



“Both of my tours to Iraq were not what most people think of when they think of deployments. I was not with an Infantry unit, kicking in doors or going on house-clearing missions. As part of the air wing, we were responsible for the safety and protection of the airfield, pilots, crew and aircraft...it was a different kind of dangerous managing aircraft fires still loaded with highly explosive ordnance.” shares Jeremiah as he described his responsibilities. “But still, I didn’t have it as bad as most, and it makes me feel unworthy of a gift like this when I know what others went through.”

Meet Our Next Recipient: #26 Staff Sergeant Jeremiah Schroeder of Appleton, WI

Helping This Veteran Move Forward With The Therapy of The Road

Jeremiah Schroeder grew up the middle child of three boys who spent much of their childhood outside, playing hockey and finding their own fun in Fond du Lac, WI. He grew up fully believing he would be a hockey professional and hoist the Stanley Cup. Although he was high school-level great, he eventually realized he wouldn't be college-level great; and not having thought much of a backup plan, he found himself unsure of his future. He knew his father's rule for life after graduation: college, pay for rent at home, or leave. After speaking with a friend at school, Jeremiah chose another path: United States Marine Corps.

As October 2001's boot camp departure drew closer, life as we knew it changed on September 11, 2001. Angry and wanting to do something more, Jeremiah went to his recruiter and asked to be reclassified as an Infantryman. Without any openings at the time, he stayed the course to complete Basic Training in San Diego, then headed to Texas for Aircraft Rescue and Firefighting school, and then finally landed in Okinawa, Japan. His year abroad complete, he was stationed at the Marine Corps Air Station New River in Jacksonville, NC as a Firefighter and Crash Fire Rescue Specialist and waited for his turn to support his Country in war. Within the short years that would follow, he would rush into marriage, have a daughter, deploy to Iraq in 2004, and again in 2005, and divorce. Also within that time frame, he would unknowingly develop lumbosacral degenerative disc disease with sciatic radiculopathy to both legs from the exhaustive hours of wearing heavy, fire turnout gear, training and the physical demands his job required.

Jeremiah was at Al Asad Air Base for both deployments and spent almost two years in Iraq between the two tours. A former Iraqi air base, Al Asad was abandoned in 2003 after our invasion and eventually became the largest American-occupied base in western Iraq until its closure in 2011. In 2004, however, when Jeremiah first arrived, extensive infrastructure and taxiway damage was present and the base operated with limited, and more primitive resources. Al Asad quickly became a major convoy hub, hosting hundreds of fuel and supply trucks everyday. Between extensive fighter jet traffic and cargo/supply aircraft, the base was logistically busy and fraught with fire potential that required advanced 24/7 preparedness. In addition to his Firefighter role, Jeremiah worked gate security and clearance, and supported the structural rebuilds required on base. The physicality of his job and training exacerbated his developing medical condition and Jeremiah found himself laid out on two different occasions because of back and leg pain. He would rest when he could but typically worked through the pain and denied the forming neurological impact to avoid being labeled. Although life inside the wire carried its own dangers, it was not near the level that many of his Brothers and Sisters dealt with outside the base and Jeremiah, too, felt that pain and guilt.

His second deployment in 2005 to the same air base was much the same but with added responsibilities of Off-Base Crash Response... and images that would forever stay cemented in his memory. Although his back and leg pain worsened in both frequency and intensity, the psychological toll his second time around proved far worse. For at least half of this deployment, Jeremiah watched over several flag-draped coffins that would line his airfield every day, waiting for their final journey home. Seeing the painful toll war took on his Brothers and Sisters...and knowing someone's son, spouse, parent or friend was not coming home burned deep within him, impacted his heart and his mind, and added to his brewing anxiety disorder as he more frequently pondered his own fate.

Jeremiah returned stateside, neatly tucked his experiences and strife away, and moved forward in his duties, rank and beloved military career. Young and idyllic, he still saw military retirement in his eyes, yet realized his need to add a personal release to manage the damage done in war. So after years of dreaming, he bought his first motorcycle: a new H-D Street Bob, and brought it to base. He quickly realized the benefit to his conflicted mind and the escape the road provided to his structured life; and, he rode every chance he had. Life was good, and got even better in 2007 when he met his current wife, Kathy, who lived in Appleton, WI. Shortly after getting engaged, Jeremiah received orders for four years of recruitment duty in West Bend, WI and happily moved closer to home. The two married in 2008 and began building their family as they fought for, and won, custody of his daughter from his first marriage.

In 2012, his recruitment duty complete, their growing family transferred to Hawaii where he resumed his firefighting specialization. Although the area was beautiful and he could ride every chance he had, Jeremiah's back issues and daily pain became more problematic and personal family needs became more pressing. With re-enlistment pending, he weighed his priorities: he put his love of family first, transitioned to the Marine Reserves and returned to Wisconsin. Without a job lined up or place to live, Jeremiah sold his beloved Harley to pay off the loan and buy a home for his young family.

Jeremiah fully believed the Reservist transition would be easy and, after getting settled and finding a civilian job, he would have the chance to buy another bike. Unfortunately life had a different plan for him and set him on a course of rejection and disappointment that would worsen his struggle with anxiety. Within his first year at the 4th Marine Aircraft Wing in Minneapolis, MN, a Headquarters audit removed his billet. Without a need for his job anywhere in the country, he was unable to re-enlist. To expand on his 13 years of service, he transitioned to the WI Army National Guard with the new job of Electronic Warfare Specialist. He was waitlisted for two enrollment periods before securing a training school position; and when his opportunity finally came up, his back injury had acutely flared and not only prevented him from attending, it automatically placed him in a Medical Review process to determine service continuation. In physical pain, anxious about the impact on his family, and without any control in the matter, Jeremiah had no choice but to endure the arduous process. Although the Army eventually granted medical retirement in February, 2020, he never attended the training school that would enhance his future opportunities and, after 17 years, 4 months and 10 days in service to our Country...nor did he end his military career the way he'd envisioned.

As if the uncertainty and frustrations within his military career wasn't enough, finding civilian employment during this time proved more problematic than ever imagined. He went through ten different jobs in the ten years since becoming a Reservist that either didn't fit, didn't accept him or downsized...and Jeremiah learned first-hand that military skills, experience and style don't always translate well in civilian life. And yet, he would push on, deflated yet determined, because not doing anything simply wasn't an option for his character or his family. His anxiety, however, worsened as a result and the years of instability further eroded his sense of value, purpose and pride as his family of five scraped to provide a stable home life and meet their needs. Just as they'd find a level of comfort, another shoe would drop and deal Jeremiah another blow. The rollercoaster ride continued until 2021 when a temporary job turned into a permanent position as an IT Service Desk Analyst. Not only has the group welcomed him, it's work that satisfies him and offers him the

stability he needed. Still, every single day he goes to work wondering if this is the day his life will be turned upside down again.

Despite his struggles, Jeremiah has many gifts in life. His wife, Kathy, is a smart rock of compassionate support and he oozes with pride as he talks about his three children. He is a personable and social guy and has several close friends that buoy his spirits and enjoy life together. Their extended family is both supportive, close and involved. And together, Jeremiah and Kathy laugh frequently, make time for their relationship, and share in tears of gratitude and disappointment—all of which we saw in our short time together. Moving forward and focusing on their family is their driving mantra and the only option they allow themselves when dealing with life's challenges. As Jeremiah tries to put off surgery, he tailors his exercise and receives the occasional steroid injection. Additionally, he is committed to therapy to manage his anxiety. And despite his daily, unstable pain in his back and legs, he pushes himself to fully enjoy life. He loves the outdoors and hunting and remains a huge sports fanatic. However, the one thing that gave him personal comfort and release was no longer in his life, and the loss of riding has darkened that cloud that will forever hover in his mind.

Jeremiah grew up with a father who rode Harley-Davidson's, and the impression both the bike and camaraderie made in a young child's heart fueled his life's passion. Selling his bike in 2013 was, and still is, the hardest thing he's had to do; and he believed buying another during these tumultuous years was financially irresponsible. Just as real, Jeremiah feared the impact another setback would have on him if he lost it. So, he would borrow bikes from family members or friends for an occasional ride just to get that wind on his face...and hope with all his might that his luck and "someday" dream would eventually return. Hogs For Heroes felt this Veteran needed a positive life-changing event and healing force to help him through the hard work of rebuilding and moving forward...and we decided to make his "someday" happen now.

Jeremiah was bewildered by our surprise news and it took awhile to sink in...until he found the beauty that made his heart flip on the showroom floor of Vandervest Harley-Davidson in Green Bay, WI. The 2018 H-D Road Glide Special in Wicked Red, with less than 6,000 miles on her, is an eye-catcher for sure, and a nod to both his Marine Corps and Firefighter loves. When he realized it would be priced beyond our budget...our amazing friends at Vandervest H-D took that price down to make this Veteran's dream come true. This is our fourth time working with VVHD and as we enjoyed a celebratory drink, let's just say there were tears of joy all around as we raised a glass to Vandervest.

Unique to this bike, it has been fully paid for by the 2021 fundraising efforts of our friends at Wisconsin's International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE) Local 139. This amazing group has shown us the love since 2016...and their generosity is making both #26 and #27 giftings possible this year. We will be handing over both keys following their 2022 5th Annual Poker Run for Hogs For Heroes on Saturday, June 25 at 5:00 at their impressive IUOE Training Center in Coloma, WI. Spend the day with us and join the ride for us at 9:00— it's truly one of the best we've been on!