



Introducing Veteran Recipient #23: Marine Sergeant Matthew Wagner of Belleville, Wisconsin

Helping This Veteran Make Himself a Priority

Matt Wagner came from a family rich in military service; and, as a high school senior in Waupun, WI, he, too, wanted the personal challenge the Marine Corps offered and the chance to prove his doubters wrong. He saw military service as a building block for both a college education and future career; and in 1999, after graduating and spending his senior summer riding his first motorcycle, Matt left for boot camp. He left confident and optimistic; and, he returned home four years later a completely different and desolate man. A man who struggled for ten long years before realizing the deeply invasive toll war had taken on his person, his character and his life. And then, he did something about it.

After settling in at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina, Matt, a Landing Support Specialist, brought his motorcycle to base for the release and joy riding provided him. Two years in he was attached to the 26th MEU and had seen parts of the world he'd never imagined. Life was good: he'd just met his future wife and was ready to hit the Mediterranean Sea for another tour across the Atlantic. On a field march in August 2001, Matt stepped in a hole and strained his knee; and, fearing an injury would prevent his upcoming deployment, he kept it quiet. After watching the eviscerating horror of 9/11 with his platoon that fateful day, Matt knew his destiny would be forever changed. His unit was special-operations capable and already prepped to deploy; so, rather than head to the Mediterranean as planned, he found himself bound for the Arabian Sea. In late 2001, in the middle of the night, Matt stepped on the shores of Pakistan to prepare for war.

His Platoon was assigned to an airfield and began preparing it to accept aircraft loaded with supplies and equipment. For almost three months, he unloaded and reloaded aircraft after aircraft, sometimes working 24 hours a day, with an undiagnosed knee injury. Adding to his physical pain were the horrific living conditions they endured. He went 67 days without a shower, eating nothing but MRE's, and stayed in makeshift hangers under constant threat and exposure to the elements. Every day his fear of not returning home grew; and every day that fear and danger fed his developing PTSD.

When his deployment ended and he was back at Camp Lejeune, Matt knew he was a changed man with a different life perspective, but couldn't see just how intrinsically changed he was. He pushed aside all he could and put on the stiff upper lip the culture demanded. He became the Hazmat Safety Manager to finish out his last year and eliminate the potential for redeployment. But in January, 2003, with nine months left on his contract and against unprecedented odds, Matt's entire Battalion was called to deploy to Kuwait for the Iraq invasion, along with a possible extended discharge date.

Once there, and with no need for a Safety Manager, Matt's position was changed to Convoy Driver in a Seven Ton transport vehicle. He drove six months straight, every single day, on treacherous routes from Kuwait to Iraq and back again: a route littered with threats and tragic aftermath. It fed an anxiety he needed to hide and built a warehouse for memories to torture him long after his service had ended. The scenes he saw are forever etched in his mind. The smells of war and its destruction are

ingrained in his senses. The constant tension would later impact his physical health and the demands on his strained knee became a meniscus tear that later required two surgeries. The frequent loud noises of explosions conditioned his body to startle and their triggering incidents still drive the hypervigilance he maintains today. The experiences of both deployments combined to affect Matt for the rest of his life... and turn him into the man he would become, both good and bad.

In September of 2003, Matt's deployment ended with a one day notice: he packed his things, flew home to a parade reception, and was given three weeks to check out and develop a plan for civilian life. There was no guidance, resources or directions for what to do and where to go. At just 22 years old life as he knew it had simply ended; and, there was no one to talk to about what he just went through. He left base with a few other buddies who processed their life events with solitude, bewilderment and alcohol—and enough of it to the point of depleting his checking account. Alone, confused and obstinate, Matt spiraled in a sea of bad decisions; and the one thing that gave him peace of mind...his ability to get on his bike and be free.

Matt eventually returned to Waupun later that year for the support of his family and the chance to rebuild. Denying his pain and tamping down his memories, he moved toward a future that included several jobs and academic pursuits; and in 2006, he married Joi, the woman he loved from first sight. His next best decision was joining the Police Academy where he immediately fell in love with its structure and impactful work. But just as soon as he found hints of a better life, the nightmares and panic attacks would pull him under again in waves of angst and irritability. It was a vicious cycle that lasted ten years before his wife issued the ultimatum of therapy or divorce. In 2013 Matt took his Marine attitude into his first weekly session and found himself over the next six months reeling with the benefits of release as he learned to talk and cry. He was vulnerable and open, scared and relieved; and every chance he had, he rode to clear his mind and heal his aching heart. And every chance he and his wife could find, they rode to strengthen their relationship and find happiness together.

Matt has worked hard over the past several years to rebuild, invest in himself and develop coping skills to manage his struggles; and in doing so he found joy and purpose in community service and leadership. He has been a Police Officer for the past sixteen years, working first with Oregon and now, as a Lieutenant, with the Cottage Grove Police Department. Along the way he received Associate, Bachelors and Masters degrees to strengthen the leader he was destined to become. He is a kind, genuine and open man who continues counseling and has learned to tell his story to inspire others. As an advocate for mental health awareness, Matt helped develop an Officer Wellness program to support and manage the demands of their stress-filled profession. Today he bravely steps forward to publicly share his personal story to help others know there are options, resources and support.

Along the way Matt and Joi carved out a life together and welcomed two children, a daughter and a son. His opportunities to ride became less as family demands increased; and, as bills began to accumulate and savings became more necessary, Matt sold his bike in 2014 to pay off bills. They live a modest life; and prioritizing his family's needs and stability above all, he believes his dream of buying another bike is selfish. He's not, however, stopped longing to ride and dreaming of a someday chance. Hogs For Heroes felt that Matt, a man who sacrificed much for our Country and uses both his character and struggles to serve others, should have wind therapy back in his life for his own personal peace and ongoing healing.

We surprised Matt with our news and, over the course of a three hour dinner learning more about him, we knew our Board made the right choice as this humble man expressed both his bewilderment

and gratitude through tears. The shock lessened a little bit more when he found the bike of his dreams sitting on the floor at Open Road Harley-Davidson in Fond du Lac, WI... and then he took it for a spin sealing the deal. This pre-loved 2018 Ultra Limited not only met every wish he had, its two-tone color scheme sported his lifelong favorite color—green, and it immediately captured his heart.

Unique to this bike, it has been paid for by the fundraising efforts of the Firefighters Local 311, a Dane County Union that represents over 500 Firefighters and Paramedics, nearly a third of whom are Veterans or active service members. We think it's a beautiful match for this dedicated servant that his bike come from those who couldn't more fully understand the pressures, and pride, found in supporting the emergent needs of their community.

We're bringing that bike closer to home and **we'll be hanging at Harley-Davidson of Madison on Saturday, May 7, 2022 from 11 am - 1 pm**, where those awesome folks jumped at the chance to host our double gifting (and graciously welcome in another dealership's bike!)! Come learn more about our unique mission, meet some of our prior recipients and welcome our two newest recipients back to The Road. **Our Presentation of Keys Ceremony will begin promptly at 12:00 pm--** and trust us, you don't want to miss this emotional and special moment.