



Meet Our Next, and 21st, Recipient: Army National Guard Veteran Ashley Ferg, of Waupaca, Wisconsin

Ashley Ferg grew up on a dairy and cattle farm in Manawa, Wisconsin and fondly recalls the joys of farm life in a small town. She loved the peace and quiet, the animals and the physical labor. She was no stranger to hard work and determination; in fact, she used these strengths to secure her spot as a middle linebacker on her high school's football teams. It was about this same time when, unsure of her life direction and inspired by her older sister's path, Ashley decided to join the military. She wanted exposure to a larger world yet the chance to remain in, and care for, her current small one. She wanted to push her knowledge, strength and experience levels, yet not lose the foundation and values she held dear. And she wanted to spread her wings and become a part of something bigger, without losing herself.

Looking for the combination that offered her the best of all worlds, Ashley chose the Army National Guard (ANG). She graduated hopeful and excited, and headed off to basic training shortly thereafter. She specialized in Chemical Operations and took every school she could, including LIMA 5 and 6, and Chemical Reconnaissance. In between, she supported her family farm, held miscellaneous jobs and enjoyed life with friends. She was young, eager and ready to conquer life—and then came her time to deploy.

In early 2006 Ashley was individually selected from the Wausau ANG 32 Infantry Brigade and attached to a Battalion in Kentucky that was sent to Bagram, Afghanistan for a year. Once there, and without a need for her speciality, she was assigned to the 101st Airborne's Military Police division to fill their vacant positions--and found herself in a world that all her drills and training couldn't have prepared her for. At 19 years old, she sat in a M1114 Up Humvee hatch as a Gunner on convoy and extraction missions. She worked in their makeshift jail, an old Russian storage facility littered with known environmental toxins. She ran missions through crowded streets and family residences to identify and isolate the enemy, and faced unknown threats at every turn. Her base was mortared on a daily basis; and, on that same daily basis, she stood on base to honor the day's fallen Brothers and Sisters. Ashley saw things in combat that she still can't unsee today. She felt things during that year's deployment that her former character couldn't have imagined feeling. And she did things in war that she can't undo. All these things immediately reached far and deep into her psyche to combine and take a tenacious and terrible hold of her during that one year—and still haven't let go today.

Ashley returned home after her deployment knowing she wasn't the same person, nor would she ever be. Transition was hard: still reeling from the violence of yesterday juxtaposed with the unaffected daily life of home and family. She was angry, anxious and confused. She felt isolated and depressed as she moved through pain-filled memories she couldn't control and situations that no longer made sense. She denied the demons she brought home; and, knowing others couldn't understand, she withdrew and pushed away what and who she could. Fearing military judgement and stigma, she held in her struggles and continued with her National Guard responsibilities in silence. She found herself entrenched in a daily despair she didn't know she was capable of having, let alone managing. She did her best to help on the farm and maintain jobs, but every aspect of her life was further complicated by the depression and migraines consuming her. Sleep was hard to come by; and when it came, it was filled with memories and emotions that ravaged her. She thought of suicide almost daily, and acted on it multiple times over the course of the years to come.

Ashley knew enough about the poor state of her mental health to forgo a 2009 deployment; but when 2010's requirement came due, she mustered up the strength to fulfill her duty. She was again pulled for individual mobilization, assigned to an aviation unit and deployed to Tallil, Iraq. Her Chemical Operations expertise still not needed, she was assigned to Air Mission Request and prepared travel manifests and logistics for crew

movement. Although her direct combat exposure was lessened this time, the surrounding hostility and ongoing violence fostered a new sense of apathy and acceptance for death's fate--emotions that did nothing to help her current mindset. When her deployment ended 14 months later, she returned home to find herself lost, in a worsened emotional and psychological state, and again contemplating suicide. She remained plagued by nightmares, anxiety and fear. Her migraines increased and her body ached from the physical tolls of war and drill. She managed this by drinking excessively and transitioned further into an angry and hateful person she no longer recognized, nor liked.

In 2012 she adopted Bently, a rescue horse, and began realizing the healing therapy that talking to her beloved Paint provided. He listened to her stories, he nuzzled her tears and his strength gave her the courage to finally work on hers. She went to the VA and although she left feeling discredited, she did leave with medications to help her depression. She continued moving forward slowly and, like many, experienced the painful highs and lows as she worked toward a better life for herself. She took a job as an Assistant Manager at Walmart and helped farm, both of which allowed her to buy her first home in 2015 in Waupaca, WI. She finally began "feeling like a functioning member of society again", and she pushed on despite the continued dark days.

In the face of her struggles, Ashley loved being in the military. She thrived on its purpose and focus and depended on the companionship her Brothers and Sisters provided. However, in 2018, after learning another deployment was likely, the now Staff Sergeant and Stryker Commander made the tough decision to separate from the Army National Guard after 16 years of service rather than lose ground she'd gained on her healing path. With a renewed commitment to care for herself, she again sought support from the VA and began pursuing disability claims that finally recognized her PTSD and significant struggles. She resumed exercising and has found benefit in both her emotional healing and in managing the hip and knee issues she had developed in service. She's gained personal strength and confidence in her team leadership role at Walmart. And she reconnected with an amazing counselor who helped her navigate her muddled waters and focus. And noting it as "the best thing I've ever done for myself"... Ashley added riding to her life.

Ashley grew up on dirt bikes and spent many of her adult years as a passenger on somebody else's bike. Wanting more control, she took Appleton Harley-Davidson's riding class and bought her first bike in 2018. It wasn't much of a bike: but for \$1000, the '98 Suzuki Intruder was hers to cultivate a new love affair. The immediate freedom and peace she gained soothed her soul. She found strength in the control she had behind the bars and focus in the adrenaline rush it provided. A year later, Ashley joined the Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association Chapter 45-3 and quickly reconnected with the Brotherhood she'd been missing and the personal understanding few can offer. Unfortunately her bike has had more problems than imagined and it's unreliable nature has limited her ability to ride. Understanding the high-risk nature of Ashley's struggles, and learning how far she has come these past few years, Hogs For Heroes felt it important we help her stay on a good path with riding and support in her vulnerable life.

We showed up for a family dinner to surprise Ashley, and found her shaking as we approached. She had been a passenger on our June 12 CVMA Ride, unable to rely on her own bike, and stayed as we conducted our 19th Presentation of Keys Ceremony afterwards. She never approached us to meet then, but she knew exactly who we were now... and could hardly believe we stood in front of her sharing our good news that she would be #21.

Knowing the tight market for Harleys, we sent Ashley out to the many nearby dealerships to find what captured her heart. She test-rode several in an effort to make sure The One she'd been dreaming of was, in fact, the best for her. It was...and it just so happened to be sitting on Vandervest Harley-Davidson's showroom floor in Green Bay. Ashley has long loved the H-D Softail Slim Special with the 110 engine in Army Green from afar; and once she sat on its low profile and heard the loud, throaty rumble of it's killer pipes, her heart and mind were set. Of course our amazing friends at VVHD were more than thrilled to work

with us again! They helped add a detachable shield and stretched our dollars to leave more in the tank for our next recipients.

We will be gifting this bike in a place that is special to Ashley: it's the clubhouse of The Brothers By Choice, a Veterans Motorcycle Club in Arpin, Wisconsin. Ashley's brother-in-law and sister are members, and both were on base with Ashley during her first deployment. This supportive Veterans group has welcomed Ashley in several times and made her feel comfortable...and now they are graciously extending that invitation to the Hogs For Heroes family and supporters for this special gifting ceremony. How cool is that! Join us on **Saturday, August 7 from 11 am - 2 pm at the Brothers By Choice Veterans MC Clubhouse on 7561 Bethel Rd in Arpin, WI.** Come hang with friends, old and new, meet prior recipients and welcome Ashley back to the road! We will begin our **Presentation of Keys Ceremony at 12:30 pm**, and trust us— it's an emotional and patriotic moment you won't want to miss. The Brothers By Choice will be offering burgers and brats for lunch, and will have their bar open to help us celebrate and toast our shared commitment to caring for our Veterans.