

Photo by Ray Devlin

Putting a New Face on Memorial Day

Loud pipes speak for POW/MIAs, veterans

Photo by Ray Devlin



by Ernie Copper

WASHINGTON, D.C., MAY 27—Memorial Days, before the advent of Rolling Thunder, were spent watching the Indy 500, or the World 600, barbecuing, drinking and trying to avoid the inevitable list of spring chores. But for the past 18 years, a demonstration named Rolling Thunder held in our nation's capital has grown in popularity with motorecyclists until it has become the event to attend on the Memorial Day weekend.

All riders are welcomed at the Rolling Thunder Ride for Freedom and I'm sure there are some who aren't even sure why they are there, but it is clear that most of the hundreds of thousands who participate do understand the purpose of Rolling Thunder and support it.

Major Andras Marton

Photo by Ernie Copper



The central issues in Rolling Thunder's agenda are: calling on the United States Government to account for American POWs and MIAs of all wars, and support for veterans who have returned. Currently, maintaining quality health care for American veterans in the shadow of administration budget cuts is a priority.

To bring these issues into focus for the American public at large and the American government in particular, supporters met in the North Parking Lot of the Pentagon on the Sunday before Memorial Day and rode motorcycles en masse from there to the National Mall across the Potomac River in Washington, D.C. Rolling Thunder's National Executive Director Artie Muller noted that if they rode in cars, everyone would think it was just a big traffic jam. That is at least part of the reason motorcycles have become linked with the American Veteran, POW/MIAs and patriotism.

The name "Rolling Thunder" not only fits the events of today as the steady rumble of motorcycle exhaust fills the air around D.C., it also pays tribute to Vietnam Veterans. A bombing campaign in Vietnam was named Rolling Thunder by President Johnson and it is fitting that the name reflects that, since many of the members of today's Rolling Thunder are Vietnam veterans.

Despite the monuments, memorials and history, Washington, D.C., was not a hotbed of activity on Memorial Day weekends before the advent of Rolling Thunder. This Memorial Day weekend, it was nearly impossible to walk a single city block in

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Photo by Ray Devlin



People reflect at the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C

Photo by Ray Devlin



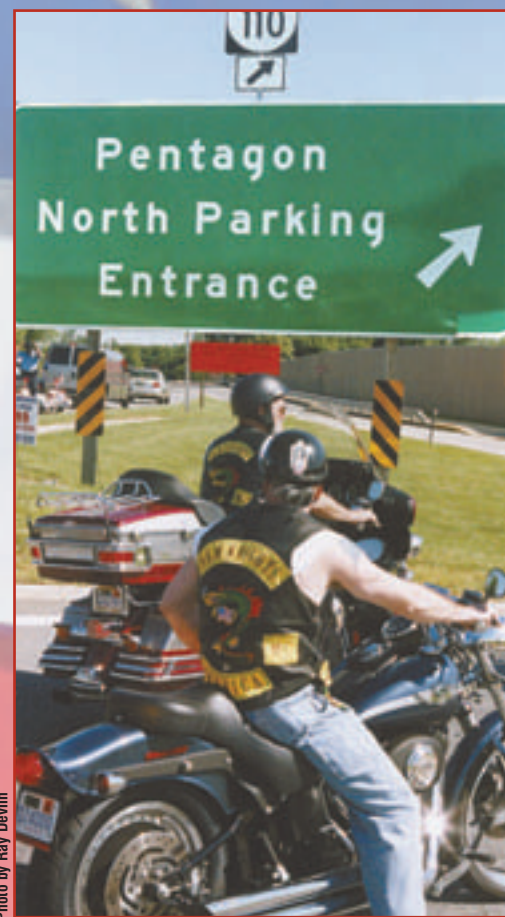


Photo by Ray Devlin

12 noon and took two hours or more to completely arrive at the National Mall area, filling Constitution and Independence Avenues and every available nook and cranny. Two full hours of thunder, riding two and four wide, is a lot of motorcycles. It also represents a lot of voters to the politicians whose attention is being sought.

Heartfelt ceremony

At 1:30 p.m., even though all of the bikes hadn't reached the National Mall, activities on a stage set up between the Reflecting Pool and the Lincoln Memorial got under way with the presentation of colors, the National Anthem sung by Gordon Painter, and the Pledge of Allegiance led by Rolling Thunder's National President Gary Scheffmeyer. That was followed by an invocation, Rolling Thunder's mission statement and an enthusiastic welcome from Sgt. Artie Muller, Rolling Thunder's national executive director.

Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff, General Richard B. Myers, USAF, dressed in a flag-like shirt addressed the crowd. He and his wife also rode in the demonstration and his remarks were well received.

Rolling Thunder

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downtown D.C. without hearing or seeing at least one bike. Hotels are booked, restaurants are full and the tourist trade is booming.

The Rolling Thunder demonstration left the Pentagon parking lot at



Korean War Memorial



Photo by Ray Devlin

Vietnam veteran Gerald McCullar of Illinois does this every year to remind us there are still POWs and MIAs not accounted for



Rendering honors to the flags of the US and Marine Corps

RENDERING HONORS AT ROLLING THUNDER

THE LONE MARINE

Chambers does his part to ease the pain

by Phil Scott

WASHINGTON, D.C., MAY 29—Thousands of people were lining the streets. It was May 29, Rolling Thunder Sunday in Washington, D.C., and the Run For The Wall was about to start. Impatiently pacing, I was scanning the crowds for one individual in particular, a marine in full dress uniform. This particular marine had captured my curiosity. For the past several years, I had seen him in

his dress uniform standing on the double yellow lines holding a salute for every biker in the Thunder procession. He would stand at attention from start to finish. This was a feat that would last over four hours and display the meaning of intestinal fortitude. I was on a quest to talk to this marine. I had tried in vain calling all the usual suspects from the Marine Corps, but

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The many guest speakers to follow were introduced and escorted to the microphone by Master of Ceremonies Mike DePaulo, who serves as the National Service Office for Rolling Thunder; and his Co-Masters of Ceremonies, Ms. Chris Noel of Armed Forces radio and Ms. Nikki Mendicino, veterans' advocate and "every veteran's kid sister." There were a variety of speakers on POW/MIA affairs, approaching the subject from various areas of expertise and reporting their progress. Each spoke enthusiastically and with conviction that they are, or would soon be, making a difference in the arena of the POW/MIA.

For me, the showstopper was the address of Major Andras M. Marton. Major Marton had visited Rolling Thunder XVI via a wheelchair, necessitated by wounds he sustained in a grenade attack while serving in Kuwait. Two years ago, the Major couldn't stand without assistance due to his leg injuries and doctors told him he wouldn't ride again. During his visit to Rolling Thunder XVI, several challenged him to ride with them in the future. Candidly, he wondered if he would even be able to keep his leg, let alone ride.

The Major rode his Harley in this year's demonstration. With emotion and conviction he spoke of the dedication and spirit of not only himself, but all veterans and how he would have traded all the well wishes and brushes with celebrity he had during his recovery if he could have gone back to Iraq to be by the side of his fellow soldiers. He remembered the words of President Ronald Reagan: "Freedom is always just one generation away from extinction," he said, going on to remind us that we must all earn freedom and it is always being challenged.

Keith and Carolyn Maupin, the parents of Sgt. Matt Maupin, a POW/MIA of the Iraq War, spoke to the crowd. Keith is sporting a rather bushy beard that he has vowed not to shave until their son comes home. Seeing them brought the POW/MIA issue home.

There was a tribute to Gold Star Mothers and Wives—women who have lost their children and husbands to war. Let the record show that the quote "Every Gold Star Mom is every veteran's mom" was first uttered by Mike DePaulo at Rolling Thunder. There was a time when

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a lot of people didn't know what a Gold Star Mother was. Unfortunately the title is being bestowed with regularity again.

Updates from two popular speakers, Secretary of Veterans' Affairs (Retired) Anthony Principi and Nikki Mendicino, now 16 years old, were also warmly received. Some even began to chant "Nikki for president."

Singer Gordon Painter provided some memorable entertainment, leading the crowd in "God Bless the USA" as we joined hands, swayed and sang along—loud. I don't know how we looked or sounded, but it felt good to be in the company of those who really would stand side by side to defend our country.



Photo by Ray Devlin

A Gold Star Mother gets a ride from a veteran

President Bush did not escape the wrath of Rolling Thunder for two primary reasons. One was budget concerns for veterans' health care. A \$2.5 billion budget shortfall threatens the quality of care received by veterans. President Bush is also under fire for the use of a term known as "Missing Captured." The Missing Captured designation is a loophole and has been

The demonstration concluded with a musical tribute to Veterans by Paul Revere and the Raiders, Nancy Sinatra, Bill Medley and Homeland.

I watched the program on C-SPAN when I got home and frankly, it lost something in the translation between "in person" and on TV. The emotion and enormity of the event just don't come across well on the tube. Rolling Thunder's Ride for Freedom has to be one of the biggest runs there is in terms of number of bikes, but it's much more than that. It is a relatively small group bringing national attention to POW/MIAs and veterans and I can't think of a more important way to spend Memorial Day. ♦

used in the Iraq War in instances that would normally carry the POW/MIA designation. Rolling Thunder seeks to eliminate the Missing Captured designation altogether and replace it with POW/MIA and the benefits that go with that designation. POWs are entitled to additional medical benefits and compensation for injuries/diseases that occurred as a result of their internment.

A semi-surprise appearance by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld interrupted the performance of the Last Madman of Rock and Roll and Rolling Thunder favorite, Paul Revere and the Raiders. Rumsfeld's stay was brief, but important, as it showed Rolling Thunder is having an impact on government.

ROLLING THUNDER, INC

Brought to you by...

Honoring those who make the thunder roll



Elaine Muller and Gary Scheffmeyer

by Ernie Copper

CRYSTAL CITY, VIRGINIA, MAY 28—On the eve of Rolling Thunder XVIII, the leadership of the nonprofit organization, Rolling Thunder, Inc., took time out to honor those who give of their time and talent to make it the success it is. The main ballroom of the Crystal City Hyatt Regency was SRO as representatives of the various chapters of Rolling Thunder filed in at 8:00 p.m.

As the final few took their turn at the buffet table, Sergeant Artie Muller was introduced by Mike DePaulo. Sergeant Muller reinforced the purpose of Rolling Thunder, which is to find our POWs and bring them home. He cited instances of POWs being located and returned decades after their respective wars were over, adding to his belief that there are still American POWs alive in Vietnam and Korea. Muller's statement that "None of us want a war, but if we're going to have a war we'll do it on their damn turf not ours," drew thunderous applause from those in attendance. "We cannot leave our men and women behind on the battlefield," said Muller. This could be called preaching to the choir, but there are certainly some of you reading this that weren't there to hear it—and you wouldn't be reading it if Muller hadn't said it.

Addressing the budget concerns regarding veterans' health care Sergeant Muller reasoned, "If our country's going to spend hundreds of

billions of dollars for a war then I'm sure they can afford a hundred billion dollars to take care of the veterans," referring to a three billion dollar cut to veterans' benefits.

Rolling Thunder National President Gary Scheffmeyer then stirred things up by reading an opinion piece that had been published in the May 25 edition of *The Examiner*, an area newspaper. The article, entitled "Rolling Thunder Should Roll Somewhere Else" described participants as riding "loud, smelly motorcycles" and wear-



Artie Muller at the Hyatt Regency

ing "insolent attire." The author didn't want the Harleys "descending" on his neighborhood. Scheffmeyer charged those participating in Rolling Thunder XVIII to "Show 'em what the hell we really can do. We are here for a cause. We're here for these guys sitting over here [injured Iraqi War vets at Walter Reed]. We're here for the ex-prisoners of war from Vietnam, we're here for the POWs. We're here for the MIAs, we're here for every goddamned veteran that ever served," and the crowd once again erupted into a standing ovation.

Many were recognized. One of the most moving award recipient's speeches was given by Nancy Sinatra. "Boots"

began by saying that she was embarrassed because "somebody was thanking her for saying thank you to you (the veterans). She related a story she's carried in her heart since the '60s in Vietnam. During her USO tours to entertain the troops, Nancy made a point of visiting the field hospitals and writing the names and phone numbers of the wounded she held in her arms in her journal so she could contact their families when she came home. Tragically, her journal was lost, so she was never able to fulfill her promises to the troops. She never could

come to terms with her disappointment and the unresolved feelings she carried from Vietnam—until she became a part of the Rolling Thunder family. Her efforts have more than made up for the loss of the journal and she was recognized for that.

It has been said that behind

every good man is a better woman. Elaine Muller, Artie Muller's wife, was named The First Lady of Rolling Thunder in a proclamation read by Gary Scheffmeyer. She reminisced about the early days of Rolling Thunder and how big it has become since then.

The feeling in the room that night had similarities to that of a locker room before a big game. But that falls far short of really describing this experience. The stakes are much higher, the challenge much bigger than any sporting event. But the members of the Rolling Thunder team are undoubtedly champions. ♦



Tim's family (l.-r.), Nathan Linkof, Mariam Ebrahimi, Mom Diane Desantis, Tim, and Grandmother Anne Desantis

Honors

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no one knew anything on the subject. Only later did I find out this marine was a lone wolf, not a sanctioned poster boy for The Corps.

Noon was fast approaching and you could hear the collective roar of bikes getting ready to run their pilgrimage. I took one more long look around the corner of Constitution Avenue and then I saw him. Moving with a half swagger and half march,

the marine approached, his family in tow, and he headed toward his appointed spot just shy of the turn onto Constitution. As he walked you could hear the loud shouts of "Semper Fi" which were in turn answered with a guttural "hoorah!" Along the way, he shook hands and stopped often to kneel down and talk to kids. You could feel his energy as he drew nearer and heard him speak. His demeanor was stern, but kind, and when he spoke he looked directly into your eyes. With a firm handshake, he agreed to give me a few

minutes at the end of the run after the last bike rolled by. I in turn assured him a cold bottle of water when he was done. I knew he would need it. A giant rock of a man was assigned to help guide motorcycles to the left and right, a road guard if you will. The marine began to take his position in the center of the street when a young boy wearing a Marines shirt walked up to him and in the blink of an eye, they were doing push-ups in the middle of the road. Suddenly, the call came out that the Run For The Wall was about to start. People were quickly cleared from the street. The roar of machines grew louder and the unrelenting lines of bikes appeared. In one smooth mechanical motion, the lone marine cocked his salute as bikes began to roll by.

The marine is Staff Sergeant Tim Chambers. I spoke to his mom, Diane Desantis, his grandmother Anne Desantis, his girlfriend, Mariam Ebrahimi and his buddy Nathan Linkof. Tim was one of six kids in a very active household. He came from a lineage of military folks as his father was a marine in Vietnam and his grandfather was in the Coast Guard in World War II. Tim's family came from the small town of Silverton, Oregon.

Tim spends hundreds of hours helping out various charities, advocates for veterans' benefits and their causes and visits veterans' hospitals.

Tim's card explains what he is all about. He is starting a charitable organization called "Tim-for-America" whose centerpiece is, "improving the quality of life of our youth, the less fortunate and heroic veterans..." His aim is ambitious, but simple: Get people involved and volunteer to help.

After more than four hours, the last bikes finally came over the bridge and slowed down to pass by Tim. When the last escort motorcycle rode by, Tim cracked his salute in perfect military precision. He did a left face and walked toward his family. The surrounding crowds erupted into applause and people came from everywhere to shake Tim's hand and thank him. He would in turn thank every person for being there. Although sweating, Tim seemed no worse for the wear.

Tim explained that for several years, when he was stationed in D.C., he would wear his uniform during Rolling Thunder and walk around talking to people. He would shake hands and thank veterans and their families. He listened to their stories and their plights. Tim decided that he wanted to do something to show that he cared. He spontaneously, in full uniform, stepped into the road during Rolling Thunder 2002 and gave his salute to the riders in the Run For The Wall. The next couple of years his spontaneous salute evolved in to a planned event. This year, he was invited by The Rolling Thunder organization, which flew his family in from Oregon and Tim from 29 Palms, California.

As I walked away, it struck me that I hadn't asked the most important question. I turned around and called him, "Sergeant Chambers, why the salute?" His response was effortless and profound, "It's about the pain. A lot of these heroic guys still hurt and if I can relieve their pain for just one brief moment, then I've done my job." ♦

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