



Meet Recipient #36: Chad Caso, Army Veteran of New Glarus, Wisconsin

Chad Caso, of New Glarus, Wisconsin, had less than a storybook childhood. Although born in Madison, his parents had moved their young family to three different states and several cities fleeing eviction notices and domestic violence, forcing Chad into a new school every year. Chad was nine when his mother and siblings returned to Madison to start anew. Their family life remained hard—dotted with physical abuse and violence, drugs, poverty and homelessness; and as a result, Chad found himself in trouble with the law on more than one occasion. Early on Chad learned how to fight for his safety and rights, how to scrape and work for what he needed and, perhaps most important, how to never give up in the face of struggle. At age 16, Chad became a father. He dropped out of school, obtained his HSED and worked two and three jobs at a time to provide for himself and his son. He had little to his name, slept on couches and streets, and ran in troublesome circles until turning to the Army for the skill training and stability it would offer. Chad loved fiercely; and he believed the Army was his chance to make something of himself and show his mother he was earnest and good. In 2001, Chad signed his contract one month before 9/11 forever changed our world, and his...and it took every bit of courage the 18 year-old had to leave home that October on the brink of war. He knew war would be hard, frightening even; but he had no idea war would leave him disabled from the debilitating, invisible grip PTSD took on his life, and those he loves.

Thriving in the discipline and structure offered, Chad moved through boot camp achieving multiple promotions and graduated with honors. He was then stationed at Fort Benning in Georgia; and at 5'2" tall, was tapped for specialty training as an Abrams Tank Crewman where he mastered the roles of gunner, driver and munitions loader. With the gravity of war looming, he trained further for urban assault, hand to hand combat, and both medical and casualties management. In April, 2002 Chad's unit was sent to Kuwait for six months of desert training where they drilled in combat maneuvers, communications and area surveillance. He returned to base eager for planned vacation time with his son and family only to be denied and, instead, handed orders for combat in Iraq.

In January 2003, as a member of the Third Infantry Division, Charlie Company, 2nd Battalion, 69th Armor Regiment, Chad's unit returned to Kuwait for advanced preparations; and in March, was the first to cross the Iraq border to invade Baghdad in a tank. For the next six months Chad lived a life in war that, in his sister's words, "her brother never came home from". Every day their tank rolled into a new area gathering intel, engaging in firefights, taking out assailants, and clearing a path for the U.S. Forces following them. Chad's crew of four lived in their tank, slept on their tank and provided

for their security as our forces seized territory and overtook bases to establish footholds. Living conditions were extremely primitive and limited: not only were there no military bases yet, there was literally nothing in that desolate country that would support human life. The constant explosive violence of mortars and gunfire surrounding him, the gruesome sights he took in, and the way he lived left an indelible mark that would impact every aspect of his life; but it's the things he did in war that inflicted a deep moral injury he would spend the rest of his life dealing with.

“War, it was hard”... “constant mortar attacks”... “we had nothing out there”... “snipers”... “bodies everywhere, in burnt cars, rubble”... “rounding up people”... “couldn’t trust anyone or anything”... “I almost died from infection and dehydration”... “so many firefights”... “no water”... “my rifle taking lives”... “so much death”...

The painful, clipped memories streamed out of Chad in tearful conversation with us, as clear today as they were then. And while he's learned to share and release today, with limits, that wasn't the case then. After six months of brutal nonstop combat living, Chad was placed on a plane and sent back to Fort Benning to finish the last few months of his contract. Those same memories, emotions, and conflicts started infiltrating his young mind...and he denied it all in screening paperwork to appear strong amongst his soldiers and pushed it far away to do his job. Chad went on to complete two more simulated combat trainings stateside, and nearly missed one more combat deployment before separating from service.

In late 2004, with little separation processing support, Chad returned to Madison to be near his family. Reintegration proved harder than imagined and quickly posed challenges he couldn't easily grasp. War was still early on and few understood what he had just been through, let alone provide supportive resources. In response, Chad further buried as much as he could, fought the demons as they crept out, and did his best to provide for his son. He found work, but struggled to relate to others and moved through jobs, relationships and transient accommodations just to make ends meet. He felt desperate, unstable and alone. Longing for security and understanding, and recognizing the support his military structure once provided, Chad joined the Army Reserves in 2006, again hopeful for training and income.

While in the Reserves, Chad became a Surgical Technician and transferred to Brooke Army Medical Center at Fort Sam in Houston, Texas, where he assisted in both restorative and reconstructive surgical procedures. While he excelled academically, the weight of surgically attending to critically, combat-injured Brothers and Sisters grew increasingly onerous. Chad found himself emotionally and psychologically unprepared to see the damage inflicted from the other side of the battlefield he knew too well. Again, he did his best to tamp down his growing turmoil but during a particularly difficult and graphic surgery, Chad experienced his first traumatic flashback while in the operating room with a team who couldn't understand. Although he regrouped and fought to move forward, that single flashback opened the door for every other memory and pain to sneak back in and it slowly further eroded his life.

Fully aware of the traumatic, dark path he was on, Chad turned to the V. A. for counseling and medications and was eventually diagnosed with PTSD. He enrolled in different college classes, completed his Reserves contract and tried again to balance the duties of being a father with the trauma inflicted. Nightmares plagued his sleep and left him restless and irritable. The few relationships he had left were lost, as were college pathways and jobs, and he again fell into homelessness. Destitute and unable to find himself, he let not only his physical self falter, but that which he believed to be the core of his character as well. He grew more hopeless and angry. People and friends were unfamiliar and led to volatile interactions and, in turn, he learned to stay distant and isolate himself to avoid the trouble life brought. In 2012 as a young parent forced to make difficult choices, Chad found himself sitting in jail on illegal driving charges. While there he met a Dane County Veterans Service Officer with whom he shared his harrowing struggles; and it wasn't until this moment, six years after starting with the V.A., that Chad learned he was eligible for more assistance, including Veterans Disability Benefits.

Chad is a fighter who prides himself on his ability to fall and continuously get back up. Knowing he wanted a better life, he summoned the strength to pursue what he was entitled to; and with a V.A. Rating and Allowance, Chad now had a monthly income on which he could get back on his feet, secure a home and food, and care for his son. As he moved along his healing journey, he pursued every opportunity to learn how to improve his life, his physical and mental health and his tender heart. He eventually received a degree in Graphic Design. He began repairing damaged relationships with family, he found love and acceptance with his now wife, Tara, and he slowly re-engaged in society. Counseling remains an ongoing part of Chad's life, but expanding his family and finding purpose in serving others has given his heart more than he imagined. He notes his greatest life achievements as being a husband, father, stepfather and grandfather; and he smiles big when speaking of his brood. As an artist, he's shared his talent with others to enhance his community with beautiful murals and teach our youth. As the VFW Commander of Post 10549 in New Glarus, he's guided cohorts through similar struggles, growth and success. And while all of this has moved his personal healing over the years, it is the lack of wind therapy that currently nags at his soul.

Part of Chad's improvement plan after separating was to learn to ride a motorcycle. He bought his first bike cheaply to develop experience and clear his head, but quickly learned the passion that comes. Having bought older bikes, he learned to tinker and customize them and found that, too, comforted his soul. He and Tara spent hours riding and weathering personal storms, and he learned riding's priceless impact on relationships. Unfortunately, Chad's current bike was a lemon from the start and is now in gross disrepair. Unable to justify any more money fixing it, the Suzuki has sat, unable to run, for the past two years. Living paycheck to paycheck doesn't responsibly leave room for another motorcycle, and so the old one serves to visually remind him of one more thing he's lost. Chad has great love for others and shows this in his giving nature, but admits he struggles every single day to find love for himself given all he's been

through. In a life filled with adversity and hard hits, and after fighting to grow up, fighting for our Country, fighting for his family, and fighting for his own heart, mind, soul and life... Hogs For Heroes felt that Chad needed someone to fight for him. We believed regaining a motorcycle and the therapeutic benefits of riding would help Chad move further on his healing journey, and we selected him to be our next Veteran Recipient.

We surprised Chad with our news and very quickly came to understand this gentle man who wears his heart on his sleeve and owns his truth: the good, the bad and the ugly. After being turned loose to research and find his first Harley-Davidson, he nailed it at Harley-Davidson of Madison the very next day. A gorgeous 2020 H-D Street Glide Special, completely blacked out and loaded with upgrades, was patiently waiting, seemingly just for him, to grab his heart. Our own HDM family never disappoints— they stretched our dollar and then sent Chad out the door with an H-D bike cover and battery tender to best care for his new ride. Unique to Chad's bike, it has been fully paid for by the 2022 fundraising efforts of Sloppy Joe's Benefit Ride & Smoke on the Water's Hogs For Heroes Festival. This amazing group of owners, friends and sponsors not only threw one heck of a day last year, they raised enough for bragging rights this year—making this the second bike their team has sponsored! It is only fitting we bring this bike to their 2023 Festival and present it in front of the crowd that made it possible. Please join us on **Sunday, June 4 at 4:00 pm for Chad's Presentation of Keys Ceremony at Smoke on Water's Hogs For Heroes Festival in Lake Okauchee, WI.** You can ride with us all day...or you can show up for the music festival at the ride's end and catch nationally known talent Bobby Friss as he rocks the stage!