



**Introducing Veteran Recipient #39:
Active Navy & Army Reservist, Sergeant John Olen II
of Appleton, Wisconsin**

For as long as John Olen II can remember, his grandfather encouraged him to join the military for the discipline and guidance it offered. John had other ideas about how to live his young life; and since school wasn't necessarily his thing, he graduated high school and floated between jobs looking for his own fit. In his early 20's, John was running with the wrong crowd and spending too much time in the bar; and, despite working three jobs, he was on a path to nowhere with nothing to show for it. His grandfather's words came back to him and John realized the military, specifically the Navy, could help redirect his life. In 2009 he left for boot camp at Naval Station Great Lakes and easily fell into the routine and structure. To get out of mopping one day, John went to a meeting to learn about membership in the U.S. Navy Ceremonial Guard. Interested in the option, he returned for the next several meetings and advanced through the selection process as the group was whittled down from hundreds to the chosen few. John made the cut and, along with two others, was sent to the Naval District Washington in Washington, D.C. where he joined a prestigious group of men, who fit specific physical characteristics, to honor both our Fallen and our Veterans, as well as their families, in the last capacity our nation can offer at Arlington National Cemetery.

Training was intense and focused on physical precision and showmanship, timing and personal discipline. The performance of sharp, repetitive routines and movements with flags and rifles occurred year-round and demanded a unique physical and psychological strength and stamina. Guardsmen drill to not feel or show emotion and to bear long periods of time without making a sound or unplanned movement. John repeatedly carried out these ceremonies up to three times a day and estimates that in his two year commitment he performed at least 750 funerals. Over time, the physical demands strained and tore down his upper muscles as he held flags in statuesque fashion, through winds and all weather conditions, while the miles he marched in military corfams tormented his lower body and feet. Clearing their minds in ceremony provided "time to think", and John found himself trapped in thoughts of his own mortality and laden with guilt as others fought and died while he was paid to perform. Every day he endured the anguish of parents, spouses, children, and his own Brotherhood; and it all slowly settled deep within to simultaneously tear down his mind. Without psychological support or debriefing during his two years, John turned to alcohol. He drowned his thoughts and soothed his pain nightly; and he surrounded himself with others who withstood the same proud, yet significant burdens.

August 6, 2011 was the deadliest day in Navy SEAL Team 6's history: a Chinook carrying 38 individuals, including 15 Navy SEALs, multiple Joint Services members and Afghan nationals, was shot down by an RPG in Afghanistan, killing all on board in a fiery explosion. On John's very last day in the U.S. Navy Ceremonial Guard, he was a casket bearer for one of his 13 Brothers laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery and folded the Sailor's last flags with crisp, stoic precision and care. He will never forget that sensation, that sound, that pain, those tears and that anger. In spite of the great honor John knew he was providing, he had spent two entire years focused on death, grief and tragedy. With every loss he memorialized, he built and buried layers of pain that would eventually leave him fully disabled with PTSD, depression and musculoskeletal strains. There is a reason a second term isn't allowed; and in weighing his next career options, John chose to support life by becoming a Corpsman.

In 2011, and just recently married, John left his then-wife behind and headed to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas for his medical training while she, a soldier, remained stationed in Kansas. Although he

excelled in this capacity, his unresolved mental and emotional struggles continued to erode his well-being; and seeking help wasn't an option for fear of ostracization or discharge. John pushed through the despair and was later stationed at the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard in Bremerton, Washington, working at a small medical clinic where he conducted physical exams, and attended to Shipyard injuries and illness on base. Struggling and lonely, it was there that he met a Brother who introduced him to riding and helped him get his first, and only, motorcycle: a 2005 Victory Vegas 8 Ball. He quickly fell in love with riding and immediately realized its benefits as he rode out his demons, released his stress and drank less. With the arrival of his first daughter, the pain of separation grew from afar; and with his contract coming to an end, John chose not to reenlist. He packed up his belongings, and his bike, and moved to Milwaukee, WI in 2014 to meet his wife and begin living life as a family.

Unfortunately the distance and short nature of their relationship had not made things easy and their marriage quickly strained under the stress of readjustment and financial struggles. John took several different classes and jobs exploring his interests and searching for a fit; and he cared for his daughter while his wife worked nights. Together they welcomed their second daughter in 2015 but, despite their efforts, their marriage continued to strain and they separated as divorce became inevitable. Looking for additional income and the chance to remain with his daughters, John joined the Army Reserves and specialized in Psychological Operations. Through life's ups and downs the past five years, John rode every chance he had, in every condition and temperature, and to the point of bald tires he couldn't afford to replace, simply to clear his mind and ease his pain. As proceedings grew uglier and costlier, his ex-wife had his motorcycle repossessed in 2017. Divorced and alone with his dark thoughts, John found himself buried in legal fees and fighting for time with his daughters...and without his bike to soothe his soul, he was fighting for his life.

Having been trained to not feel or express emotion, John was drowning in a sea of depression he couldn't speak about and others couldn't understand. His body's multiple strains and pains hampered work, activities he once enjoyed, and time with his children: all of which further impacted his mental health. He floated from class to class pursuing different professions to find a niche, and he moved job to job searching for fulfillment and acceptance, none of which came to him. Recognizing his spiraling struggles and lowest points of desperation, John bravely stepped forward for help and has since spent his last five years investing in his mental health. It's not been an easy road, but with medications and long hours with therapists, John has delved into his difficult past to learn how to "feel normal again", adopted new coping strategies and lessened the burdens he still carries.

In 2020 John met Katy, his now-wife, on a dating app; and despite her desire to not date another military man and his wish to not fall for a woman with children, the two hearts collided, combined their families and married in August 2022. With all the changes and delays that Covid inflicted on John's military path the last two years, he chose to again prioritize his family and separated in September, 2022 after 13 years in service. After saving and pooling their resources, the couple bought their first home for their combined family of five children, all under the age of 11. While their new, lively household is filled with love and laughter, there are still days, and hours, when dad can't be dad, where his darkness still seeps through, and his body aches from strains of yesterday. After months of looking for a job he could connect with, John recently took a position with the Outagamie County Sheriff's Department; and working as a Corrections Officer, he's found a good match for his Psychological Operations skills and a work environment similar to the structure enjoyed in the military. And although he's working hard to care for his own healing and provide for his large family, there is no room in a tight budget for a motorcycle and the wind therapy he once thrived on, let alone the Harley he couldn't let himself dream about.

Service to our Country takes many forms and all are key to the multiple demands of our military and its storied traditions and services. The honorable path John took, and its subsequent toll, is uniquely different from most and clearly a service, and sacrifice, to be both proud of and grateful for. Hogs For Heroes admired John's strength and determination to move through the hardest of times and believes his ongoing healing would be greatly enhanced by regaining wind therapy in his life. We took John by surprise, sharing

our news to a bewildered face that couldn't have been more shocked and an emotional response that couldn't have been more genuine or appreciative. As this would be his first Harley, we sent him home with an assignment: research models, test ride models and find the one that captures your heart...and he did just that at Open Road Harley-Davidson in Fond du Lac, WI. Pulling him in was a beautiful red, pre-owned Street Glide he'd seen on their website; and when he rode that iron beast he knew immediately she was "the one". John was completely thrilled with what he'd chosen...but in an awesome show of support for our mission, on shopping day the Open Road team offered us a brand new, 2023 Street Glide in Redline Red instead—and they made it fit within our budget! We couldn't have been more blown away by the generosity shown; and when he walked down the dealership's aisle to his favorite song, an overwhelmed John emotionally rang that bell with tears in his eyes. Progress.

Unique to John's bike, it has been fully sponsored by the fundraising efforts of Tavern League of Wisconsin members across the state. This is now the third Bike and Veteran pairing they've made possible since 2021, and we couldn't be more excited to bring it to a cool, biker-friendly joint near John's hometown to hand over his keys to freedom. Join us on **Saturday, August 19 at 5:00 pm at Damn Yankees Watering Hole in Hortonville, WI for his Presentation of Keys.** Come early to chat us up, meet prior Recipients and rock out to live music from Bobby Eveans Band from 4 pm to 8 pm. We'll take over the stage at 5:00 and would love to have you with us as we change another struggling Veteran's life with the healing power of The Road.