



**Introducing Our Next Veteran Recipient:
Army Sergeant Aaron Kloss of Oshkosh, WI**

“Have I struggled? Yes. I have struggled with reconnecting with loved ones and the feelings of guilt for leaving them to manage without me. I have struggled with questions of whether I was worthy of returning home at all. I have struggled with a need that can’t be met to atone for sins that I haven’t committed. I struggle to this day with the idea that I am not enough, and never will be, regardless of how much I sacrifice and give back to those around me. I know that I will struggle with all of this until the day my body can no longer give any more. Where all of the struggling and feelings of inadequacy has drifted away, and has been lifted away, has been on a motorcycle. Being unable to ride these past few years has felt like I’ve been left with no escape.”

-----Meet Aaron Kloss, Hogs For Heroes Veteran Recipient #69

Mistakes can change life stories: and for Aaron Kloss, his change began after “borrowing” a car and a motorcycle at the age of 19. He’d been driftless after high school, working factory jobs without a directional path forward. Having lost his truck’s registration, and with his parents on vacation, Aaron needed a car to get to work...so he took theirs, without their knowledge or permission. Although he’d never ridden a motorcycle before, the idea was so attractive that he took his parent’s bike as well. He quickly figured out how to ride and fell in love with the rush. Once the police confronted Aaron with the reported thefts, he quickly figured out his next move after being offered two choices: jail or the military. And in September of 2000, Aaron joined the Army National Guard 1157th Transportation Company in Oshkosh, WI as a wheeled-vehicle operator. What may have started as a consequence soon became something much larger—a life of service, sacrifice, and responsibility that would stretch across the next seventeen years in the Guard...and then far beyond the uniform.

In between drill weekends, Aaron worked several miscellaneous jobs and met Jessie, the woman who would become his best friend, wife, and the rock who would steady him in his years to come. One year after watching the tragedies of 9/11 play out, Aaron was mobilized to Fort Bragg for deployment training to Iraq. While there Aaron was pulled from his Company and assigned to deploy to Iraq with Special Forces. In September, 2002, on a plane headed to Kuwait, they were ordered to don their protective chemical gear as Iraq launched missiles into Kuwait amidst threats of weapons of mass destruction. Aaron hadn’t been scared until that moment when allusions to danger became all too real. It would prove the worrisome introduction that set the tempo for the next six months, followed shortly thereafter by the searing image of one of our Patriot Missiles intercepting their Scud Missile. War was coming.

After a month of acclimation training and equipment preparations in Kuwait, they moved into Baghdad, Iraq. Our Special Forces had already overtaken one of Saddam’s palaces for base operations and had begun running reconnaissance and clearing missions, capturing key targets and securing the airport well before our official invasion. Aaron was in a support role and it was his job to do whatever was needed: from market trips to digging trenches to supply convoy runs amid small arms fire to combat runway drops in the dead of night. Our Country’s advanced preparatory efforts for our invasion were continual and demanding. In his short time there, Aaron had seen and done enough to return home and rededicate his life to one of purpose in the Guard versus one of penance.

Aaron returned home in 2003, right before our official invasion, and reconnected with Jessie and his family. He was quieter than before, less certain of his civilian self, and less comfortable in crowds. Jessie patiently coached him through his transition, and their friendship eventually turned into love. In 2005, after welcoming their daughter, the couple married right as Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast. As the National Guard is our Country's domestic response to emergencies, Aaron's Unit was immediately called up and sent to the French Quarter, causing the newlyweds to miss their honeymoon—a trip that, 21 years later, they still have yet to take. He drove supply trucks through town, witnessed all the devastating horrors, and slept on an abandoned runway for two weeks. When no longer needed, Aaron returned home to the normalcy and comforts of his life and, troubled by the catastrophic despair and images he brought with him, took on a new-found commitment to personally take care of others.

In 2006, after learning his Unit would deploy again to Iraq, Aaron volunteered for the chance to join the friends he'd trained with and to prevent another from leaving their family. Aaron landed in Kuwait that August, moved into Taji, Iraq and began driving 5,000 gallon fuel tankers in convoys across war-torn Baghdad for the next 16 months.

In addition to battling insurgents for control of the city, Baghdad in 2006 was the epicenter of a brutal sectarian civil war marked by daily car bombings, targeted assassinations, and rampant fury amongst neighborhoods and enclaves forcibly segregated. As his time in-country progressed, 2007 proved to be the deadliest year for U.S. military personnel. And Aaron was there for it all.

Their fuel convoys traveled almost exclusively at night, navigating dark roadways and volatile districts that compounded the anxiety and uncertainty inherent in their job. Improvised explosive devices (IED's) were increasingly utilized; and crews routinely rolled past their twisted, burnt remains with silent hope they'd not be next. Convoys could consist of as many as 12 fuel tankers; and crews feared the delays when they were stationary, faced suspicious activity and obstacles, or came under small arms fire given the loads they moved. To do his job, Aaron resigned himself to the likelihood of death and tamped down every angst-filled emotion to remain calm and focused on the mission. Aaron had several friends who were injured from IED's and projectiles while there; and while he made it through his 16 months without physical injury, the invisible wounds of PTSD he left with would go on to affect every day of the rest of his life.

After a year and a half away, Aaron returned home in October, 2007 and began the difficult task of transitioning back into civilian life. He'd grown comfortable wearing his uniform, in knowing who he was and in what to do while in his uniform. Civilian lifestyles, interactions and communications now felt foreign, uncomfortable and hard. He settled apprehensively into the quiet comfort of their home and reconnected with his wife fairly easily; but it was the strain of his now 4 year old daughter who barely remembered him that broke his heart. Aaron pushed forward to care for his family, found employment in a series of factories, and avoided thinking about his time in combat. His avoidance, however, didn't stop the demons from letting him know of their presence.

Aaron couldn't understand his anger, the rage that would take over and the way he snapped. Days grew harder and longer, common interactions grew rougher to handle and arguments occurred more frequently. He felt as though he would switch between feelings of cowardice, self-doubt and despair, to anger and rage, to a robotic approach to simply move through life's demands. Memories would flash back and nightmares would disrupt his sleep...and he refused to address the whys behind his struggles. Looking for ways to escape his frustrations and pain, Aaron turned to video gaming and riding. When a friend was moving and unable to take his bike, Aaron bought his first, and only, bike: a 2001 Kawasaki Vulcan 800, and taught himself to ride. He again took to it naturally, and from his very first moment he grasped the mind-clearing freedom and focus it provided him. He rode as frequently as he could—happy for the

commute to work, the trip to the store, or the three hour cruise that let him breathe and reset. Riding gave Aaron the healthy outlet that nothing else could fill, and he was hooked.

On March 30, 2009 Aaron and Jessie experienced the heartbreaking loss of their first son, still born at 40 weeks. Aaron pulled from deep within to muster the strength to care for his wife and daughter, put their needs and grieving first and kept his family moving forward together. Riding gave him his release; but in early 2010, when Jessie was stronger and his family stabilized, Aaron chose to further deal with his grief and anger by volunteering for a third deployment to Iraq.

When a Helicopter Battalion came looking for Blackhawk door gunners, Aaron and a friend raised their hands for the “cool” assignment and the adrenaline release Aaron, in particular, needed. On their first day of predeployment drill, they learned they’d been duped and would, instead, be refueling the helicopters. And in June, 2010 the two landed at Talil Air Base, in southern Iraq to work for the next 15 months in positions neither wanted.

For a man who truly loves driving and moving across the countryside, being tasked as a refueler and stuck on base felt like having his wings clipped. They were dark days, filled with boredom, routine and anger, and an experience far from what he’d hoped for. For 15 months straight, he refueled helicopters day in and day out, and felt he offered nothing more to the war’s effort than a gas station attendant. Iraq was still a volatile country and, despite our drawdown efforts, the base took frequent mortar and projectile attacks. Aaron, further depressed and unbothered by the destructive risks around him, often refused to take protective measures, lapsing further into apathy and the drudgery of his assignment instead.

Aaron had no sooner landed on American soil when he learned his parent Company was deploying to Afghanistan, and he and his battle buddy immediately volunteered again. It was a chance to escape, find the action they wanted, and further avoid everything Aaron had been pushing away. Both were rejected given their short turnaround time: and to this day, as much as he wanted to go... he now believes a fourth combat deployment would have broken him.

Aaron returned home in 2011 barely recognizable to himself, let alone to those who knew him personally. His emotions and volatility were amplified; and rather than acknowledging their cause, he put on his public facing masks to push through the motions of life and provide for his family. Once again, riding helped him move through the tough times in his life and in his mind, but it didn’t stop the outward behaviors and depressive withdrawal. Aaron knew he needed a life change and believed a new job would be the answer. He left the factory to become a Line Therapist helping autistic children. After realizing the joy he found in his new work, Aaron began undergraduate studies in social work at UW-Oshkosh.

In 2013, the couple happily welcomed another son. Building their family was indeed a gift; but struggles to earn enough, pay their bills and put food on their table weighed heavily and further strained Aaron’s coping. After taking a hard look at who he was at home with his family, and how he behaved with them, Aaron decided they deserved better from him. His daughter had been witnesses to all of the ugly struggles and behaviors, and reliving what she went through still brings a tear to his eyes. Jessie had supportively suggested that they needed to work on their issues together, but Aaron believed it was he who owned the responsibility. Wanting a better version of himself, in 2014 he sought mental health treatment for PTSD through the VA and began unwrapping years of compounding invisible wounds. As he moved through the heavy challenges in self-discovery, riding soothed and sorted his pains.

On a drill weekend in 2017, after struggling to meet the physical fitness standards with a service-connected disability, Aaron’s leadership offered him the opportunity to medically retire. It wasn’t what he wanted or planned for, but saw it as his best outcome...and in an instant he lost his identity, his community, his time

away to recharge, and his purpose. After nearly seventeen dedicated years in uniform and three combat deployments, the Sergeant's chapter as a National Guardsman closed; but the weight of service did not, and Aaron has developed a reputation as a result.

While in college he worked the front desk in the Student Veterans Services Office. After graduation, Aaron took a position as the Veteran Services and Education Benefits Coordinator and obtained a masters degree in educational leadership, which helped him guide military-connected students in their academic and personal pursuits. He's made it his personal responsibility to care for, assist and support everyone around him and before him. Over the years, he's struggled with financial hardships and has stretched unbelievably to make ends meet but, in the midst of it all, still found ways to support his parents and in-laws, Veterans in need, a fellow student, the hungry homeless man, organizations, local business owners... almost anyone before himself. It is Aaron's way to put his family's needs first, his children's education, interests and desires, well before a dime is spent on his needs. He's also believed that household expenses and repairs are saved for and done before selfishly paying for endless repairs on his broken-down, unreliable 25 year-old bike...which is why he's not been able to ride for two years. And this loss has taken a hard toll on his mental health.

A person can be helping others every day and still be fighting their own battles: battles no one else can see. Aaron's service-connected disabilities affect him every day: whether it's his PTSD, which requires ongoing therapy and medications, or the migraines and tinnitus that can physically derail him. In the face of all he has done, moved through and offers, he still questions whether he did enough in service, whether his role was impactful enough, whether he will ever be enough...and hence, still questions his worthiness. Aaron's story is not about the mistake that first led him to service: it is about everything he became after that moment and the way he continues to show up for others because of it. Hogs For Heroes had no question about Aaron's worthiness and the immediate, healing impact our gift would have on his mental health struggles; and we believed we should show up for Aaron.

Aaron is a gentle giant who was reduced to tears of surprise, humility and gratitude with our news: not just for the life gift we represented, but for the message we represented. As we talked about bikes, he knew he wanted a touring bike suited to his size and comfort, and he hoped he'd find something in his favorite color: green. After scouring local dealerships and test riding models, Aaron found "the one". Sitting on the showroom floor at Rosholt Motorcycle Company in Rosholt, WI was a 2021 Electra Glide Ultra in Snake Venom with only 355 miles, just waiting for an owner who could ride her. They were great to work with and excited to play a part in our mission...and we were just as excited to make that unbelievable find Aaron's.

Unique to Aaron's bike, it is the fourth of four motorcycles fully sponsored this season alone by the 2025 fundraising efforts of Wisconsin's International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE) Local 139. Through their annual Golf Outing and Poker Run, they proudly hit their goal of raising \$100,000 and subsequently changing the lives of four more struggling Veteran riders. We couldn't be more grateful for the love and more honored by the beautiful support they've provided our Veterans. Aaron will receive his keys during a private Presentation of Keys Ceremony on July 18, 2026 at the Operating Engineers Local 139 Family Picnic so that all their members can see, and feel, the impact of the healing gift they've made possible.