



## **Meet Veteran Recipient #63 Army Sergeant First Class Seth Walls of Cleveland, Wisconsin**

**“Since I found motorcycling last year, I don’t know how to go without it. It was like I was awake again. I haven’t felt that alive since I deployed. I wish I had known the lifestyle years ago when I was at my worst, it might have saved me from making a lot of mistakes.”**

**—a quote from Seth’s application**



Growing up in Columbus, Ohio, Seth Walls faced a difficult and unstable childhood. With an abusive father at the helm, Seth was shifted around family members for safe-keeping and raising. He quickly learned to navigate strained relationships and what kind of man he wanted to be when he grew up. Seth was a kid who liked to build forts, play soldier with sticks and participate in sports. In high school he took up wrestling until, at just 16 years old, Seth became a father himself. He dropped out of high school to find work and begin providing for his young family.

Seth bounced between odd jobs, learned responsibility in real time, and carried the weight of parenthood while still a kid himself. He’d always dreamed of being a soldier, but it wasn’t until he accompanied a childhood friend to the Recruiter’s office that he realized the possibility and job security it could provide. Seth then earned his GED to assure eligibility and future growth. And when he turned 17, he did two things to solidify his responsibility: he married his sweetheart and mother of his child, and he enlisted in the Army. In October, 2001, the friends headed off to boot camp followed by specialization training as a Combat Engineer for Seth. It would be the beginning of more than two decades of service with five deployments, four of which to Iraq, that would earn him two Bronze Star Medals and one Meritorious Service Medal.

Seth's first duty station took him to Baumholder Army Base in western Germany. It took six long months before his young wife and daughter could join him; and no sooner did they arrive did he receive his first deployment orders to Iraq.

Seth landed in Baghdad in May, 2003 with our Country’s invasion already underway. He drove an M113, a tracked personnel carrier, from which they moved about manning check points and guard posts, removing dangerous threats and conducting surveillance. Although he notes it as his “easiest deployment”, the city was volatile and chaotic with our advancement, and small arms and indirect fire were a constant threat. Communications home were minimal, and by mail, though an occasional satellite phone would be possible for \$20 a minute. In a rare phone exchange with his wife, Seth learned the buddy he’d enlisted with had been killed by an RPG in Baghdad. It hurt; and like all the other difficult experiences he’d experienced thus far, Seth pushed it down and focused on his job. Twelve months in, as his Engineer Company was preparing for departure, an uptick in insurgent activity forced a three month extension to maximize force with overlapping arrivals. They unloaded, turned around and went back at it with a mere weekend break at a tent complex in Qatar to decompress.

In June, 2004, the soldier returned to his family in Germany. Though unrecognized at the time, Seth had changed in war; and readjustment was both awkward and strained. His wife had become unfamiliar, his daughter didn’t know him and even base life felt different without the constant presence of his Brothers. The young couple did their best to acclimate, just in time to transfer to Fort Bliss, Texas, where their journey strained even further. While Seth trained daily for combat in their new city, they welcomed their second daughter in 2005...followed by orders to spend another year in Baghdad. It was a fate that prompted the couple to divorce: and she left with his two girls shortly after he left for war.

As an Army Combat Engineer, Seth specialized in clearing obstacles, or creating them, to enable the movement or protection of our forces. In November, 2006 Seth found himself in all too familiar territory, and during the deadliest year in the war’s history. Tasked as a Dismount Team Leader, it was his job to lead his team out of the truck to

assess and intervene where needed. Still feeling the angst of divorce, Seth transferred that energy into his role's demand for risk-taking. He cleared buildings, kicked in doors and readily moved amongst deadly people. He built barriers, guard towers and checkpoints within the metropolis and dismantled enemy equipment and fire power. Additionally, Seth worked route clearance facing hidden, deadly threats head on; and after just three months in, he lost track of the number of times he was directly attacked with an explosive device after reaching 34. This exposure, combined with the frequent small arms fire he engaged in, would eventually result in a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) diagnosis nearly twenty years later. Its unrecognized symptoms would, nonetheless, affect him all his years before that, and well into his future.

Seth returned to Fort Bliss in late 2007—exhausted, alone and spinning from what he'd just been through and done. As he again sought his new normal, the ugly seeds of PTSD began to grow alongside the troublesome symptoms of his TBI. Military culture at the time didn't support "talking about it" or seeking help: there was only the risk of mockery and separation if one was perceived as weak. So Seth shut his mind down, focused on his training, and began drinking.

One night Seth went to a friend's party for the diversion he needed, not looking for anything but a cold beer, when he met Crystal. The two talked most of the night, about music and the hard divorce path they shared, then coincidentally met again the next day. They quickly developed a supportive friendship that turned into love. When Seth was reassigned to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, Crystal and her son moved with him and the couple welcomed their first of many children together. It wasn't long after the new foursome settled in that Seth received his third set of orders to head back to Iraq.

In January, 2009, Seth landed in Mosul, the most dangerous city in Iraq and a key stronghold for Al-Qaeda. And he arrived angry. As a Squad Leader they again found themselves on stressful route-clearing missions. With a demanding hypervigilance and improved equipment, Seth estimates discovering "hundreds" of IEDs during their year. They blew up the smaller devices on site, but the homemade versions and larger devices required skilled Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) personnel. Their missions again required movement through congested city dynamics amongst mixed crowds of suspicious civilians and seething insurgents. Rules of engagement at the time supported more direct response to any perceived threats; and with hostile gunfire and rocket attacks a daily part of life, Seth had more than his share of involvement. Not caring any longer if he lived or died, the emboldened Staff Sergeant took more personal risks than ever, looking hard for those threats and reacting quickly to stop those threats, and subsequently earning his first Bronze Star Medal for heroic efforts. It is an award he quietly dismisses, noting he was simply doing his job.

Seth returned to Fort Campbell right before Christmas, grateful to be out of Iraq and initially happy to be home. But as he settled in, all he'd tamped down over the years began to resurface in a world that couldn't allow it. He pushed harder to ignore his demons, immersed himself in perpetual combat training, and drank, hard, to settle the mounting anger he couldn't shake. It had become a vicious cycle; and less than one year later, orders came through for his fourth combat deployment.

In January, 2011, with the war in Iraq ending, Seth, now a Platoon Sergeant, spent the year moving across the country to shut down various bases and outposts. That did not mean that Iraq's deadly efforts had shut down. Advanced IEDs, car bombs, new projectiles and vengeful insurgents remained a strong and persistent presence as Seth worked to secure route safety for the truckloads of equipment and supplies leaving the country. Midway through his year, Seth returned home for the birth of their daughter; and while the experience warmed his heart, his return to Iraq quickly hardened it again. As Seth has always done through life, he set his sights on what had to be done; and with his characteristic grit and commitment, forged ahead. For a job well done, and while working in a position above his rank, Seth was meritoriously awarded his second Bronze Star Medal this tour. Although the deployment "wasn't as bad" as the others, its completion was made even better by the likelihood he would not be back.

In 2012, shortly after Seth returned home, he married Crystal, adopted her son, and did his best to build a life grounded in commitment and resilience. Military life is hard on a family, requiring frequent and long periods of absence and uprooting change. As their family grew, so did their desire for a more constant presence at home. Rather than take another move to Germany, in which he knew he would deploy again, Seth transitioned into the Army

Reserves after ten years of active duty. For his time and leadership shown, Seth was awarded a Meritorious Service Medal. Leaving was perhaps one of the hardest decisions he'd ever made...and he had no idea just how hard life would become as a result.

Their family moved to Wisconsin and rented a home to be near Crystal's family in Howards Grove. Seth was attached to the 335th Regiment, an Army Reserve Unit in Whitehall, Ohio, that provided training support to Reserve and National Guard units. He gladly made the long drive when required to spend time with the Family he knew and loved. Seth would go on to serve in the Reserves for the next twelve years...but in the meantime, he spiraled into the worst years of his life.

At just 28 years old, and after ten years of knowing nothing but Army routines, discipline and war, Seth found himself lost, without purpose or identity, and floundering in a civilian world. He moved from job to job, struggling to fit in, communicate and care about what now seemed insignificant. Years of difficult, ugly memories flooded in as stray thoughts, flashbacks and nightmares; and his anger grew outwardly making it hard to be around him. Depression seeped into Seth's bones and made it hard to get out of bed. Hypervigilance and anxiety made it hard to be in public, and his irritability made it hard to have friends. Seth continued drinking to soothe struggles he couldn't understand or address. As his marriage strained, he tried counseling and left frustrated and angry. Unsure of his next steps in life, Seth wondered if everyone would be better off if he took his own life. And then one day his Unit's leadership asked him to take a one-year domestic deployment...and he pulled himself together for the chance to regain a purpose he could get behind.

In February, 2018 Seth and his growing family relocated to Fort Hood, Texas. The Sergeant First Class was there to train mobilizing Reservists and Guardsmen in preparation for European and Middle East arenas. Crystal and Seth strengthened their marriage, established their children in schools and routines, and extended his deployment an additional two years. While staying in Texas, Seth found work as a Corrections Officer and picked up welding and wood working. Realizing the better move for their then six children was back to Wisconsin, in 2024 they relocated once more to the small rural town of Cleveland where he took a position within LDS, a dairy equipment company, as an installation technician. And, after 23 years in service, Seth made the difficult decision to end his military career.

As part of that retirement, he immediately accessed the VA for ongoing medical and mental health support, and has worked hard to control his drinking and temper. While he's done a lot of self-reflection to understand his struggle, and has found reels of Veterans sharing their stories to be enlightening, there are still many days where Seth is surrounded by depressive darkness and anger. It is a burden he's learned to live with to provide for his family; but as he reflected on what he needed for himself...well, that's when he chose to pursue riding.

Motorcycling had always scared Seth; but he stared that fear in the face and enrolled in Road America's rider course for the adrenaline release he needed. He was hooked from the start. With a full household and limited finances, Seth and Crystal saved to purchase a 20-year-old Sportster 883 off Facebook Marketplace. It wasn't flashy, but it didn't need to be. It simply needed to be something he could practice on; and then it became something he healed on. Riding became an immediate outlet and Crystal noticed the difference even a short, 15 minute ride made for him. After putting on over 2,500 miles his first summer, riding gave him something he hadn't felt in a long time: freedom, peace and excitement. Sharing his life details with others isn't something that comes easily to Seth, and learning to open up to others and build relationships has been part of his path forward. Seth then joined the Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association, Chapter (CVMA) 45-7, where he found the camaraderie he'd been missing since leaving active duty. Crystal joined their Auxiliary for the support she, too, needs as a spouse; and together they found a community who simply understand and want to continue serving others through riding.

Unfortunately, Seth's starter bike has fallen into disrepair and, on a tight family budget, repairs are unaffordable and likely to cost more than the bike is worth. The bigger bike he dreamt of, the one that lets him and his bride of 15 years ride together, remained well out of responsible reach...and the dread of no longer riding weighed heavy on his tenuous shoulders. Hogs For Heroes heard his struggle and effort and we felt the passion found in his new release. We believed our gift would make an immediate, healing difference in this man's life, and that of his family's, by keeping him on The Road he's worked hard to find.

We took Seth by complete surprise with our news and tasked him with finding the model that fits him best and captures his heart. Test rides on larger touring models quickly solidified his choice. Sitting on the showroom floor of Suburban Motors Harley-Davidson was the bike of his dreams: a blacked out 2024 Street Glide Special. And we made it his.

Super cool to this bike, it is the second bike this year to be fully sponsored by the fundraising efforts of the over 5,000 members of the Tavern League of Wisconsin, and their eighth Bike and Veteran pairing since 2021. Seth will get his keys in a Double Presentation of Keys Ceremony on Sunday, May 17 at 12:30 pm at the Curve In Bar in Kewaskum, WI. We'll be hanging out from 11-3, ready to connect with friends old and new! Come hungry, the Brat Hut will be open!