



The Other Honor Guard

They gather clad in grimy jeans, bandanas and riding gear. Their long hair, full beards and colorful tattoos are cause for notice. These men and women exude a tough and hard-bitten vibe, oozing attitude and effortless cool. Their black leather vests and jackets are adorned with patches from various clubs and events. They muster as few as five and as many as 100. Rather than marching, they ride loud, powerful and stunning two-wheeled machines. As they roll through the streets in a two abreast formation, American flags mounted to their chassis flap proudly in the wind behind them. They aren't your stereotypical motorcycle club or organization. When members of the Patriot Guard Riders roll through big cities and small towns of the American landscape, their simple mission is noble and seemingly uncommon – they proudly and solemnly escort fallen service members to their final resting place.

The Naval Special Warfare community reaped the benefits of this non-traditional honor guard, as Patriot Guard Riders from all regions of the U.S. volunteered their services as family, friends and Teammates mourned and memorialized the 17 SEALs and five enablers killed when the CH-47 helicopter they were traveling in was shot down by an insurgent-fired rocket-propelled grenade while supporting operations in Wardak Province,

Afghanistan. While military honor guards rendered 21-gun salutes and played taps during memorials and services, volunteers of the Patriot Guard Riders led funeral processions, stood watch and paid tribute to the fallen with their motorcycles and flags.

According to the club's website, the organization was first established in 2005 after groups such as the American Legion Riders chapter 136 from Kansas began standing between protestors at military funerals and the mourning families. As word spread of this kind of action, Jeff "Twister" Brown, from Broken Arrow, Okla., decided to do more than just ride. He saw a need to get a strong nation-wide communications and recruiting program in place. He contacted the original riders in Kansas and told them of his plans. They openly shared their experiences, suggestions, and encouragement. Within a matter of days, Brown had formed the Patriot Guard Riders and began a national campaign to garner support.

Since its establishment, Patriot Guard membership has grown to more than 250,000 volunteer members from diverse backgrounds and areas across the nation. The only prerequisite for joining the club is sharing a mutual respect for those who serve their country.

"To those of you who are currently serving and fighting for the freedoms of others, at home and abroad, please know that we are backing you."

- Patriot Guard Riders Mission Statement

LEFT: A member of the Utah Chapter of the Patriot Guard Riders stands in respect as the Honor Guard carries IT1 Jared Day to his final resting place.

RIGHT: Members of the New Jersey Chapter of the Patriot Guard Riders stand at attention in a flag line as the funeral procession of SO3 (SEAL) Denis Miranda passes by.



© John Scorza

Photo by MC2 Dominique Lasco



Standing for Those Who Stood for US



LEFT: Members of the Louisiana Chapter of the Patriot Guard Riders muster to distribute flags for their flag line.

BELOW: A member of the Utah Chapter of the Patriot Guard Riders looks on while standing in a flag line outside the memorial for IT1 Jared Day.



“We, as an NSW community and the military as a whole, owe them our deepest gratitude for their selfless support.”

-SOCM Bradley Lucas
Casualty Assistant Calls Officer

“Our mission statement is to come and stand to honor the families of the fallen as invited guests,” said Peggy Morrill, state captain for the Patriot Guard Riders in Utah. “We are a nonprofit service organization. We are not a motorcycle club. We don’t have meetings and we don’t pay dues. Everyone comes on their own dime and their own time.”

The organization calls their services “missions.” According to members, a mission starts when the service member is brought home and may include several steps depending on what the family requests. They start by escorting the procession down a street then gather to stand in a flag line.

“We set up flag lines to help show the family that they are loved and supported. In the unforeseen circumstance that we have to deal with people the family does not want to have around, we act as their shield so they don’t have to hear or see anything disruptive,” said rider Matthew Munk of Salt Lake City. “They are suffering enough; they don’t need to experience more.”

Missions have varied over the years to include homecomings and farewells of deploying service members, but the riders remain true to their promise - to provide non-violent intervention between those who wish to disrupt and families celebrating or mourning their service member.

Families like John and Celeste Thibeault who were able to receive the support of the Patriot Guard after their son died in 2008 while serving his second tour in Iraq

“It was just an awesome service and a lot of support. It’s almost indescribable,” said Celeste. “I was really touched by the support and the respect they gave to us and how they honored our son. It gave me a sense of security. I felt comforted by them; it felt like a great big hug the whole time they were with us.”

“By being present at the services, we let the families know they are not alone and that there are people out there who love and support them, even though we may not know them personally,” said Munk. “They have given the ultimate sacrifice for the freedoms we enjoy and without them, we wouldn’t have it.”

According to the Thibeaults, they joined the team after the heartfelt support the Patriot Guard Riders provided them when they lost their son. They are not alone. Many people, from veterans to military supporters, look beyond the leather and chrome and find inspiration in the organization’s

selfless acts and become members themselves.

“They might look tough on the outside, but they are all just big teddy bears,” said Celeste. “You have to be sensitive and loving and compassionate to do what they do. They stand in blizzards, in heat and in rain. Some of them have their own physical challenges, but they still come. ‘Stand for those who stood for us,’ that’s one of our mantras.”

“It’s an honor to be invited and do this,” said Morrill at an August memorial in Utah. “I wish we didn’t have to be here under these circumstances, but it’s an honor.”

Members like Robert Zimora and Bill Fox use the missions to illustrate to their children the importance of honoring those who have served and standing up for what they believe in.

“I brought my son here to let him see what this organization does and to let him see that there are still people out there that believe in our service members and what they do,” said Zimora.

“I feel that he needs to know what patriotism is,” said Fox about his son. “What better way than to show him? These missions are the ultimate way for him to see for himself, how important it is to show respect for those serving his country and their families.”

Some families and service members don’t even know of the service the organization provides until tragedy strikes. For NSW casualty assistance calls officers like Master Chief Special Warfare Operator Bradley Lucas, who was assigned to help families of the 17 SEALs and five enablers killed Aug. 6, this was their first and very memorable experience with the organization.

“Prior to this assignment, I had never interacted with the PGR,” said Lucas. “My only knowledge of them was from news articles about their participation in ceremonies where anti-military funeral services demonstrations might take place in order to “counter protest” the protesters.”

Lucas witnessed firsthand the support of the organization and the impact it made on the family he supported.

“To see how many dedicated PGR were willing to spend personal time and effort supporting a family of the fallen during a very emotional time of bereavement provided a great sense of pride and appreciation for the family,” said Lucas. “It literally brought tears to the eyes of all those that observed them to see them in action, both on their motorcycles and lining the streets standing at attention with American flags. My feelings are that we, as an NSW community and the military as a whole, owe them our deepest gratitude for their selfless support.”

MC2 Dominique Canales