



**Introducing Veteran Recipient #47:
Marine Andrew Beck of Superior, Wisconsin**

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“It took me several years, including a failed first marriage, to realize I wasn’t okay. When I served, the mentality was “suck it up”. Immediately after returning from Iraq, a member of my unit filed a PTSD claim. We all made fun of him, including myself. It was a massive gut-check to admit ten years later that I had mental health issues. Not only was I ashamed of myself for making fun of him back then, I was ashamed of myself for not being strong enough to handle my own issues.”

Andy Beck grew up in Cloquet, MN, raised primarily by his divorced, single mom. Andy knew he was “a poor kid” in town; and although they had shelter and food on the table, he learned early on that to achieve anything in life he would have to be self-reliant and hard-working. He worked several jobs from age 14 on to buy his first car, pay the insurance and afford the extras his mother couldn’t provide. After graduating high school in 1999, Andy struggled finding a better path forward. Without prospects or resources, and unable to afford advanced education, Andy enlisted in the Marine Corps to escape his small town and access GI Bill benefits. It was a time of peace for our Country; and so thoughts of danger or the resulting deep personal impact he would endure for the rest of his life, never really entered his young mind.

Andy’s path hit a few bumps through boot camp, but he determinedly pushed through challenges to make the cut. He scored high enough on his aptitude tests to have his pick of jobs; but when the young, strapped man heard “artillery” and “blow things up”, along with a \$5,000 bonus, it solidified his specialization choice: Fire Direction Control Man. The Artilleryman landed at Camp Pendleton, CA in December of 2000 where, after several field operations, they learned he was great on the headsets talking to the gunline and giving them firing commands. It quickly became his role and he was thrilled for the key position. Life was good; and Andy felt like he was “at the best summer camp ever” with a cool fraternity of brothers the introvert hadn’t experienced before. He had his first Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) deployment scheduled for January 2002; and having reconnected with a high school girlfriend, set a wedding date of late September, 2001. With so many great things lining up, Andy began thinking about how he’d get the motorcycle license he’d dreamt of since childhood. And then...9/11.

On September 11, 2001, Andy was in the hot desert at 29 Palms, CA, training for deployment. In an instant, that “summer camp” environment evaporated and every bit of fierce preparatory and retaliatory training clearly refocused their future reality. Bases were shut down, plans changed and all leave was immediately canceled. His command, however, allowed Andy to attend his wedding 11 days later, but required he and his new bride return the following day. The departure of his Western Pacific MEU, although

routine, was moved up; and Andy boarded the USS Bonhomme-Richard for a six-month deployment to Kenya and back. In April, 2002, after starting their return, the crew learned of a mandatory two-month extension as the ship changed course and settled off the coast of Afghanistan. The ship's Harrier Jets took off daily for combat missions and Andy's Battalion prepared to be sent ashore and directly into combat at any time. While it never happened for him, the peripheral positioning and involvement would contribute to his rising anxiety disorder. Andy returned home in July; and believing he'd now be "in the clear" for another deployment, the couple looked toward his contract's end, their return home and chance to start their family. Two months later, Andy's Battalion received deployment orders to Iraq: they would fly out January, 2003 for the initial push into Iraq.

Andy landed in Kuwait to nothing but tents and port-o-johns; and there they spent two months staging before invading Iraq. While equipment and supplies rolled in, they lived with nothing but a 3-foot sleeping mat on a plywood floor for personal space. They ate MRE's and did laundry in boxes lined with garbage bags; and sand invaded every imaginable space and crevice. They unloaded, set up supplies and trained on equipment and munitions during long, exhaustive days. And while the temperatures weren't overly distressing at the time, the burn pits absolutely were. Fires burned continuously as they managed their Camp waste: packaging, environmental, equipment, human and chemical—if it wasn't needed it was burned. An E3 at the time, Andy took shifts tending the fires; but every minute of every day while in Iraq he breathed in all the environmental pollutants. It was desolate and uncomfortable living for sure; and despite the extensive preparations, talk and tension, Andy was still unwilling to recognize that he was about to go to war.

In March, 2003, while still in Kuwait, their Battery started firing artillery into Iraq from their Howitzer. Trained as the headset operator, Andy gave the command to fire their first rounds of war, and the multitude that followed. Even then it didn't seem real to him: for as an artillery unit, they typically didn't see their impact area. It wasn't until the following day's light, as they packed up and moved into Iraq, did he see the grave results of their shelling. Burned convoys, dead bodies, building rubble along with destroyed homes, livestock, and livelihoods...gone. In the Humvee he drove, he had a front row view of the mass carnage he helped create. For the next thirty days, this would be his life: shoot, pack, drive through the devastation, and then repeat the cycle as they made their way to Baghdad. For thirty days straight he told himself that he was fine. He told himself it was war and it didn't matter. He told himself he was a Marine, doing his job; and so therefore, he told himself to suck it up and move on. And he did just that, never thinking about what this might personally cost him later in life.

After that first month of invasion, Artillery was no longer needed; and so, they became an occupation force in Tikrit as they waited for their return stateside. It was during this time that Andy picked up a gastrointestinal ailment that caused him to become violently ill for several days; and despite the treatment he would receive, it would become one more devastating disorder that would forever change and haunt his life. Their mission complete, Andy returned to Kuwait five months after landing there, anxious for his flight

home and ready to put the harrowing experience behind him. Instead, plans changed again: and they boarded a ship for a slow two-month cruise home where they had nothing to do but ruminate over what they'd just been through. En route they were offered a single 30-minute class on transitioning that Andy summed up as "You've been through some stuff...don't be an asshole to your family." He returned to Camp Pendleton in July, turned in his rifle and was given three weeks off to convince himself he was fine.

Life on base went back to business as usual. There were no supportive resources or communications amongst the tough Marines; but there was unfortunate laughter and mockery for those who were overtly struggling with what they had been through, what they had seen and what they had done in war. It was the ill-fated culture and norm of the times...and Andy was just as guilty of participating in the ridicule as he was of denying his own struggles. He knew he had returned with stomach issues, but easily chalked it up to readjustment; and while he couldn't put his finger on the change then, he knew enough to protectively forget all that happened and bide his time until separating ten months later.

With the military behind him, the young couple moved closer to home and eventually settled in Ashland, WI...and his post-war issues moved with him and patiently waited to slowly expose themselves over his next 20 years. Andy picked up odd jobs; and again unsure of his future path, he accepted an invitation to do a Fire Service ride-along. The excitement and purpose immediately clicked; and enthralled with the chance to help others, he signed with the Ashland Fire Department, immediately began their paid training program, and obtained both Firefighter and Paramedic certifications within 18 months. With everything again falling into place, they started their family and eventually welcomed a daughter and son into their fold. Andy excelled in his new role and loved its fulfilling purpose. But like our military, First Responders deal with stressful, emotional situations and physical demands; and that made Andy work harder to deny and ignore this new set of strains. During this, his first ten years after separating from service, Andy rose through the ranks professionally as much as he fell through darkness personally, at home.

Andy grew angry and short-tempered at home, snapping at the smallest things. He loved his children and sense of family dearly, but as the years strained his marriage, he found himself drinking to escape the different people both he and his wife had become. His body ached more than it should have, he was continually exhausted and his intestinal tract was both irritable and unpredictable. Migraines occurred more frequently, and he worried more about his ability to provide for his family. The combined strains weighed further on his anxious and depressed mind; and Andy not only grew unhappy, he began to doubt himself and sense of worth. Looking for a release, Andy started dreaming of riding again; but affording a bike on a tight single family income wasn't an option. At a family gathering he spoke of his desire to get his license and ride, and an uncle offered him his second bike to fix up and use. It was a 27 year-old Kawasaki, but Andy got it running and connected with the road's ability to release his pressures and lift

his hampered spirits. It wasn't enough to redirect his struggles; and unfortunately, it took his marriage failing before he could admit he needed help. He divorced in 2011, began sharing time with his children and eventually relocated to Superior, WI where he started fresh with the Duluth Fire Department. And since the motorcycle belonged to his now ex-wife's uncle, he lost the bike as well.

It was all enough for Andy to make him pursue a friend's suggestion he get his VA Benefits. Still in denial, Andy began the arduous move through paperwork and appointments "just to see" if there was something there. As his diagnoses revealed themselves, his guilt, shame and embarrassment rose simultaneously with unexpected relief and validation. His many physical ailments defined themselves as Fibromyalgia, Irritable Bowel Syndrome and Sleep Apnea...and they could all be linked to the Burn Pits he'd been exposed to. The rapidity and proximity of artillery shelling created hearing loss and he now wears hearing aids at age 43. And while Andy couldn't tell you if it was the first dead body, the last, or the many in between that affected his mental health...the diagnoses of Anxiety and Depression were now officially related to his time in combat and further exacerbated by years of denial. Seemingly a lifetime ago he'd been the one to laugh at the others and tell himself he wasn't injured; and now his own invisible burdens were equally real and affecting every aspect of his life.

After ten years of denying their existence, Andy has spent his last ten years working to address them and reduce their impact on his daily life. He finally used his GI Bill to obtain a Bachelors Degree in Emergency Management and advanced his career. In 2014 Andy married Lyndsay, adding great love and friendship to his life, and combined their families to now include four young, amazing teens in their active house. Still, there are days he can't get out of bed because of the migraines, events he can't participate in, limits he faces at work and times when, for no reason, his 43 year-old body feels like he's been hit by a bus. The worries and fears continually ebb and flow and often leave him gasping for both reassurance and understanding. Andy utilizes counseling and medications and he hits the gym regularly to keep his muscles loose. He keeps his inner circle close and surrounds himself with family activities. He enjoys camping, cooking and four-wheeling at his in-laws home; and enjoys crafting projects in his man-cave garage. He's volunteered with 23rd Veteran for six years, a nonprofit focused on suicide prevention through positive thinking, and has completed their program. Andy has served his community's fire and health needs for 20 years, and running, not only because he truly enjoys helping people, but because it helps balance out some of the guilt he still carries from war years ago. While he feels he's made great strides, and despite all of his efforts to learn and address his issues, there remains a deep wound from war that repeatedly tests his strength and threatens his progress. And the one thing that has historically soothed his soul and freed his mind remained out of reach: riding.

Life grew exponentially when they combined their families, as did their bills; and between their collective debt things are tight. Andy has dedicated his entire adult life to providing for and building up his family; and he frequently works extra shifts to support their

needs. As much as he longed for a bike, he believed more in giving his children a better life than he had; and instead of buying himself a motorcycle, he directed extra funds to family trips, experiences and activities for his children. Andy had been good with that sacrifice until 2020 when he personally experienced a Patriot Guard escort for the return of a family member's remains who had been MIA since the Korean War. The beautiful honor fanned a desperate flame inside Andy's rider heart; and he refinanced his truck for a little cash to buy a 2006 H-D Street Bob. It wasn't much of a bike, but riding removed his worries about what came next, or how to pay for the upcoming repair or who needed new shoes. Unfortunately, his ownership wasn't for long. Two years later his commuter car died and Andy made the agonizing decision to sell his bike for the fuel-efficient car his family budget needed. Hogs For Heroes felt it was time that Andy gained the wind therapy he needed by having a consistent and dependable bike in his life; and our Advisory Board chose him to be the next Recipient of our healing tool.

Without doubt, this was our fastest introduction-to-purchase time record: we met him for breakfast, upset his world (in a good way!) and had his bike two hours later. Andy had been dreaming for months about what kind of bike he wanted: stripped down, classic look and totally blacked out. And shockingly, the exact bike he'd been eyeing was still sitting on the showroom floor at Rice Lake Harley-Davidson: a 2023 Road King Special. One phone call and a test ride later we sealed the deal. It was our first time working with RLHD and not only did they know who we were and what we did for our Veterans, they generously helped us leave quite a few dollars in our fuel tank for the next Veteran.

Andy's bike, #47, rolls out with full compliments from the Tavern League of Wisconsin's fundraising activity this past year. This is the fourth bike the organization has made possible since throwing their support behind us in 2020. Please join us for Andy's **Presentation of Keys Ceremony on Saturday, July 13, 2024 at 12:30 pm at Jimmy's Saloon, 1812 Iowa Ave. in Superior, Wisconsin.** We will be hanging out from 1130-2:00 at this cool neighborhood bar along with its proud owner, Keith Kern, the President of the Wisconsin Tavern League, who will provide a donation lunch of burgers and brats for us! Rain or shine, join us and help welcome one more Veteran rider back to The Road.