



## **Meet Army Veteran and Recipient #57: First Lieutenant Dan Rigney of Mosinee, Wisconsin**

Dan Rigney was born and raised in Minnesota; and after his parents divorced, he lived with his father and bounced between his grandmother and aunt for care. Home life was tough for Dan; and frequent time spent in detention didn't help his rebellious, lazy reputation. Although he didn't care for academics, Dan did well without effort or concern. When an Army National Guard Recruiter provided the chance to get out of class his junior year, Dan chose the escape and, after listening, decided it might be good for him. He graduated in 1991, moved through boot camp and specialization training to become a Cannon Crewmember. Although the Private made his obligatory drill weekends and annual training, it was, admittedly, a lackluster approach. Per his own words, he "wasn't much of a soldier"; and to prove his point, over the next 13 years he remained in the same job, with the same unit, and with only three rank advancements—far below the norm.

While enlisted in the National Guard, Dan worked first as a construction drywaller, then moved onto Kraft's assembly line for the benefits offered. He worked nights to avoid the eyes of administration, though eventually gravitated toward shift management himself. Along the way he married, had a daughter and took an interest in computers. He enrolled in technical college for a degree in information technology, began working at Kraft's IT Help Desk, and quickly developed an expertise and proficiency in both problem solving and project management. In 2001, Dan transferred to Kraft in Wausau, WI for an IT position, and there began the next 25 years of his career path, over half of which was done while still meeting his basic National Guard obligations and then some.

On September 11, 2001, not only did our world as we know it change, the devastating shock and emotions got Dan thinking about what it meant to be a soldier. In 2003 he was mobilized to England for nine months to relieve Base security forces; and it was this time in service that he finally felt like, and understood what it meant to be, a soldier... and he wanted more. After years of complaining about leadership, a friend challenged Dan to "do something about it and become an Officer". And so, in 2006, at age 33, and after 16 years of enlisted service, Dan applied and was accepted into Army's Officer Candidate School (OCS).

Approximately 1% of our nation's population joins the military; and of those who do, only 1% become Officers. With OCS complete, and having just remarried, the Second Lieutenant wasn't sure he wanted to take his commission or where he wanted to go. He deliberated options until 2008 when a position within Wisconsin's Prairie Du Chien 229th Engineer Company opened up; and for the chance to be a "kid in the sandbox with full-size Tonka trucks", Dan eagerly accepted the First Lieutenant commission. Under his leadership, the 229th not only drilled for responsive action, they built roads, culverts and shelters for areas in need. And when the Dells' Lake Delton burst in 2008, it was his Unit that went in with heavy equipment to reinforce banks, move debris and pull trees from flooded waters. In 2009, Dan attended Engineer Officer's technical training; and just months after completing the program, the Officer was involuntarily deployed to Iraq to fill a leadership vacancy for another Unit, with three weeks notice.

In early 2010 Dan was first sent to Kuwait to plan for personnel and resources; and in March, on his 20th anniversary within the Guard, he arrived in Iraq amidst a mortar attack, and where he would move between Iraq's Joint Base Balad and Camp Taji. He was assigned Combat Patrol Leader for a mismatched platoon of engineers and cooks, and a group who, although all trained as Infantrymen, had never trained together. During their time they provided transportation security, patrol duties and later trained Iraqi Army members on engineer operations—none of which was easy or safe. Dan saw it as his job to take care of his people: keep them all alive and hold them accountable for the roles, procedures and detail assigned. It was a good group of people but a nerve-wracking responsibility: and amongst the many threats of the time, he'd lost two from his Unit to Explosive Formed Projectiles (EFP). The weight of it all quickly combined to affect his mental health. Dan was known as the Lieutenant who'd hang with his Enlisted, help dig the ditch with them, find solutions and resources for the job at hand...and when needed, share in the traumatic retrieval of those killed in action and disposition of their personal possessions. The hard memories and emotions earned still trigger his mind and affect him to this day.

Halfway through his time in Iraq, Dan learned his organic unit, the 229th back home, would be deploying to Afghanistan for a year...and he wanted to join them. He immediately blocked out the personal turmoil and memories he'd accumulated and volunteered to deploy as Company Executive Officer (XO) in another, different war, while continuing his efforts in Iraq. Dan returned stateside in 2011 and, in order to focus, further pushed away the demons he accrued. Although he resumed his civilian life and job, Dan never really left his war mindset as he began preparations for Afghanistan. In August, 2012 the First Lieutenant left his family and job again, with little insight on how much his first deployment had affected him...and eager to face another.

Dan, along with the 229th Engineer Company, landed at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Pasab, in Afghanistan's Kandahar Province to build combat trails for Infantry access into areas known for high insurgency. The Unit rolled through the deadly terrain laden with landmines and IEDs to do so; and when they could, performed the field breaching they were trained to do. They lost four from his sister unit and had several injured by IED's; the toll of which still haunts him daily. While there the Engineers also built, enhanced and tore down various Bases and additionally trained members of the Afghan Army Engineers on engineer operations. When needed, Dan ran several missions to urgently move equipment, gather supplies and repair damage. When a horrific incident threatened to leave behind those killed in action, his Unit was part of the recovery mission that searched and leveled the area to recover the Soldier and clear out the enemy presence. His Company earned an Army Meritorious Unit Commendation for their performance. And Dan's own determination to do what was right, bring everyone home, and carry out thoughtful, planned and supported missions earned him a Bronze Star...along with an unhealthy dose of anger for the barriers, frustrations and hypocrisy he'd encountered. His year complete, Dan returned to Wausau in 2013 to again jump right back into his civilian and professional world, with little transitional support, and a self-imposed mask to hide all he was feeling.

Dan wasn't a fan of being called "Sir", nor the salute that came with it, though understands the decorum. He laughs when he says he wasn't a fan of Officers before his commission and, after his deployments as one himself, had come to realize how destructively the bad ones stood out from the many good. He describes his OCS experience and positions that followed as his "best worst life decision". Dan was proud of all he accomplished and, more importantly, of all he was able to both provide for and shield his fellow soldiers from, but he had had enough of "politics and bullshit". After eight months of more domestic power plays, Dan retired from the Army National Guard in 2014, after reaching 24 years in service, and as an angry, depressed man about to enter the darkest time of his life.

In the year that followed Dan did little to address his struggle, except drink excessively to numb his pain and frustration. He held his mask in place outside the home, but soon enough began experiencing work challenges as struggles affected his performance. He recalls endless alcohol induced evenings, acerbic arguments in a deteriorating marriage and walls punched searching for release. As despair built, so did his desire to end it all; and on two different occasions, his wife found him with a loaded gun poised to take his life. It was that point in which Dan finally realized his rock bottom, walked into the area's Vet Center and asked for help.

Dan began the long haul of working with the VA to obtain individual counseling, group therapy and medications for his depression. He removed guns from his home and to this day, keeps them far out of reach. He divorced for a second time, lost familial connections and endured strained relationships with others. He learned first hand the importance of involvement; and Dan began volunteering within local Veteran organizations for the friendships made, the support and understanding offered, and the purpose he found in serving others. And as he did all this, he came to realize the true healing his lifelong passion for riding afforded him.

Motorcycling has woven a long thread throughout Dan's life; and like many, his first introduction came from riding dirt bikes as a young teenager. He officially got his endorsement at age 20, and with bikes in between, bought his first Harley in 2004. As a gift to himself after completing OCS, he bought a brand new 2007 H-D Night Train. He spent his second honeymoon on it and the next 10 years customizing it, only to sell it in 2023 to pay off the credit card debt he'd acquired. His mental health took another significant hit and put him in a slow-moving downward spiral. Dan is smart enough to know what he is supposed to do, but burdened enough by his invisible wounds to be incapable at times. And now, after still losing over half of his pay in marital support, and a slew of poor decisions and behaviors causing him to lose his job, along with everything he'd worked for throughout the years, Dan hasn't been in a financial position to buy another.

In 2024, Veteran friends stepped in and began borrowing Dan a bike to ride. It was this generous extension of support that helped Dan find a new path through the darkness. He rode to find strength, clear his head and reclaim a brotherhood he'd been missing. He rode to find himself and to help others through their battles; but what he rode

belonged to someone else. Hogs For Heroes felt it was time that Dan got his own bike: a tool that would allow him to join a Veteran riders group and continue on a path that supports his healing as well as those his efforts impact.

Dan filled out our application this March, quietly surrounded by friends for support as he wrote out a long, pain-filled history. When we shared our news with him, an overwhelmed and grateful Dan had his close friend at his side and a restaurant filled with others who approached him with the love and admiration he has earned. Dan knew what he wanted and began searching for a Road Glide that night. By the next morning he had a route that included stops at four different dealerships, finding his love at his final stop, Suburban Motors Harley-Davidson in Thiensville, WI. Not only was this black, 2023 Road Glide Special what he'd hoped for, his dream bike was within our budget. And when we arrived to purchase the beauty, our SMHD friends dropped the price even more to let us leave a little something in the tank for the next Veteran.

In a beautiful twist of fate for this First Lieutenant Engineer, his bike has been fully paid for by the 2024 fundraising efforts of Wisconsin's Operating Engineers Local 139. It is the second of three motorcycles to roll out this summer with their full compliments, and from a group who can truly appreciate the work this Engineer did in service. Dan's Presentation of Keys Ceremony will be on Saturday, June 28, 2025 at 4:30 pm at Summit Ridge in Wonewoc, WI, following the Local 139's public Benefit Poker Run for us. Dan will receive his bike, along with Recipient #56, in a double gifting!

Have the day free? Join us as we raise funds to return more injured Wisconsin Veteran riders back to the road for the alternative healing found in riding. This is a well-planned ride with incredible swag, raffle items, and cash prizes for top hands. They offer two separate routes for motorcycles and UTVs...and all come back together at the end to share in the gratitude and support we have for all Veterans by supporting these two.