

SIGNS OF RESPECT

**THE PATRIOT GUARD RIDERS, RECIPIENTS OF AFSA'S AMERICANISM AWARD,
SUPPORT FAMILIES OF THE FALLEN AT MILITARY FUNERALS**

By Myrna Traylor



In August 2005, a funeral was scheduled for a fallen service member. He had served honorably in Iraq and was being laid to rest near his family's home in South Haven, Kan. Mourners gathered in preparation for the service that day, but another, uninvited group was waiting, as well. These were members of the Westboro Baptist Church (WBC) of nearby Topeka, Kan., who felt it was important to disrupt the solemn proceedings with a political and religious protest—one filled with shouts and chants and garish signs that condemned the United States and even applauded the deaths of members of the military.

Needless to say, there were some Americans who took exception to this display.

Among them were the members of the American Legion Riders Chapter 136 from Kansas, who decided that action was needed. But how could they neutralize these protestors without using violence and do so in a manner that was respectful of a fallen service member and a grieving family?

Some weeks later, these riders heard that the WBC was going to mount another protest at the funeral of Sgt. John Doles in Chelsea, Okla. After obtaining permission from Doles' family and informing law enforcement in Chelsea of their plans, the men of the American Legion contacted like-minded groups in Oklahoma and went on their first honor mission: They mounted their motorcycles, drove to the cemetery, and formed a cordon between the unwelcome protestors and the grieving family.

Within weeks, as more motorcycle clubs and Veterans' groups joined such missions taking place for service member funerals in Oklahoma and Colorado, the Patriot Guard Riders was officially established.



Patriot Guard Riders stand ready during a ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery. The Riders are active across the nation, making their participation possible regardless of where the fallen's final resting place is.

“These people didn't know me or know my son, but they were there. I walked over to them and shook every single one of their hands. I was crying like a baby, but I wanted them to know I appreciated what they were doing.”

— Bill Ciccone

A STEADY PRESENCE

Now Patriot Guard Riders (PGR) is a national nonprofit organization boasting some 250,000 members across the United States—although they might be better described as a network of concerned citizens. There are very few meetings and no dues, and all work is done on a volunteer basis. A large number of the Riders have themselves

been or have had a loved one in the military, but that is not a prerequisite for membership. One doesn't even need to ride a motorcycle. All that is required is a deep respect for those who have served the community and the nation in uniform.

Beyond that, the PGR's primary mission is to serve as an unofficial honor guard at funerals of service members of any branch of the military (active duty, Reservists, or honorably discharged veterans), as well as law enforcement, fire fighters, or first responders. In addition, they serve as a support group for the families of the fallen.

And, above all, PGR has no political or religious agenda. Riders attend military funerals only at the invitation of the deceased's family. In their role as a shield against disruptive protests, they want their presence

to be a sign of respect, not an incitement for further misbehavior on the part of protestors.

Making a connection between the PGR and these families is handled very deliberately and delicately. Robbie Smart, national president of the Patriot Guard Riders, says that State Captains keep an eye on the Department of Defense casualty reports for announcements of service members killed in action and then contact the responsible casualty assistance officer to ask him or her to let the family know that PGR is there to help. If the family wishes

PGR to participate, a Ride Captain is assigned to speak with the funeral home to determine when and where the Riders should be posted. In some cases, the PGR has been asked to accompany remains from the time they are air-lifted stateside through the burial.

PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

Bill Ciccone had never heard of Patriot Guard Riders when he learned of his son's death. Although he was in a haze of grief, he agreed to the PGR's participation when the casualty assistance officer mentioned them to him. And today he's glad he did.

"When we went to the airport to accept my son's remains, there were about a hundred men and women on motorcycles lined up, all with flags," says Ciccone. "These people didn't



The lines formed by members of the Patriot Guard Riders along the paths of military funeral processions serve both as a buffer against political protests and a quiet but powerful show of respect.

know me or know my son, but they were there. I walked over to them and shook every single one of their hands. I was crying like a baby, but I wanted them to know I appreciated what they were doing."

Ciccone adds that after his son's burial, the PGR Ride Captain periodically called to check on him for months afterward. It made an indelible impression on Ciccone.

When Virginia state trooper Darrell Bowling lost his son—he and three other Marines were killed in an ambush in Iraq in 2005—there were rumors that Westboro Baptist

Church would be sending a group to protest at the funeral. "No one ever showed up," Bowling recalls, but his concern at the time was real, and later that same year when Bowling met PGR member Tony Turner, the organization's mission and message resonated with him.

Today, both Bowling and Ciccone, as well as Ciccone's wife, are themselves active Patriot Guard Riders.

"I had been hurt when I was in the Army, and my injury



Bikers are known to be loyalists to their local riding clubs. But with the Patriot Guard Riders, the American flag is the banner that unites everyone.

THE BIG TENT

Patriot Guard Riders has more than 200 affiliated groups that can muster riders as the need arises. Some of the member groups include the Hells Angels of South Carolina, the Buffalo Soldiers VMC of Philadelphia, Rolling Thunder, Operation Wounded Warriors, and the Union Iron Workers MC.

"I've been on missions with Christians, I've ridden with pagans," says Robbie Smart, PGR national president. "We only ask that riders use duct tape to cover any patches that might be viewed as questionable."

Even though many Riders have military ties, others do not. "Some people feel more obligated to participate because they never served," says PGR member Bill Ciccone.

➔ To view a video about the Patriot Guard Riders, visit AFSAs website: www.hqafsa.org/pg-video.html.

affected my balance. I couldn't ride when I first joined the group, so I drove my truck," Ciccone says. "Then I saw someone with a trike, and I figured we could ride one of those." Ciccone says he wants to be there for the families—especially for the families whose loved ones died as a result of PTSD, as his son had.

"It is an honor for me to stand in honor of the fallen," says Bowling. "We've ridden in the rain, thunderstorms, snow—any conditions. We figure the soldiers didn't have any choice about the conditions they were serving in."

In addition to participating in missions as a rider, Bowling serves as a contact point for families and helps them navigate an unfamiliar process. For instance, retrieving their loved one's remains "can sometimes take five to seven days from the notification," says Bowling. "That's an unusually long time for most families. I give them advice on how to deal with the casualty assistance officer, or sometimes just talk to them as a parent who has lost a child in service about how to cope. I didn't really have anybody."



C.D. Studyvin, a Veteran of both World War II and the Korean War, salutes the U.S. flag during a Memorial Day ceremony at the El Paso Cemetery in Derby, Kan., May 26, 2014. Studyvin was one of several Veterans on hand for the ceremony, which was coordinated and conducted by members of the local American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars organizations. The ceremony paid tribute to military members who gave their lives in service to the United States. (U.S. Air Force photo by Capt. Zach Anderson)

Bowling says that he hasn't had any run-ins with protestors on the missions he's participated in. "I've never had any experience with those—well, let's just call them 'unpleasant

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ABOUT AFSA'S AMERICANISM AWARD

The Air Force Sergeants Association's Americanism Award recognizes organizations that, through the development of programs, ceremonies, or other initiatives, further patriotism in America. The award is presented annually to the group that the Association believes is most deserving of this honor.

“We want to show the families that we are indebted to them for their sacrifice. We are there to represent John Q. Public.”

—Robbie Smart

have taken that negative and turned it into a positive, reports Smart. “We want to show the families that we are indebted to them for their sacrifice. We are there to represent John Q. Public.”

To that end, PGR also offers its Riders' presence at happier events, such as troop send-offs and homecomings and as escorts for a wounded warrior's trip to a new, accessible home.

This year, AFSA recognized the Patriot Guard Riders with the 2013 Americanism Award, accepted by Florida's State Captain John Vincent at the annual Professional Airmen's Confer-

ence. Smart says PGR was awed by the award. As he said in his thank-you letter to AFSA, “What we do is out of gratitude for the sacrifices made by servicemen for our freedom. Thanks for our efforts are not required or expected. However, to see the efforts of thousands of our Riders acknowledged with this prestigious award from such a respected organization is certainly a boost to our morale.”

➔ **If you wish to join or support the Patriot Guard Riders or want to request a mission, go to www.patriotguard.org.**



people,” says Bowling. “We are usually there in large numbers. We're not ‘big and bad,’ but when people see a whole line of people with Harleys, nobody messes with us.”

“When we arrive at the cemetery, we set up at a respectful distance between the mourners and any protestors,” adds Smart, who is a retired Air Force major. “Our flag line is a visual shield and if anyone tries to yell anything, we just rev our engines and drown them out.”

Even though the Patriot Guard Riders started out of frustration with the behavior of some “unpleasant people,” they