finally sought treatment for his PTSD and began taking his life back. He obtained two Associate degrees and, after various jobs, landed a "dream job" advocating for Veterans as an Assistant County Veterans Service Officer. Working to facilitate Veteran's claims in Sauk County, his role has added immense pride and purpose to his life. He saved enough to buy his first home three years ago in the Wisconsin Dells and provides a plentiful, stable life for his two teenage daughters who are his absolute world. And still, something was missing from the life he dedicates to others: a piece of him.

Rick is modest and reserved when he speaks of his service. It is not the spotlight he seeks nor wants, and not one part of sharing his story is easy. His road is unmistakably rough, and he is raw, irritable and intense. He carries a beastly weight of responsibility for multiple deaths, both directly and indirectly, and the anguish of survivor's guilt still painfully burns fourteen years later. Not a day goes by where his mind doesn't pull him back to those dark six months and his body doesn't betray his efforts to move forward. Sleep does not come easily

or peacefully; and his struggles make it hard for him to make friends, have relationships, and enjoy life like he used to. Every day he agonizes over ways to find his place and his release...a problem made worse two years ago when he sold his motorcycle to pay for a necessary bathroom remodel.

One of the first things Rick did when returning from service fourteen years ago was buy himself a motorcycle. He rode as much as his parenting responsibilities would let him... and it helped. It was his escape: travels gave him the personal time and adrenaline he needed to sort through his mind. It gave him freedom from his demons and the chance for peace. And it gave him joy and time with his girls, one at a time on the back, taking the long way for ice cream. His two teen daughters are everything to him, and readily admits he wouldn't be here today if it weren't for them. He fills his life with theirs and the satisfaction he finds in working with Veterans. Hogs For Heroes felt this Veteran needed to find and fill time for himself, gain Brotherhood, and continue the hard work of healing with the gift of a motorcycle to help.

With his coworkers in on the surprise, we scheduled an appointment on Rick's busy calendar and watched this stoic man release a bewildered smile or two. We took him shopping the very next day and found the Street Glide he dreamed of, in the color he hoped for, on the showroom floor of Wisconsin Harley-Davidson in Oconomowoc. This Crushed Ice Pearl 2017 Street Glide has only 9,000 miles on her and is not only loaded with upgrades, it has a customized adaptive seat to give his back the support it needs and 12" bars to release his shoulders. The WISHD team were phenomenal: they expertly placed Rick on his first Harley and generously stretched our dollars to fit this dream within our budget. Unique to this sweet ride, it has been fully paid for by the 2020 fundraising efforts of the Tavern League of Wisconsin (TLW), and we couldn't be more honored by their support of our Veterans and desire to continue raising funds for Hogs For Heroes.

Join us on Sunday, May 23 from 12-3 pm when we support this Veteran, our 18th, by handing him his set of keys at The Keg & Patio in the Wisconsin Dells. Come learn about our unique mission, meet prior recipients and welcome Rick back to The Road. We will begin our Presentation of Keys Ceremony at 1:00 pm, and trust us--it's an emotional, patriotic moment you don't want to miss. The Keg will be offering a lunch for donation to us, and... **THEY WILL HAVE THE HOGS FOR HEROES GOLDEN ALE**, a craft beer created in partnership with Wisconsin's Capital Brewery and Tavern League to support our Wisconsin Veterans. Ride on over and hang with friends, old and new, as we support this deserving Veteran and honor the gratitude we have for all.

Please note, there will be designated motorcycle parking in front of the restaurant. We suggest that you enter the downtown Dells area via Hwy 13 or 23.