

## My 2018 Run For The Wall (RFTW) experience



First of all allow me to introduce myself. Tom Sprague. I joined the Navy in May 1968. One year out of High school and I was given greetings from the draft board. Some of you baby boomers may remember in Jan of 1968 the war in Vietnam was in full swing and the North Vietnamese mounted an offensive that became know as the Tet Offensive (Tet is the new year celebration in Vietnam). This was the largest offensive push the Viet Cong (VC) had ever mounted. The USA was caught a little by surprise. The press published this as a major defeat for the US. Although in reality it was a big defeat for the VC. Yes it was also a major turning point in support for the US. The Tet offensive was the beginning of the end for President Johnson.

Anyway back to the RFTW. A fellow motorcycle rider friend in the Austin area convinced me the RFTW trip would be a great bike event. I had heard of the event but did not know that much about it. So I went to the web and looked it up. The cause sounded good and after all it was coming into summer and I was retired. My wife and I normally take a trip in the summer to escape the Texas July and August heat. This was a little earlier but it sounded like a lot of fun. My friend joined the ride in Grand Prairie TX (DFW area) on Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> of May 2018. I was busy with another event that day but I could catch them and join the ride on Sunday in Monroe Louisiana. My wife and I departed the Austin area around 7:30 Sunday AM. We were on our way with our 2000 Goldwing and towing a little trailer for our luggage. Everything went well until we went through Mt Enterprise on Hwy 315.

At that point I felt the back tire was low. I stopped and found the rear valve stem was leaking. I put some tape on the valve stem to hold it in place and connected my little emergence compressor and was able to inflate the tire. I was hoping it would hold until we got to Monroe. Well no such luck. About one mile from DeBerry (intersection of hwy 79 and 31) the stem gave way. The tire went flat and I was doing about 60 MPH. That is an experience I do not want to repeat. I am thankful for all the training we do with the Goldwing group that I am a member of. I knew not to clamp on the breaks but I lightly applied the front brake and guided the bike to the side of the road. Out came the GWRRA Gold book. This is a book of Gold Wing riders that are willing to aid and assist folks. This was the third time the book has saved me on the road. I was able to contact Bill Parish in Marshall TX. He was about 40 miles away and said he would be there in about one hour. Bill showed up in a little over one hour with his truck towing a trailer. He we loaded the bike on the trailer and put the little luggage trailer in the back of the truck. Bill took me to a friend (Junior). Junior lived 11 miles down the road, the same direction we were headed. Junior lived off the main road but he was a great handy man. Had a big garage full of almost everything. We got the bike on the center stand and with the use of a big C clamp we were able to access the valve stem. Junior had an old valve stem for a car lying around and it fit. A total of a 3 hour delay and we were back on the road. Hard to believe on a Sunday afternoon what good friends you have that will come to your rescue. BIG THANK YOU to Bill and Junior.



We still had 122 miles to get to the Monroe and the Comfort Inn where we had reservations. We arrived around 7pm and our friends were in the hotel lobby checking in. My wife and I got

checked in and went to get a bite to eat. We had an early morning call to get registered. Registration opened at 0550. I thought that was kind of early but I was not aware of the check in process. We got the Sam's Club parking lot at 0530. There were already a bunch of bikes there and people holding up signs. The early morning twilight was just starting to light everything up. I asked where the registration was and was informed they were not there yet. After a few minutes I was directed to the registration vehicle. It was a van with a person sitting at the back. We got all the formalities done and I gave them the registration money for me and my wife. The Sam's Club was open for the use of the restroom and there were folks in the front passing out McDonalds biscuits & sausage sandwiches. There was coffee, water, gatorade as well as bananas and other fruit. Well since I paid my fee I got some breakfast. I was given a briefing and told to put a purple ribbon on the bike and a number 8 in the wind screen and get in line with other folks in platoon 8. I was given a badge to put on my jacket that proclaimed I was a FNG (Fine New Guy). This is the designation as a new participant. At 0650 there was a general meeting of all the riders. This was quick briefing of what the day is going to hold. All the FNG's were asked to come to the front and face the group. There were about 3 or 4 of us. I was a little weary of what was to come but was relieved to get a WELCOME HOME cheer from everyone.

I have to admit the schedule was followed to almost an exacting second. I have never been with about 300 independent thinking riders and seen so much camaraderie and precision. Everyone knew what to do and what was expected of them. We broke out of the general meeting and then had a platoon meeting. As I mentioned I was in platoon 8. This was the platoon with bikes with trailers. There was a platoon leader, an assistant platoon leader and a platoon drag bike. The platoon leader Robbie was a nice guy and he gave me a briefing of what to be aware of and what to expect. I was informed what was expected of me and did not have any issues with the directions.

Departure was targeted for 0800. A horn blast indicated we had 10 minutes to get on the bike and get ready to leave. When they say 0800 they mean 0800. We left the parking lot and

headed for Monroe City Hall a total of an 8 minute ride. I was thinking this is short. Streets were blocked and everyone lined up in the parking lot across from city hall. The street was shut down and everyone walked to city hall. We had a 50 minute ceremony with a Wreath presentation at the monuments for the wars the US where involved in. We were welcomed to the city by the mayor. After the ceremony we were on our way to the Tallulah love truck stop for a fuel stop. I was wondering how you can fuel 300 motor cycles. Well it is quite simple. Shut down the station, take over 10 to 15 gas pumps and double line each pump with bikes. The fuel pump was kept open and passed between the bikes. I had read the instruction book and knew to have cash ready and to round up to the nearest dollar to pay for the fuel. When getting to the pump I was informed the fuel was donated and no money was necessary. After fueling the bike I was directed to line up with platoon 8. I got off the bike and had about 30 minutes to use the restroom and get something to drink. Each stop there was the supply trailer handing out water gatorade and snacks and fruit.

About this time I was scratching my head at the precision and exact timing everything was kept on. Again the horn blew and that was the signal to get to your bike and get ready to hit the road.

On the road many of the over passes were lined with people waving flags and hands to the group. I was beginning to comprehend the reason for the schedule. I later learned there were ambassadors on bikes that were ahead of the pack that would stop at many of the overpasses and thank the folks for their support. This was starting to make me feel a real tingling in the pit of my stomach. When we crossed the state line from Louisiana to Mississippi we were greeted by a flight of about 6 helicopters. I think there were three Huey and 3 attack helicopters. They continuously flew up and down the freeway, again showing support. This display of support lasted all the way to our next stop in Jackson where we fueled and lunch was supplied by Harley Davidson of Jackson MS. When we made this exit I saw at least 30 motorcycle state troopers in the lead of our group. We picked up the troopers at the state line and they stayed with us all the way through the state. During lunch there was a program of

speakers and we were addressed by one Vietnam POW that spent 8 years as a prisoner. He had a very moving speech and I was almost in tears after his talk. In Mississippi I think there were people on every over pass. Some overpasses had fire trucks with giant flags hanging from the ladder truck. This was a long way from the greeting we received when returning during the Vietnam error.

This process repeated day after day. Up early, breakfast supplied by some grateful, patriotic people. Everyone thank you for your service. Stories that would make you laugh and cry at the same time. Fuel stop with a break and people waving flags and showing support for the RFTW efforts. The only fuel I had to pay for was at the last stop of the day to top off the fuel tank to be ready for the next morning. Every fuel stop we made along the way was donated. I do not know by whom and I do not know how. I am guessing each fuel stop (about 2 or 3 a day) ran into a couple of thousand dollars for each stop. That is only a conservative guess.

Every time you turned around there were random acts of kindness. Someone would take your plate after you ate and ask you if there was anything else you needed. At one stop in we found out a bed and breakfast at one of our stops was donated. It was auctioned off for \$300. The person that bought the room gave it to my friend that was having a birthday that day. My jaw almost hit the floor. Who are these people. What makes them so special? What had I gotten myself into?

On Wednesday we arrive in Wytheville VA. We were directed into the center of town and parked in Withers Park on the bike path. The whole town turned out. The mayor went on how the RFTW folks first started coming to town. The fact that many of the riders had adopted the town and the kids in the town. Sending them letters and supplying some with computers and electronic devices. RFTW had been stopping in Wytheville for around 18 years. After the ceremony the Moose Lodge treated the folks on the ride to a steak, potato and salad dinner. In the morning we again collected at Withers Park and were again treated to a full breakfast in the school around the corner. The school kids came to greet everyone. By 0940 we were on our bikes and lining up on Main Street for a parade

through town. Again, the whole town was along main street and we were off for Montvale Elementary School.

When we got to the school the kids were line up on the side walk and waving flags. We were directed in the school for lunch and to visit with the kids. Some of the repeat riders that had made the trip a couple of times had kids that looked for them. There was a program in the school gym. First grade sang "*This Little Light of Mine*". The upper grades sang "*The Star Spangle Banner*". There was a presentation to two high school boys for the amount of \$700 each for their college fund.

At this point many of you are probably scratching your heads like me. What is the RFTW thing? How can this be happening? If I knew all the answers I would give them to you. I was completely floored. Each morning I looked forward to the day. My wife is not an early morning person. She is not normally out of bed before 0900. In the morning the alarm would go off and she would be out of bed before me. Most mornings we were up by 0530 or 0600. I guess you can say this is a life changing event. I encourage any Vietnam Vet that rides a bike to look up this event and to give it serious consideration. If you do not ride a bike and want to become involved there are a number of positions that need to be filled. People on the fueling crews were always ahead of us getting thing ready for our arrival. There were people holding up the platoon numbers to get lined up at every stop. The supply trailer keeping cold water, fruit and snacks ready at every stop. There was registration every morning and evening. You might think this runs on love but it takes money. Nobody receives a paycheck. So everything you donate goes to the program. Personally I have just found my favorite way to donate time and money. There is no telling how long this RFTW will continue. I am hoping the next generation will keep it going. The veterans involved in Desert Storm, Iraq Freedom and all the conflicts our service people serve in.

This was the most unbelievable 1,595 mile trip I have ever taken on a bike.



A big thank you to Robbie our platoon leader. I also want to thank Preacher our assistant platoon leader. Preacher took me under his wing and offered help and guidance.

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This Memorial Day I will pause for the fallen.  
For those that lost their lives in battle....

WWI -----	116,516
WWII -----	405,399
Korean War-----	36,516
Vietnam War-----	58,209
El Salvador War -----	37
Beirut -----	266
Grenada -----	19
Panama -----	40
Persian Gulf -----	258
Operation Provide Comfort -----	19
Somalia Intervention-----	43
Bosnia-----	12
NATO Air Campaign-----	20
Operation Enduring Freedom-----	2,356
Operation Iraqi Freedom-----	4,489

and for those who returned home only to lose the battle within.

There are 22 veteran suicides every day.  
65% of those are veterans 50 years old and older.

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Day 1 for me in Monroe LA. Morning briefing (Day 6 for riders that started in Ontario CA)



First stop in Monroe. City hall and a dedication to the people that gave their life in battle.



Jackson MS. Stop for fuel and lunch. American POW Bill Robinson spoke at the lunch and there was hardly a dry eye in the house. See Bill's story attached.



End of Day at Meridian MS. Review of the day and plan for tomorrow. Dinner buffet was supplied in the County Ag Pavilion. People serving were roaming around making sure the riders had everything they needed. Also this was the end of Day 6 for riders coming from CA. There were volunteers to collect laundry and wash and have it returned the next morning.



Volunteers in Orange hats being recognized for their assistance. (Al Hancock in blue shirt to right.)



Day 7. Stopping at the Tuscaloosa VA Medical Center. We had lunch provided by the center and visited with Veterans staying at the center. Very moving to see some of these veterans. A plaque of appreciation was presented to the VA center manager.



Atrium in the VA Center where many ate lunch.



Some of the bikes parked at the VA center.



Stop for fuel at the Piggly Wiggly in Ashville AL. This is the first time we hit some rain. Dry until we were stopped for Fuel and I put an umbrella over my bike to keep it dry. Most of our fuel stops were around 45 to 60 minutes.



End of Day 7 was at the Chattanooga Harley Dealer. The drive through the rush hour traffic was a little grueling. Although we did not have a police escort we did have a rolling block provided by city trucks on the freeway. This allow the group to stay together and to make the exit all at once.



Bikes parked in front of the Harley dealer. You can see the rain in the distance. We got a little wet coming into Chattanooga.



Start of Day 8. One of our normal breakfast supplied by local folk. Eggs, sausage, biscuits, gravy, always lots of coffee and juice.



Knoxville TN First fuel stop for the day



Second fuel stop in Greenville TN



Wytheville VA. End of day 8. The mayor talks about the dedication of the RFTW folks and how proud Wytheville is to host the evening stop for the group. There is a scholarship given to one young lady (see below) that graduated from HS and can remember being in grade school when RFTW came to town. RFTW has been stopping here for 18 years (The southern route has been established that long). This was the 30 annual RFTW.



After the presentations at the park in the center of town the moose lodge hosted a steak and potato dinner for the riders.



Day 9 morning. We all came back to the park and lined up on the green. Full breakfast hosted at the school around the corner or you could have coffee and donuts at the tent. Around 8:45 the school kids came to the park and handed out first aid kits and thanked all the veterans for the sacrifices they have made.



Chapter O folks having our coffee in the park.



Young lady receiving her scholarship for college and addressing the group.



Morning gathering and briefing in Wytheville.



School kids singing God Bless America at our morning presentations.



For the safety of the kids they all got in the bleachers when we started up the bikes to file out of the park and line up for the parade through town. Once we cleared the park the kids went to Main Street (one block behind the stands) to observe the parade. Lots of shouts when the bikes started up (USA – USA)



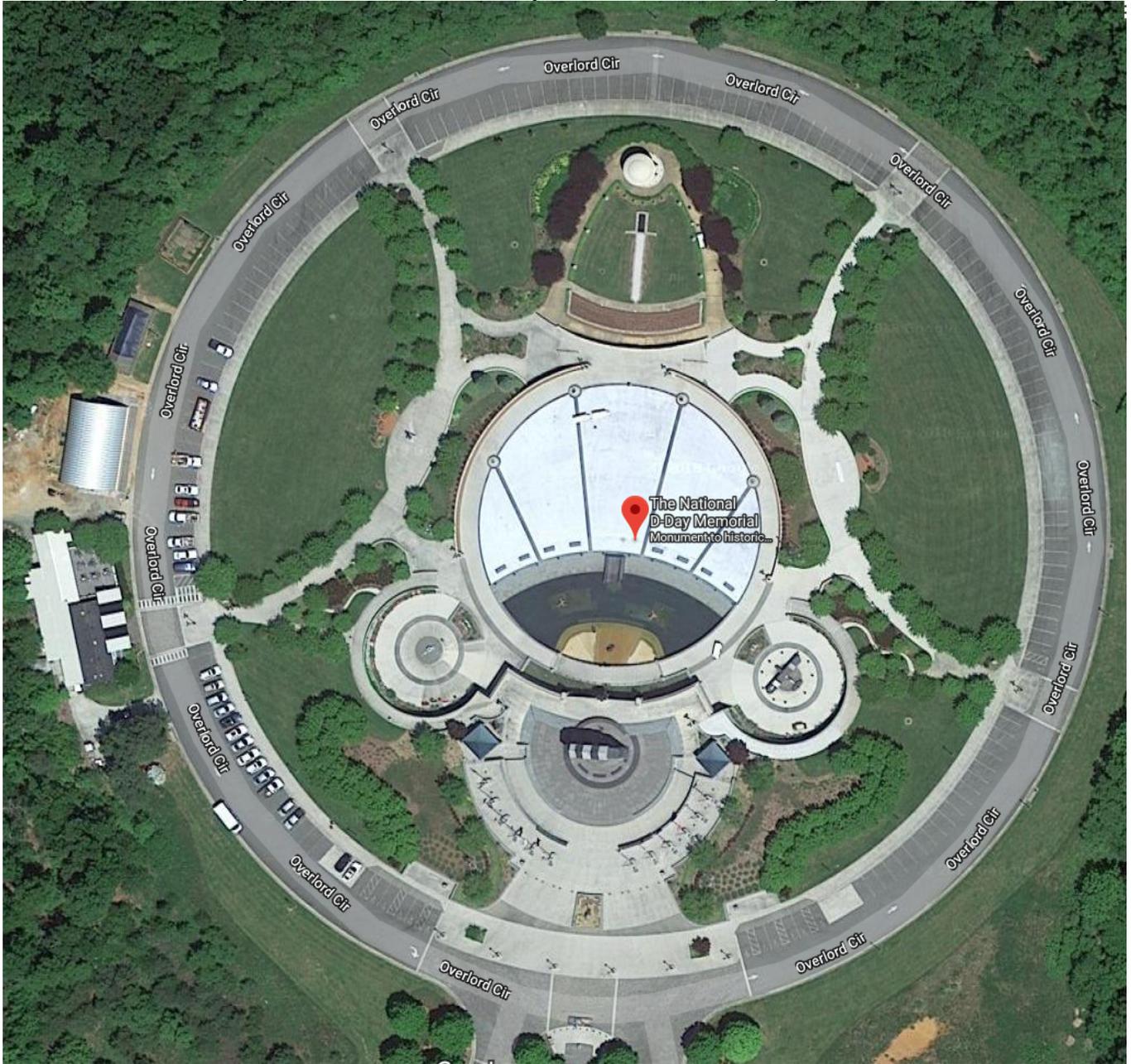
After leaving Wytheville we made one fuel stop and then on to Montvale Elementary School. We parked on the entry circle for the school and all the kids were lined up on the sidewalk to greet us and yell and scream. You got your lunch and many of the riders went to different classes to visit with the kids, some stay in the school lunch room.



After lunch there was about a 45 minute program in the gym. Youngest sang "This Little Light of Mine" The older classes sang a outstanding rendition of God Bless America. Oh YES there were two scholarships handed out here. We departed Montville School at 1:42 (right on schedule) and headed to the D-Day Memorial in Bedford VA.



The below over view picture is to give you an idea of the layout. This memorial is extremely impressive and is a must to see if you are in the area. I will try to describe what the pictures below.



The pavilion to the north with statue of Ike in the middle leading the assault.



Looking out a landing craft with men on the beach.



On the beach you will see a dead comrade in arms. In the distance you can see men climbing a wall to represent the cliff. In the water you will see a spurt of water to represent shots being fired. The water would come up in different areas with the help of air nozzles and almost sounded like gun fire hitting the water.



OVERLORD was of course the name of the operation.



This represents the men that made it to dry ground and a friend dragging his buddy after being wounded.



10<sup>th</sup> platoon picture at the D-Day Memorial. You can see Al and Claire.



Day 10. Arrive in Washington DC at the host Hotel.



Day 11. Formation of first time riders on RFTW. Getting ready to ride into Arlington National Cemetery. Only first time RFTW riders are allowed to make the trip to the National Cemetery due to space considerations. The riders are police escorted into Arlington Cemetery. Upon leaving you head to the Lincoln Memorial for a group shot and to visit the Vietnam Wall.



Changing of the guard at Arlington National Cemetery.

