



## **Introducing our 20th Recipient: Vietnam Army Veteran David Ronn of Fond du Lac, WI**

Army Veteran David Ronn of Fond du Lac, Wisconsin recounts a troubled childhood, noting himself to be a “terrible teenager”. School was not his thing, nor was staying out of trouble. A string of bad decisions and temperamental behaviors led Dave to run away from home. He hitchhiked from Chicago to Los Angeles, only to be robbed, arrested and returned home within the month. His father gave him an ultimatum for staying under his roof: remain in school or work and pay his own way. Wanting an option other than finishing high school, the Army agreed to take him on at age 17. Six months later Dave was trained as a Combat Medic and deployed to Landing Zone English in Bongson, Vietnam with Company B of the 173rd Airborne Brigade for the first of three tours from 1968-1970.

While in Vietnam, Dave worked to provide triage and emergent medical care for those Brothers brought by helicopter directly from combat; and, to this day, the sound of a helicopter sends his mind reeling. He saw savage wounds and disfiguring injuries he’d never imagined at a tender age; and those long-ago, vivid images still fill his nightmares today. He heard thousands of pain-filled cries and prayers for help; and remorse for what he couldn’t do continues to eat at him every day. Dave worked simply and quickly to treat injuries with minimal supplies, capabilities and space; and he did this work within the high target zone of his base airstrip. Enemies and Agent Orange littered his perimeter-- and imparted the hypervigilance, anxiety and cardiac disease he endures today. Every single day Dave’s young heart and mind reeled from the sheer number of soldiers he cared for; and he learned to survive by hiding his feelings deep within. And every day that he did his job for his Country, and for his Brothers, he did it underground... literally buried under the dirt.

Dave worked in a field hospital made of large Conex containers buried in a massive trench to provide hidden, contiguous sealed compartments and treatment bays. He accessed tunnels for newly injured soldiers and fresh air at shift’s end, then faithfully followed them in for the daunting, claustrophobic care they provided...buried under the dirt. For almost two years Dave worked in these conditions to save as many as he could; and carried the torturous burdens of his time, and guilt for those he couldn’t save, for the rest of his now 70 year-old life.

His contract complete, Dave returned stateside at 20 years old to a Country who condemned and harassed those who served, a community who wouldn’t support him and a family who didn’t understand him. At the time he believed silence was the better approach and, in an effort to carve out a future he chose to forget his past. He got rid of his uniform, denied his participation in the military and Vietnam War, and deeply buried every memory he could. He fought his dreams by staying awake long hours. He made friends with those who didn’t care enough to ask about his history. And he turned to alcohol, spending entire paychecks simply to numb the pain and despair he couldn’t shake. Recognizing his emerging struggles, Dave sought care in 1971 and was told nothing was wrong. And so he pressed on.

Along the way he reconnected with a teenage love, Jacqueline: his now wife of almost 50 years. They married, hopeful and excited, and worked to establish their young lives. But despite Dave’s efforts to deny and forget, the deeply rooted pains from war steadily reached into his daily life. Anger, depression and anxiety began showing themselves in home and work situations. Looking for a change, he and Jaci moved to Kenosha, WI where he found work at the American Motor Company. Unfortunately, his demons made the move as well.

They settled into a home and work life and eventually welcomed their first daughter; only to have their hearts ripped apart by a genetic disorder that claimed her life at just five months old. Their faith and love strong, the two managed to push forward despite Dave's internal crumbling. When the AMC plant closed in 1976 jobs were scarce and tension was high; so Dave reenlisted with the Army for secure employment the next 12 years. He worked again as a Medic stateside and eventually became a Recruiter. The again-growing family moved bases six times over the course of their next years and welcomed two more daughters into their lives. Dave found comfort in his military life. It made it easier to stay focused in the present, but his past never left him. Drinking worsened, behaviors spiraled and unable to meet the Army's weight requirements, he separated in 1988. Again, Dave sought mental health care from the VA; and was, again, told nothing was wrong. They both knew better... as did family and friends; and yet, he pressed on.

It wasn't until 1989 when he came across a flier for Bamboo Bridge, an emotional support group for Vietnam Veterans, that he connected with others, began sharing his struggles and finally felt understood and validated. Unfortunately later that same year, tragedy again struck his family as their 11 year old daughter was killed in a motor vehicle accident. Lost in their grief, Dave credits his faith for pulling them through the unimaginable; but the heart-break further allowed the undiagnosed pains of PTSD and Survivor's Guilt to seep through. He became more hypervigilant and non-trusting. Bamboo Bridge helped, but it wasn't enough. His nightmares grew markedly and his mood swings escalated. He floated from job to job as he was quick to argue and hard to work with. He alienated people, fought continuously and drank more to avoid the darkness he knew. It wasn't until 2010 when the V.A. finally recognized his emotional injuries from war and he began getting the help he had desperately needed for the past forty years.

Dave and Jaci are fighters. They are determined individuals who are made of an impressive strength that allowed them to press on despite the exhaustive years of "hell" Jaci recalls living through. They have compassionate hearts that want to support others and understand, perhaps more than most, the cruel hardships of life. Dave continued to work, and volunteer, with Bamboo Bridge for the next 12 years, encouraging and supporting other Veterans as they shared their emotional injuries, all the while dealing with his own. After a lengthy inpatient admission in 2011, Dave pushed himself to continue helping others and became the first president of a Wisconsin nonprofit, Vets Journey Home, an off-shoot of Bamboo Bridge, and still facilitates Veteran retreats for emotional healing today.

Amongst the dark times, Dave filled his many years with joy of family, boating and fishing. He finds tremendous healing in volunteerism: he devotes his time in worship as an Altar Servant and in caring for Veteran's needs and flag services. He is active in the American Legion, has been a Post Chaplain, and is a VFW life member. Back in 1980, Dave was offered a motorcycle for a dirt cheap price. Although he had never rode, he jumped at the chance for the adrenaline rush and cultivated a 40 year love for riding. It became his escape and chance to focus; and it became the way in which connected with others, including his now Legion Rider District 2 family. He always bought what he could afford--never what he wanted, and never the Harley he dreamed of. Without hesitation, he cites riding as his ability to find the better person within himself; and, believing PTSD affected the life of his wife and youngest daughter, he wants only to offer his family and friends a better version of himself. Unfortunately, as Dave has aged, arthritis has taken its toll and affects his ability to both safely mount and ride his unreliable 34 year old Honda Goldwing. Wanting to assure this Veteran's stable and continued riding years, and recognizing the tremendous healing and peace it provides him and those he serves, Hogs For Heroes decided we needed to up his wheels by putting him on a Trike and his first Harley-Davidson.

Surprising our Veterans with news of their selection is always a powerful and emotional moment: Dave humbly hung his head and cried. Years of personal pain, struggles and sacrifice were, once again, recognized and supported for him. And that is exactly what our healing gift is intended to do. Equally emotional, is taking our Recipient shopping to find their dream ride. H-D inventory across the nation remains unbelievably tight... and preowned Trikes are even harder to find. Collectively, Wisconsin's H-D dealerships had listed six within our price range, and three sold before our day's shopping trip. Different times call for different strategies and, shockingly, we found a beautiful 2016 Tri Glide with only 8,000 miles

on her at Southeast Sales in Milwaukee-- and, wow! They were incredibly generous and appreciative of the chance to be involved in our mission...and made this otherwise out of range Trike possible for Dave.

We will be bringing this red beauty back to Fond du Lac to hand over the keys in a ceremony hosted jointly by his Plymouth Legion Post #243 family and his hometown Legion Post #75 friends on Saturday, July 24 at the American Legion Post 75's Foxhole in Fond du Lac. Join us! We'll be hanging out from 2 pm - 4pm to enjoy the camaraderie of one another, and will "take the stage" for our Presentation of Keys Ceremony at 3:00 pm and give Dave his keys to a dream. The Foxhole Bar will be open so that we can toast all who served as we support this one.