



Mike Christensen, Founder

#### Mike's Story:

When Mike Christensen was 21, he had studied to be an auto mechanic, but the industry was not for him. He saw a sign advertising free college at a strip mall in Chicago, which turned out to be an Army recruitment office. Without consulting his family, Mike enlisted in the Army. His father was an Air Force veteran having served in Vietnam.

Mike completed his basic training and AIT (Advanced Infantry Training) at Fort Benning and enjoyed his weekend warrior guard duties in Chicago and was promoted to sergeant.

Mike enrolled in Northern Illinois University studying Structural Engineering and participated in ROTC. Because of his previous military experience, Mike was able to join as a junior (MS3) and quickly grew into leadership roles. He truly enjoyed mentoring other students.

During summer breaks, Mike completed Airborne and Assault Schools. He also began Ranger training. However, he never finished Ranger training because he injured his knee and they would not wait for it to heal, so he was sent home. This failure, Mike laments, still bothers him to this day. He later enlisted as a 2nd Lieutenant with an Infantry MOS, and a guaranteed reserve contract.

Mike and his now-wife Gina were engaged the week before September 11, 2001, a day that he knew his life would change. On September 12, Mike was driving to work when he was given orders to deploy. While in Kuwait, he served on an Air Force base on the border of Iraq, prepping for an invasion that never occurred during his deployment. Mike mainly did patrols, securing the base but thankfully never seeing any combat. After returning home, Mike left his position as a Structural Engineer to build homes full-time.

Instead, Mike started his own construction company. He states he always felt entrepreneurial as a child, and enjoyed building houses in high school. Mike moved to be with his wife in Arizona. The housing market was strong at the time, so his business was busy. Although he admits he lost money on his first house, he kept going and invested into multimillion-dollar housing projects while still serving in the National Guard. Mike spent his weekends doing drills and

continuing officer education to maintain his position. He became a General's Aide, and one of his tasks was the heartbreaking consoling of families who lost loved ones during service. The emotions from this experience would become beneficial for a realization later in his life.

Eventually, as a busy entrepreneur, Mike wanted to shift gears and go to inactive reserve status with the Army before full retirement. Two months later, he was deployed to Afghanistan. During his deployment, he had six multi-million dollar homes in progress, and left their management to his wife and dedicated staff. While in Afghanistan, Mike was initially not placed in an infantry role. The base needed lots of improvements, and since Mike had years of experience as a structural engineer and general contractor, he was promoted to Executive Officer and base engineer.

Three months later, he was at a meeting where they were discussing relieving a lieutenant of duty for not following the rules of engagement. The team needed someone with experience to replace him. Mike proudly raised his hand and became a scout/sniper platoon leader over 45 men.

Now Mike would spend two weeks a month in a poorly constructed and undefendable mountain base. Their role there was to bargain with the local Afghan people for intelligence and work alongside the Afghan Army. Over time, Mike and his men slowly began improving the quality of the base. They fortified it while adding new elements, such as a gym and a refrigerator they bought after saving up money. Having cold water greatly improved morale.

Families would often send them items from the States. The platoon soon grew tired of their often-received Otis Spunkmeyer Muffins and Girl Scout Cookies, so they requested toys and school supplies to give to the Afghan children, who were overjoyed at the sight of a crayon.

Throughout his time spent in the mountain base, there were several random Taliban attacks, leaving the men always on guard. The Taliban frequently threatened the locals if they interacted or gave the Army intelligence. Once their convoy was hit with an IED explosion, which landed between two vehicles. Mike clearly remembers looking in the rearview mirror and seeing a mushroom cloud behind him, thinking he could have died in the explosion. Despite these surprise attacks, the group became close, trying to enjoy their time together. The platoon kept their spirits high by joking around and making fun of each other. They would participate in skits, comically impersonating others. They worked out in their gym lifting weights and played friendly games of volleyball with the Afghan soldiers. The platoon would often watch pirated DVD movies and TV shows together that they bought from the local bazaars. Mike's favorite was *Band of Brothers*.

Mike came home feeling like he hadn't finished the mission. The war was continuing, but he was no longer there. During his mission, they would have to identify Afghan high-value targets

and then apprehend them, yet later on, he would see them on the streets. Mike felt like their mission failed and didn't help fix the situation, yet they moved forward with their lives and returned to the US.

Once home, Mike constantly felt on guard and situationally aware. Loud noises and slamming doors brought him back to the fear of combat in Afghanistan. He completed his final years of service as a Combat Engineer with the National Guard until he retired in 2013, with over 20 years of service.

When Mike returned from Afghanistan, he returned to a broken housing market. His construction business partnered with Jared Allen's Homes for Wounded Warriors. This organization would build/remodel specialized homes for veterans who had been severely injured during combat. There would be an opening ceremony for the veterans, and even President Obama attended one for a highly elite combat veteran. Mike became curious, though. Despite having a new house, the veteran was left the same, with the same mental health struggles. He wondered what more he could do to support veterans.

After a few years, Mike became aware of the prevalence of suicide among his fellow veterans, with six of his friends unfortunately committing suicide. Everyone would reunite at the funerals, which led Mike to host a gathering with his platoon, going as far as flying out their Afghan interpreter. The reunion went well, and the missing camaraderie returned. Mike thought that if he could recreate a tribe, this band of brothers, it could help the mental health of veterans in different ways from the VA programs.

This idea led Mike to form Freedom for Heroes, a non-profit organization. The goals are aimed at group events, focusing on resurfacing the feeling of camaraderie that is felt within a platoon. With a passion for the outdoors himself, he discovered that these outdoor experiences bridged a gap between deployment and regular life. Even small day hikes will keep a veteran from sitting at home, dwelling in the negativity of PTSD.

Freedom for Heroes hosts monthly hikes, annual fishing trips, annual backpacking trips, and more in order to make a difference in the lives of service members. The organization also provides advocates for the veterans to get the help they need through the VA, a large organization that is often difficult to navigate. With your support, Freedom for Heroes can help more of the more than 15 million US military veterans in the US live the lives that they fought so hard to provide to all of us.