



***“...(if you select me), could you not make me look like Rambo.
I was a soldier. I was a Sergeant. I led soldiers.
I define myself as a leader, and nothing more.”***

Meet Army Veteran Neal Long of DePere, Wisconsin Recipient #19

High school graduation came and went without any defined plan for Neal Long. Unsure of his life direction and feeling lost, he happened upon a job working as a service assistant at a Colorado Springs Harley-Davidson dealership. He'd been around bikes growing up, rode with his dad and loved the benefit of taking demo bikes out on weekends. He quickly identified and valued the connection riding provided him with his surroundings and himself. Life was good for Neal: he took a few computer classes, hung with friends, and contentedly wrenched bikes for three years...until 9/11. In the silence of the shop that fateful day, the televisions replayed the devastating news. Our Country had been attacked. On our home land. Hurting our citizens. On our collective watch. Those messages and images cycled in Neal's mind, and it was enough to provide him with the direction and purpose he'd been searching for. He enlisted in the Army two weeks later.

At the time many reacted similarly; in fact, Neal patiently waited almost 2 years for a basic training class to become available. He eagerly worked through it in 2003 and specialized in Military Police, believing it would provide him with more employment opportunities upon separation. Young and hopeful, Neal never imagined the toll war would take on him or his mental health. He never envisioned himself as a young man separating, and unable to work again. He never thought about the personal costs to him, or his family, as he departed for each of his three combat deployments. Instead, he thought about his Country, it's liberties, and the people he loved. Among the numerous medals earned and the pride he feels for his efforts, Neal also brought home PTSD: a deeply invasive, invisible injury that left him 100% disabled. And when asked if he'd do it again, knowing the heavy personal toll it took... his answer was a resounding "yes".

Neal left for Germany in 2004, trained, then flew to Kuwait to move north into Iraq. He worked initially to establish Camp Cuervo in Baghdad's war zone and, once secured, worked to occupy the Iraqi police stations and rebuild their police force with training and weaponry. Every day they patrolled the congested city checking stations amongst peril, hostility and dissent. Every day they moved door to door to evaluate and eliminate threats. While out, they served as back-up for others encountering firefights and IEDs within the city, and every day Neal saw the injuries and death toll mount. Every day he trained others and grew proud of his developing leadership. He described himself as a "hard charger" and, after a year in

Iraq with countless enemy confrontations, he was promoted to Sergeant E5 in minimum time... and then sent back to the States.

He shipped back reluctantly having found purpose in leading others despite the fear, violence and images seared in his mind. Wanting more, he buried his emerging struggles and transferred to Fort Lewis in 2005 where he received permission to redeploy to Iraq almost as soon as he hit the ground. This time Neal joined a unit as a Team Leader conducting route clearance: it was their job to drive 12 hour shifts on the main supply route and look for IEDs. Every day. Look for IEDs. It was a dangerous, high-risk assignment and Neal can't even count how many times they found IEDs and were hit with gunfire or explosions in the process. He does, however, still recount the names of each Brother he lost, and each Brother and Sister injured, during this rough tour. This time when his deployment ended, Neal was ready to come home. He knew something was wrong and he knew he wasn't the same; what he didn't know was what to do about it. So he chose denial: he pushed away the fears and anxiety, and he tamped down images and names. He went about working on base, ignoring the PTSD growing within, until he deployed again a year later, for another one year assignment in Iraq.

In 2007, during this, his third deployment in four years, Neal assumed the position of Squad Leader in command of four teams who quickly developed the skill and reputation for difficult missions. While his leadership motivated many, accomplished much, and earned him a Bronze Star for meritorious service...the strain of it's responsibility increasingly weighed on him. He was mentally exhausted by the hundreds of trips outside the wire with soldiers in his care. He grew fearful of others being hurt after directions he gave or choices he made, and he took more personal risks to avoid placing another soldier in jeopardy. Growing weary of war's demands and preparatory efforts, he realized this needed to be his last deployment. After a year in Iraq, he received a letter from The Red Cross indicating his eldest brother was in hospice and nearing death. Neal took terminal leave for two months and realized his crushing personal need to begin processing separation and disability claims.

While home Neal married Sarah, a fellow Army MP whom he met, and secretly dated, while deployed together. He bought a Buell to reclaim the peace and connection riding once provided him. He sought medical care, counseling and started medications; and to further numb the pain of the war still raging within, he turned to alcohol. Two years after marrying, Neal and Sarah welcomed the first of their four children. In order to pay for the costs of moving and renting a larger place, Neal sold his beloved motorcycle and stayed home to care for his children. He occasionally borrowed his dad's bike and dreamt of days riding dealership bikes; but the demands of family life simply came first and he repeatedly delayed buying one to pay for the next household need. Without a release, Neal continued drinking excessively to deal with the demons that haunted his days and affected his sleepless nights, and he continued isolating himself from people and social situations. Depression and mood swings took over and clouded his judgement and memory... and together he and Sarah fought to combat war's excessive toll and continue building a life for their family.

Caring for his family is Neal's sole purpose and focus, and he lights up when he speaks of his children. Creating tea parties, games, Cinnamon Roll Sundays, and camping trips gives

him great pleasure... but also keeps him contained on the home-front and without personal interests or outside involvement. With a service dog to assist him, he's lessened his anxiety and hypervigilance in public and crowds. Wanting to be a better father, he's been sober now for two years and continues to focus on incremental steps in healing. Sarah notes he rarely smiles and both feel the need for him to gain personal release and social support, but opportunities are limited or too uncomfortable still. Learning how hard Neal has worked and how far he has come, Hogs For Heroes thought the next step in his healing journey should be to get back on a motorcycle and find support and involvement in the rider community.

"I've never seen him smile so much" mused Sarah after we surprised Neal at lunch and, in record time for us, found him the Harley of his dreams just 3 hours later. He is a kind, sensitive man who was extremely excited by, and appreciative of, his selection. We were stoked to walk back into the arms of our friends at Vandervest Harley-Davidson in Green Bay, and overwhelmed by their generosity in putting Neal on a 2019 Road Glide, in Twisted Cherry, with only 6,800 miles on it. They were ecstatic to work with us again, too, and included a new set of pipes that gave Neal's heart the extra rumble he loved...and VVHD made it all happen under budget!

Our goal is to get our Recipients on the road as soon as we can and get them connected with those who understand just as quickly. Neal had been thinking of joining the Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association (CVMA) if he ever had the chance to ride again. In a beautiful twist of fate, CVMA Chapter 45-3 in the Fox Valley just happened to be hosting a benefit ride for us on this coming June 12, and we decided that would be a perfect place to introduce Neal to the new family and friends he was searching for. We apologize for the short notice on this one, friends, but our focus puts our Veterans first and this man needs to ride. Therefore, we will be hitching our 19th Presentation of Keys to the end of the their benefit ride!

The CVMA Benefit Ride for Hogs For Heroes is on Saturday, June 12 with registration at 10:00 at The Bee Hive Barn & Grill in Neenah, WI. All vehicles are welcome with departure at 11:00 and plans to return to the Bee Hive by 5:00 pm. **Hogs For Heroes will be at The Bee Hive from 4 pm - 8 pm, and take the stage at 5:30 p.m. for our 19th Presentation of Keys!** Come hang, have dinner and enjoy live music by Minus One from 6:00 - 10 pm. The Bee Hive will generously be directing 10% of their food and beverage sales back to us during this time-- so be sure to fill up on some great food for a cause!