



Introducing our 56th Veteran Recipient: Naval Petty Officer First Class Johnathan Oppermann of Waupun, Wisconsin

Life has a way of making its mark on us. Johnathan Oppermann was born and raised in a close-knit family in Waupun, Wisconsin; and it has been his family that has shaped his values and supported his position in life. He grew up playing outdoors; and to this day, still loves hunting, fishing and gardening. Enthralled with the Dukes of Hazzard, he has a therapy dog named Duke, once owned a '76 orange Nova as a close runner-up to the General Lee, and a daughter named Daisy Mae. He watched loops of Gilligan's Island as a kid with his sister; and not only can he still sing the entire theme song, he spent over nine years working and living on ships, albeit a different kind of cruise. Johnathan helped his dad polish his bikes while dreaming of his own: and on his 13th birthday, he got a dirt bike. He spent hours exploring the countryside and learning how two wheels could free his bullied mind. When he turned 16, he took the motorcycle safety course, along with his mom; and the successful pair then shared a Honda 250 for practice. It didn't take Johnathan long to fine tune his skill and, over hundreds of miles, grow his passion and plans for his first Harley. In school, academics weren't his thing, but shop classes were: so he turned his love of country, and desire to defend, into a position as a diesel engine mechanic within the U.S. Navy.

In 2013, after graduating high school, Johnathan headed to Joint Expeditionary Base in Little Creek, Virginia where he was assigned to the USS Tortuga, a Landing Ship Dock (LSD) vessel. On the low salary of an Engineman Recruit, there was no chance for a bike just yet; and so he continued saving for the right time. When he'd left home, he had been dating a woman and, over the months away, fell in love. In 2014, when they became pregnant, the two married in a joint ceremony with his sister while on a two-week leave. The young couple settled in Virginia and welcomed their daughter, Daisy, five months later. Life was stressful for the new family with long work hours, new roles and little sleep, but they made it work and were happy. Being a new parent on a single family income further pushed back his bike plans, but the joy he felt for his daughter made the wait worth it.

Jonathan spent most of his days working on the docked ship before heading home. Only when the ship was "underway", meaning out to sea for training, missions and ship testing, would he be away from home. He quickly advanced in expertise, rank and pay; and after years of saving, purchased his first Harley, followed shortly by the couple's first home. With a go big or go home mentality, Johnathan bought a 2008 H-D Ultra Electra Glide Peace Officer Edition. It was cheap, comfortable and even cooler after he drilled out the stock pipes. He rode as much as he could: between base and home, on weekend rides with friends and anytime he needed to clear his head.

In 2017, Johnathan was emergently deployed on a humanitarian mission to Puerto Rico after Hurricane Irma had devastated the island; and, on an LSD, rode through the one-two punch of Hurricane Maria to get there. The LSD has a well deck that carries and launches amphibious vessels through a flooding and deballasting process on ship. For three months Johnathan ferried Marines and Navy SeaBees, along with their vehicles and supplies, from ship to shore on the Landing Craft Utility (LCU), stored within the LSD's well, to clear wreckage and rebuild towns. Upon his brief return stateside, and after almost two years of riding his Harley, Johnathan was rolling into work one early morning when he became the victim of a hit-and-run accident. Outside of bruises and scrapes, a destroyed uniform and a cracked helmet, he was otherwise alright...his bike, on the other hand, was not. A cracked frame would total his first love and leave him with an insurance check to find another. Since his scheduled combat deployment was less than two months away, he thought there was no point in getting his replacement until he returned.

Although an LSD is equipped with gun turrets and limited air missile defense, their deployment in combat supports the critical conveyance of personnel, amphibious crafts and assault vehicles, equipment and supplies for the tactical operations of others. When Marines say, "Thanks for the ride, Navy..."this is what they mean. In February 2018, Johnathan deployed on the USS Oak Hill, specifically as the Chief Engineer on the LCU 1656 carried within the well deck of the LSD. They first headed to Romania carrying Marines that the LCU would take to shore for special operations. He sailed to Georgia to train local forces, moved through the congested Suez Canal and landed in Djibouti, Africa to deliver more Marines and equipment for covert operations. While in Somalia, they focused on pirate activity and Marine beach assaults. Armed with his M16, Johnathan, who was additionally trained as a grenade launcher, stood with the crew on high alert at the ship's rail for nefarious activity that never happened. Their ship

pulled into Saudi Arabia for a day to defiantly show they could, spent a week in Jordan's port, and stopped at several more European allied countries before returning home. After a long and stressful six months at sea, with a few cherished phone calls home, and one still-saved video of his daughter singing to him, Johnathan had earned his Navy Sea Service Deployment Ribbon.

The Sailor had barely regained his land legs when he unexpectedly received orders to move his family cross-country to Point Loma, California, in six weeks time. His marriage, already tense from his time away and the readjustment a return requires, further strained with the frenzied move. Leaving his home, military base, assignment and the brothers he'd closely worked with for five years caused Johnathan great angst. Realizing his modest insurance check wouldn't likely cover a California-priced bike further broke his heart. It wasn't until the family arrived in California that life took an even more difficult turn. The Navy didn't secure a house as he'd been told; and with no place to go but a hotel, friends allowed the family of three to stay in one of their bedrooms for the month. Living arrangements were tight and stressful; and once in their own place, tensions further built and betrayal made the couple temporarily separate. As much as Johnathan longed for a bike to ease his heart and mind, finances were now tighter than ever. And when the couple decided to come together again in 2019, he regained hope that a better future lay ahead.

Johnathan worked and studied hard to advance and earn his Naval titles and responsibilities. In 2020, while Craftmaster on board the Torpedo Weapon Recovery Devil Ray (TWR-6), the Commanding Officer directed Johnathan's crew to manually move a life raft capsule to the deck below rather than follow protocol and use the crane. After hand rigging lines, they lowered the 400 lb. capsule as Johnathan stood below guiding its movement; and when the lines let loose, he was trapped underneath. Pinned and fearful of its explosive release on impact, he physically braced the raft against the bulkhead until help could arrive. He had heard and felt a pop in his lower back with immediate pain; and by the next day, he was unable to get out of his recliner. At the hospital, the 26 year-old learned he'd herniated three discs in his lower lumbar region, significantly strained his neck and damaged his right shoulder and wrist in the incident. He had two back surgeries within six months of his life-changing injury, including a vertebral fusion with screws and rods—neither of which dramatically improved his situation. His five pain-filled years since have been burdened by physical limitations and sleepless nights, epidurals, TENS units, and pain management classes for his injuries and resulting degenerative disc disease and radiculopathy to both legs.

To continue working, Johnathan transitioned into the Fleet Area Control and Surveillance Facility in Coronado, San Diego, CA; and his debilitating injury moved him into a Medical Review Board. Both experiences pulled him further away from the ship life he loved and the engine mechanics he excelled at. His physical limitations and constant pain made it hard to even play with his daughter; and the years of struggles and losses all combined to send him into a deep depression. As his marriage crumbled irreparably, Johnathan restarted divorce proceedings in 2021. He hoped for a break to go his way and longed for a motorcycle to clear his mind. Realizing neither of which were going to happen, he sought mental health counseling to help focus on his daughter's needs and his own well being as they moved through heartache. In September, 2022, after "nine years, six months and 21 days" of service in a tight military family, Jonathan was medically retired...one day before his divorce was finalized. The Petty Officer First Class and technical expert lost his world, his job, his career path and retirement plan, his Brotherhood and his wife... all at once. The one bright spot he didn't lose: his daughter.

After fighting for Daisy, Johnathan's ex-wife gave up parental rights in the divorce and he happily assumed 100% placement, without child support. Family is very important to Johnathan: and the two moved back to his hometown for the love and supportive influence of theirs. His eyes light up when speaking of his girl; and her needs always take precedence over his. He's a proud and involved dad who spoils her with Pizza Ranch outings, fills her adventurous heart with kid's lawn mower racing, and makes sure she is building good grades and friendships at school. And he insisted Daisy's love of gymnastics and softball make the list of activities she has excelled at with her hard work (and his supportive guidance).

Despite his constant pain, and the depressive weight it carries, Johnathan pushes himself to continue living life and doing whatever it takes to provide for the two of them, including side jobs to help save for their first home. His injuries and struggles have required several doctor's appointments these last years, which has made finding a job difficult. Even harder, and despite his desire to work, his on-ship diesel engine experience doesn't seem to translate in the civilian job market. While Johnathan has joined his local VFW for camaraderie and understanding, some days are still harder to deal with, particularly when others don't seem to understand him. When his depression pulls harder at him, he chooses a treasured spot in his garden or the woods to sit and think it through...but no spot makes it easier when he sees his friend group out on their bikes and doing motorcycle things that he can not. His riding dreams of not

so long ago, and the joy-filled freedom he once had, pushed back for service and family and now financially out of reach, only compounds his emotional pain on those harder days.

Not all of our Veteran Recipient's lives are filled with action-packed heroics. Their stories, however, are all filled with dedicated service, a passion for riding and, unfortunately, life-changing injuries sustained while doing their job—for us. Hogs For Heroes exists to redirect struggling lives by reconnecting a passion that heals. Two years ago Johnathan's parents gave him the Hogs For Heroes application and told him to look into it. He certainly doesn't believe he's a hero; and so, our organization's name turned him off. Last year, he didn't want a handout: he was just doing his job when he was hurt. This year, when his parents again suggested the opportunity, he thought differently. For the first time he really thought about what getting back on the road might do for his mental health, what it might do for his socialization efforts, and what it might do for his father-daughter time...and he decided to apply for his chance to regain wind therapy. Our Advisory Board understood his hesitancy and need, admired his vulnerability and responsibility, and saw our opportunity to help get this young man on a better path for himself. When we shared our news with him, as giant, sweet tears rolled down his cheeks, he thanked us for seeing him.

Johnathan's heart was firmly focused on finding a Street Glide. After days of searching he found his dream bike sitting just an hour away at Suburban Harley-Davidson, in Thiensville: a 2024 Street Glide Special, in Whiskey Fire, with only 900 miles on it. Unique to his bike, it has been fully sponsored by the 2024 fundraising efforts of Wisconsin's International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE) Local 139. It is the first of three Harleys to roll out this summer, with their compliments, after they handed us \$75,000 last year. **Johnathan's Presentation of Keys Ceremony will be on Saturday, June 28, 2025, at 4:30 pm at Summit Ridge Bar & Grill in Wonewoc, WI**, following the Operating Engineers Poker Run for Hogs For Heroes.

Add more fun to your day by joining us on the Poker Run! Trust us, folks, this is one well-done, public benefit ride (and they welcome UTV's on a separate route!). Registration is at Summit Ridge at 0900 and we head out at 1030. Join the fundraising fun and help us return one more injured Wisconsin Veteran Rider back to the healing road!