

Meet Recipient #33
First Sergeant Mike Erickson, Army Veteran of Oconto, Wisconsin

“I came back. Twice. I didn’t lose limbs. I still had my daughter. I can hurt, and I can cry and I can whine...but I can’t complain. I can deal with it.”

–telling us how he’s dealt with his pain for so many years.

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Motorcycling’s cool vibes caught Mike’s attention as a kid growing up in Green Bay, Wisconsin, and laid the foundation for a lifelong dream of someday owning a Harley-Davidson. He no sooner got his driver's license when he bought his first motorcycle, long before owning a car, and rode everywhere he could simply for the peace and freedom he learned early on. As graduation neared Mike planned to attend a business college; but when financial aid fell through, he shaped up Plan B and joined the Army for the GI Bill’s educational support. He signed on his 18th birthday, graduated high school in 1988 and sold his bike before boot camp that fall.

Mike became a Combat Signaler, specializing in wire/radio communications and technology, headed to Airborne School at Fort Benning, Georgia, then stationed a year in South Korea. He transferred to the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg in North Carolina and worked communications maintenance. With the Gulf War’s start, Mike deployed to Saudi Arabia in August 1990 as a Team Leader for nine months. During Desert Shield’s build up, the Combat Signaler worked directly with the Battalion Commander to relay and manage mission information. He lived and trained in primitive desert conditions often sleeping on the ground and without showers for weeks at a time, and he rucked long hours to train for the war’s next phase. As Desert Storm’s aerial attack began, his unit moved into Iraq to cut off the country’s supply routes and secure the area. He was 20 years old and the entire experience hit every check box for adventure on his young list. Still an “invincible kid”, he downplayed the hardships to his feet and back—jumping out of planes was awesome and being in war was worth it to him. And since he wasn’t “personally impacted” by the violence surrounding him, he didn’t give much credence to the mark it would all leave.

Mike returned to Fort Bragg to complete his four-year contract and, seeing the war's devastating impact on his fellow soldiers, quickly compartmentalized his experiences and moved forward with the job at hand. With prior academic dreams calling, he separated on his 22nd birthday and returned to Green Bay. He coped with the transition by staying busy: he jumped back into work, hit the gym frequently and enjoyed the social life of the age. Over the next years he explored academia and career options and eventually received his Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration. Learning he would become a father pushed back his plans to ride, but he believed he could save again. His daughter became his life and heart’s focus; and while on a trip to Germany together, her young mind asked why he didn’t “play Army” anymore. After believing he’d never go back in, the question and its impact weighed heavily on him. Nine years after separating from the Army, Mike joined the Army Reserves in April, 2001 for the experience and camaraderie he was missing and without thought as to how the world may change just months later.

In his early 30’s now, Mike again pushed hard to keep busy and stay in shape...but the plantar fasciitis that affected both feet rucking all those years ago, quickly worsened with each requiring surgery in 2003. And the parachuting injury to his young back, the one he dismissed back in the day, now strained further as he tackled life today. He worked in Corrections and Security and took short-term military assignments to further his career and pay the bills; and simply dealt with the pain to move forward. Understanding the demands of two concurrent wars on his fellow soldiers, Mike knew

deployment was inevitable; and with a young daughter to think about, he volunteered for a one year tour to Iraq with a California Civil Affairs Battalion in 2005.

Mike landed in Iraq's hostile Samarra region where outsiders weren't welcome, U.S. resentment was high, and violent attacks were common. As a Team Sergeant in Civil Affairs, he built relationships with Iraqi citizens and facilitated the area's rebuild. He moved through villages to build trust, secured resources and contractors, and assessed project progress. Every single day he felt the escalated tensions, he saw all the horrors of war, and he heard the attacks and bombings around him. With his daughter in mind, he quelled the rising anxieties to safely move through the psychological challenges his mission brought. While on base in 2006, a rocket struck an occupied vehicle nearby and in running to help the soldiers hit, Mike "tweaked" his knee. He originally walked it off and, without treatment or rest, managed the increased swelling and pain to complete his deployment's responsibilities. He left Iraq and again separated himself and his mind from a second time in war; but his pain would again be a constant reminder of what he went through.

Home again in Green Bay, he jumped back into life and work routines and bought another motorcycle as his "deployment gift" to help his transition. His daughter filled his heart; but now he needed to clear his mind and ease his struggles. It worked for a while; but his exhausted body and mind responded by socially withdrawing. Wanting more privacy and comfort for his daughter, Mike sold his motorcycle in 2008 for a downpayment on a house and began saving for another bike, never imagining this would be the last bike he could afford.

As a Reservist, Mike took a full time position within Green Bay's 432nd Civil Affairs Battalion as a Staff Administrative Assistant and completed required drills, stayed in shape and sought additional training to further his career. With increasing pain from the demands of his job, working towards military retirement became a long, arduous journey that he frequently questioned but pushed through nonetheless. So when a chance to establish another retirement plan arose, he purchased a small Oconto bar, named it Mookies Pub, and opened it for weekend hours. In an effort to improve his left knee, Mike went through three different knee surgeries; but the damage had been done, and now his other knee, hips and spine were affected by his altered gait. Doctors refused to prescribe narcotics for pain management and told him to "just deal with it"--and he did, because he'd been doing that all along--but in turn, Mike drank more to ease his pain and withdrew even further. In 2018, having hit his magic number of 21 years in service, the First Sergeant chose military retirement. Since this meant losing his government day job as well, Mike started a new full-time job in the role of Logistics Coordinator with LeTourneau Plastics in Oconto and set his sights on recovering, saving and riding again.

As part of the plan, Mike knew he needed to find support and stop isolating himself. He longed for the camaraderie he had in service and believed getting another motorcycle and joining a riders group could give him that. Life, however, intervened again; and in 2020 Mike's small rural bar, like so many across our nation, suffered Covid's devastating blow, set him upon hard financial times for the next few years and pushed his dream further out. His knee had now become a bone on bone situation that affected his ability to work and open his bar. After years of being told he was too young for knee replacement, he finally had that done in 2022. While he's now moving forward in recovery, financially he still didn't have room for the motorcycle he dreamed of. Hogs For Heroes admired Mike's dedication to his Country and the grit shown in doing the job at hand, despite pain and hardship. While we can't take away his physical pain, we can help make his "someday" dream come true now, ease the struggles he carries, and put him on his first Harley-Davidson.

A quiet and humble guy, Mike was reduced to tears upon hearing our news, never believing he was deserving of such a gift for "doing his job" and above the needs of so many others. As it had been 14

years since he owned a bike, let alone his first Harley, we sent him out to test ride models and find the one that made him smile. Like a kid in the candy store, his heart and mind exploded with options; and he found his perfect fit at Doc's Harley-Davidson in Bonduel, WI. This 2018 HD Ultra Limited, in Gray/Black Denim, spoke to him almost immediately and its fit provided the exact comforts his body needed. Doc's team fabulously stretched our dollars to keep this beauty under budget and put this Veteran on his dream of 36 years! As if that kind of support wasn't enough, Doc's is enthusiastically hosting his Presentation of Keys Ceremony on Saturday, May 6, 2023 at 12:00. Join us as we support this Veteran's ongoing healing by returning him to the road on his first Harley!