



Introducing Veteran Recipient #59: Marine Corporal James Rehme of Clintonville, WI

James Rehme grew up in Hortonville, Wisconsin, a self-described “good kid” who surmises his parents would laugh at and say “he could have been worse” in agreement. He loved shop classes and being outdoors, hunting and fishing, and was known to skip school to wet a line with friends. Early on Jimmy had a need for adrenaline: he raced snowmobiles, rebuilt car motors, and took to riding a Yamaha Virago, much to his father’s dismay. He was a freshman when 9/11 devastated our Country; and he vowed then to serve our Country and join the fight just as soon as he could. In his mind, there was no other option than to pursue the challenge of, and reputation held by, joining the Marine Corps. Jimmy had literally just walked his high school graduation ceremony, then left that very same day for his chance to stand on the yellow footprints at the Marine Corps Recruiting Depot (MCRD).

Jimmy arrived at MCRD in San Diego, CA on June 2, 2004 and almost immediately began second-guessing his decision...until he saw the Phase 3 Recruits marching with pride and confidence as they neared graduation. Almost as quickly his nerves settled and refocused for his chance to become the fighting Marine he dreamt of. Basic training complete, the Infantryman headed to Camp Pendleton for specialization as a Mortarman and, again successful, then stationed at Marine Corps Base Hawaii with the 2nd Battalion 3rd Marines. Jimmy thought he’d won the lottery with his assignment on the beautiful island; but no sooner had they settled did he learn they would deploy to Afghanistan in six months time.

In June, 2005 the Marine landed in Afghanistan’s Kunar Province where, for seven months he would perform patrols, provide indirect mortar fire support and work with the Afghanistan Police and Army. Shortly after arriving, Jimmy’s Platoon was sent into the mountainous terrain to provide mortar fire coverage for Operation Red Wings. Unaware of the Navy SEALs reconnaissance mission they were supporting, their assignment was extended to seven days when a Chinook carrying 16 Special Force members was downed, killing all on board, tragically turning the mission into a high profile retrieval and recovery operation. Their Platoon had nothing for shelter, ran out of food and water and, after using the river for hydration, were sickened with gastrointestinal ailments and dehydration. After returning and learning of all that unfolded, they were proud of the role they played to support their own and equally burdened by the heavy toll the Taliban had claimed.

While there Jimmy’s Platoon moved between FOB Asadabad and Camp Blessing to assist in patrol and assault efforts, frequently hiking into the rugged terrain with mortar launching gear, places far beyond vehicle access. The area was saturated with Taliban presence and local insurgents, requiring frequent small arms and mortar fire exchange. Working everyday amongst the violence and unknown threats, while simultaneously communicating with locals and the dubious Afghanistan leadership, built mistrust and made for tense and difficult living. Jimmy stayed focused on their safety and training, tamping down both the growing anxiety and exhaustion, to successfully complete his deployment. Unfortunately, the seeds of PTSD had successfully taken root.

Upon returning to Hawaii in January, 2006, Jimmy enjoyed a short leave to Wisconsin then returned to begin training for his second deployment: this time to Iraq. He was young, enthusiastic, and in a great deal of denial. In September, his Battalion landed in the Al Anbar Province where, for the next six months he would move on mounted patrol through the violent, IED-laden area known as the Triangle of Death. Terrorists were ramping up their use of IED’s as the main way to remotely attack and destroy, leaving our forces compromised and with little ability to immediately retaliate. Every night Jimmy would move in a 4-vehicle motorcade, manning the gun turret on the lead vehicle and patrolling the same 30 mile stretch of roadway. They were there to deter and disrupt terrorist efforts to place IED’s and identify possible explosives. Roughly one month in country, Jimmy was conducting a black-out night patrol when their vehicle struck an IED. Through his night vision goggles, all he could see was a blinding white flash. The blast dislodged Jimmy from the turret and launched his gun into the air, landing upright in the truck’s destroyed engine. After a brief loss of consciousness, Jimmy woke to a deafening quiet followed by ringing and a chemical smoke that irritated his lungs and compromised his breathing. Although medically cleared at the time, the incident would leave him with a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), hearing loss, and asthma from his scarred lungs, as well as reinforce his growing PTSD. His ongoing fear of thunder, lightening and explosive noises would all be traced back to this life-changing moment in time. Jimmy pushed the experience as far back as his mind would let him...and continued patrolling the same routes for the next five months, looking for the same IED’s that tried to claim his life.

Iraq 2006 was a horrible place to be; and while dealing with war’s demands, they moved amongst unknown combatants, mixed with locals, and still attempted to build rapport within ravaged villages. On patrols Jimmy would

face fear and anger, poverty, peril and pleas...never knowing who to trust amongst the terrorist-fueled living conditions. Nonetheless, he befriended local children and his Platoon helped families by providing school supplies. But amongst the same people and territory they moved through, his Battalion alone would lose 23 Marines and see over another 170 members wounded during their six months. The psychological and emotional toll taken was heavy. Jimmy knew he was struggling and he hid every bit of it while there, unprepared for how his pain would play out on the home front.

Jimmy returned to Hawaii in April, 2007, turned in his weapons and, simply told not to get drunk or in a fight, was given ten days liberty. He returned to family in Wisconsin; and thrilled with his safe return, they threw him a welcome home party. Still reeling from the somber loss of so many Brothers, he struggled celebrating his return when he knew the pain other families were facing. The surreal juxtaposition of American living, versus what he'd been through, did and saw in war, further messed with his mind; and Jimmy found himself disengaging, unable to talk about his time away, and yearning to be back with those who could understand him. Being back on his known Base comforted him and he resumed daily activities. There was no talk about what their Battalion had been through nor support for what they may be feeling. In fact, at the time, talk and emotions were viewed as weak and one was expected to push through...so Jimmy did. With his four-year contract coming to an end, and knowing he couldn't go through another deployment, he began out-processing, narrowly missing his Battalion's next return to Iraq. In June, 2008, exactly four years after graduating high school and moving along those yellow footprints in training, Jimmy became a civilian. At age 22, the young man had never lived on his own nor provided for himself; and his inner strength would push through every barrier and struggle ahead to do so commendably.

Jimmy quickly found a place to live and a job loading trucks while he sorted through dreams and crafted a future plan. He sought medical care from the VA for his service-connected asthma and hearing loss; and even though he knew of his mental health struggles, he didn't want the labels and stereotypes associated with PTSD and denied every psychological question to quietly handle his own issues. His friend had just bought a new Harley; and while Jimmy longed for the release, he couldn't responsibly afford a bike while just getting settled. While saving for that Harley he'd already picked out, he fell for a cute bartender. And when they became pregnant, he married her, cared for her three children and together welcomed three amazing daughters over the course of their marriage. There would no longer be room for the motorcycle he dreamed of...let alone one for the next 15 years.

Jimmy jumped into his new family's life demands and his children filled his heart. Unable to find full-time work, he took on several different jobs and pursued educational opportunities to give his brood a better life. He didn't have time for his PTSD demons, nor could he risk their affect on his employment pursuits, so he worked just as hard to silently keep them at bay. The family lived on a rented farmette at the time; and with Jimmy as the sole provider, the couple began accruing credit card debt. In 2011, an opportunity for private overseas contracting work became available: and feeling the pressure to go where the money was, Jimmy took the job for his family. For four years he went back to Iraq, for 4-5 months at a time, providing security for high-profile people and events in volatile areas outside the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad and U.S. Consulate in Erbil. It was stressful work, but it fulfilled his need to be a part of efforts bigger than himself and the money allowed him to finally buy their first home. Jimmy would return for 30 days in between assignments to share in family time, catch up on chores, and then prepare to leave again. Although he loved the brotherhood he regained, the danger he faced to provide for his family made leaving his girls both difficult and worrisome, and it further strained his marriage.

In 2015, after years of searching for a steady, full-time job locally, Jimmy finally landed an entry level position with Amcor Healthcare Packaging. He never saw himself in a factory, but the people and opportunities provided turned incredibly supportive. With on-the-job training and a financially supported apprenticeship, Jimmy has both excelled and grown to love today's role as a Maintenance Technician servicing the factory's machines. And while this component of his life soared, his marriage further deteriorated causing Jimmy to file for divorce in 2021.

A long and drawn out divorce over 3 1/2 years turned Jimmy's world upside down. Not only did he have to fight for any amount of time with his daughters, the caustic resistance forced Jimmy to go into debt to cover legal bills, mortgage and rent, and care for his three daughters. His girls were all he cared about and what kept him going; and his heart hurt for time lost with them and visitation limits. In 2023 Jimmy recognized a growing depression from the family strain faced and turned to the VA for supportive counseling. It was only then that he began exploring the underlying impact that both his PTSD and TBI from service almost 20 years ago had on his life today.

In 2024, Jimmy actively worked to improve his mental health and became involved in his church and Veteran communities. He pursued an opportunity through HOOAH WI to take the free motorcycle safety course and instantly reconnected with the feelings of freedom, joy and peace he'd found all those years ago. Although struggling financially, he bought a 2003 Honda Shadow, all he could afford, just for the chance to ride...and he rode, all over, as

much as he could, to clear his head and lighten his load. The old bike quickly required one repair after another; and he saved for each just to keep riding. In February 2025, he joined the Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association (CVMA) Chapter 45-3 and immediately regained supportive camaraderie from a family who understands his service and subsequent struggles. His youngest daughter has taken a shine to riding with him, and Jimmy believes the time spent together has helped them both move through life's recent pains. Although he has since regained his home, he still faces child custody hearings— neither of which leave him in a position to afford a more reliable bike to stay on the road. This is where we come in.

Albeit perhaps a shorter riding history than most we've supported to date, Hogs For Heroes appreciated Jimmy's efforts to regain wind therapy. We recognized his commitment shown in learning, buying an old bike to build his experience, and the effort required to both stay on the road and connect through the road. Our Advisory Board both saw and felt his growing passion...and we decided to support Jimmy's need to keep riding and healing. We met Jimmy on a day off from work and surprised the heck out of him with news of our selection. Within two days of shopping and test-riding, he'd found The One sitting at Vandervest Harley-Davidson in Green Bay, WI; and wouldn't you know our VVHD friends super-stretched to put that Marine on a brand-new, 2024 Street Glide Special in Blue Burst. He plans to call her Blue Betty.

Unique to Jimmy's bike, it is the third of three Harleys gifted this year to be fully paid for by 2024's fundraising efforts of our largest supporters: Wisconsin's International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE) Local 139. Since sponsoring their first Veteran and Harley pairing in 2020, this match makes it their twelfth overall. Jimmy's Presentation of Keys Ceremony will be on Saturday, July 19 at 12:00 in a private event held during the Operating Engineers Family Picnic, thereby allowing their over 10,000 members the chance to see our mission, and their beautiful impact, in action.