



Introducing Veteran Recipient #38: Marine Sergeant Joshua Hameister of Sun Prairie, WI

Joshua Hameister lives in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, but grew up on the north side of Madison. He was a bit of a “ham” who chose classroom antics over academic performance and focused instead on his love of sports. After years of Varsity football, baseball and wrestling, Josh headed to UW-Eau Claire to play football. In addition to sports, he’d grown up thinking about military service; and after 9/11’s attack on our Country his freshman year of college, his resolve grew stronger and he considered leaving school. His father, proud to have Josh be the first in their family to attend college, advised him to pursue his education first and Josh agreed. He stayed the course until, realizing the vast difference in academic demands, he found himself on repeated academic probation and then, a year later, dismissed from college. He returned home to sort through his next steps when a fight with his dad caused a headstrong Josh to leave and couch surf with partying friends. He knew he needed a directional change and he wanted to fight; then one day while driving, Josh took an unplanned turn into the Marine Recruiter’s parking lot. He walked in February, 2003, asked for Infantry and requested the fastest combat deployment he could get.

A medical delay slowed his departure, but Josh finally got to San Diego in October, 2003, easily navigated boot camp and was quickly promoted to Squad Leader. He transferred to Camp Pendleton’s School of Infantry and became an Anti-Tank Assaultman tasked with breaching, demolition, and rocket fire against fortified positions. Before graduating, a portion of his Company received orders for early deployment preparations. In May of 2004, Josh boarded a ship for his first West Pacific deployment, a Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) that was, by nature, rapid-deployment and crisis ready. The Navy’s USS Comstock was en route to Hawaii when they learned they would, instead, go to Kuwait and then Iraq, to perform route security. After two weeks acclimating to Kuwait’s desert climate and extreme July temperatures, they moved into Iraq, in the dark of night, for a six-month experience that neither his age nor his training could have prepared him for.

As operational support they stationed at FOB Hotel in Najaf, a base comprised of nothing but tents. From there, the Assaultman moved through arid terrain and volatile cities performing route and check point security. Although they were present to promote Iraqi independence, hostile interactions were a constant and violent exchanges were plentiful. They traveled in unarmored Humvees with sandbags on their flat floor beds to reduce IED impact; and once an area was secured, Josh conducted patrols, manned checkpoints and provided convoy security. In August, Josh’s mission changed and they engaged in prolonged firefights with area militia to secure and hold the world’s largest cemetery, built atop catacombs and encumbered by caverns and tunnels. In October they moved to Fallujah, a hub of resistance, in preparation for Operation Phantom Fury, a fiercely fought campaign to retake

the city. For the next two months Josh lived at Abu Ghraib prison, sleeping in cells and riding out to support battle operations and route security.

Joshua trained to be effective and focused, but he wasn't prepared for the daily, let alone cumulative, toll it would take on his life and affect him still twenty years later. The barrage of explosions and heavy machine gun fire permanently damaged Joshua's startle reflexes, created anxieties and caused hearing loss. Mortars, RPGs and grenades surrounded makeshift barracks, patrols and unprotected vehicles continually threatening their security and safety. Dust and debris, along with fumes from burn pits, decay and sewage assaulted him daily, only to later ravage his body and impart gastrointestinal issues today. Unknown assailants often mixed with civilians and children which ingrained fear and mistrust amongst those he tried to help as well as subdue. Insurgents became more aggressive with IEDs hiding them in roads and curbing, amongst trash, abandoned vehicles and dead animals; and their presence demanded fastidious attention that built a hypervigilance he carries to this day. Street fighting and mass destruction was fierce; and as both the injury and death toll grew, so did his anger. The terror, death and decay of war that continuously surrounded them overwhelmed Josh's brain with images he can't forget, actions he can't undo and smells that roil his stomach to this day...and it all fed an anxiety and depression he now battles daily. But while in war, it wasn't what he thought about; and amongst his Brotherhood, it wasn't what they talked about. After months of raw living and brutal combat, Joshua's MEU was sent back to Kuwait for a month out of the fray to await their return stateside...and he used this time to deeply bury all he had just experienced.

Back at Camp Pendleton Josh lived on the edge: he spent and lived freely, pursued cross-training for rank advancement and looked forward to his next deployment. Along the way he met a woman, fell quickly in love, and married nine days before departing on another six month MEU. In February, 2006 he boarded the USS Peleliu, a Navy ship headed directly to Kuwait for combat and again, mid-sail, learned of a route change that would, instead, take him to Hawaii and through the Western Pacific countries he missed the first time. Simultaneously disappointed and relieved, Josh grew anxious that another change in direction, and mission, could happen anytime. While he didn't let himself think about what he'd been through in war, he was certainly realizing he didn't want to go through it again.

The Sergeant returned stateside ready to start life with his new wife. He separated from service in 2007 and the couple returned to Madison, WI. Joshua left his military life and burdens behind, further pushed away demons threatening to expose themselves and focused on enjoying life in his twenties. He hung out with friends, played ball and worked a machinery job to pay the bills. And while it was fun for a while, the loss of responsibility and purpose began to cloud his mind, their lifestyle incurred debt and they found themselves in financial struggle. Contemplating his options, Joshua still wanted to serve and liked the idea of protecting others; and rather than reenlist, Josh, instead, chose to become a police officer. And all those PTSD demons that sat so deeply buried within Joshua...they, too, chose to patiently wait for their chance to make themselves known.

Josh graduated with high honors in Criminal Justice, attended Police Academy and in 2012 landed a job with the Sun Prairie Police Department. It was about this same time that they

expanded their family and welcomed his son, Jack. Josh initially loved his role in law enforcement: protecting and assisting his community gave him great purpose and pride. But as the years progressed, the stress of the job and family life began to take their toll and strains on his mental health began to appear. Things he had bottled up and ignored for years seeped into his mind and affected his character. He was on edge, struggling to interact and hiding anxieties and anger to shield others, particularly his family. Strangely, the conflicts and dangerous situations he experienced in war now similarly represented themselves in police work. Community approval was changing, violence was growing, public disrespect and disregard became more prevalent, and everyday civilians and exchanges proved more uncertain and volatile. He knew he was deviating from the kind of person and father he wanted to be; and after stubbornly denying the issues at hand, he made the decision to seek help from the V.A.

While the tide was turning for mental health support in law enforcement, it was with hesitation that Joshua sought treatment. He began counseling and guardedly explored the PTSD he had incurred in service. He received medical care for the physical struggles service had left him with and medications to manage his anger and anxiety. Through all of this, Josh realized that the pride he had in achieving the big job, big house, bigger paycheck—and the bills that came with it, were unfulfilling to him and further impacted his mental health. After ten years with the police force, the Sergeant learned that law enforcement was no longer the right fit for him and he resigned in 2022. PTSD has affected every aspect of Joshua's life; and while he's become more comfortable talking about his struggles, buried deep are "shitty experiences" he still can't talk about outside of his Cognitive Processing Therapy sessions. He's proud of the changes and efforts he's made to improve his mental health; however, they did not come without cost and Joshua lost his marriage in the fray of trying to find himself.

Again, wanting to serve others, Josh took a position within Wisconsin's Department of WorkForce Development, in the Office of Veteran Employment Services. As an Employment Specialist, he works with employers to match them with qualifying Veterans. While he finds joy in facilitating their livelihoods, he earns less than half his former salary, pays child support and lives on a tight budget. Josh shares custody of his son and looks forward to every chance he gets to spend time with Jack and his family. He still loves sports—baseball in particular, and fishing. His therapy dog, Fenix, is a young rescue mutt who Josh is training to help manage his anxiety, lift his depression and provide a social buffer. And while all of Josh's personal efforts have helped him move through difficult burdens and face his days, it was his motorcycle that helped him best release his demons and find understanding.

Josh grew up admiring his dad's love for motorcycles; and he knew it would only be a matter of time before he had his own. When he returned home from college dejected and unable to afford the Harley his father required, Josh bought a Suzuki "crotch rocket" against his parents' safety concerns. He rode frequently and wildly; and when he returned home from service to find it waiting in his garage, he rode it even more to transition and free his mind. Unfortunately financial troubles for the young married couple forced its sale to pay the bills; and it wouldn't be until ten years later that another bike would enter his life. On his 35th birthday, his then-wife gave him a Honda Fury to support his healing and peace of mind.

Joshua shared that he “was in a dark place at that time, struggling mightily, and that motorcycle saved my life”. He rode to “keep all the bad away and focused on being a better man, husband and father”. He joined the Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association (CVMA) 45-5 and found instantaneous support and understanding from the Brotherhood he regained. Unfortunately, when his divorce was finalized early this year, his bike had to be sold; and without a bike, Joshua lost his membership within the CVMA as well as his healing passion. Hogs For Heroes admired Josh’s efforts to find his healing path and the hard work it has required; and we believed regaining a motorcycle would help Josh stay on the delicate path he walks every day.

We met Josh at a dinner with his kind and supportive parents; and while he immediately knew who we were, it took a few minutes for his mind to grasp our unexpected news... and when it did, he hung his head in relief and tearfully thanked us. We shared stories of family and service, filled our time with laughter and tears, and learned more about the man who would become our 38th Recipient. This will be Joshua’s first Harley and when asked about his dream bike, he described a blacked-out Street Glide but noted he’d be “happy with anything just to get back out”. We sent him home to check out local dealerships...and the very next day, Josh found the very same dream bike he had long envisioned. Sitting on Milwaukee Harley-Davidson’s showroom floor was a 2021 black Street Glide Special, with just 1,700 miles, and we swooped in to purchase that sweet rid just in time to present it during the Harley-Davidson 120th Anniversary Celebration! **Joshua’s Presentation of Keys Ceremony will start at 12:00 pm on Saturday, July 15, 2023 on the mainstage at Milwaukee Harley-Davidson.** Admission to dealership events is free— so join us for the festivities and help welcome another Veteran rider back to the healing road.