



"I was over there, twice.

*I wasn't on the front lines and I wasn't injured in combat. I dealt with the aftermath of war.
But because of that, I've never felt worthy or deserving because I didn't fight."*

We respectfully disagree.

Introducing #27: Army Sergeant Zachary Bays of Berlin, Wisconsin

Reconnecting This Veteran With His Healing Passion

Even as a young child, Army Sergeant Zach Bays saw nothing but the Army in his future. He proudly grew up the son of an Army Veteran and wished for no other plan than to serve his Country. A Freshman in high school, he watched the events of 9/11 play out on his classroom television and it further solidified his resolve to serve and protect. As a Junior he enrolled in the Army Reserves and attended boot camp the summer before his Senior year. He loved every minute of the structure and doctrine and it left him eager for his advanced training school after graduation. His father agreed to his enlistment with the caveat that he select a job that lent itself to civilian employment and, out of concern for his son, that he specifically avoid three classifications: Medic, Infantry and Truck Driver. Zach has a heart that wants to help people and he was immediately attracted to the medical classifications. So in keeping his promise to his father, he chose to become a Biomedical-Electronic Technician.

With boot camp and graduation behind him, Zach received his first motorcycle from an uncle as a graduation gift: a new 500 Ninja sport bike. He rode that bike as much as he could until it was time to transition to active duty. He immediately connected with the adrenaline and focus it provided; and, realized early on that riding would become a life-long passion. In July, 2005 he left for Sheppard Air Force Base in Texas to begin the 42-week training his specialization required. Successful and thriving in his new-found purpose, Zach was then sent to Fort Hood, Texas, and assigned to the 583rd Medical Logistics Company. Zach had wrestled since the 5th grade and had been participating in Mixed Martial Arts (MMA); and looking to expand his service contributions, he became certified as a Modern Army Combatives Instructor. War was raging on two different stages and Zach hoped he would be called upon to use his training and skills to support his Country's effort.

He finally got his wish: word came through and Zach was deployed for a 15-month tour to Afghanistan in 2007. With a primary purpose of caring for the medical equipment used in treatments, Zach was flown all over Afghanistan, through volatile air space, to inspect and technically attend to the machinery on different bases. Machinery, mind you, that was attached to the sick, injured and disfigured, the burned and barely alive Brothers and Sisters he served with. He worked in operating rooms, recovery rooms, and treatment bays filled with the aftermath of war and the physical horrors caused, including heartbreaking deaths, and alongside their exhausted medical teams. Images and emotions quickly laid a foundation of pain from which Zach began to build a warehouse of torment upon. Anxiety and fear continually crept in and Zach learned to shut down his thoughts and bury his emotions. There was no room for weakness. And as nobody has

just one role, his secondary purpose came to be supporting triage by transporting the injured from the flight line to the treatment bays and relaying case information. The immediate stories, raw sounds and smells, images and emotions were hard to shake; but he did so just to stay focused. Despite pushing aside those torments they, too, found a path to his mind's growing warehouse and presented themselves through nightmares and insomnia and a growing anxiety. And everyday as he cared for the machines attached to the family he loved, anger and depression took hold.

Back on base in Texas, his first deployment complete, Zach knew he was a different man and knew he was struggling with what he'd just been through. At the time, showing signs of deteriorating mental health was viewed as a weakness; so unable to seek help, he turned to his motorcycle for the support he couldn't ask for. The speed and lean became more essential to his raw emotional release and survival; and eventually he upgraded his ride to a Yamaha R1. He needed to stay busy and he kept his days filled with work, MMA, and teaching combatives. Zach reconnected with an old high school flame, married and saw his marriage start to crumble almost as fast. And every chance he had, he rode to outrun the emerging demons and clear his mind.

In January of 2010, Zach was deployed again, this time to Iraq to work at Camp Al Asad hospital, a former Iraqi base, with the 21st Combat Support Hospital. Just as before, the equipment he attended to was attached to his injured and struggling family—individuals who saw the combat his job did not require, and feelings of guilt further sank in. He didn't have to travel this time, but his new secondary duty required he check incoming patients for weapons of all sorts, including bombs. His anxiety grew quickly and once again, the insomnia and nightmares began. Seeking medical support to help with the fatigue they caused, Zach was prescribed three different sleeping medications. Unlike his first deployment, he was now adding new layers of invisible, yet completely real pains on top of the old, unaddressed scars...and life began to unravel. He was exhausted, anxious and, now on medications, not thinking clearly. His marriage was quickly dissolving from a far and he grappled with what his future held. At his lowest point, Zach sat in his room for four hours staring at his weapon. Recognizing his intent, he had the courage to seek the support of leadership who immediately Medivaced him back to Texas. And once there, new leadership immediately began proceedings for a Medical Evaluation Board to determine service continuation. On top of the chaos in his mind, he felt hopeless and useless on base as he waited out this one year time period with a family that no longer valued him. Despite all he'd been through, he still wanted a future with the Army. The Board felt differently and medically retired Zach in 2011, citing PTSD, and quickly forced him out of his lifelong career dream and into a spiraling decline he couldn't have predicted.

With a month to prepare for his transition, he began counseling, secured a place to live for his family back home in Wisconsin and found a job. And then another job. And then another job. Hoping a relocation would change their course of events, Zach moved his family to Indiana for a job that didn't work out...and then another job. His marriage further eroded to the point of divorce. And then, the one thing that helped him move through his new-found dark places—his Yamaha R1—was stolen off his back porch.

Zach was lost and alone, angry and embarrassed; and, he turned to drinking to numb the pain. Staying employed remained problematic: he grappled with anger and communication issues as he confronted differences in approach, integrity and styles; and subsequently, he moved from job to job desperate to find a comfortable and accepting fit. Looking for another change, he moved back to Berlin, WI in 2013 and moved into the cabin he used to live in, only to resume building his string of broken jobs. It took him two years of saving to finally get another motorcycle...but just months later another job hit forced him to sell his bike to keep a roof over his head. Although devastated and disappointed with the carnage of 17 jobs in 10 years, Zach remained determined to succeed and find a new path forward.

In 2017 Zach met Rebecca, his current wife, through an online dating service...and here lied his new path. As they talked and spent time together, they both knew they had something special. With Rebecca's gentle support, Zach learned to open up more, trust again and communicate; and, with her support, Zach restarted

counseling. Committed to moving forward together, they bought Zach a Sportster 883, his first Harley, to regain the therapeutic release riding had previously offered him. Rebecca surprisingly found herself hooked on the ride as well, and they quickly upgraded to an older Electra Glide for more comfortable travels together. Along the way, they spread their love and grew their family. Zach became more involved in his community and remains an active member of his VFW Post and his Rotary Club. He found joy in hunting, MMA and disc golf... but nothing gave him peace like riding did. In 2020, when their third child was on the way, Zach made the hard decision to put his family first and sold his Harley for the minivan their growing family needed.

In 2019 Zach was introduced to barbering by a friend, pursued his training and licensure, and found work in an area salon. After realizing the therapeutic connection it provided him, he opened his own single-chair barber shop this year, Bays Beards & Cuts in Berlin, and combined it with his new disc golf business, Another Disc Golf Event. Opening and running two small, Veteran owned businesses has required every cent he's earned, and purchasing a better home for their family has been where his priorities have lied. As much as he misses the love of riding, Zach knows that the strength and stability of his family must come first. And it is for that very reason he pushes himself every single day to stay busy and move forward. Hogs For Heroes thought that in order to be a better provider for all he affects, and all he aims to be, Zach needed to regain his own healing therapy back in his life.

When we met Zach and his wife and told him our news...Zach dropped his head and cried. He has an enormous heart and an almost "teddy-bear" like quality to him that only wants to do good and help, but is challenged by a mind that tells him he isn't good enough and isn't deserving. We sent Zach out shopping for his dream bike and as fate would have it, he found it at Appleton Harley-Davidson in their back shop waiting to hit the floor. It was a 2015 H-D Road Glide Special and, although a little older model than what he wanted, it was the bike of an employee, a 24 year Army Veteran, who had completely tricked it out. Zack first fell in love with the Superior Blue and black color scheme, then the upgraded Stage 2 with CAM engine, followed by the throaty Screaming Eagle pipes, and finally the Rockford Fosgate stereo system sealed the deal...all in the matter of a few minutes. With only 24,000 miles on this bike, it couldn't have been any better loved or upgraded, and it captured Zach's heart immediately. Even cooler, its owner dropped its price for the chance to put another Army Veteran on his bike and leave some money in the tank for the next Bike and Veteran pairing.

Unique to this bike, it, too, has been paid for by the stunning, 2021 fundraising efforts of Wisconsin's International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE) Local 139. After last year's Golf Outing and Poker Run for us...they handed us a check for \$60,000 and it only made sense that we present the keys for two bikes at once, with their full compliments, at the end of their 2022 Poker Run benefiting Hogs For Heroes. **JOIN US on Saturday, June 25 for our Presentation of Keys Ceremony at 5:00 pm at the IUOE Training Center in Coloma, WI.** The gifting will follow their Poker Run...so if your day is free, join us at 9:00 am for registration. Folks, take our word for it—this is one amazing ride...and all the proceeds benefit us!