



**“My life has had many ups and downs but I’m still moving and refuse to give up.
When I’m down, there’s a saying that I like to use:
“Keep your head up and your chest out, because broken crayons still color.””**

**Meet Veteran Recipient #44
Army Veteran Justin Silkey of Greendale, WI**

Outside of his time in active duty, Army Specialist Justin Silkey has spent his entire life living and working in the Milwaukee, WI area, and he loves his big city. At just seven years old, Justin unexpectedly lost his father, leaving his strong, single mother and older brother to guide him through life. He was an altar boy, a bit of a “class clown” and he loved playing sports as a kid. But as soon as he turned 13, Justin shifted his focus toward work and enjoyed the paycheck and responsibility it provided. Military service wove its way through his family tree— his father was a Vietnam Veteran; and Justin grew up with a deep respect for service and in awe of his older brother who served. At age 21, after three years at a warehouse job he loved, and with his Country at war, Justin decided it was time he did his part in service. He drove to the Army Recruiter’s office and enlisted that day. That very same month Justin proudly headed to Boot Camp, never imagining the personal toll his call to duty would take.

In 2009 Justin was classified as a Fire Support Specialist and trained to communicate and plan fire support and target identification. He stationed at Fort Riley, KS; and in short order was told he would be deploying to Iraq for one year. His Battalion spent the next several months in combat training: sharpening skills and forging trust and brotherhood. He married his hometown girl before deploying, and after he left for Iraq in November 2010, she left for Milwaukee...with his belongings and credit cards. Justin landed in Baghdad, made Camp Liberty his primary base, then moved to different area Forward Operating Bases (FOB): Mumadiyah, Abu Ghraid and eventually JSS Muthan. The bases were U.S. claimed, and repurposed, abandoned buildings within the still volatile city of Baghdad, and typically lacking comfortable living conditions afforded larger bases. From those points, his platoon conducted numerous convoys, foot patrols and security assignments within the frontlines of the war they lived in. They moved methodically through city streets and buildings, often with an Apache helicopter for overhead surveillance and firepower, following up on hostile activity and leads. Local citizens were antagonistic and unwelcoming; and insurgents mixed amongst them as they pursued the enemy. As if his job wasn’t taxing enough, while in Baghdad Justin learned of his then-wife’s indiscretions and accumulated debt. With great effort he divorced her while in Iraq and re-enlisted for the chance to avoid home, rebuild his drained savings and debt, and attend Airborne school. As time wore on, attacks on their bases increased and time outside of the wire grew more dangerous and deadly—as did his anxiety, anger and developing PTSD.

Some dates will forever sear themselves in memory. On May 22, 2011 Justin was moved off his convoy assignment to fill a role on the base’s Quick Responsive Force (QRF) team. Two close Brothers took his place; and less than 20 minutes from base, their truck hit a buried IED that killed them both and injured a third. Justin, on QRF detail, was immediately dispatched to find his Brother’s heavily damaged truck engulfed in flames. It was a chaotic and gut-wrenching scene that would leave him with visions he can’t erase, smells that still linger and a deep, painful guilt that doesn’t ever leave. He should have been the one in that truck. Justin went through a week of leave and counseling on base and learned to push away every difficult memory and emotion that had been building in the last six months. Then he returned to the front lines to perform his job and complete his last six months in combat.

In April, 2012, four months after returning from Iraq, Justin left Kansas and his close-knit Battalion for Airborne training. Now in unfamiliar territory and terrified to jump, he questioned his rash choice of long ago; but he went for it and found the mid-air free fall to be completely relaxing. Having earned his wings, Justin proudly transferred to Fort Bragg, NC where he'd spend the next four years training and jumping with "the best of the best". Parachuting was tough on his body: gear and rough landings injured his back and damaged his legs. Continual exercise drills didn't help his conditions, yet he persevered through injury so as not to appear incapable amongst his peers and leadership. His shins would eventually require surgery after discharge, and their pain, along with his back injury, would affect him the rest of his life. Justin knew he was struggling mentally with all he'd been through; but in a culture that touted "show no weakness" he hid his anxiety and depression to appear strong. In 2014, while on leave back to Wisconsin, Justin met another woman; she moved with him to North Carolina and they married. While on a training mission less than a year later, Justin returned home to find her gone. In her wake would be a completely emptied home and another massive string of credit card debt in his name. The personal impact angered him and simultaneously crushed him, leaving him to, once again, rebuild after heartbreaking betrayal. Sleeplessness and physical pain began to interfere with his mind; and the emotional toll of this second episode, along with the PTSD he'd been pushing away, began seeping into his daily life. His Battalion had learned of an upcoming deployment to Afghanistan and knowing he could not physically manage it, in 2016 Justin transferred to spend his last year in Milwaukee's 157th National Guard.

Justin returned home to Milwaukee a completely different man than when he had left. He had accumulated horrific heartache and mistrust, a cache of memories and emotions he could no longer control, and massive debt that would follow him to this day. With nothing to his name, he moved in with his brother to sort through his hard transition. Justin grew anxious and aloof with the lack of structure in his life; and unsure how to move through it all, he gained weight and then felt even worse. He would try to go out with friends but struggled in crowds; and feeling hypervigilant and unsafe, he became more suspicious and reclusive. Flashbacks, nightmares and sleeplessness impacted him physically; and his exhausted character further strained under a growing anger. Every day became a struggle burdened by the physical and emotional pain he carried. Justin didn't recognize his deterioration as depression, but his close friends did...and in 2016 they gave him an ultimatum that made him seek care from the VA.

Justin had floated from job to job finding work in security services and corrections trying to rebuild financially. He lived with his brother for two years until he felt stable enough to live on his own. And after two years of counseling and medication support, surgery to his shins and physical therapy for his back, Justin finally found himself moving forward. Surrounded by the love and support of family and close friends, Justin was returning to himself. In 2018, he courageously sought a new purpose and fulfilled a lifelong dream by becoming a Police Officer with the Milwaukee Police Department. Justin was happy and excited in his new life and role. His mom felt like she finally had "her Justin back"; and he knew he never wanted to be his former self again. Justin began working out more, picked up extra shifts and, committed to continually improving his health, he sought another type of therapy: riding.

In 2019, Justin took the rider's class and bought his first bike to practice on: a Honda Grom 125cc. The 6'1" man was the clown car version on two wheels, and he practiced faithfully for 21 days, then bought a bigger bike, and then his next. He found immense release in the freedom riding provided and he quickly learned to tune out the world and settle his mind. In 2020 he met a group from Wisconsin's Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association (CVMA) at a Bike Night and Chapter 45-1 welcomed him in. Justin immediately found the brotherhood he's missed since service; and he felt safe, supported and understood. He's worked hard personally to move past his challenges and demons, but credits both riding and this group of Veterans with redirecting and saving his life many times these past few years, particularly in the wake of more heartache to come.

Some dates are inherently part of who we are, like our birthdays; and again, some dates, and even years, will forever mar one's timeline. In 2023, on Justin's birthday, a fellow MPD police officer, classmate and

close friend of Justin's, was killed in the line of duty. The traumatic and senseless death flooded his mind, broke his heart and took his mental health into a downward spin. He worked hard to regroup and rebuild throughout the year: he had leadership support, departmental counseling and he used his 2014 Kawasaki ZX10R to ride out his demons as much as he could. Unfortunately his back pain from injuries long ago is exacerbated by the riding position of his bike, limiting his time to ride. Despite working extra shifts every week to pay off his debt, Justin isn't in a financial position to purchase a different bike. He desperately needed wind therapy this past year: and so he rode, in pain, as much as he could. In fall he decided he would sell his bike in the spring of 2024 and hopefully trade for something older, upright and cheaper. The decision was ominous to say the least, but the clouds surrounding Justin's world darkened further when he lost another close friend and MPD officer in a car accident, December, 2023.

This winter has been hard on Justin: he's pushed through much to heal reopened wounds, all the while still serving his community. With the pending sale of his bike, he now faced the possibility of not riding this season and threatened progress he's gained. Law enforcement is a difficult and harried job, fraught with danger; and it, like the military, is a call answered by few to serve a vast majority. Justin loves helping others; in fact, he has been recognized for his courageous actions in service twice in the last six months and it strengthens his resolve. While he has an amazing support base, professionally and personally, there are many times when the physiological toll of his shifts and experiences only add to the burdens he already carries. His CVMA brotherhood has been a solid support, but without a bike he risks losing that family. Hogs For Heroes believed that keeping this Veteran and Police Officer on the road would not only impact Justin's life, and the good path he's forged for himself, it would benefit the Milwaukee community he loves and faithfully serves as well.

Justin lives a very modest life. Outside of work, he goes to the gym every morning to physically release his demons. And outside of riding and CVMA activities, he's a huge sports and video game enthusiast, and he enjoys fishing and learning guitar. He takes little for granted and is profusely appreciative of how, and what, he has rebuilt and the friends and family who surround him. To say Justin was shocked by our decision would be an understatement; he was humbled and grateful, and is probably still pinching himself right now in disbelief. When we asked him if he'd given any thought to what he might like for his first Harley-Davidson, he said with little hesitation: "a Street Glide, black on black, and I'd like to work with Suburban Motors Harley-Davidson as they've been good to CVMA". Check, check and check: the very next day Justin found his exact dream on their showroom floor: a 2022 Black Street Glide Special, barely broken in with only 3,200 miles. Suburban H-D, in Thiensville, WI, had just reduced its price to make it fit perfectly within budget.

This Harley has been fully sponsored by the fundraising efforts of Sloppy Joe's Ride and Smoke on The Water's Music Fest for Hogs For Heroes in June, 2023. The two sister-restaurants, and their amazing teams and customers, raised enough last year to make another Veteran & Bike pairing happen this year. In fact, this will be the third year in a row that they have accomplished that herculean feat! Please join us in honoring the gratitude we have for all Veterans by supporting the healing of this one. **Justin's Presentation of Keys Ceremony is Sunday, June 2, 2024 at 5:00 pm at Smoke on The Water in Lake Okauchee** following the benefit ride. The Flag Raising Recognition starts at 3:30, and the incredible Milwaukee Tool Shed Band will rock the stage from 4 pm - 8 pm. Come early to catch it all—plenty of food, drink and raffle fun will be on site to raise funds for us! Please note that there is a \$10 donation charge to get into the festival.

Make your day even more impactful and fun-filled by joining us in the morning at Sloppy Joe's in Hubertus, WI for a beautiful ride through Lake Country, ending at Smoke on The Water. Registration is \$25 per person and includes entry into the Festival. Check out this Facebook Event for more information: <https://hog4heroes24.eventbrite.com>