



Introducing Veteran Recipient #66: Army Specialist Brandon Pszanka of Clintonville, Wisconsin

Brandon Pszanka grew up a happy, active kid in Pulaski, WI, surrounded by family with cousins for playmates. He enjoyed sports, played percussion in the high school band, and looked forward to the future. Unsure exactly what that future might look like, Brandon decided to first serve his Country. Between his junior and senior year, Brandon enlisted in the WI Army National Guard and chose to become a Combat Engineer with the Medford Engineer Company. He graduated high school in June, 2009, headed for his specialized training that July, and returned home in September to a slew of phone messages from his new Unit trying to reach him. Their Company had been given deployment orders to Iraq, and Brandon would be going with them. Barely a Soldier at the time, he was mobilized within the week to begin processing. After eight months of preparations, combat training, and blending with a Company from Puerto Rico, Brandon was as prepared for war as he could be at that age. He was not, however, prepared for what he would experience, nor the physical, mental and emotional scars war would impart.

In April 2010, Brandon landed at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Warhorse just outside of Baqubah, Iraq; and it was unlike anything he expected. The city was a major operational hotspot for insurgency and sectarian violence; and as the mayhem and brutality amongst their own factions heightened, U.S. troops avoided entering the city proper and, instead, worked and patrolled around it. That still did not stop the mortars from striking their base multiple times a day. As a Combat Engineer, Brandon was assigned route clearance and the role of driver for his Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicle. Its very name tells you it was built for dangerous threats. His first few days he remembers being “scared shitless to even get out of the truck to take a piss”...and then, within the week, combat life and operations normalized and simply became routine. They slept during the day and convoyed in the dark, night after night, purposefully looking for explosive threats. They cleared roads and critical transportation routes, searched ditches and fields, and patrolled the fringes of towns looking for hidden devices and projectiles before other Units traveled those same roads with devastating effects.

The weight of responsibility hung heavy on Brandon’s young shoulders; and as the months rolled by he managed his anxiety by pushing it away and staying focused on the job. Every mission carried an uncertainty and fear that he didn’t talk about; instead, he adopted a fatalistic mentality because it was easier to live and think that way. But that apprehension was always there, lurking deep within, as they rolled slowly through the dark with nothing but their headlights, some technology and focused eyes looking for the thing that might change, or take, their lives. He was young enough and bold enough to think it would never happen to him...until it did. Three times. In three months.

In July, 2010, on a route clearing mission for a supply convoy, an Explosive Fire Projectile (EFP) hit the vehicle behind him throwing Brandon into the windshield. While he didn’t lose consciousness, he has little recall on how he followed protocol and repositioned his vehicle behind the one damaged. He does, however, recall the horrific scene of having to helplessly watch his good friend nearly bleed out from the shrapnel to his neck. He returned to base with a significant headache, went through a post-blast assessment and, despite the diagnosis of a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), was cleared to work the very next night. This time Brandon took a load of fear with him, along with images he couldn’t shake, and returned to the road that tried to kill them.

Less than one month later, a well-hidden EFP went undetected. It was remotely detonated as they passed: and the deafening explosion blew through a building in front of Brandon’s truck, delivering a second TBI

with another headache and whiplash. The second concussive event earned him a few days of light duty on base and further solidified his growing PTSD. Once again, Brandon returned to slowly roll across the country's dark and treacherous roads, night after night, with an even greater anxiety and hypervigilance... all of which he tamped down to do his job.

On September 19, 2010, the date he now calls his Alive Day, and the date that would earn him a Purple Heart, Brandon was driving the last truck in their clearance convoy when a buried roadside IED was remotely detonated immediately outside his door. The blast threw the upper half of his body into the passenger seat, twisting his back like a corkscrew, and leaving his legs pinned under the steering wheel. The bomb's accelerant set his leg's nerve endings ablaze and the combined pain sent Brandon into shock. He was brought back to base where, within hours, his cognition, speech and balance began dramatically changing. He'd received his third TBI and news that he required further emergent care and diagnostics elsewhere: but Brandon did not want to leave. His greatest fear was that he would not be able to complete his mission alongside his Brothers; but when those same Brothers encouraged him to go, he reluctantly agreed to travel to Germany. Brandon believed it would be a temporary detour that would bring him back to his Family; he unfortunately had no idea just how life-changing that injury would become.

While in Germany, Brandon's TBI symptoms worsened, affecting his ability to walk, speak and cognitively process information. His lower back showed five herniated discs, the torn cartilage in his knee would require surgery, and his mental health was spiraling downward. Recovery would prove to be long, painful and difficult. He eventually transferred stateside to Fort Leonard Wood's Warrior Transition Unit for ongoing medical and rehabilitative care where he progressed from being wheelchair bound, to using a walker and eventually a cane. While recovering Brandon learned two friends were killed on a route clearing mission he should have been on: and the news hit hard. He was already angry that his mission had been "stolen" from him, required him to leave and tasked his Brothers to fill in for him; and now, he was overwhelmed with Survivor's Guilt. It was 1 ½" inches of steel on his vehicle's door that saved his life...why couldn't the same steel have done that for his Brothers? He was a young man without a wife or children...and neither of his two lost Brothers could claim the same. Why was he saved? Day after day Brandon processed the tormenting questions of "why" without answer. And despite years of therapy and counseling that followed, these same questions still plague him to this day.

It was Christmas, 2010 and the 20 year-old Brandon was finally transferred home to Green Bay, Wisconsin, feeling his entire world changed and taken from him. He was unable to live by himself for six months, and so his older sister welcomed him in. Still on Active Duty, Brandon was stationed at the Green Bay Armory where he worked full time on various base projects while attending his many mental, physical and speech therapies, as well as medical appointments, to assure his continued recovery. Life got very dark for a while: and as he struggled with all he'd been through, Brandon began drinking excessively, often blowing his paycheck at the local bar to soothe the pains he dealt with. He continued to progress physically: and in the fall of 2011, Brandon successfully moved through a Medical Review Board, transferred back into the Guard with his Engineer Company in Medford, WI, and was finally cleared to resume driving, get his own apartment and have his knee surgery. Unfortunately, Brandon's drinking didn't slow down... until a DUI made him rethink his lifestyle and self-medicating habits. He then refocused his efforts into finding a job, planning for a future and finding a release.

Some of Brandon's earliest life memories involve motorcycles. His dad and uncle both rode; and Brandon recalls sitting on the tank at just four years old, being around their bikes, and rides with his dad letting him hold the bars. In 2012, Brandon took the riders course and bought his first bike: a 1989 Kawasaki. It was the perfect release; and a few years later he upgraded to a 1994 Harley Low Rider. He rode to clear his head, connect with family and friends, and raise funds for charitable needs—and he loved it, everything about it, every freeing moment on it. Additionally, Brandon began taking classes at UW-Green Bay

ultimately deciding on a Human Services focus. And then, with just one look at the woman his cousin set him up with, Brandon had found the love of his life.

Unfortunately Sommer didn't initially feel the same way, struggling to even talk with Brandon and declining to give him her number. Eventually she agreed to a double date in 2015, and when Brandon picked her up on his motorcycle and she held on tight...things began to change. They rode together until 2016 when Brandon dumped his bike because he, at 26 years old, and with significant back and knee injuries, was unable to hold it up. He moved it to his garage, had his broken collarbone surgically repaired, and hoped beyond measure that he could afford the costly repairs and someday be strong enough to hold up two wheels again. That day would never come.

Life continued to deal surprises Brandon's way. When the couple learned they would become parents in 2016, Brandon left college to find work and care for his young family. After failing to pass a physical training test on a Guard drill weekend, Brandon was moved into another Medical Review Board. He was devastated and angry; and after almost 11 years of service, he was medically retired in 2018...once again feeling his mission had been taken away from him. He moved between several entry level jobs to support his family until realizing he needed something that offered him a more secure, skilled future. He connected with Wisconsin's International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE) Local 139, joined their Apprentice Training program, and subsequently found work as a proud Union member driving haul trucks, dump trucks and skid steers. He pushed through the pain magnified by the jobs, and through years of layoffs, seasonal demands and business closures to take care of his family. He tried physical therapy, nerve ablations, and pain management programs without relief; and in 2026, when his back and legs could no longer tolerate the demands of his work, he stepped back to contemplate his life options.

Throughout their years together, Brandon and Sommer married, bought a home and have joyfully welcomed three young daughters. As much as his household of ladies fills his heart, it wasn't until he connected with the VFW in 2022 that he was able to fill his heart's void of brotherhood. Benefiting from the connections made and purpose gained, Brandon took on a new mission: serving on the homefront. In 2024 he was elected Commander of VFW Post 664 in Clintonville; and every day, as his wrist sports the two silver memorial bands engraved with the names of Cintron and Delgado, Brandon hopes that in supporting their Brothers and Sisters, he honors their memories. In part due to his leadership and continued counseling, Brandon is gradually learning to talk more about his memories and painful emotions as part of his healing release...but it is hard and worrisome. There is still, however, one more pain in his heart that needs release, and for which he has no substitute: riding.

Struggle is, and has been, an unceasing reality for this 35 year-old man; and he has nonetheless persevered. There isn't a day that goes by where Brandon is not in physical pain from his blast injuries 16 years ago. His TBI symptoms have left him with constant headaches and slower articulation, and combined with his PTSD symptoms, he struggles with irritability, forgetfulness, anxiety and depression. His disc herniations and degenerative disease in his spine have gone on to painfully affect his hips, legs and knee, and compromise his daily activities. He knows surgeries are an unavoidable reality; and he knows affording the trike he needs to safely return to riding is not. It is, however, a reality for Hogs For Heroes.

To say Brandon was shocked and overcome by the news of his selection would be an understatement. We lost count of the "thank yous" he choked out after 13 in the first three minutes. Brandon went out test riding and shopping the very next day and found his dream model—a 2024 H-D TriGlide— at Bull Falls Harley-Davidson in Wausau, WI. This black and rustic red beauty had an old-school vibe that immediately pulled at his heart, all the comforts he needed to ride safely, and the ability to take his wife on date rides again...and our Bull Falls friends stretched to make this sweet dream a reality for Brandon.

Unique to Brandon's bike, it is the first of four bikes this summer to be fully sponsored by the 2025 fundraising efforts of Wisconsin's International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE) Local 139. While we could never have predicted it, we are thrilled with the opportunity to return one of their own back to the healing road...on a bike they made possible. Brandon will receive his keys in a **private Presentation of Keys Ceremony on Saturday, June 20, 2026** during the Local 139's Annual Golf Outing that will allow members, business partners and leadership to see exactly how their generous efforts impact our Veteran's lives.