



Meet Our Next Veteran, #45:

Army National Guardsman Sergeant First Class Jennifer Driebel of New Lisbon, Wisconsin

Jennifer grew up in Milwaukee, WI, and while living with her mother was introduced to bikers and the lifestyle: and jumping on an open back seat was the most exhilarating thing she could do. With all her \$300 could get her, she bought a Honda CB900 and learned to ride, quickly grasping the unique personal connection riding offered. Jennifer balanced multiple jobs, obtained a criminal justice degree and after a bit of soul searching, pursued her dream of military service. Wanting both a civilian and family life, she set her sights on the Army National Guard; and enamored with the thought of “being a badass and being paid for it”, at age 24 she walked into the Recruiter’s office and enlisted on the spot. Less than a month later Jen headed to boot camp at Fort Leonard Wood, MO; and after choosing to become a Healthcare Specialist/ Medic, she got her advanced training at Fort Sam Houston, TX.

Jennifer saw her life advancing in all the ways she’d hoped. As she grew, so did her bike size when she bought her first Harley, a 2007 Night Train. Living next to Milwaukee H-D at the time, the culture quickly became a part of her identity and social circle, and she balanced work as both a bank teller and bartender with Guard responsibilities. In 2010, with our nation in two wars, Jennifer volunteered to deploy to both relieve the strain of multiple deployments for others and put her training to use. After 18 months of not hearing anything, she let go of the idea, fell in love and got married. The day after returning from their honeymoon, Jennifer got her individualized deployment orders attaching her to the 1157th Transportation Company as a convoy Combat Medic. Pre-mobilization procedures and training started within a month; and in April 2012, four months after the call, she landed at Bagram Airfield Base, Afghanistan, for a one year tour.

A lot of bad things happen on convoys during war: insurgents, snipers, IEDs, RPG’s, and suicide bombers to name a few. Because they are ready targets for the enemy, at least two combat medics were assigned to travel with the Company’s security teams. Jennifer was the non-commissioned officer in charge of the Transport Medics, and she had two roles: ride along with the convoys and work at the Troop Medical Clinic providing health care for those on base. As the Convoy Medic she sat in the back of a truck, bouncing on a wooden bench for 12-20 plus hours in 90 pounds of body armor, waiting to be needed. When they made their destination, she cleaned and cared for the convoy’s equipment and restocked supplies. It was primitive, exhaustive, and tense living outside the wire. It left Jennifer anxious and vulnerable as she was moved about the foreign land exposed to dangers and threats; and she quickly learned to push fear and emotions far from her mind to keep a strong persona for those who depended on her. Violence struck their convoys on numerous occasions; and it was Jennifer’s job to run to the attacked truck and attend to injuries, just as it was her job to also assist in the retaliatory response. On one fateful mission, Jen’s truck was hit by a roadside IED and her convoy attacked by insurgent gunfire. She was thrown within the truck, striking her head hard. Her team fought back, benefiting from a directly-aimed enemy RPG misfire, while they waited for air fire support from two Apache helicopters upon surrounding insurgents. Jennifer remembers thinking at the time how cool it was to see it all play out like she was in the movies; but later couldn’t afford to think about the horrific reality that was hers and how close to death they came that day. She dealt with her concussion and banged up body; and since she had more trucks to climb into and more patients to attend to, she locked it all down tight in the far recesses of her mind to fester.

Day in and day out, Jennifer often worked multiple back to back shifts between both roles with little to no free time, lost 67 pounds and struggled to sleep. She spent roughly 75% of her time outside the wire, but

her time on Bagram Airfield and surrounding bases wasn't that much safer or less volatile. Attacks on base were common; in fact, she was sound asleep one day when the empty tent next to hers was struck by a mortar. She recalls several times either in Clinic or on base where she helped redirect others who were struggling and times where she physically saved lives after destructive artillery. In her last month of deployment, Jen worked at the Clinic and was assigned to the base's Quick Response Force (QRF) as a Medic. Roughly 5 times a week, typically in the dark of night, they would be dispatched off base to respond to a traumatic incident and render life-saving care. She learned to go to bed in her uniform and boots; and she further mastered the art of shoving down all the horrors of war she saw and lived amongst. Home was just around the corner and she'd had enough.

In 2013, Jennifer returned to Milwaukee, went through transition programs and medical checks; and even though she knew she wasn't okay, she lied on all the checklists just to get home. Her next year was rough, struggling to fit in and function in the brutal juxtaposition that was now "normal" life. She lacked purpose and felt insignificant compared to who she was and all she'd done in service. Although she reached out for help once, Jen found it easier to suck it up and ignore all she was feeling. She turned to her Night Train to ride through the chaos in her mind but after an accident totaling her bike, she turned to drugs and alcohol to numb all she tried to hide. She spiraled further, as did her home life; and after almost losing her job and military career, Jennifer scared herself straight. She pushed away the turbulent emotions, divorced her husband and, working as a traveling wellness examiner, she relocated to rebuild her tenuous life.

In 2016, on a whim to help a friend, Jennifer started her own transport business as a side job, grew it quite successfully and was eventually afforded a comfortable lifestyle. She bought a home on land outside of Wautoma and she bought a brand new Street Glide to reconnect her passion. Back on the road, Jennifer's world, outlook and experiences reopened themselves to her and she found herself thriving and happy. Unfortunately, Jennifer met and fell for the wrong man again. In short order she found herself manipulated and threatened, and would eventually lose all her business and personal assets, including her bike, and amass great debt. Life unraveled quickly and so she found another way out. In 2019, Jen moved and took a full-time job within the Army National Guard as an instructor at Fort McCoy, redesigning and teaching the Comprehensive Medic Course and Master Resiliency Training. She loved this work, and she was good at it; and despite all she'd personally been through in combat, and all she still denied, she expertly taught the content for the next four years until she no longer could.

Unfortunately the degenerative disc disease to her neck and back from combat had been worsening the past five years and she sought treatment from the VA, including procedures to burn her nerve endings to reduce pain and massages for muscle tension. In the fall of 2020, while getting a therapeutic massage for her back pain, Jennifer was sexually assaulted by the male therapist. Her world and sense of self was immediately devastated. She struggled to sleep, work and stay focused; and as she spiraled, years of denied PTSD began seeping through the cracks of her strong facade. Jen again turned to alcohol to soothe the hard hours alone. She sought counseling for the assault; but with minimal support from area police, she grew angrier and fearful that it might happen to another woman. In response, she reached out to the Department of Justice who assigned a special investigator, went public with her story and helped the local PD bring charges after uncovering another six women who'd been sexually assaulted by the same man. Jennifer fought and advocated for others in the midst of her own turmoil; and it paid off. In a plea deal last month, the perpetrator pled guilty to several charges and "no contest" to Jen's lowered charge of 4th degree sexual assault. He faces sentencing this month; the personal cost to Jennifer, however, was like salt on her hemorrhaging wounds.

Jennifer's story is one of strength and courage amidst great pain. Over the last 11 years, she's moved through combat, failed relationships, property loss and crippling bills, and then sexual assault with little, close support. She handled each as best she could until she couldn't, then she'd gather herself, move forward and go back at it. In January of 2022, Jennifer made the painful decision to remove her close cousin from life support; and that deeply personal loss of sisterhood was the one that finally broke her.

Jen's shattered resilience made it easier for flashbacks, nightmares and all her anxieties to ooze out. There was no resolve left to push back the years of accrued pain; and depression not only took over her life, it nearly ended it. She'd become a brittle shell of herself; and one day while simulating the treatment of a trauma for work, Jennifer snapped. A colleague stepped in; and in perhaps Jennifer's strongest personal move to date, she went to the VA emergency department. While there a social worker, who Jen credits with saving her life, quickly surrounded her with a mental health care team that picked Jen up and helped her move through 18 months of counseling and medications to get her to the point today where she feels like she is healing from the inside out. Jennifer is deeply proud of her 15 year military career and impact; but realizing she could no longer compromise her mental health, the Sergeant First Class medically retired from the Army National Guard in November, 2023 due to PTSD from combat.

Jennifer has always strived to be a good person and she's learned a lot about herself the last few years to make her a better person. It's not always easy, and she has a long way to go with rough days still, but she's learned to talk, forgive and accept help from others as she releases deeply rooted emotional pain she spent years building. Equally hard and compounding her efforts, Jen lives most days in physical pain. Between her neck and back disc disease and the radiculopathy affecting both of her legs, Jennifer's compensating body mechanics have now affected her knees and hips and weakened her musculature. She's had surgery for a torn rotator cuff from service, but still faces surgery to her feet; and, Jennifer is a mere 39 years old. With so many health care appointments and procedures, she's not been able to currently manage working and lives frugally on her disability allowance for now. She calls herself a broken mess, but refuses to stop doing the things she enjoys like fishing, hunting and being outdoors in general. She's added much to her life, including new love and acceptance from an understanding and supportive man, and is just recently engaged with rings that reflect their love of Star Wars. But one of the things she connects with most, filling her heart and clearing her mind, remains financially out of reach: riding. Unfortunately, Jennifer's unstable legs and physical deterioration are not able to safely handle two wheels anymore; and a motorcycle, let alone the trike she needs, is financially well out of reach. Hogs For Heroes admired Jennifer's strength and felt that our healing gift might just be the one that not only helps hold her up, it keeps her moving forward on the hard path she still has ahead of her.

Jennifer has learned to count her blessings, but we were one she didn't think she'd get or deserved, and we completely caught her off guard. We sent her out to test ride trikes and find the model that best fit her, and it was the TriGlide that suited her desire to tour. Preowned TriGlides fly off of showroom floors these days, but she found her perfect beauty at Ukes H-D in Kenosha, WI. This 2019 black H-D TriGlide has just 9,000 miles on it; and our friends at Uke's super-stretched our dollars to make this unbelievable find land within our budget. Unique to this bike, it has been fully paid for by the stunning 2023 fundraising efforts of Wisconsin's Operating Engineers Local 139. This group has been amazing supporters for the past eight years and we will be gifting this bike following their Poker Run benefiting us this year! Join us as we hand over Jennifer's set of keys on **Saturday, June 22, 2024 at 4:30 pm at Summit Ridge Bar & Grill in Wonewoc, WI.** Better yet, jump on your bike or UTV and join us for the day's Poker Run to have some fun with us and raise funds for the next Bike and Veteran pairing!