



## **SURPRISE! HE'S ALREADY OUT ON THE ROAD!**



### **Meet Veteran Recipient #52: Marine Sergeant David Lehrer of Appleton, WI**

Marine Dave Lehrer is a lifelong Wisconsinite who, after growing up in Neenah, returned to the Fox Valley upon separating from service. Self-described as a “trouble-maker” in his youth, Dave always had his eye on service after school, particularly to honor his Army Veteran grandfather. A smooth talking Marine Recruiter got to him first; and in a time of peace, Dave enlisted as a 17 year old high school junior. Then, like so many, he watched 9/11 events unfold on a classroom monitor; and in November, 2001 Dave was off to boot camp and training schools at a now uncertain time for our Country. He went first to Japan; and in 2003, as we prepared for war, Dave was called back to Camp Pendleton, CA, with orders to Iraq.

In January 2004, Dave landed in Fallujah with an engineer battalion as an advanced party to build base infrastructure. Living facilities were tents with makeshift porta-potties whose contents required on-site burning, with diesel fuel, along with all the other waste the base accumulated. It was simply a necessity, and Dave gave no thought to the asthma and other health issues the exposure to burn-pits would create for him years later. “I was a grunt” tasked with whatever was needed at the time— driving, foot patrol, building berms and barriers, ordnance clearance, equipment maintenance, convoy security, and enemy engagement. When Camp Fallujah was established within the city, Dave moved into an apartment complex overtaken for troop quarters. Insurgency ran deep providing near constant, perilous warfare throughout the area. On neighborhood patrol one day, Dave’s Platoon came under attack and returned fire, eliminating all perceived threats, regardless of their age. There was no room for second-guessing, but the traumatic decision and imagery would later haunt and affect his own fathering. Random shots and mortars on base weren’t unusual either. One early morning, coordinated gunfire put their outpost Water Pump Station under attack. Dave was pinned down and out of ammunition; and it was fire support from two Cobra attack helicopters that ended the deadly exchange and left him screaming for joy at their arrival. He buried fear and loss to stay focused, and every day grew more numb to it all. And then, with his deployment’s end in sight, Dave endured the “bloodbath” of Operation Phantom Fury that unfolded over six weeks as we fought to control Fallujah. With every firefight and every horrific experience, Dave drifted farther away from who he once was; and readily admits he came home a very different, angry person.

In January, 2005, Dave returned to California and after four days of liberty, resumed the daily grind of combat training. No support was offered for what they’d been thorough. No counseling. No resources. No acknowledgement. In fact, at the time “talk” was considered weakness...and weakness was not tolerated. So Dave again swallowed his struggles and went harder at life to forget all he’d seen and done. Shortly upon returning, he met a young woman and married two weeks later. After realizing he now needed to support a family, Dave re-enlisted another four years for stable income. One year after coming home, the Marine deployed back to Iraq.

In January 2006, Dave landed in an embattled Fallujah for another year’s tour. And while he found himself doing all the same tasks and engaging in similar warfare, the rules of engagement were stricter now as our presence was intended to win the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people. The area, however, and its people, were still just as volatile, angry and dangerous. Mistrust was not only rampant amongst both sides, it was necessary and it was deadly. After having just been there to literally destroy the enemy, acting as a peacemaker, while surrounded by warfare, further agitated Dave’s anger and resentment. He completed

his year, anxious to leave it all behind him, and returned stateside to live anew. Little did Dave know he'd not seen the end of war: it would move to the home front and he'd fight personal battles the rest of his life.

The years 2004-2007 were considered the most dangerous of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) with 2006 particularly difficult; and Dave was there for two of those three. All Marines are trained Riflemen and all Marines are trained to fight, regardless of their position. Dave's job, or MOS, as a Marine was Refrigeration Technician.

Again, no support was offered upon return and base life resumed as usual. Talk alluded to another deployment, but somehow Dave and his expectant wife were instead sent to Japan for three years. The quiet "down time" of Japan wreaked havoc on Dave's unsettled mind, and he again found himself without support or resources post-deployment. To numb the demons, flashbacks and anguish, Dave began drinking excessively. He grew angrier, short-tempered and emotionally labile and it affected his position, damaged friendships and further strained his young marriage. His Command sent him to AA on base; and when Dave talked to the counselor, word got out and ostracized him for being weak and unable to handle combat. At the time, Dave was the only one in his unit to have actually been in combat. In response, Dave quickly learned not to talk, not to get close, not to trust, not to let others in, and not to care about himself.

As his contract wound down, they returned to Camp Pendleton with a young daughter in tow and in 2010, Dave began outprocessing without transitional direction or resources. He came back to Wisconsin to find a family home, only to later learn his wife would not be joining him and divorce was imminent. Dave spiraled in a sea of depression, erratic behavior and isolating anger. Not caring what happened to him, he again drank excessively and contemplated suicide. His mother intervened and secured two months of intense inpatient admission for his yet undiagnosed PTSD.

With support, and great courage, Dave learned to slowly transition and manage his depression. He found employment within a local HVAC company and met a woman who would become his second wife. Life seemed to be moving forward, until 2022 when his unrelenting demons again took control. Dave lost his job, his marriage crumbled and, feeling nothing but anger and despair, he attempted suicide. Twice. It was after that, in addition to more counseling, that a friend loaned Dave a motorcycle for the summer to help his healing. And it was that specific, generous offer that returned hope and joy, got Dave out of his house, and helped establish relationships. But when that summer ended, and Dave couldn't responsibly afford a bike of his own, the dark, oppressive clouds returned.

Dave had grown up around bikes, rode with others, and vowed to someday have his own. It wasn't until 2007 when he could get his first, and then another, and riding ignited a spark within. Life after discharge didn't leave room for another purchase, nor did he find himself caring much about what happened to him. Hogs For Heroes cared about what happened to him. We admired Dave's bravery in stepping forward for help and in owning his life story, as traumatic and difficult as it has been. Our Advisory Board decided to support, and redirect, this struggling, at-risk Veteran's life by returning a different kind of therapy...our kind.

H4H Recipient #9, Jason Sokel, is one of Dave's friends who, for two years, encouraged him to apply after seeing firsthand how his summer riding positively affected his growth. It only made sense we involved Jason in our plan to surprise Dave with news of our selection. Amongst a patriotic and supportive crowd at the 2025 Northeastern Motorcycle Show in Manitowoc, an unsuspecting Dave hung out in the audience, quiet and uncomfortable, to support his friend attending our Presentation of Keys Ceremony for #51. We no sooner had H4H51, Andy Hanscom, rev his bike for the crowd when we held up a set of plastic keys, teased the audience with our news, and pulled an overwhelmed and emotional Applicant Dave Lehrer out of the audience to tell him he was Recipient #52. His response was genuine and heart-warming; and our crowd, still tearful from the first gifting, cheered and cried some more alongside us.

Sharing Veterans personal stories publicly is harder than one can imagine, yet liberating, supportive and educational. We told the crowd of Dave's story, much of what you've now read, and with Dave completely unprepared for the moment and public disclosure. We watched him handle it all with strength and humility. We watched him gratefully open himself up to the many hugs and handshakes that followed. We watched Dave smile and physically shake in disbelief, and we watched him proudly integrate into his new H4H Family. Without doubt, Dave is perhaps one of the most raw and vulnerable we've had the honor of supporting...and we can't wait to watch Dave grow with our healing gift and the many benefits riding offers.

Dave now needed to find his bike and went to his local dealership, Appleton Harley-Davidson, to first determine the model that best fit him. He had no idea that his salesman was Josh, the dealership's owner, nor did Dave know that Josh had already seen the video of his surprise introduction. Once Dave's heart settled on the H-D Low Rider ST in Billiard Gray, Josh made that brand new bike fit our budget and absolutely helped change this man's life. Dave officially got back on The Road, with his own bike, on May 1, 2025... and we're not sure he's stopped riding yet. Ride free, ride safe, Brother —