



Veteran Recipient #55

On several instances throughout his application, Marine Dave Tellefsen of Fond du Lac, WI, tried “talking” our Advisory Board out of selecting him. He noted others to be more deserving, hoped we’d choose someone else who really needed it, and shared he only filled out the application as a favor to someone trying to help him. Heck, at one point he told us he wasn’t even sure getting a motorcycle back in his life would help his deep depression. But then, we read between the lines of his emotional, scarred release...and we believed differently.

Dave is a humble man who believes in helping everyone else first, himself last. For as much as he has served our military community, Dave still harbors years of guilt and anger for not doing enough in service, not fighting enough in wars, not keeping enough safe from harm, not being enough for those he loves, and for not keeping enough alive—either in combat or from suicide. Our answer was he did, he is, and he does.

In Dave’s application we also learned of compassion and selflessness; and equally, desperation for personal release. We heard longing as he searched for a part of his past to reconnect with and a part of a future he is distressed to hold onto. We felt his pain: not just the many physical ailments he’d accumulated through service, but the deep emotional agony he endures alongside the PTSD demons that haunt him. And when we met him...it was all he could do “to not cry or throw up” with our surreal news. And when we talked of our decision... he shared it was at first being denied selection from us that he realized just how much he’d hoped for, and needed, our support. And when we talked of his struggles...we heard gratitude for the unexpected life validation our decision provided him. And when he spent an afternoon test riding bikes and told us, “I haven’t felt this happy in years”...we knew we chose correctly.

We Gift More Than Just A Motorcycle. Meet Marine First Sergeant Dave Tellefsen of Fond du Lac, WI

Dave heralds from a long line of military and combat service—grandfathers, uncles, father, and brothers—whose stories of heroism, trials and tribulations filled his mind and heart as a child. He grew up an “Air Force Brat”, moving across the nation with his military family five different times, and living in Turkey for two years. It was a dynamic life of resilience and adjustment; and for as long as Dave can remember, it was all he ever wanted for himself. He’d imagined the Army, but it was the Marines that showed a special interest in his success. Dave signed on while a junior in high school, left for Parris Island two days after his 1999 graduation, and served active duty as an Infantryman for the next 22 years.

Dave enlisted during peace time for his love of Country, the chance to make a difference and put himself on the front line before others. While stationed at Camp Pendleton during 9/11, Dave’s Battalion found themselves involved in homeland and missile defense operations and responding to real and perceived terrorist threats at home...things most Americans had no knowledge of. Weekly recalls, classified plane rides filled with gear only to turn around, and extensive drills and operational planning that went nowhere, served to fuel an already angry and retribution-filled mentality. The rollercoaster of preparedness, adrenaline and disappointment unknowingly planted seeds of anxiety and depression in a young man wanting to defend and destroy.

While on an MEU in 2002 to Southeast Asia, a disciplinary change in Command left his hard-charging Second Battalion forward deployed in Okinawa, and out of the conflict they were headed to. Dave felt directionally lost and resentful for the missed opportunity. Told they would not deploy to combat at all, Dave found himself on special assignment as a Recruiter in Fond du Lac, WI for the next three years. While he had the incredible fortune of meeting Sarah, his wife of 18 years, while there, Dave couldn’t deploy with his Battalion when they were finally called up. He’d lost another chance to fight with those Brothers he trained and lived so closely with and, in his mind, the chance to have prevented the largest casualty toll any Battalion had endured until that point. The waves of grief and guilt repeatedly pulled on him. As his Recruiter assignment ended, and desperate for the chance to deploy, Dave convinced leadership to connect him to another Battalion headed to war and he married his girl two weeks before leaving for Iraq.

From 2007-2008, Dave was a Squad Leader on Battle Position (BP) Boxer, a small outpost of 18 Marines in Iraq’s southern desert and far from his Forward Operating Base (FOB) Train Station Al Qaim. The BP, made of sand-filled

Hesco barriers with a plywood roof for shade, was without running water. They ate MREs, slept on cots, urinated in ground-sunk pipes and burned kitty-litter filled bags of their feces, along with all their other garbage, in the constantly smoldering burn pits they lived with. They were tasked first with running patrols in the IED laden area to deter terrorist activity and disrupt their resupply efforts; and secondarily, to build relationships and trust amongst the locals within the villages they rolled through. Although area violence was prevalent, and lives were altered and lost, his Platoon made it safely through and it emboldened Dave's belief that he, personally, made a difference in event outcomes. He had yet to realize that gastrointestinal tract illnesses he was experiencing would be later tied to his burn pit exposures and plague him the rest of his life. Nor did he think the small IED that made the road collapse under his truck would actually damage his brain and thought processes in the years to come. His time complete, Dave returned stateside for six months then deployed to Fallujah, Iraq.

From 2008-2009, Dave was a Platoon Sergeant at a small FOB outside Fallujah near the hot, violent zone known as Cloverleaf. There they worked to search and detain commercial traffic into Fallujah— looking specifically for insurgent activity, munitions and destructive intent. It was a critical, high pressure job that had him on pins and needles every day for eight months. It was, without doubt, the job that cemented the anxiety and hypervigilance he carries today. He still scrutinizes roadside garbage for explosive capabilities, analyzes people for what they're wearing and hiding, and watches group movements for violent capabilities. Dave eventually returned to Camp Pendleton and began looking for ways to deploy to Afghanistan, unconcerned with the deeply imprinted memories and emotions he'd carry the rest of his life. He was a hard-driving Marine and, desperate to be where he was most needed, he volunteered for more.

In order to get to Afghanistan, Dave took an opportunity to train Reservists for combat and lead them in battle. He was strict and tough, and believed in protocol, discipline and responsibility to assure safety; and Dave began building a reputation for exceptional training results and leadership impact. Geared up and heading to Afghanistan, their deployment orders were canceled mid-flight. They landed at Camp Lejeune as planned; and instead of heading into combat, they were sent to other countries to train their soldiers for combat in Afghanistan. It was yet another battle opportunity taken away; and Dave was crushed. Survivor guilt plagued Dave as he knew others, some he trained, had been dying in places where he believed his presence could have made a difference. Anger built as he realized the inexperience of the many injured, and lost, and the poor leadership calls that could have prevented some "if only" moments. With the toll of losing so many Brothers to war and suicide upon their return, names and locations he still can recite, his own personal, depressive pain grew. Without safe space to address it all, Dave simply let it quietly smolder and pushed forward, building misguided ownership for issues, decisions and results far outside of his control.

In the several years that followed, Dave, admittedly an over-achiever, continued adding specialized training and advanced certifications to his impressive military record and rose in rank. In 2009, he was reassigned to Kaneohe Bay, HI, for three years and while there, Dave finally got his first, and only, motorcycle. He'd dreamed of one since he was a kid on the backseat of his older brother's bike and bought it to ride to work. As he realized riding's therapeutic benefits, he rode more for the personal relief it gave his mind and the sheer joy it provided his heart. When Dave was hand-selected for a specialized Marine Career Counselor position, the family moved to Quantico, Virginia, and the bike came with him. Along the way, and after years of difficult efforts to start a family of their own, Dave and Sarah excitedly welcomed their first child. Life was moving ahead in all the right directions, except in his tormented mind. When he was reassigned back to California in 2015 as a First Sergeant, the bike's value was less than the cost of moving it; and with concerns for riding in California with new family responsibility, Dave sold it and planned to buy a Harley at retirement. He still has the picture of his orange and chrome Honda VTX 1300 on his phone to remind him of his love and dream of his "someday".

In 2019, while Dave was preparing for a deployment to Australia, his then 5 year-old son tearfully questioned why his dad had to be gone so much. It struck Dave at his core and it got him thinking. Realizing that his efforts to influence leadership and enhance morale weren't as effective as he'd hoped in his new position, he thought further about his time in service. And as his body repeatedly betrayed him with physical pain from years of training, gear and activity, along with ailments from burn pits and head injuries...he decided it was all finally enough.

Dave retired in 2021, with 22 years of dedicated active duty to our Country and the people he wanted nothing more than to protect. They moved back to Sarah's hometown of Fond du Lac, WI, to be near family. They bought a home, found jobs and began navigating transitional challenges as they tried to fit into civilian life. Dave hurt, literally from head to toe, and first connected with the VA for medical care; and as time progressed, for mental health care. Flashbacks frequently took him by surprise and created further emotional turmoil. Unexpected sights, smells and tastes sent his mind reeling backwards. A "fog" enveloped his brain and he found himself struggling cognitively, acting impulsively and angrily and, with a heightened anxiety from it all, he began experiencing panic attacks.

Dave tried a few civilian jobs that left him out of sorts and he grew more depressed at home. One day Dave laughed about something and his son told him he hadn't heard him laugh in a long time. It got Dave thinking again and before long, PTSD and depression were added to his long list of service-connected disabilities. He started counseling, medications and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. He noticed an improved ability to focus and manage his emotions, but personal release and joy were still missing. Unexpectedly, the couple received the beautiful gift of a second pregnancy; and Dave readily sacrificed the joy of getting his "someday Harley" for the joy of building their family and supporting his wife at home.

Despite the progress made, there are still many days where it is difficult to get out of bed, and Dave has learned to put on a "happy mask" to make it all work. This fully disabled Veteran both needs and wants to work; and two years ago he landed the job of his dreams. Dave is a County Veterans Service Officer (CVSO) in Fond du Lac County who not only advocates for Veteran issues, he helps struggling Veterans get benefits they have earned, find needed resources and move through emotional hardships. Additionally, he volunteers within his church and his Legion, supports Veteran organizations that address homelessness and suicide prevention, and he is currently spearheading the county campaign for an enhanced Veterans Memorial Park. While Dave makes a modest living, their savings go straight toward their family and home needs and leave little room for personal expenses. As much as he has secretly longed for the Harley the couple promised themselves, he has denied the purchase believing it would be "selfish" at this point in their lives. And so we asked ourselves, who's advocating for Dave?

Helping one person might not change the world, but it could change the world for one person. That is exactly what Hogs For Heroes hopes to do in reconnecting struggling Veteran riders with the tool that brings back freedom, joy and connection. Dave was overwhelmed by our news and eager to search for his first Harley. After test riding models, he landed on a gorgeous 2024 Road Glide in Whiskey Fire, with only 2,200 miles, sitting at Harbor Town Harley-Davidson dealership in Manitowoc, less than an hour away. It was a nod to his first and only bike's colors, and a beautiful dream come true. Dave's **Presentation of Keys Ceremony will be on Sunday, June 8, 2025 at 5:30 pm at Smoke on The Water in Okauchee Lake, WI.** It will occur during their 5th Annual Hogs For Heroes Fest during which the hard-rocking Bobby Friss Band will entertain the crowd along with raffles, food and drinks. Looking for more Sunday Funday action? Join the Hogs For Heroes Benefit Ride out of Sloppy Joes in Hubertus, WI, where your registration fee will take you right into the Fest after some great scenic miles with awesome people.