



Introducing Veteran Recipient #65: Marine Sergeant Matthew Shadley of Fond du Lac, Wisconsin

Growing up in Juneau, Wisconsin, Matt Shadley knew from an early age that he wanted to fight for his Country. Captured first by the movie Top Gun, then by the Marine's commercial battling the fire-breathing dragon, Matt felt the call to be a part of something bigger than himself; and he wanted all the action it offered. School wasn't Matt's thing; and starting at age 15 he repeatedly called his Recruiter until they would enlist him. After graduating high school in 2003 at 17 years old, Matt headed to boot camp. He was still a kid by some standards; but like so many before him, he learned our Armed Forces have a way of turning young men and women into something more.

After laughing at a Drill Instructor earned Matt a long night of scrubbing floors, he quickly settled in and grew to love everything about the Marine Corps— the challenge, the brotherhood, and even the learning came easier as his fascination grew. Drawn to the use of explosives and demolition, he specialized as a Combat Engineer eager to work the front lines with Infantry and stationed at Camp Pendleton in California.

It wasn't long after that Matt received his first set of deployment orders: Iraq. In March of 2004, Matt landed in Fallujah: a difficult and dangerous environment whose reality was unlike anything he'd imagined. Matt worked on Camp Fallujah for the first half of his tour planning vehicle and heavy equipment needs for missions. Mortar and rocket attacks on base were a daily event, taking the lives of multiple Marines around him, including an officer on the phone with his family. The realities of war became painfully clear; and after that, Matt avoided putting his family through that stress and rarely called home. Its impact became personal when a mortar struck his building and violently knocked him down and out. While deemed fine at the time, looking back Matt believes he had sustained the first of several Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBI) suffered during his service. His last three months were spent working guard towers to verify and search those entering base. It would be the start of an overwhelming hypervigilance and anxiety that would settle deep within to affect the rest of his life.

Stateside in September, 2004, and a short visit home, quickly highlighted his new disassociation with civilian society. Even though he was with family and lifelong friends, Matt couldn't comfortably fit in. Questions were difficult to answer; and his life views had changed so dramatically in one short year that conversational topics seemed insignificant compared to the weight he now carried. So he drank his way through his two weeks home and yearned for base life where he knew how to act and what to say. Upon returning, leadership asked for volunteers to join the upcoming 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU). Matt immediately threw up his hand for an opportunity that would take him across the world...and shortly thereafter, learned the MEU would leave in two months, and also head to Iraq. He had no time to process what he'd been through or how he felt and, instead, refocused his mind for more combat training.

The USS Rushmore left in early December, 2004, headed first to Hawaii and then Bahrain. When the December 26 earthquake and subsequent tsunami struck the Indian Ocean, their Navy ship was redirected for humanitarian operations in Indonesia. While others were assigned off-ship duties, Matt stayed on board attending to ship duties. To this day he still clearly remembers the many bodies and debris floating around their ship eight miles from shore, as well as those they pulled aboard.

From Indonesia, the deployment continued to Kuwait where they then flew into Baghdad to augment existing troops. Assigned to Camp Falcon, a Forward Operating Base (FOB) in the southern part of the city, Matt provided base security at the main gate, manning a .50 caliber machine gun. He also worked closely with Military Police "outside the wire," installing barriers to control traffic, searching vehicles for weapons and explosives and establishing a presence within the volatile area. Their 6-month MEU winding down, Matt's task force reboarded their ship and traveled to Australia and Hawaii before returning to California.

Back at Camp Pendleton, Matt recognized he had emotions and memories that he didn't know what to do with; and he knew enough that Marines demanded a "tough guy" image. Military culture at the time didn't support talking about struggles, nor was PTSD even a word in their vocabulary; and so Matt's answer was to avoid it all, play the part, and drink. That same month, he extended his contract with the 15th MEU Engineer Detachment and immediately began training for his third deployment, which would prove to be the most dangerous work of Matt's military career.

In September, 2006, Matt deployed aboard the USS Dubuque. While onboard, he and a close friend, LCPL Chavez, discovered a potentially catastrophic Freon leak; and reporting it earned them the ship's challenge coins and a lot of pats on the back. They disembarked in Kuwait, acclimated and trained, then the two separated for different assignments in Iraq. Matt flew in by helicopter to Rutba, Iraq. At the time, Rutba was a remote, embattled town that served as a critical transit hub and smuggling route for insurgents and foreign fighters. Matt was assigned to various units for his Engineering capabilities; and was additionally attached to Recon units conducting nighttime raids and multi-unit operations. They covered the city on foot, clearing buildings and moving door-to-door in search of insurgents, weapons, and explosives. Once areas were cleared and operational space was claimed, Matt constructed and fortified observation posts and perimeter barriers.

Matt had garnered a different attitude this time around, one that realized death was a distinct possibility...and he was okay with that. Undaunted by the risks and buoyed by demands, he often worked exposed in open streets under the threat of sniper attacks and ambushes. The first and only time Matt fired his weapon at the enemy came one day as rounds snapped past his ears while fortifying Hesco barrier containers. Matt returned fire in defense of himself and his fellow Marines: the enemy eventually silenced by sniper fire. The increased insurgent activity required a city-wide house clearing, and Matt made sure he was always the first of his team to enter the building. When the area was stabilized, he again redirected his efforts and went on to construct a police station and barracks to support the area's security needs.

In addition to construction, Combat Engineers specialize in destruction and removal of obstacles. IED tactics had become more widespread and deadly: and the latter portion of his tour focused on route clearing missions, mine sweeping efforts and IED detection and destruction. Day after day, Matt operated in environments where a single hidden explosive could change everything in an instant, and it fueled his growing hypervigilance and anxiety. While he'd lost count of the number of explosive devices encountered, he still uneasily recalls the one he personally detonated with a batch of C4.

Matt's contract was nearly done when his MEU was extended. Given the option to return home early or stay for two more months, he chose to remain with his Marines. That brotherhood and that mentality mattered to him; and together they sailed home in June, 2007. Matt had wanted more from the Marine Corps: specifically, he wanted to go to Jump School. When leadership denied his request, an angry 21 year-old, emboldened Marine decided instead to separate from service. After four years filled with three combat deployments and four promotions in rank, and without any real adult life independence, or transitional support from the military, Matt chose to leave without a direction forward. He looks back on that decision with regret almost every day since.

Matt returned to Beaver Dam in August, 2007, and moved through the next four years carrying burdens and demons he wasn't ready to acknowledge...so he let them fester. He "partied hard" with hometown friends, first, for the fun in seeing others, then for the distress in dealing with others, then for the pain in dealing with himself and emotions. He drank nonstop until his money ran out, then he found a warehouse job. At a reunion with Marine brothers, Matt learned his friend Chavez was killed during their deployment: and the news quietly drained his last bits of composure. He got involved with the VFW: and at a Memorial Day event he drowned his sorrow to the point of breaking down in a cemetery with his unprepared parents at his side. The weight of losing a friend, the violence and deaths of many, the anger, the anxiety and the fact that he was still alive created a guilt and torment that wouldn't go away. It was a Vietnam Veteran, Sheldon Green, who took the struggling young man under his wing and steered him through this extremely dark time. To this day, Matt does not believe he would be alive without his mentorship. And unbeknownst to Matt at the time, that gift of support and guidance then, would help a future version of himself learn to pay it forward.

Matt knew he needed to clean up his act, but counseling still wasn't for him; so he set a path towards UW-Whitewater where he studied Sociology with a Criminal Justice focus, and planned to join the ranks of law enforcement. He made passing grades, drank to fit in and forget, and decided he still needed something more in his life.

In 2011, as a way to bond further with his father and find a personal release, Matt took a motorcycle riders course. He immediately realized its therapeutic power in class and purchased his first Harley: a new H-D Blackline Softail. Something clicked almost immediately for him, and for the first time in a long time, Matt felt free. The noise quieted. His mind cleared. The stress and weight he carried seemed lighter on two wheels. He found the power of connection. Matt's bond with his father tightened, the two of them riding miles side by side on trips with hours of conversation in between. He rode across states to meet Battle Buddies from hard times few could understand. Energized by his own growth, Matt organized a Marine Corps reunion in Washington, D.C., riding his Harley across the country with fellow veterans to reconnect with the men he served beside. For a little while, it felt like being back together again.

Along the way, Matt met a woman who would further shape his future and they married. He found work as a Corrections Officer, first with Dodge County Sheriff's Office, then later with Fond du Lac County Sheriff's Office. Matt rode to ease the stress of his job, to shake his building demons and for the camaraderie he missed. As his struggles began straining his marriage, he rode to clear his mind of suicidal thoughts.

Matt began looking for ways to understand the emotions he had yet to put a name to. He found relief in television shows that addressed mental health and realized he wasn't alone nor was he a failure. When his newborn daughter was placed in his arms, he finally felt he had a purpose and responsibility; and proudly accepting both, he cut back his drinking. A year and a half later his son arrived; and while overjoyed with their addition, his exhausted mind still swirled in waves of survivors' guilt and anger. Riding was his only safe recourse from life's stressors; and he rode that Blackline as much as he could to escape it all.

Unfortunately, as the pressures of family life magnified Matt agreed to sell his motorcycle to be more present—a decision that haunts him still today. As his marriage deteriorated, he agreed to counseling from the VA but the Zoom visits of 2020 were less than helpful, as was his guarded attitude. War's tolls were too heavy; and after eleven years of marriage, the couple divorced to now amicably share time with their two children. After eleven years in Corrections eroded his sense of self and trust, he switched career paths to become a Quality & Compliance Leader with Vista Care, a national organization providing supportive living services to disabled individuals. And after years of caring for others, Matt finally came to the realization that he needed help in caring for himself.

PTSD has been an unrecognized hardship since his first deployment in 2004: and only recently has Matt taken the hard steps forward. He began private counseling to address his demons; and for strength on days when their voices get too loud, his tattoo reminds him "Steel tastes like shit." He connected with an area nonprofit called Journey to The Light and, through faith and programming, he's incrementally learned to release and share his struggles with others. With years of turmoil and despair invested in avoidance, Matt is now turning his vulnerability into strength and leadership. His newest tattoo reflects his growth: Dum Spiro Spero, meaning "While I breathe, I hope." But while Matt has added many new tools to understand and support his changing life, there is still one that has remained out of reach.

As a single parent, his children, ages 9 and 8, are Matt's world and the reason he is still alive. Like most parents, giving their children the life they deserve often comes at the sacrifice of his own needs. Last summer Matt made a tough choice: buy another motorcycle for himself, or a small boat he could spend time on with his children. As much as he deeply needed the personal release from riding again, Matt put time with his children first, bought the boat and hoped he could save again for the bike.

Matt does not believe he is any more deserving, or his service and struggle any more extraordinary, than the next Veteran. Only through the supportive encouragement of others did he finally decide to apply for our opportunity. It was the first time he had ever written down and reflected on his story; and as hard as it was, he wished he would have done it years ago. Hogs for Heroes heard the healing release that riding once brought into Matt's life; and despite his efforts, we heard the struggles that remain a daily threat. We believe the therapeutic benefits of riding are something worth restoring...and when we told Matt our news, he hung his head in tears of disbelief and gratitude.

Matt had a little homework to do: find the bike model that best fits him now for the type of riding he wants to do. Online searches had his mind vacillating until he found the beast that would take him into his future years. Suburban Motors Harley-Davidson had his perfect fit: a 2025 black, Street Glide Ultra that radiated cool vibes...and an emotional test ride confirmed the joy, and release, this gift would return to him.

Matt's Presentation of Keys Ceremony will be on Sunday, June 7, 2026 at 5:30 pm during the Smoke on The Water Music Festival for Hogs For Heroes, featuring the Bobby Friss Band, in Okauchee Lake. This will be the second gifting we do that afternoon! Gates open at 3:00; and followed by a patriotic flag raising ceremony and warbird flyover, the music will start rocking the crowd at 4:00. Please note there is a \$10 donation to enter.

Have the day free? Join us at their sister restaurant for their annual Sloppy Joes Ride, in Hubertus, Wisconsin, with kick stands up at 10:30 and the ride ending at the Music Festival.