



Meet Veteran Recipient #71: Marine Staff Sergeant Joshua Shores of Ellsworth, Wisconsin

Josh: His Service and the Years Beyond

With a Marine father, and captivating ads, Josh grew up in New Richmond, WI, and wanted nothing more than to be a Marine himself. Despite his mother's tears, he enlisted in the Delayed Entry Program as a junior in high school with an aggressive plan to graduate in January 2004, an entire semester early. Josh left for boot camp the next month and returned in June to cross his high school's graduation stage in his dress blues, despite his principal's request otherwise, and to a standing ovation from a grateful auditorium. Having been offered his choice of specialization, Josh wanted Infantry for the chance to fight. He returned to Camp Pendleton and, as a SAW (Squad Automatic Weapon) Gunner, immediately began training for his first combat deployment.

Josh landed in Ramadi, Iraq in February, 2005 and was based at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Hurricane Point. As a primary stronghold for the Iraqi insurgency and al-Qaeda, Ramadi was one of the most dangerous areas in Iraq. Living conditions were primitive and makeshift: cinderblock barracks with tin roofs, porta johns, and burn pits. The same held true for vehicles that were reinforced with welded plates of steel and sandbags, riddled with bullet holes and marred by prior explosive damage. Mortars, RPGs and IEDs were ever-present threats on base, and on the road...and this was to be his home for the next seven months.

Although the Infantryman trained extensively for warfare and firefights, Josh would be tasked with conflicting directives to win the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people... while simultaneously facing threats that required his trained engagement. His duties would alternate between standing post at The Government Center, a magnet for violence, and patrolling the area's market, government offices, and residential districts. Civilians mixed with unknown threats in plain sight, suicide bombers routinely created chaos and death, explosives targeted their posts and patrols, and enemy sniper attacks provoked firefights. For Josh, urban warfare often left no time to pause and only the trained instinct to fight back and survive. Hearts and minds could wait as war's brutality and casualties repeatedly unfolded around him. And just three months in, he would experience injury and loss that would solidify the young Marine's growing turmoil.

On April 19, 2005 Josh's Humvee hit a roadside IED in the dark of night while returning from patrol. The vehicle took the entire blast leaving the four barely conscious and disoriented, and causing one to lose his toes in the explosion. Three went without any medical assessment or treatment for the blast injury withstood and returned to duty; the fourth was transferred out for surgical care. The very next day, on a raid seeking high value targets, and in the same Humvee from the day before, a 155 artillery round detonated next to their vehicle. The blast knocked the four unconscious...only this time two would be killed, another would take shrapnel to his buttock, and Josh would sustain shrapnel injuries to his leg. Returning to base soaked in the blood of two brothers who bled out in his arms, April 20, 2005 would become the day Josh never stops thinking about. It would be both his Alive Day and the one that still wracks him with Survivors Guilt. The day would seal a life journey hampered by Traumatic Brain Injuries and depressive PTSD, as well as earn him a Purple Heart. In the meantime Josh resumed his duties the very next day, again without medical assessment or treatment, but would complete his tour as a changed man. War grew more confusing as stifled grief and building anger invaded his 19 year-old thoughts and ways. Nightmares began tormenting his sleep. Incidents, actions and memories continued to build over time and create a deep moral injury that would haunt his future reflection, self-worth and very life.

Josh was convinced he'd never make it home, behaved accordingly, and firmly believed he didn't deserve to come home. But he did, returning to California in October, 2005, to his wife and family excitedly waiting on the tarmac. The immediate feelings of relief and serenity brought the hardened warrior to tears; and 30 days later he married his high school sweetheart surrounded by those he loved and fought for. Josh was forward focused; and with no room for deliberation, pushed all he'd been through far away, made jokes to cover the emotions and questions brewing within, and began training for his deployment on a Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU). In June, 2006 he left for six months on the USS Juneau, an old Navy vessel that was decommissioned the following year, to Japan, China and the Philippines. Midway through Josh was offered the opportunity to deploy again to Iraq. Promising his wife he

would not renew his commitment, the Infantryman, instead, extended his contract for the chance to prove he could make better decisions a second time in war.

Preparing for his third deployment required Josh to obtain specialized training to join a new unit called Marine Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC). It was a grueling path that culminated in a one month deployment to the Philippines in November, 2007, to deliver fire operations training for their specialized teams. It was followed immediately by a flight to Afghanistan, rather than Iraq as planned, for the next five months in near continuous battle.

In December, 2007, Josh landed in the Helmand Province and was based at FOB Price. The FOB was a key tactical hub for NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), primarily operated by British and Danish forces. A heavily embedded Taliban presence created a grinding stalemate for the allied forces, and MARSOC came in to support the effort. This time Josh's role in combat was clear: find and engage the enemy. He cleared buildings and villages of insurgents and weapon caches. They gathered intel and moved through areas laden with treachery and explosives, at great personal risk. And they engaged, frequently, in close-quarters firefights that went toe to toe with their adversary. Josh was fully and clearly immersed in the fight; and it was exactly the experience the trained Infantryman dreamed of. And then, his five months complete...Josh was stateside in California. Two days after arriving, he was at a wine and art gathering with his wife—and the culture shock left him bewildered and in a panic. Three months later, in July of 2008, his contract complete and a promise kept, Josh separated from service and immediately lost his purpose, his expertise, his brotherhood, and his identity. All he carried forward were his memories and demons...and they were ready for him.

Josh struggled greatly in his transition to civilian life. Despite his bravado, he spiraled in grief and anger and his outward actions and communications impacted others. He lost focus, isolated and drank excessively to numb the unforeseen challenges and despair he faced. Finding work proved challenging...and the strain of it all impacted his marriage. Looking for the adrenaline he missed and the release he needed, Josh bought a motorcycle; and after two joy-filled years, sold it for the financial relief the young couple needed. Its loss would leave him yearning for another bike for years to come and simultaneously show him the need for therapy. With uncontrolled outbursts, depressive emotions and suicide attempts, Josh took the difficult step forward and sought mental health care through the VA for both himself and his marriage. It was a challenging road, but the couple stuck with the hard, painful work to this day. Theirs has been a path peppered by PTSD and his TBI's, and further marred by personal, family loss and strife as life simply evolved.

Along the way Josh earned a Bachelors Degree in Business, enjoyed an eight year career as a Firefighter and, later in life, welcomed two amazing children into their fold who the couple home-school. Finding traditional employment that is a suitable match for him has been hard; however, Josh is a go-getter with a streak of entrepreneurialism. He is the published author of a recent memoir reflecting his journey as an Infantryman, and is currently channeling his love for drones into a small, developing business. What he doesn't have is anything to support his love for motorcycling and the release he's long hoped to regain, nor does his family have the means for such in their limited budget. He does, however, have a good friend who has been letting him borrow a motorcycle and another who's been encouraging him to apply to Hogs For Heroes for over two years. It was this support, coupled by his ongoing therapy, that led Josh to submit his application this spring for our healing opportunity. What follows is a portion of his submission to us, in his words.

Josh: His Life Since Service...In His Words

"I am a proud American, Marine, husband, and father. My wife and I started dating on September 11, 2001, and we've been together since. Through thick and thin. We were 15 years old when we started dating and married in 2005. My wife stood by my side for all the traumas I brought back home after combat. The drinking, the yellings, the crying, the suicide ideation and attempts, the distance. When I bought my first motorcycle, she did her best to show support, even though we truly couldn't afford it. I rode for two years before deciding to sell it so we could make it financially. She was so proud of me, and I felt so proud of myself for bringing her joy after all I put her through. Having a motorcycle has always been associated with having a luxury item, one I felt that one day I could afford again."

"Life had happened. I began a career as a firefighter. I finally felt I was getting my feet under me and we decided to flip houses together. Between full-time work as a firefighter and working on houses, there was little free time. What time was there was spent drinking to avoid the thoughts and memories from combat. I wanted to stay so busy to

keep from ruminating on my decisions and experiences in combat. I felt that I didn't deserve joy. I deserved a hard life of having to prove my worth to the men we lost. I still felt I needed to earn my life. There was no time for "feeling". My wife grew tired of my behavior. I had two decisions: kill myself or get help. I chose to honor my friends who died and tried to seek help."

"I went to the VA and began a Cognitive Behavioral Therapy program. My wife attended sessions with me for over 1.5 years. Upon completion I went through mental struggles trying to do everything on my own. Our relationship was a rollercoaster of highs and lows for the next eight years or so."

"Then, our son was born, after trying numerous times with three miscarriages. During the last miscarriage I received 3rd degree chemical burns from helping my neighbor pour concrete. My neighbor and I required skin grafts on our legs. I felt the event was karma for combat events... my life, as usual, was my thought. Going back to my son being born, that changed my life. I was now responsible for a life outside of my own. I needed to be there. Every decision I made needed to be intentional. No frivolous buys, no sneaking away from my family to ride a motorcycle. I was already gone for 24 hour shifts in the fire department. My family needed me present, not out having fun, even if I truly needed the wind therapy. But motorcycling was one of the most freeing and mind-clearing activities I've done, and I still miss riding. I've always put my family first financially. Now, with two kids, it's hard to justify the expense when we have them in activities and the extra expenses with the costs of living."

"In January, 2019 I slipped on ice at a fire scene and broke my neck. After realizing my neck would not return to normal I decided to leave the fire service. While training to become a financial advisor, my neck got worse and I found out I needed a disc replacement. My surgery took place a month after my daughter was born. Again I was healing from an injury that would not allow me to ride a motorcycle or get wind therapy. I had a mental breakdown during this time, overwhelmed by survivors' guilt from combat, depression and feeling worthless from my injuries. I took pills and drank a bottle of brandy, thinking my family would be better off without me. When I woke up the next day, I decided God had a different plan and I needed to follow it. I've since been seeing a therapist again at least quarterly and have had hope. I feel like it's becoming my turn to heal and feel like the wind therapy I've longed for over the years would help me."

Putting Josh Back On The Road

Our Hogs For Heroes Advisory Board couldn't agree more and selected Josh to be our 71st Veteran Recipient of a Harley-Davidson that would allow him to return to the road, regain the therapy he's missed, and continue building a healing path forward. We worked quickly to find a bike that comfortably fit his 6'7" frame as he rolled on his beautiful Driftless roads. Sitting on the showroom floor of Reel Brothers H-D in Mauston, WI was a 2024, brand new Road Glide Limited in Sharkskin that instantly captured his heart.

Josh's Presentation of Keys Ceremony will be on Saturday, August 8, 2026 at 12:30 pm at the GasLite Bar & Grill in his hometown of Ellsworth, Wisconsin. We will be hanging out from 11 am - 2 pm for the chance to chat you up and share our mission. Ride on over and explore the stunning region on two or four wheels, grab a bite or beverage at their outdoor bar and share in the joy as we welcome one more injured Veteran rider back to the road!