



## **Meet Veteran Recipient: #48 Army Veteran Cory Shier of East Troy, Wisconsin**

Cory, a life-long Wisconsinite and huge Wisconsin sports enthusiast, grew up in Waukesha, the son of divorced parents. He was a kid who learned to play outside, find friends and create their own fun and occasional trouble. Cory wasn't much for school; and instead, focused his energy on working as a mechanic. With nothing more appealing after graduation, he looked to the Army to fulfill a sense of wanderlust and provide skill training. He joined the delayed-entry program as a Senior and chose Infantry with the Airborne School option, because "if I was going in, I wanted the type of action that you make movies out of". He got just that; and, he did just that. And as he learned, the type of real action and harrowing situations they make movies of is exactly the type of stuff that they later make statistics of. Cory has since been fighting, every single day, to not be one of them.

Cory headed to Fort Benning, GA in November, 2008 for his combined Boot Camp, Infantry and Airborne training programs. He stationed at Fort Bragg, NC with the 82nd Airborne Division; and, "shortly after arriving I found my cherry ass on a plane to Iraq for a one-year deployment". With so little experience, he had no idea what to expect and excitedly looked forward to engaging just as he'd been trained. Cory landed at Camp Ramadi, Iraq, in August 2009, as a Squad Automatic Weapon (SAW) operator, and conducted frequent foot and mounted patrols to establish peace and security in the region. As the War's draw-down was underway, they were an occupation force supporting Iraqi Army and Police growth and trying to "win the hearts and minds" of the country's people. Their rules of engagement were now far more strict, limiting and stressful; and all eyes were on them and their responses. Despite our restorative efforts in Iraq, mistrust, violence and insurgent activity remained a continual threat and not only demanded constant hypervigilance, it created a toxic mix of insecurity and heightened restraint. It was there that Cory would first experience the physical devastation war creates, the gross bodily harm it leaves behind and the inevitable death toll it claims—and it wasn't like it was in the movies. It was also there where he'd first develop the anxiety and depression that would later grow out of control to feed the PTSD demons that still torture him today.

Cory returned to Fort Bragg a year later as a Specialist. He went through weeks of reintegration classes and screening; and he both locked down and denied everything he struggled with. Cory loved his time in the Army; and rather than seek support and risk his career, he hoped to work through his challenges by signing on for another six years. He chose Germany as his duty station for the adventure; only to struggle his next two years there. While at Hohenfels Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC) in Bavaria, Cory trained U.S. and NATO allies by acting as opposition forces to prepare others for combat deployment, he performed maintenance and administrative tasks, and tried to fit in. Immersed daily in all warfighting functions, Cory grew to dislike his job and location; and he drank socially for the release, then excessively, in isolation for the relief. As his mental health went unchecked, his despair culminated in anger. He became short-tempered and opinionated at work; and he drank to settle all that was unexplainably boiling within. He became hard to work with, hurt some friendships and lost advancement opportunities; and so he drank more to soothe his losses. Cory was in his early 20's, but the years of parachute jumps, training and heavy gear were affecting his back, shoulders, knees and feet; and so he drank to feel less pain. His long two years complete, Cory transferred to Fort Campbell, KY for the chance to reconnect with himself and the soldier he wanted to be. And to make it all work out, he tried to leave his demons and drinking behind.

Thankful to be stateside, Cory quickly settled back into base life routines and expectations. He completed Air Assault school and rekindled a sense of duty and pride for his achievements. The girl who took his breath away two years earlier, now gave him the green light and he quickly added Jessi and love to his brightened world. After a bad parachute landing injured his back and worsened his physical ailments, the new couple simply hoped for a quiet end to his contract and the return to Wisconsin. But base life was heating up as part of his Unit at the 101st prepared for deployment to Afghanistan; and in need of an experienced SAW operator, his Squad leader personally asked Cory to voluntarily join them. Cory was honored by the request. It was only nine months, he'd deployed before, and now he knew what to expect... and so believing he could contribute to his Squad's success, he agreed to deploy. He also knew that Afghanistan was more volatile at the time; and should he not make it back, he wanted Jessi taken care of. While on a short leave, the two married at the Courthouse six months before he left.

Cory landed at FOB Fenty, outside Jalalabad, Afghanistan in February, 2014, and to a completely different war than he'd known in Iraq and, unfortunately, one closer to the movie action he enlisted for. On patrols with his Platoon, the SAW Operator moved through towns to build relationships, assess dangers and respond to threats. They engaged in frequent firefights and he again saw damage and death: this time, however, at his hands. The actions, sights and sounds further scarred his memory and fed his growing depression. Mortar and rocket attacks on base were common occurrences; and they taxed the anxiety he carried and deprived him of sleep. In addition to patrol work, Cory provided route clearance to counter enemy IED efforts for convoy security: it was his job to find the hidden IEDs. And after the destruction caused by suicide attackers, it was Cory and his Platoon that searched for identifiable human remains. The cumulative toll repeatedly assaulted his senses, thoughts and dreams; and it eroded his resistance. Coupled with his growing physical pains and fatigue, Cory was silently struggling... and he didn't believe he would survive this deployment. As if war's toll wasn't enough to wear one down, on top of it all, not just once, but twice during his nine months, did he learn about the deaths of two Brothers who lost their lives on the home front's battlefield with PTSD. He'd deployed with them both; and Cory had no idea that they, too, struggled as he did and carried dark thoughts as he did. Cory knew things weren't right in his own head, but Afghanistan wasn't the place to show weakness, to grieve or to take action; and so, Cory shoved it all far beyond his reality to deal with when he got back.

The same guy who left Ft. Campbell did not return to Ft Campbell in October, 2014. Once again, Cory tried to cover up everything that could alert others, but his behaviors quickly betrayed him. He began drinking almost immediately; and with his wife home in Wisconsin, Cory isolated himself in his off-base apartment and drank excessively. Unable to sleep, the fatigue combined with his many pains to hamper his judgment and stamina; and alcohol inflamed it all. While he was failing his physical run times and drilling requirements, he was gaining in self-loathing and self-destructive behavior ...and he missed formations under a leadership that only exacerbated his struggle. During all of this, and of all things that he was experiencing, Cory failed his hearing test and it was this that ultimately pushed him toward a Medical Review Board and a medical discharge decision. And just like that, Cory was a civilian...and an at-risk Veteran.

Cory had not been a civilian since he was an 18 year old living under his father's roof. Now, six years later, without resources or structure; he was navigating a new path with undiagnosed PTSD. He and Jessi lived in her parents basement, with their brand new daughter, and saved to buy a home for their family. Cory found work but struggled with relationships and balance; and despite his longing for better, his demons were resurfacing. Less than a year after discharge, Cory learned another close Brother took his life in suicide; and it all flooded back to him. Grief, still, from the other two he knew so well, and the many more he knew nothing of but the pain they shared, gripped his heart. Flashbacks set him off and nightmares plagued his sleep; and in response, alcohol affected most of his waking hours. Cory hurt everywhere, physically and emotionally, and was overwhelmed, angry and apathetic to life. He didn't know it at the time, but it would take him several years to recover from the ripple effect this loss created. He mustered the strength to push forward and past his own dark thoughts, committed to his family and their needs; but remained lost in the rip current of despair and addiction.

Having bought a home, it was now time for Cory to fulfill a lifelong childhood dream: he got his motorcycle endorsement and bought his first Harley to help move his mind. And it did: almost immediately he felt the freedom he remembered riding with his dad 25 years ago. Riding let him clear his head, focus in the present and escape his past; and his ability to do so likely saved his life over the years. While riding moved him through some dire times, it did not redirect the path he was on. He lost a job, found another, drank and spiraled more in the deep, ugly behavioral pattern he fell into. Cory grew more detached and despondent; and one morning after a severe episode of mental dissociation in his car, he woke to find his gun in his hand. It scared him enough to go to the V.A. for inpatient treatment; but frustrated with the people he was surrounded with, he left the program to battle his demons on his own. He changed jobs again and buried himself in work and booze; and after several mistakes almost cost him his marriage and family, he went back to the V.A for outpatient help. Cory's since spent his last five years in medical evaluations, outpatient counseling, addiction therapy, and on medications...desperately trying to move beyond his pain.

Along the way, the family added a son to their fold and Cory upgraded his bike to an Ultra Limited Low to more comfortably fit the 1,000 miles a month he was putting on to keep his mental health balanced. Life seemed to be moving forward, albeit hard and tenuous. On top of the mental anguish that was his rollercoaster life, Cory's days are filled with chronic pain from his spine's degenerative disc disease with nerve radiculopathy to both legs, and the torment of his fallen foot arches. As a result, he struggles with manual labor and standing for prolonged hours...and yet he pushed himself to do these very jobs as best he could over the years, until he couldn't. In 2023 Cory recognized that his injuries and PTSD were getting the best of him and believed taking a break from the workforce would help. He sold his motorcycle to help cover the loss of his salary and stopped working. Unfortunately, the effort only compounded his depression and spiraling suicidal tendencies; and in the fall of 2023, Cory checked himself back into inpatient care at the VA and completed the program.

This time was different: he knew he needed to change his narrative or become another statistic. After 15 years of fighting to live for his Country, and for the woman and the family he loves, Cory was now ready to fight for himself. He's since learned to release and talk about his experiences and feelings; and now understands the need for his continual therapy. He's learned to control his alcohol addiction and has adopted alternative strategies and procedures for managing his pain. He's developed skills to build relationships and better communicate. He's become more active and engaged; and wanting to give back to others, Cory volunteers with the Milwaukee VA's recreational program on the Spinal Cord Injury Unit. In the last six months, he's learned there are more feelings than anger as he's begun to laugh, play and look to his future with purpose and growing excitement. None of this, however, comes easy and requires a dedicated effort. And while life has improved dramatically for him and his family lately, Cory knows he still has rough hours and days ahead; and he takes comfort in the progress and tools he now has. His heart, however, still feels empty: for one tool, in particular, remains elusive for his foreseeable future...a motorcycle.

As Cory shared with us, a part of him died the day he had to sell his bike; and despite his wife encouraging him to keep it, he thought it best for their family finances that he eliminate the loan payment. Hogs For Heroes immediately recognized the vulnerability that Cory showed in exposing his life struggle the way he did, and the courage to find a solid, purposeful path forward. We believed that getting a bike back in his life would return a part of his identity, provide for the physical release he needs and return the deep joy that fills his heart. We surprised him with our news and asked him to peruse local dealership inventory; and by the very next day he found his next love: a 2021 H-D Road King Special in Snake Venom, the exact color he hoped to find, and barely broken in with only 3,300 miles on her. The team at House of Harley threw a hearty welcome for him as Cory rang that closing bell and excitedly offered to host his Gifting during the H-D Homecoming Celebration. Cory will receive his keys on Saturday, July 27, 2024 at the House of Harley in Milwaukee, WI. We will be hanging out at their massive party and take over the stage for Cory's **Presentation of Keys Ceremony at 1:30 pm.** We hope you can join us in support of this brave man by welcoming him back to The Road and the many healing benefits it provides.