



Meet Our Sixth Recipient of 2022: #28 Navy Reservist Kevin Kuhn of Abrams, Wisconsin

Kevin Kuhn was raised in Suring, Wisconsin; and loving rural life and its community support, he chose to settle and raise his family in Abrams, not far from his hometown. The son of a preacher, he grew up with a strong faith and sense of responsibility. He played sports and the guitar and he sang in a classic-rock garage band with high school friends. Kevin also grew up with a reverence for the military: he fondly recalls uniformed service members in patriotic parades and knew from a very young age he would choose a future with the Armed Forces. Just a few years later as a 7th grader watching 9/11's attack on our nation, his resolve was solidified; and, it never wavered.

In 2006, Kevin was a Junior in high school when he enlisted; and wanting a different course than most, he signed with the Coast Guard. Graduation came and went— and the Coast Guard still didn't have an opening for him. Frustrated after more than a year of waiting, Kevin walked into the Navy's recruitment office in January, 2008, signed papers for the branch transition, and was off to boot camp less than one week later. He chose to become a Heavy Equipment Operator within the SeaBees; and wanting more of a home-life balance, he switched into the Naval Reserves after his individual training. With a friend's encouragement, Kevin took a rider's course and was hooked from the first moment. He bought his first bike with all the money he had, quickly traded up and rode until he blew the engine. Without a bike and less than six months after boot camp, his first deployment orders came perfectly timed and he eagerly shipped out to Kuwait, and then into Afghanistan for a 12 month tour.

At the time, the U.S. was just beginning efforts to withdraw from Iraq and equipment, supplies, and personnel were being moved into Kuwait while sequencing decisions were made. Kevin worked the front line unloading and moving materials in and out of transport vehicles while waiting for his assignment. Eventually orders moved his unit into Senjaray, Afghanistan, an isolated and desolate part of the country's southern region where they, the first full SeaBee Battalion in Afghanistan, were tasked with building a base out of nothing. By the time they left a year later, they had built Command Outpost Senjaray—complete with barracks and bathrooms, offices, kitchen and dining facilities, and relaxation offerings of a gym and theater for their Brothers and Sisters. While Army Infantry was on base providing security, the middle of nowhere still had its dangers and took its toll: both human and environmental. Snipers frequently took shots into camp, rockets landed randomly to remind its occupants they weren't wanted, and the locals repeatedly proved untrustworthy. Convoys to a near-by camp for building materials and goods were fraught with the unknown, and all of this left Kevin with a hypervigilance and mistrust that permeates his life today. Being a Heavy Equipment Operator and doing construction is hard on a body; and combined with the weight of protective gear, painful degenerative changes to his back began to develop. Sand exposure and burn pits ravaged his sinuses and caused migraine headaches that still affect him several days a month. But doing construction in the midst of a war and insurgents, as violence and death raged around you, is even harder on the mind— particularly when not acknowledged...because Kevin was "fine" compared to others, and he was just building a camp.

In mid 2010, Kevin returned home and, as a Reservist, dropped right back into his hometown without connection or support to resume civilian life as it was. He was 21 years old and bravely said he was fine; his actions and mind, however, quickly proved otherwise. He found himself angry and struggling to fit in. Mood swings complicated his efforts to socialize and he destroyed relationships, hurt people and found himself further isolated with few who understood him and what he'd been through. He drank excessively to soothe

the internal conflict he was dealing with; but the harder he tried to hide his struggles, the more he grew apathetic to life and those around him. And on top of the invisible wounds he and others couldn't see, Kevin was in physical pain, bearing through several days where he couldn't tie his shoes. Yet, he pushed forward as best he could: he worked different construction jobs, took college classes and looked forward to Reserve drills with his Navy family. But perhaps most impactful in advancing his life, he bought his first Harley, a Springer Softail, as soon as he got home. Riding was the one thing that truly eased the chaos in his mind. Eventually he upgraded to a 2007 Electra Glide, the bike he still has today, to give him the distance mileage he needed and the comfort his aching, young body demanded.

Despite the physical and psychological challenges war had cost him, Kevin desperately missed the structure and brotherhood his deployment provided. So in 2014 when he received orders for a second, one-year, deployment to Afghanistan, he found himself happy again and excited to leave his current reality for the lifestyle he took comfort in. This time he headed north to Bagram as part of a 10 man team where he was tasked with dismantling components of an undisclosed Base before turning it over to the Afghanistan Army we had been training. The work was laborious and strenuous: and Kevin's worsening back issues became the permanent degenerative disease he still lives with daily. After breaking his ankle on a job, he was placed in a walking boot and went back out the next day for it to heal poorly and affect him later in life. The "fire sand" and powdery "moon dust" soil that invaded the air retriggered Kevin's already damaged sinuses, and the burn pits further ravaged his upper respiratory system inflicting sleep apnea, chronic sinusitis and debilitating migraines for the rest of his years. Despite all this, Kevin was in his element and with his Brothers; and while there, he could push away the images and emotions of death, violence and destruction to stay focused. It was a strategy that worked well... until he returned home.

In 2015, after having lived through his running count of over 170 explosive events during his two, one-year combat deployments "just doing construction", Kevin returned home and desperately wanted to be "fine" this time around. Despite knowing otherwise, and now age 26, he thought moving forward to achieve life accomplishments would help him settle. He started dating shortly after returning, married his wife 6 months later and began building their family. He tried to return to school, but couldn't relate and subsequently couldn't finish. He worked multiple construction jobs to make ends meet and found himself struggling to feel fulfilled, let alone keep the physical pain at bay. Civilian life responsibilities were much harder to deal with and his anger and frustration grew. Perhaps most heartbreaking to Kevin, his mood swings would leave his family scared of him. He knew he was struggling; but not wanting to burden others with his issues, or risk military discharge for the stigma he feared, he bottled it all up and further strained his marriage. He and his wife eventually separated and Kevin found himself spiraling, depressed and struggling with suicide ideation.

Along the way Kevin found his local Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association (CVMA) Chapter, 45-3, and instantly gained the understanding and support he needed from Brothers and Sisters who'd been through similar experiences. With their encouragement, he began seeking VA treatment for the medical ailments that service left him with; and later, after learning his struggles were not unique, he sought mental health care for his depression. Under their umbrella, Kevin also found a renewed purpose in serving and supporting Veterans in his community and took on the role of Chapter Chaplain. He rode frequently, talked more within his trusted brotherhood and shared time with his new family for the healing and joy it provided him. Eventually finding himself in a better place, he and his wife reconciled and came out stronger for the adversity faced; but the debt accumulated during legal proceedings would add to their growing family's financial struggle.

In 2018 Kevin received orders for a third deployment, this time to Africa. As customary, he headed first to Virginia for preparations and while there, the different paperwork for his injuries came together and halted his processing. After further evaluating the injuries to both his back and ankle, and now depression, he was placed in a Medical Review Board and sent home. Even with all he'd been through, the rejection hurt and he felt the loss immediately and deeply. Again, Kevin turned to riding to calm his mind and find freedom, leaned on his CVMA family for support, and in the midst of career uncertainty, he strengthened his resolve to

continue serving by supporting other Veteran's needs. The Board's eventual decision found him medically ineligible and prevented his pending reenlistment. Kevin separated in March, 2021 after 13 years of service, clearly short of his retirement plan.

Girl-dad Kevin and his wife, Emily, have three daughters that fill their hearts and schedules; and all Kevin does and pushes through is for the sake of his family— whether blood or military. He works full time as an automotive parts manager with Bergstrom Subaru in Green Bay so that his wife may be home with his girls. He's pursuing an online degree in Business Administration, with an emphasis in Automotive Dealership Management, to enhance his career opportunities and he aims for graduation in 2023. Although he leads a worship group once a month in song, his only true hobby is CVMA...and without a functioning bike, he can't be a member.

Since buying it nine years ago, Kevin's 2007 H-D Electra Glide has had more repairs and work-arounds to stay running than he'd ever imagined. With parts now obsolete, he limits his miles and event participation to stretch the life of his bike... and every time he rides, it is in fear of that final breakdown and ugly consequences. Fulfilling his children's needs takes priority over anything else; and paying off his debt first speaks to his character. His efforts to save for a replacement remain several years out and he does not believe his bike will make it that long. Since learning to ride, Kevin's bike has repeatedly brought new life to him at critical points where he needed perspective and life-changing direction. Additionally, the relationships and purpose found in riding have inarguably saved Kevin's life, and enhanced that of others. While some might argue that Kevin does, in fact, have a bike—and even Kevin argues this point as he struggles with his worthiness...Hogs For Heroes felt that the soul of this rider needed more miles on a reliable tool, and the stability of his mental health needed the he support found behind the bars and with fellow riders.

Knowing his time with his bike was increasingly limited, Kevin had been looking at bikes for several months and calculating how he could make a new purchase work...but he just couldn't do it. He'd been into Vandervest Harley-Davidson in Green Bay no less than 4 times since May, specifically eyeing up the same 2018 H-D Ultra Limited in a beautiful charcoal gray and silver scheme. So when we surprised him with our selection news, the image of his dream bike was sitting in his mind...and, shockingly, still sitting on the showroom floor. This is now our fifth time purchasing a bike from Vandervest H-D, and they repeatedly knock our socks off with their amazing support of our Veterans and mission. The VVHD family made this unbelievable ride, barely broken in with only 1,500 miles, meet our budget and grow Kevin's heart three sizes that day.

Acknowledging the strength of the CVMA family and their impact in our Veteran community, we will be handing over Kevin's keys during their Regional Rally closing ceremonies. All are welcome! We will be hanging out on Sunday, July 24, 2022 from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. at the beautiful Brown County Veterans Memorial (next to Lambeau Field and the Resch Expo Center), and his Presentation of Keys Ceremony will start promptly at 11:00 a.m. Please join us as we honor all of our Veteran's contributions to our nation by supporting the healing of this one.