



Introducing Air Force Veteran and Recipient #72 Senior Airman Matthew Winnekins of Marinette, Wisconsin

Matt grew up in Marinette, WI, and with motorcycles in his family. Having just gotten his drivers license, and after begging his parents to learn to ride, he started on a Maxim 750. On Day 2, he confidently rode straight across the street and directly into a tree. He and the bike were fine; and he was hooked with a passion that would span, and support, his lifetime. He got a loan for his first bike: a Yamaha XT and he rode everywhere for the freedom, belonging and identity he sought.

Struggling to maintain passing grades and foresee a future, it was 9/11 that showed the directionless high school junior a path he could be proud of. Interested in aviation and mechanically inclined, Matt entered the Air Force through the Delayed Enlistment Program and immediately redirected his academic efforts to succeed. In return, he was awarded the Presidential Award for Academic Achievement his senior year and offered specialization as an aircraft mechanic and turboshaft engine specialist. He graduated in June 2002, left for basic training and followed that with Turbo Prop/Turbo Shaft Apprentice Training at Sheppard Air Force Base. Matt was proud and excited, and carried a strength, determination and commitment that would follow him through six years of military service, including multiple combat deployments, and well into his future adult years burdened by PTSD.

Matt's first duty station was Florida's Hurlburt Field, the home of Air Force Special Operations, and he was elated for the opportunity. He immediately bought a Honda CBR; and as his only vehicle, rode everywhere—through every weather condition Florida would offer—for the release he needed. Like many young service members trying to find their place, Matt didn't always feel like he fit in. His effort and ambition were often met with ridicule from peers who did not understand his drive. Still, he kept going, striving to offer and achieve his best.

Life as an Air Force aircraft maintainer was demanding and unpredictable. Their forces would deploy fast and frequently, often with only mere weeks to days notice, around the world and to active war zones for craft maintenance, repair and recovery needs. Within three months of his arrival, Matt was deployed to Djibouti, Africa to service helicopters during Operation Enduring Freedom's (OEF) counter-terrorism efforts. It would provide an introduction that would forever stain his memory and alter his life course.

On June 22, 2003, while en route from Kuwait to Djibouti, and excited for his first deployment, their aircraft was directed to return for coolers for an emergency blood supply. Upon landing they learned the reason for the coolers: an Air Force bomber had dropped ordnance on two Marine helicopters, with mass casualties, in a friendly-fire training incident. It was the first day of Matt's deployment; and his immediate assignment would be one of ghastly recovery—filled with death, dismemberment and destruction. It instantly showed the unprepared mechanic the ugly weight of war and the horrific cost of life, livelihood and family. His only choice was to push forward, suppress the images, and do the work required of him. And it left a mark that changed his life forever.

After returning from Africa, Matt immediately jumped on his bike to ride through the chaos in his mind. It wasn't enough: and he turned to alcohol for comfort, to make friends, and to forget the haunting images and emotions he carried. He met his first wife, fell hard and, enamored with the comforts of love and acceptance, married quickly and welcomed his first son in December, 2004.

From 2005 to 2008, as is the always-ready nature of Matt's work, he deployed to Iraq six times, each over 90 days, to service and recover helicopters. He was based at LSA Anaconda in Balad, Iraq for every tour; and when needed, would be dispatched to other bases and field sites for distressed assets. Each time the familiarity of it all would add to the blur created over years. The same bed, the same dining table, the same buildings, the same terrain, the same birds...details rolled into the others, but life changing moments stuck out.

LSA Anaconda was targeted around the clock with mortar and rocket fire; and as Matt grew fixated on the violence and risk surrounding him, he worked hard to hide his growing fears of death. During one attack, Matt took a near direct mortar round to his hanger. A shell landed on the roof above him at his locker, causing shrapnel to tear through the canvas and lockers and pepper the concrete around him. Physically, he was unharmed...mentally, he was destroyed.

Matt returned home a very different man. He drank to ease the pain and fears he carried and, unable to acknowledge his struggles, isolated himself from the world. Focusing on work and daily activities became challenging; and as he further disconnected, his marriage strained under the burdens he quietly carried. While away, bills had accumulated from excessive spending; and in an effort to catch up on payments, Matt sold his motorcycle and only source of freedom. Then life got harder.

Matt again left behind his young wife and son for another deployment to Iraq. They'd lost a helicopter in a crash, and it unlocked a new level of fear for Matt: flying. Nonetheless, his job required him to fly across Iraq, through dangerous skies, to repair broken or downed rotorcraft. The seasoned technician knew the damage his uncontrolled fears could cause so he, once again, pushed every fear and compromising emotion away to stay focused on his training and safety. With two months left on this tour, on a call home with his wife, Matt learned she was taking their son, and their savings, to Florida to be with someone else. Matt was moved further to the edge of despair; and when he finally returned home, it was to an empty house and bank account. The marriage ended in divorce, leaving him alone and struggling. And to fill his mind and heart, he bought a CBR 1000 to keep him moving forward.

Matt was initially relegated to every other weekend with his son; and as deployments and jobs interfered, to annual summers in later years...and then, to nothing at all. His crippling child support payments, however, never stopped nor did his love from a far. As Matt's life would spiral in turmoil, and near financial ruin, he couldn't help but think his son, too, might be better off without him.

Our military climate at the time did not promote or accept talk of mental health struggles. Matt swallowed every bit of pain, fear and despondency to avoid ridicule and exclusion; and spent his time working, riding and drinking in isolation. As his contract wound down, Matt knew he was not in a frame of mind to deploy again or renew. When an opportunity to join the Honor Guard came knocking, he jumped at the chance to provide his Brothers and Sisters this final, patriotic act and proudly spent his last six months standing in solemn respect for their service contributions. In 2008, when his contract was complete, Matt honorably separated from the Air Force after six years of service to figure out life as an adult in a civilian world he'd not experienced yet.

Leaving the service did not mean leaving the war behind; and Matt's transition as a citizen was marred by the depressive PTSD and anxiety he refused to acknowledge. His first job was as a contractor working on Air Force aircraft, continuing the kind of work he knew best...and was lost due to his drinking. He found another contractor position that took him to Afghanistan for seven months and afforded him an apartment and chance to pay off his CBR. He was doing well for himself; but while on assignment in the Philippines, his drinking again cost him his job. Dejected and unwilling to seek professional help, he instead reached out to his family for support and they brought him, and his motorcycle, back home to Wisconsin, along with his demons. It didn't take long for his self-destructive cycle to restart.

In 2012, Matt met Jada, his now-wife of thirteen years. She showed him a new purpose, believed in him and encouraged him to change his ways. The two relocated for employment and the chance to build their family with a fresh start, but it was a lonely venture that nearly cost them their marriage. To pay for the move back home, and keep his family united, Matt again sold his beloved CBR.

Unaddressed depression, drinking and PTSD, made it difficult for Matt to not only hold a steady job, but to find a job he was passionate about. He tried college, but the strain further compromised his mental health. He worked in corrections; and unhappy in this role, he resorted to drinking after his shifts to soften the anguish and thwart his suicide ideation. As their family grew, so did the pressure to provide: and as is Matt's approach, he pressed on to offer his family the best he could.

With another lost job on his resume, Matt finally found steady, enjoyable work as a project foreman for a commercial security company and his outlook began improving. Recognizing the loss of wind therapy in their lives, Jada surprised Matt with the chance to get back on the road. It would be his first Harley—a Street Glide; and he fell hard for the brand and culture conversion. The couple rode together frequently, strengthening their marriage. They joined the Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association (CVMA), Chapter 45-3, where both Matt and Jada instantly found a sense of belonging, purpose and fortification. Things continued improving for Matt; and while he'd not yet chosen to seek help, he was able to curb his drinking...until, Covid.

Amongst the epidemic's devastating impacts, employers laid off people: and Matt lost the job he loved in 2020. Worsening the situation, a clerical error delayed unemployment financial assistance for nine months and sent Matt spiraling into his darkest times. The couple was dead broke; and Matt turned to drinking and thoughts of suicide as

his out. He credits his bike and his brotherhood for saving his life; but his rollercoaster ride was far from over. After another series of jobs gained and lost, his demons now caused him to become paranoid and distant. His marriage crumbled; and, once again left with just his bike, this time Matt turned his pain, and inner strength, into action.

After years of struggle and a new-found desire to be a better person, husband, father, and employee, Matt began seeking treatment at the VA. That decision mattered, and it redirected his life. He reunited with Jada and they grew their family to four children. He's now enjoyed two years of steady work with Enstrom Helicopters, with people and a product he cares about. Wanting better for their family, the couple began looking for their first home: unfortunately a poor credit history and lingering debt halted the bank's approval. To improve their financial standing, and provide for their children's needs and interests, Matt made the painful choice to sell his cherished Harley this past March.

Matt continues to live with the daily impact of his time in service, but he also continues to fight for stability, purpose and a healthier life. Most impactful has been his 28 years of motorcycle ownership. The healing release and brotherhood gained have been a lifeline: and without a bike, both are at risk. Hogs For Heroes uses a motorcycle as the tool for healing; and we believed our gift will help Matt stay on the healing path he's struggled long and hard to find, and remind him that there are still miles ahead worth riding.

Matt never put two and two together when he saw us coming—he was far too excited to introduce us to Jada as the “Hogs For Heroes people” he'd been telling her about. When we shared the news of his selection, he immediately dropped his head in tears and shook. Hope, joy, release, family and a hell of a ride would soon be back in his life...and he was overwhelmed with the gifts our selection represented. We gave Matt his homework assignment: find the bike that captures your heart and takes you into your healing miles ahead. He'd always dreamed of someday owning the sexy look of a blacked out touring bike...and sitting on Vandervest Harley-Davidson's showroom floor in Green Bay, WI, was a 2022 Ultra Limited with 3,700 miles—barely broken in, with killer pipes to boot. We made his “someday” dream come true for him.

Matt's Presentation of Keys Ceremony will be on Saturday, August 15, 2026 at 2:30 pm at the River Pub's Dog Days Block Party in Peshtigo, WI. He will be one of two Veterans we support that day with our healing tools and the wind therapy they will return. Join us for our last gifting of the year—rain or shine—and help us welcome two more struggling Veterans back to The Road.