



SURPRISE!

THIS MARINE & ARMY VETERAN, #29, GETS THE SURPRISE OF HIS LIFE!

In an excerpt from his application, Kevin Ropson wrote to us:

"I've been riding since I was 18. That's 43 years of wind therapy. I rode while I was at boot camp, in between deployments, and while at home. I've road in wind, rain, snow and sun. My bike is my refuge; it's my place and my release. I've had many bikes through the years. Unfortunately I'm 61, my back is getting worse and I'm having trouble keeping it up when I stop, getting the kickstand up and backing it up. I know my two-wheel days are numbered, and I can not imagine my life without my much needed wind therapy in it...and we don't have the means to handle another payment."

We do.

And, we're doing things a little differently this time around.

We're sharing Kevin's story with you **after** we surprised him with a set of keys to a pristine 2014 Harley-Davidson TriGlide, barely broken in with only 3,340 miles. We knew what he needed and worked covertly with his wife on this special mission. Kevin was standing in a crowd watching us hand over keys to his friend, Recipient #28. When we finished with that special moment... we created a little more magic and changed one more life. We made our surprise announcement, pulled Kevin out of the crowd and then rolled the trike he needs to stay on the road right up to this bewildered man. Surrounded by brotherhood and love, Kevin was completely overwhelmed with joy and support, humbled by the gift, and reduced to tears.

Meet Veteran Recipient #29:

Staff Sergeant Kevin Ropson, of Wrightstown, WI

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Kevin Ropson grew up a farm kid in New Franken, Wisconsin. At 17, his best friend asked him to leave school and join the Marines. Kevin had no real aspirations at the time; but having promised his mother he'd finish high school, he declined the offer, graduated and began working in home construction. He picked up his first motorcycle and quickly found joy and freedom in riding. Wanting more out of life than a job he hated, he quit and joined the Marine Corps with Bill, that same best friend, in 1980. After bootcamp together, they went on to California for individual training: Bill to 29 Palms and Kevin to Camp Pendleton. Military life was good for Kevin: he became a Motor Transport Operator, thrived in the structure and brotherhood, and bought another bike to cruise coastal roads and visit his buddy three hours away.

There are people and days that imprint on our lives and affect our hearts and minds for the rest of our days; and on May 16, 1982, Kevin learned Bill had been shot and killed in a senseless civil dispute. This moment, loaded with loss and guilt for instigating his enlistment, left an indelible mark on Kevin's young mind. He received orders to escort his best friend home and stoically stood at full attention for his funeral. He then spiraled through his grief, drinking and self-isolating to minimize his risk of attachment. He shipped out to Japan and Korea, and finished at Camp Lejeune. Struggling with a burden he couldn't release, he separated and returned home hoping for the normalcy of his former life. He worked construction, drank heavily and married quickly. Still, nothing felt right; and so, he reenlisted. The young couple headed back to Camp Lejeune where Kevin threw himself into assignments away, welcomed his only son and divorced three years later.

His contract complete and his son moved away, Kevin settled in Iowa and took a job as a corrections officer, finding the structure suited him. He worked additional jobs to occupy his time and he rode to clear his head; but he remained unsettled and unhappy, and drank more to forget his pain. Missing the camaraderie from service, he joined the Army Reserves in 1991; and with an eye on retiring at 20 years in, Kevin happily worked his monthly drill weekend for the comfort it gave him. Another divorce literally left him with nothing but his pain, and he moved back to Wisconsin to rebuild his life and relationship with his son. In 2002, Kevin went to a church picnic, met a woman and gave her a ride on his bike. He married that woman, Vickey, his now wife of 20 years, four months later and two weeks before he deployed.

Approaching his last year of service before retirement eligibility, Kevin, at age 41, received orders to deploy to Kuwait and Iraq. After prepping at Fort Knox, he left the country on May 16, 2003—the same date Bill had died 21 years ago. With his head and heart in all the wrong places, he would struggle to set them straight in the chaotic and dangerous world he was entering. Landing at Camp Arifjan, a forward-deployment and logistics Army base in Kuwait, the Staff Sergeant was assigned a team of 15 soldiers to run daily supply missions across northern Iraq and back. Kevin rolled across the hostile countryside doing his job, and on high alert, for the next 5 months; and its cumulative toll affects his mind and body to this very day.

Life in a combat zone eroded every one of his nerves. His leadership required a mask of strength, and he pushed away every image and emotion he could to the deep recess of his mind to fester with the other pain he carried. Hidden IEDs, frequent explosions and close calls marred his travels; and the roadside carnage of trucks, debris and bodies left him with visions he can't unsee and an anxiety that escalates many a situation today. Fearful for the young lives he was responsible for; an anger and impatience settled deeply within and still shows itself in panic attacks and in his irritable and short-tempered nature. There were dangerous, unknown threats and people at every turn; and to this day, he works hard to trust and interact socially. Without doubt, fatigue and strained mental health further complicated the physical toll war took on his 41 year-old body. His job demands pulled on every part of his body as he moved, lifted, jumped and hauled loads in massive trucks—repeatedly straining his back and worsening the arthritis developing in his knees. He pushed to fulfill his missions, manage his team and get his loads to those who depended on them. The jarring ride in the trucks he drove, over primitive and rough terrain, shook his aging and changing spine, for hours on end, day after day. Sleep was hard to come by and catching winks on the ground, a cot or a truck further compromised the developing degenerative back and neck disc disease brewing within. He learned to work through the pain until five months in, the back pain so intense, it held him back and eventually sent him to Germany for care, then stateside to Walter Reed, and finally home to await a Medical Review Board. It was good to be home; and outside of the brotherhood he loved, there was little to like about the “hell” he endured. Deemed physically unfit to continue as he hit his 20 year mark, Kevin retired from the military.

Although grateful for his safe return, transition bewildered Kevin and nothing felt right. He struggled to communicate and relate; and the guilt he carried grew for leaving others to fight. Mental health care wasn't as acceptable at the time, nor did it suit Kevin; so he denied his struggles and tried moving forward. Flashbacks and nightmares relentlessly took him back there, panic attacks and anger bruised relationships and held him back, and he was in physical pain that compromised the many life activities he once enjoyed. Although his motorcycle helped him sort through his demons, he found himself again needing to escape. He bought a semi truck and hit the road for two years to remove himself from the people and life he so desperately fought to come home to.

He learned much about himself on the open road and realized he was good at working in structured environments, specifically correctional systems. Since 2009 he's worked at Green Bay Correctional Institution, then transferred to Oregon Correctional Center to rehabilitate inmates by working on the adjacent farm and, after eight years there, moved to Wrightstown where he works at Sanger Powers Correctional Center as a Correctional Sergeant. Kevin has always worked long hours and extra shifts to help cover his

prison's staffing and coworker's schedules; and his efforts leave him physically worn and in pain. After years of steady work and saving, Kevin and Vickey finally bought their first home four years ago. Along the way Kevin connected with the VA for medical treatment of his degenerative disc disease, arthritis in his knees and the gastrointestinal struggle that burn pit exposure had since inflicted. Refusing mental health care, despite an awareness of his struggles, Kevin added his service dog, Abby, to his life. Recognizing the tremendous impact Abbey has made in his hard journey, they began training service puppies for Custom Canines to help other struggling Veterans.

Kevin has used a motorcycle to ride through some of the most painful parts of his past 43 years and to strengthen his relationship with his riding partner, Vickey. After learning about the supportive brotherhood in the Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association (CVMA), they both joined for emotional support and the chance to give back to their community's Veterans. Without a motorcycle, not only does their membership end, but life as Kevin knows it dramatically changes. With little else he can physically do or hobbies he enjoys, riding is his thing. Unable to safely handle his bike and precious cargo, and without means to afford the stability of the three wheels he needs, Kevin faces the end of his riding days. The Mission of Hogs For Heroes is to provide or maintain the alternative therapy of motorcycling in an injured Wisconsin Veteran rider's life. Riding is clearly in Kevin's soul and, at age 61, we believe him too young to hang it up and still too in need of the wind therapy the road provides him.

As you read his story, Kevin, now our 29th Veteran Recipient, is likely out riding the 2014 Harley-Davidson Tri Glide we surprised him with on Sunday, July 24, 2022... immediately following the planned gifting of our 28th Harley to another CVMA Brother. Because we knew what Kevin needed, we could find the bike ahead of time. Working a second time with Southeast Sales in Milwaukee, WI, didn't disappoint— and they, loving what we do for our Veterans, drastically dropped that price to make this magic happen, brought it up from Milwaukee and rode that bike out in front of the unsuspecting crowd of mostly combat Veterans...to bring us all to tears. Hard to pull off...yes...but oh, so worth it to keep this struggling Hero on his hard, healing journey forward.