

Last Ride – Run For The Wall XXX...a third of the way

At my age day-to-day life is somewhat humdrum, full of commonplace predicaments. Rarely does anything outlandish occur. My mellow retirement routine centers on yardwork, tennis, workouts, TV (*too much TV*), reading books and an occasional lunch out...the usual stuff. And then – with a feeling akin to Dorothy's stint in Oz – I left California on my Harley for 3½ days of the 10 it takes the motorcycle pack-ride Run For The Wall (RFTW) to reach Washington D.C. My need for this escape was linked to the first run in 1989. I didn't want to miss a chance to have ridden on both the Inaugural and the 30th event. In many ways a thirty year span of participation would be an endearing accomplishment.

I'm hesitant to ask anyone to go along with me on RFTW. Why? The ride has happened 29 times. At some point anyone who sincerely wanted to participate would have already done so. *It is not a fun run!* It's a *demonstration* of solidarity for American P.O.Ws & M.I.As, family, friends and all those who respect the men and women in our Armed Forces. RFTW's cross-country trek has three separate routes each composed of 250 or more riders. Both those old and new to pack-riding become molded into tight platoons riding in formation, adhering to a ridged protocol, a preset timeline and preset distances. All of this is peppered with repetitively occurring waiting-lines both on and off the bike. Yup, it's almost like being back in the Army.



1989 leaving for RFTW – CA had no helmet law

We used to advertise the Run everywhere in an attempt to get riders to join. Nowadays without any publicity the numbers are huge. Pre-Registration for RFTW 2018: Central Route 672; Midway Route 387; Southern Route 542. That's 1,601 Participants signed up ahead of time!

RFTW is a heartfelt event that is extremely well organized. It even has its own 2-piece embroidered back-patch-set intended to show pride of participation and ID the group. RFTW is the consummate motorcycle pack-ride – *i.e. "Colors"* but *technically not via motorcycle club protocol*. The first run, an *Old School* cross-country putt, became my induction into the Biker Nation. Those long days spent in the pack led to a lasting comradery. My coordinating the 4th Run in '92 – one of my 8 times riding the full route – certified my link in RFTW's history. To me, making the Run is a credibility thing! I hold a distinct respect for anyone who has made the entire trek from CA to DC. My being a Vietnam Vet bolsters that respect. I enlisted during the Vietnam War, was stationed in Germany, volunteered from there for Vietnam and then extended *In Country* until my enlistment was up. Many people talk of their desire to ride RFTW; but, those are hollow words until that person actually rides All-The-Way.

For at least two years prior, I fine-tuned my escape. Those plans included making an updated version of the original RFTW embroidered patch, something I'd done in the past for the 10th, 20th and 25th Run. During its early years RFTW was partial funding from sales of two embroidered patches. One patch featured a black field with bright yellow letters proclaiming "Jane Fonda American Traitor Bitch". The other, *The White Patch*, artistically depicting a column of motorcycles arriving in Washington D.C. at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall. I figured an updated White Patch would be a great way to

commemorate the 30th event. Having made a batch of fifty RFTW XXX Whites over a year ahead of time, enabled my sending fifteen samples to RFTW's President in a pitch for their mass production. Though the patches were well received my proposal failed. The Board of Directors chose instead to create a new, simpler – but nice – 2018 patch. In appreciation for my effort I received two embroidered RFTW back-patch-sets.

I distributed the remaining thirty-five Whites as I saw fit. Some that I had mailed to folks vanished as if never sent. Run Founder James Gregory, whom I had sent a couple of patches, asked for a more when I met him at Staging. Other attitudes ranged from apathy to fervor. I had sent Don “Bullitt” Pierce two White Patches. Bullitt is a brother 1989 all-the-way rider. When I spotted him at registration he had a new White Patch sewn to his vest. “Evo I’ve got something for you,” he said and took off. The *something* turned out to be an outlandishly bright red, ball cap with ostentatious gold flames flanking its sides. (*Caps are a thing among RFTW cadre; cap color & script proclaim job status.*) Bullitt was making a statement for the three of us present from 1989. The cap’s front declared in two lines “**Run For The Wall – 89er**”. On its back was my *road name* coined on the first run – “**EVO RED**”.



Along the route the Whites received mixed reactions. Patches I’d given to two Run Leaders were essentially snubbed. One treated the notion as if I’d shoved a Jehovah leaflet into his hand. The other made a wisecrack to which I cracked-wise back. The response from *Bones*, the Missing Man Formation coordinator, was one of deep appreciation. On Day 1 in Needles, CA during lunch, a down-and-out looking fellow stood outside the Community Center as an ad hoc doorman for approaching riders. Upon receiving a patch, he held it with both hands entranced by its image; his face lit in gratitude. Also in Needles, the owner of a small beauty salon bordering the town square of our stop – amidst work on a client – gratefully accepted a patch. Her shop offered cookies and other bakery to riders. Besides the food, she had allowed *Many Bikes* to park his scoot on the sidewalk in front of her salon. His Harley was hooked to an extension cord that stretched through the shop’s front door from a back wall outlet to his trickle charger, a quick fix for his defunct charging system. A couple of days later I slipped four White Patches to the *Independent Riders of Raton*, NM club President Tim Trujillo as he finishing a broadcast interview. For years he and his club have paid fuel costs and given small commemorative patches to all riders. Being righteously preoccupied, his response was a simple thanks.

Was my rather expensive patch undertaking a fiasco? Nope. The effort was well worth the pleasure emanating from people that appreciated receiving patches.

One proven way for RFTW to mark its path is via \$2 bills. I took fifty \$2’s along for tips, paying for gas and making purchases. People tend to remember the source of this rarely seen currency.

There is always the dilemma of whether to join an event solo or with someone. When I asked my riding bro of many miles whether he wanted to go, he was up for it. He made that pledge at least a year in advance – around the same time I was dealing White Patches to the Board of Directors. The

second back-patch-set I'd received was intended for him. Long story short, at the last minute he reneged on his promise and completely broke off all contact! As a counter to the default, I traded his 2-piece-set at the registration for some new RFTW commemorative patches for my grandkids. Days later when handed the emblems, my grandkids interrupted their play diverting interest for *almost* 10 seconds.

On the 25th Anniversary Run I left my original RFTW Vest in D.C. at The Wall. We 89ers didn't wear anything close to matching vests. The RFTW embroidered-set came on scene years later as an option. Having gotten a free set from The Board I decided to put together a new vest, in reality a storyboard of embroidered emblems each a reminder of something meaningful.

The New Vest: The left front represents Wind & Fire MC...the club I founded. The right front denotes RFTW and my Vietnam service, including a 2nd Field Force Vietnam emblem (white sword in a blue arrow) and the Military Police crossed pistols. Apart from these two themes are four expressions of my own.



"Today...is a Good Day", don't dwell in the past or worry about the future, live in the day being thankful of all you have and those in your life. **"Live with Understanding – Bless Everyone Mitakuye Oyasin"**; the latter is a Lakota phrase meaning *"We are all related"*. **"Not Crazy – Just a little impaired"**; a *Matchbox 20* lyric that seems to address the idiosyncrasies found in all of us. My **Mickey Mouse Face**; a reminder "Don't take life too seriously."

Reality Check. My wife took a "set to go" photo of me the day before I left. Wow! I was shocked



at the old dude on my bike! I'm in much better physical shape than a lot of guys my age. But, man.....! The premise of this being my *Last Ride* had just scored some major street cred from that pic! Last Ride? Yes. Doubts about going? No. Riding within a large group is not a worry to me. In the pack is where I want to be, one of the pixels creating the Run's visual statement.

Tuesday May 15th, 2018 the day before RFTW's start, I rode down to the rally site in Ontario, CA east of L.A. After signing in and getting the necessary tags and blue ribbon to I.D. my bike (*the blue ribbon, #4 with #0317 meant "Central Route, Platoon*

#4, Bike #0317") plus a lanyard draped medical ID for me, I rode to my hotel 20 miles away.

The next morning I pretty much screwed up. I got up a bit late. The alarm clock went off late. I took too long to load my scooter. The traffic was heavy. End result: I was the second-to-the-last bike to show up...*2nd to last meaning 749th of 750 or more riders!* Everyone else had made it to the morning's mandatory meeting. Unknowingly I'd also missed an intro by Run Founder Gunny Gregory recognizing me as one of the three 89ers present. As quietly as I could I putted my raucously loud glass-packed mufflered Harley into the jam packed staging area, shut off its motor and then proceeded to "foot peddle" from place to place in search of my designated Platoon #4 Central Route slot. A bit of misdirection didn't help; but, I finally was in position. I said a quick "Hi" to some old friends who were there but not riding and then snuck into the tail end of Platoon #4's briefing. Shortly afterwards, off we went.



The first day of riding was intense with the FNGs (*Funny New Guys*) lacking group experience and the old crew getting settled into pack mode. It is difficult to relate the intensity involved. Perhaps it's akin to the squeezed-together pack of racers in NASCAR or the peloton at the Tour de France? Most RFTW platoons ride side-by-side style. Front-to-back spacing of bikes is kept close otherwise the already long column would double its command of the road. From time to time road guards pass along the line urging riders to maintain a uniform bike distance. On that first day at least a dozen times Platoon #4 hit rubber-banding rapid-speed-shifts with drops from 70 mph to 40 and 60 mph to 30 then back to 65. One policy to lessen this occurrence is, when possible, down-shift rather than brake for speed control. Less braking means fewer ripples through the pack caused merely by the sight of brake lights. Though any significant miscue along the column could initiate a domino effect of multiple riders going down, amazingly it doesn't happen. Nevertheless, a relentless awareness of that potential lurks. The requisite *continuous full focus* of pack riding definitely injects a touch of adrenaline. Perhaps a paralleled feeling if driving would be to hold-constant for 10 days the tension caused from a near-miss auto accident.

During the first day I began to wonder why this rubber-banding was happening? Isn't the leader of this whole thing supposed to ride at a set pace? He must know to enter the roadway at a slow speed until all the bikes are on board before gradually upping the pace to a constant 65 mph? Back in the old days with a much smaller pack we simply got into the fast lane, stayed there and jammed on down the road at 70. That tact became null and void once 300+ bikes were involved. One counter to unwanted speed changes is setting up platoon groups. Gaps between platoons allow traffic to enter and exit lanes. But if a car, cars or an eighteen-wheeler slips into a gap and slows, the rubber band effect snaps to life. Because the ripple within the column is less near the front, platoon position is rotated daily. At the start, Platoon #4 was fourth in the column; the next day 3rd; and so on. An apropos driving study clarified what happens. Seven test cars were set up traveling in a line. When the lead car reduced its speed by 5 MPH, in a short period of time, the last car was forced to come to a full stop. Day 2 when I rode a leg up front directly behind the lead bike I saw the Route Coordinator ride exactly as I had questioned. He entered the interstate at a slow pace, held speed and then gradually increased to a set 65 mph.

Before the last leg of that first day, I left the pack and rode ahead to Williams, AZ. My plan was to take photos of the column as it paraded through town to day's end. As I stood on Main Street in front of an Italian restaurant waiting for the pack, one of the RFTW crew shouted, "Twenty minutes!" *Twenty*



minutes? I went inside to order some pasta. Riders began arriving *four minutes* later! I sprung to the street from my inside table and began shooting pics. None were very impressive. Without an elevated position it's nearly impossible for a sidewalk shot to catch the blanketing depth of the column.

The next morning offered a much deeper photo of the bikes compressed together on Main Street set for Day 2's morning briefing. City support for the Run was evident: yesterday's parade, the previous night's dinner at the VFW and morning breakfast

provided the in the heart of town. (*My pasta at its inflated tourist price was so-so.*)

Riding conditions improved significantly on Day 2. Our platoon had moved up a slot in the column while at the same time riders had begun settling into the rhythm of the pack. So far the weather had been great! Prominent to my whole *escape* was the day's last leg in which I was assigned as rider in the *Missing Man Formation* from Holbrook, AZ to Gallup, NM.

I-40 passes through the bottom of the Navajo Nation with Gallup, NM being located just outside the reservation boundary. I hold fond memories of welcomes received from the *Diné*. The Navajo revere those who serve in the Armed Forces, seeing us as warriors. I remember one occasion when *The People* waited in the cold and later the dark for our 2-hour-late arrival. Our initial stop was just off I-40 at the senior center, a pause to greet tribal elders. Farther down the road our main welcome came at the Window Rock Memorial. We were met with ceremonies, Code Talker demonstrations, a meal and each rider was given an enameled pin featuring the seal of the Navajo Nation. Remarkably, as we stood in the cold evening air during the festivities I was given a quilt! On another occasion a few years later after the RFTW Gallup leg, I embraced my friend Doc's offer to ride back that night to The Nation for a Sweat Lodge prayer ceremony. Doc's intent was to bless the tobacco-ties he was taking to D.C. In route to the sweat location we stopped at a local gourd dance gathering. Joining the festivities we stomped in drum cadence rounding the warrior's dance circle. Upon completion of the sweat's prayer ceremony I was given an eagle's feather. All these happenings combined over the years to create within me a calming sense of welcome whenever I am in or near the Navajo Nation. Saying I felt honored to ride the Missing Man Formation into Gallup is a gross understatement.

On the first RFTW, as I recollect, riding Missing Man was a chance happening, i.e. "Yeah, that'd be cool; let's do it." That remembrance gesture has grown into the highly structured Missing Man Formation (MMF). The *MMF Position* itself is a vacant space at the head of the column directly behind the lead pair of riders. The MMF rider is charged with maintaining an open slot riding solo as if a riding partner were present, creating a visual reminder of someone lost at war. That someone is specifically identified. In my case he was Michael Jay Gladden, an infantryman killed in Kontum, Vietnam during the A Shau Valley Battle of November 1967. His death fell within the same timeline of my stint *in country*. He

was unknown to me; but, he was dearly loved by his cousin, a non-rider deeply appreciative of Michael's being remembered via the MMF.

The whole MMF detail is handled by the Missing Man Formation Coordinator. In the case of the Central Route, that individual is Tom "Bones" Pogue. If someone were to ask me where to find the heart of the Run I'd send them looking for Bones. His dedication is written on his face, evident in his speech and solidified by his actions. At the end of each leg Bones can be seen down on his knees within the now parked MMF slot chalking the name of that remembered person onto the roadway. The freshly written name is accompanied by a photo and a story telling the honoree's tale of service.

The pack exited I-40 on the west side of Gallup parading through the city to its eastern outskirts. Onlookers welcomed us along the entire route. Whole families could be seen waving from the roadside, often gathered together near their pickup trucks. The majority of supporters were Navajo. In this age of bombastic "experts", self-serving career-politicians and fake news, the Navajos get it. Their gesture went beyond *Thanks for your service* to a true *Welcome Home*. That parade rightly became an emotional moment linked to my past memories.

Our final Gallup destination was Red Rock Park where a Gathering of Veterans ceremony was



given to us by The Black Creek Gourd Society. During ceremonial drummed gourd dances we veterans – a sorry lot – stomped to the drumbeat as best we could turning the perimeter of the dance circle. Back in the stands after our dance efforts I caught an intense stare from one Black Creek Veteran present



within the celebration. We locked eyes on one another. I don't know whether his stare was in recognition or from my having made some breach of protocol. The moment passed unanswered. After the ceremonies the City of Gallup served up dinner in a park building on-site.

Day 3 was shot with intensity. That day and the next until reaching the border of Colorado the New Mexico State Patrol provided the column an all-inclusive escort through their state. Along with local law enforcement support, the State Patrol had even shut down the I-40 and I-25 Freeways for our pass through Albuquerque. Their escort enabled the pack's lengthy footprint to transition easily to its various designations. Escort dynamics required the Patrol and our RFTW road guards to blow past the pack at speeds touching into triple digits as they leap-frogged to advanced positions. Holding place within the formation was paramount. A split second drift into the fast lane at the wrong moment would not end well.

Lunch that day was provided by Santa Fe Harley-Davidson at its dealership. Most riders were still inside eating when I happened to be at my bike – a speck within a sea of parked motorcycles –

switching my gear to match the upcoming weather change. A media photographer scouting the sea of



bikes meandered over. Her camera to eye, she began snapping multiple shots of me fussing with my stuff. She then asked my name, my *road name* and inquired of its source. The following day the accompanying picture appeared in *The New Mexican* with its caption, *"Jerry Eibert, aka 'Evo Red,' earned his road name because in 1989 — the first time he did the Run for the Wall — he had a red, soft tail motorcycle."* Olivia Harlow/*The New Mexican*

Later in the day as we rode single file on the winding two-lane through the mountains, the State Patrol rode ahead directing all opposing traffic to pull to the side of the road. The path of our single file became the inside ¼ of the road or to put it another way, the right half of the uphill half of the road. Keeping close to the inside shoulder allowed additional space for our escorts to pass. This riding technique was nothing out of the ordinary. Nevertheless, I did hear a scraping sound from directly behind me. A quick look in my left mirror captured a touring bike crossways on its side with its rider sitting in the roadway on his butt. No one stopped, not with a column of 300 bikes plus chase vehicles! The downed rider's miscue was a slow speed blunder. Its likely outcome was *minor* scratches to the bike & biker; but, a *major* hit to his pride. As far as I know, the pack arrived at the Angle Fire, NM Vietnam Veterans Memorial State Park without further mishaps.

"When sons or daughters die in battle, parents are confronted with the choice of what they will do to honor the courage and sacrifice of that son or daughter. Following the death of our son, Victor David Westphall, on May 22, 1968, in Vietnam, we decided to build an enduring symbol of the tragedy and futility of war." Dr. Victor Westphall

Doc Westphall passed away in 2003. The chapel and memorial he built live on. One of my cherished photos is from 1995 showing Doc, my son Joe and me in Doc's office at The Memorial.



Riders were left on their own at the Memorial. Afterwards, they individually headed to nearby Eagles Nest, NM for the night. In my case I rode 66-miles further along to my hotel in the town of Raton, the site of Day 4's first stop. What a relaxing feeling it was riding casually solo through the hills and then across a flat landscape dotted with pronghorn antelope. Well aware that it's easy to keep riding, stay in the moment, not drink anything and get dehydrated, I stopped to get a bottle of water from my saddle bag. Rather than pull onto the shoulder of the road I always search for a driveway, side road or some such. *(A mental image flares up whenever I pull off the road. It's of JR, a past RFTW rider I'd met, being struck and killed on a road shoulder when he stopped to help another biker.)* Up ahead a large storage tank with off-road access fit the bill. Dismounting well clear of the two-lane, I spied a drab colored cap

laying ten feet away in the dirt. It was clean, fresh shaped by a cardboard stiffener and decorated with three mother-of-pearl doodads sewn to its side...definitely a new lady's cap. I bagged it.

After checking into my hotel I went to K-Bob's for dinner. Having made my order, I got up to go wash my hands. At that precise moment my boot's right heel and most of its sole came loose. Instead of clop-skipping across the crowded restaurant dining room I nonchalantly slid my right foot along as I walked. Dragging my foot along while weaving among the tables and wearing a black leather vest festooned with Veteran patches – one of which is a huge "Vietnam War Vet" side rocker – defied any attempt at subtlety. Instead, I felt the vibe of quick stares and eyes averted from the guy with a "bad leg". Diners had to be thinking, *"So sad, the casualties of war."* Embarrassing! I should have just taken off my offending boot. Nah; walking around in socks would have gotten me thrown out of the place. *Yup, it would have been goofy; but, probably a better tact to have clop-skipped.* Anyway, the burger was great; its price half that of back home in Santa Barbara.

Man, I had to get that boot fixed! The best they had at the local market was Gorilla Glue. Back at my hotel I Gorilla'd the hell out of my boot. The next morning at breakfast and while loading my bike, the glue-fix worked great. Then, I damn near cartwheeled down the stairs into the hotel lobby. So much for the Gorilla. I needed some epoxy. As luck would have it, adjacent to the hotel was a local agriculture business, The Tractor Supply Co. I bought the quickest-drying epoxy in stock, mixed it up on a magazine palette while sitting out front on some fertilizer sacks and attempted to smear my boot sole. The newly mixed goo setup too *instantly* becoming a small plastic-like slab. But it hadn't completely hardened. I pried it free, slapped it onto my boot bottom and stood motionless while shifting all my weight to one leg trying for a pressure set. Not the greatest; but, it worked! Off I went to RFTW's staging area on Main Street. I gave my newly found lady's cap to the Platoon Leader's wife. The cap's O.D. green was a fashion match to the general atmosphere of the Run. *(The Platoon Leader's wife w/cap appears in the photo's background)*



From Raton we rode 107 miles up I-25 to our next fuel stop, Pueblo, CO. I happened to be riding directly behind the Assistant Platoon Leader. A few miles from Pueblo the Assistant "tapped-out" – hand thumped the top of his helmet – and left the column. Riding protocol moved me up into his vacated slot alongside the Platoon Leader. Thus, I rode my last pack-miles at the head of Platoon #4 into Pueblo's gas stop. I too tapped-out just as we made the turn for fuel, exiting the 30th Run after 1,088 miles.

After a few miles solo up the interstate I took Highway 50 westward. I hadn't gone a block down 50 when I spied a Black Eyed Pea restaurant. The sight of this forgotten eatery brought back past RFTW memories. In the early years a Black Eyed Pea in Fairfax, Virginia served as my RFTW finish. As happened once in May, I sat there alone on my birthday. In '92 as run coordinator I chose the Pea for RFTW's *After Run Get Together*. This same eatery, though at a different location, served again as my finale.

My destination for the first night on my own was Tomich Village located on the east edge of Gunnison, CO. I checked in, found my room, went down to unload my bike and was saluted with a sole-flop from my right boot! Luckily I still had half of the epoxy. After having meticulously scrapped the boot

bottom and its sole, using my newly found appreciation for *instantly*, I promptly spread the sole with the mix. The weight of a table, leg stuck into the boot top, served as an overnight press. Meanwhile outside, dark clouds threatened rain.

Though it was where I planned to dine, I found the hotel restaurant defunct and up for sale. Spending time in town at an eatery, with rain on the horizon, meant riding back in the wet. Donning my trail shoes in place of the glue-setting boots, I headed to town for takeout pizza. While the pie baked I grabbed a beer from the nearby market. The market's young checker demanded to see an I.D. for the alcohol. *Gray hair and days away from age 73...got to love the functioning of bureaucracy!*

In the morning my bike was a bit ornery. It needed several push attempts to get it going...*a prelude to what would come later*. The craziness of pack riding was over. My boot was holding together. The weather was looking good. I was riding in the scenic mountains of Colorado. All in all, it was a great day to be on my own. Up ahead, on the two-lane about thirty miles west of Gunnison, a car was pulling a camping trailer. Cruising down the straightaway I realized this guy was almost into the curves where he'd likely start to dog-it. With that in mind, I sped up to pass him. As I pulled abreast of his rig he slowed. *Nice guy, letting me pass*. I lifted my hand to wave, looked in my mirror and all I saw was flashing red & blue lights. *Shit...*

Kickstand down, helmet off, sitting sidesaddle, I waited for the inevitable. The patrol officer's first words were, "You were doing 83 in a 60."

"Really!"

It's impressive how quickly I can reach passing speed on my bike. In hindsight I was so pumped to be on my own away from the Run's constant 100% focus that I had veered from my original plan to ride home at a casual pace. Perhaps remnants of adrenaline still lingered in my system? A \$250 ticket sucks; but, I wasn't that upset with it. Driving is a game. Sometimes you win; sometimes you get caught. The more I rehashed my fate, the better I felt. The ticket definitely got me back on track...maybe even saved my butt. Normally my riding mode is 5 *mph* over with an interstate max of 75. The officer handed me the ticket to sign. He said the fee could be mailed. As I handed back the signed form I gave him a "Today...is a Good Day" patch. He was apprehensive, unaware of what I'd slipped into his hand. Realizing it was merely a small embroidered patch he said, "What's this?"



"It's something I had made up."

After his closer scrutiny, "I'll put it up on the bulletin board at the station."

My plan for the day was to ride to Grand Junction, stop at Cabela's outfitters, continue on to Moab for lunch and spend the night in Green River, UT. Knowing Cabela footwear had a lifetime guarantee gave hope to my trading-in my floppers. I replied, "Really old" when Customer Service asked my boots' age. Replacement credit was based upon the amount of sole wear. Being that my boots were for riding and almost never used for walking, they had almost zero wear. Voila...\$71.00 credit! Out the door I went shod in my highly discounted, much improved, new footwear.

About 20 miles from Green River my motor started missing big time touting anxiety of a possible breakdown out on Utah's desolate I-70. The rest of the way to the hotel was anything but smooth; but, I made it! Now what? My next night's reservation was in Salt Lake City. I was headed there to visit a longtime riding bro. From our months ago conversation he knew the day I would be there. Upon hearing of my predicament he sympathized, said he'd like to help and bring his trailer down; but, he had an appointment tomorrow (?). I mentioned that I might continue riding his direction stopping at a Harley shop along the way to have my bike looked at. The distance to the shop was 200 miles! The chance of even starting my bike the next morning was slim. The possibility of riding any distance was up into lotto odds. If I did get on the road most likely I'd breakdown in the middle of nowhere. I chose a saner tact of having my bike towed. As a Harley Owners Group member I'd be reimbursed \$100.00 if the tow was "to the nearest dealership." That dealership turned out to be Grand Junction H-D, a 102-mile backtrack at a cost of \$450! From past experience I knew Grand Junction had a great shop with a conveniently located Holiday Inn next door. Done deal. We made it to the dealership and hotel by 2:00 PM.

The motor problem was a simple fix...bad sparkplugs. I told the wrench that he might as well do a 5K service while he had my bike. Getting a service done back home meant: ride 45 minutes to the shop, wait 3 hours and then ride 45 minutes back. Since leaving home days ago for RFTW, this was my first day free from riding. Meandering about the local area I found an Italian place for a late lunch, *Octopus Coffee* for tomorrow's breakfast and learned *WW Peppers'* dining hours, a place I knew from another time. All-in-all a good day.

On my morning breakfast stroll to *Octopus*, while passing through an industrial park, I found a 10 inch purple & black handled knife lying on the pavement.

A smile wouldn't have helped. It was a stupid move. I shouldn't have walked into the Octopus "allegedly brandishing" the knife. Everyone there had those damn cell phones! It was too easy to capture the scene and call 911. It being Colorado, at least the guy with a concealed carry didn't shoot me!

Nah, never happened. I'd stuck the knife backwards into my vest pocket, an unnoticeable inch of its blade peeking out. Octopus Coffee was as artsy and homey as its name implied; its walls and shelves offered goofy posters, comically printed socks, quirky buttons, stickers and such for sale. My tasty artisan oatmeal, cinnamon roll, individually brewed decaf plus free knife made a good start for the day. BTW: I kid you not. At home the same day wrote the Octopus Coffee tale, a local news flash headlined "Man arrested for allegedly brandishing a knife." This from the neighboring strip mall to my house.

How many chances in life do you actually get to do something significant for a close friend? It's rare; might be less than one. The scheduled visit to my friend in Salt Lake City and its roundabout return would add 600 miles to my trip. Contemplating his indifference towards my visit and feeling fresh from a day's break, I decided instead for a two day ride straight home. Not exactly straight. I'd skip I-15 for a few extra miles along Utah's scenic Highway 89, including its Route 14 mountain link back to the interstate. It being May some snow would still be on the ground in the mountains, a somewhat odd feature considering part of the terrain was lava rock. My riding past Duck Creek, an out of the way camping area off Route 14, brought back fond memories of the times I'd stayed there.

The week before I'd left Santa Barbara a casino/hotel mailer came to our house. It offered a free room at the Casa Blanca Resort in Mesquite, NV. The offer seemed legit especially with my chosen date

falling on a dead-of-the-week Tuesday. I presented the flyer to the casino desk clerk. He looked at it, looked back at me and belched, “It’s not valid. Today’s a blackout day.”

I completely understood and said, “That’s bullshit.”

If it hadn’t been for the offered “free room” I would have ridden long miles that day to Jean, NV in an effort to create a shorter last day’s ride home. Screw it; though it was late in the day I continued on from Mesquite to Jean for the night. Nighttime interstate riding to-and-through Las Vegas has reduced traffic, fewer speeders and the calm of darkness; it’s almost peaceful. I pulled into the Gold Strike Hotel at 10:30 PM, got a room and walked down the long hallway to an on-site Denny’s for a late dinner. The dining hall was all but empty: one waitress, two guys at another table and one lone biker.

Throughout my 927 miles from Grand Junction to Santa Barbara the bike ran great though I had planned to sell it at the end of the ride. Selling a 41,000-mile 12-year-old bike isn’t easy in today’s flooded used bike market; it’s damn near impossible. A small note stuck on front of the bike odometer comprised my entire sales scheme. Black print on blue painter’s tape read “BIKE FOR SALE.” The offer was only visible from a head-on look. If no reasonable bid, I’d keep the bike. Back at Grand Junction H-D the wrench fixing my Harley had said he might know of someone interested. Three days after I returned home the guy called. No way would I have found this buyer sans the breakdown and its \$450 tow! Two weeks later Colby and his brother Bubba showed up from Colorado to pick up the bike. A couple of days after that the \$100 H.O.G. reimbursement check appeared in my mailbox. My breakdown ordeal had completely flipped from bad to good. The dread of needing a major repair had vanished with new plugs. My Grand Junction Day of strolling about the area in new – *unusually soft* – boots, shooting the breeze at the H-D shop, eating good food and having a restful night was an escape in itself. I got a cool free “letter opener”, avoided another local 4½ hour service grind and my marketing tactic was a hit. The day’s break had revived me for the ride home. Even my friend’s too busy appointment became a plus.

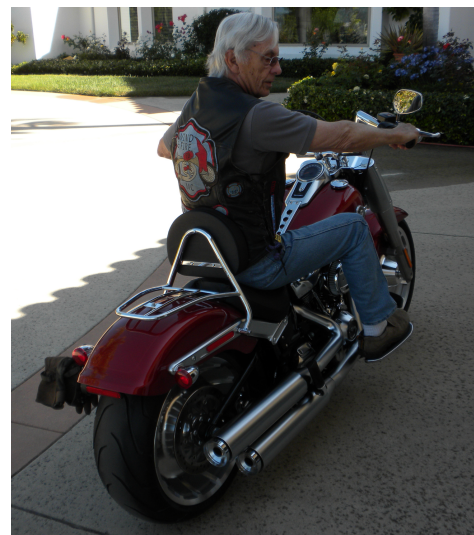
This **Last Ride** was a mix of loss and fulfillment. I will always be proud of riding for those who were lost in our country’s wars on the 1st, several others and then the 30th Run For The Wall. From my first new Harley in 1985, to founding Wind & Fire MC in 1991, to RFTW 2018, it was a great ride!

Being without a bike definitely feels weird though...almost as if I’ve lost part of myself.

— *Evo Red*

That was 2018. Now it’s “Stay isolated”, “Mask up”, “Cancel RFTW” 2020. As always, rereading something I’ve written compels me to edit. First off, RFTW XXX is no longer my “Last Ride”! The Corona Virus Outbreak laid a final straw atop my two-year longing to get back *In-the-Wind*. Thus, a new Harley showed up at my door on July 4th. Riding is one activity unaffected by the *new abnormal*. Besides...having founded an international motorcycle club, I should at least have a bike for a monthly putt to a chapter meeting. My riding will be local, at most a hundred miles to the north or a hundred miles south. As always riding is an escape.

“Life is risks.” So, a few more years to go then...



Epilogue: There is an ingrained hardheadedness attached to riding motorcycles. It's a resolve that enables a rider to cope with the elements, the risks, the physical demands and maintain a focus essential to riding. This fortitudinous-need is magnified on long hauls and pack rides. Obviously hardheadedness doesn't mix well with aging. As aging diminishes balance, reflex, physical conditioning and mental agility that hard mind-set can slip from the edge of reason. I witnessed this slip in my dad. At age 85 he rode with me to Sturgis, SD from Santa Barbara, CA. Subsequently riding a 400-mile-day solo, he crashed losing a leg. RFTW was originally a Vietnam Veterans' thing. Most all of those vets are now in their 70s. What will happen as these riders continue to age and ride? Most know enough to avoid the pack. At some point it's time to quit. Sooner is definitely better than later. I'm in great physical condition for my age; but, I realize I'm not what I once was. Short local rides are reasonable. Riding in another RFTW pack? Bad idea. It's not going to happen.

Going against the biker axiom, *"If you don't understand, I can't explain it"* I'll site some *personal examples* relative to being *in-the-wind*. It starts with a bang. In Canada on a *first ever* long ride – not paying attention – you crash, spend three days in a hospital and fly home; weeks later you return to finish. Hail hitting your legs at highway speeds feels as if you were being pelted by rocks. Rain hitting your face at highway speeds feels like needle pricks. Getting hit from behind and knocked off your scoot shocks your brain worse than seeing it coming. Riding in 120+ heat makes the road seem to stick to your tires. Extremely high temperatures combined with lengthy stop-start traffic will overheat and shutdown an air-cooled motor. Wind in your face at triple digit heat is like having a hair dryer set on hi, inches away, pointed at your nose. Riding in that same high heat is worse in short sleeves or without a shirt. Riding in the cold can unknowingly lower your body temp to the point where you shiver uncontrollable once you dismount. Somewhere above the single day 800-mile-mark the molecules in your body seem to vibrate in sync with the motor...even after you dismount. In the rain you might pull off under an overpass for protection. In a violent storm that same underpass will be filled with cars; so you ride on. A crosswind can blow so strongly that your bike cables rub the paint from your front fender. In summer a Swiss Alpine road with its open 1,000-foot drop shoulder can suddenly be hit with snow flurries. During a European summer you may ride in the rain so often that you skip rain gear, even when the locals pull off to put theirs on. In your own neighborhood a cop pulls you over with a lie to cover his profiling you for the way you look. Drivers can pull in front of you blind or fail to see you causing: 1) you to clamp down your brakes and fish-tailing around a near hit; 2) after t-boning a small truck you're launched as an airborne flying object, wallet ripped from your pocket on touchdown; 3) you're forced into a best-option-slide smashing into an SUV rocker panel. A warm weather rain through-and-through soaking causes you chills upon entering an air-condition restaurant. You survive the close calls: an unseen deer by a hand's width or inches from an oncoming bumper of a Alpine tour bus on one side while a mountain's rock face looms on the other. At midnight on September 11, 2002 you're with Wind & Fire MC at Ground Zero, the first group on scene for the one year anniversary of 9-11. One of your road guards is killed in an accident the next day as the group begins its trek to the IAFF Memorial Wall in Colorado Springs, CO to honor the lost FDNY 343. Over those memorial days traveling from New York to Colorado you hear the bagpipe dirge played so often that the melody runs nonstop through your head. Harley-Davidson Motor Company supports W&F MC's FDNY memorial effort both financially and physically...seeking nothing in return. A Softail shock breaking on the interstate causing your back to painfully fill the void. When a "state of the art" torsion-bar rear suspension shears off its fastening bolt, the projectile blows a hole in your motor's primary case; the part is unavailable and you're 1,800 miles from home. In a day the weather changes from hot, to snow, to rain and back to hot. You unexpectedly

ride into a sticky snowfall that covers and fogs your face shield forcing you to ride one handed while constantly clearing your view. Coming down a mountain road close to home your front tire blows out. At 1,000 miles from home your motor completely destroys itself. You're riding in a parade in Washington D.C. on a Sunday when your clutch goes out causing you to ride without one for the next two days. You lead a pack of riders on a 9,000-mile trip with the anxiety that every move you make causes a chain reaction...right or wrong. You ride straight through from Hill City, SD to Santa Barbara, CA with only a twenty minute nap. You learn that wearing a full-face helmet functions as a great pillow for a quick nap dozing on a bench. Your throat feels the soft rubbery thump of a bat body as you night-ride down a mountain two-lane towards Phoenix. Lastly, you are warned thousands of times by *non-riders* to "Be Safe".

I failed to mention the good stuff: the peace of mind, the freedom, the excitement, the absolute joy of being in-the-wind on a perfect day or on a clear night with a full moon bright enough that you shut of your headlight for a mile or so...and of course all the people you meet along the way, the friends made. Unforgettable for me is a Memorial Day Weekend while walking along the Reflecting Pool in D.C. having Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell – relaxing nearby on the grass with a friend – called out, "Hey Jerry." Heartwarming are the smiles you put on the faces of kids, burn victims or terminally ill, when they sit on your bike during a charity event. The pride of being a part of the support given at the Love Ride, Christmas Toy Runs, Burn Camps, Ronald McDonalds Camp for Good Times, The Ride to Remember, Rolling Thunder D.C. and RFTW. Good times riding with my father, my wife, my son and my daughter.

Ten days after I got home my brother Steve died. There were only four of us in our family. He was definitely my *older* brother. At age 18 he left high school to become a Christian Brother in the teaching order of John Baptist de La Salle, instantly becoming the "saint" of our family. Meanwhile, ten days later, I turned 4 and continued my stint as the goofy little kid with big ears and skin covered in eczema. As the years fell away so did the eczema. The shock of my triple digit IQ was the first of many for my parents. My brother and I were distant in age and location. His last few years were spent at the Christian Brothers University residence in Memphis, TN. We might have been distant but our love for one another was close.

(From a road tale I once wrote he was actually pictured in *Easyriders* magazine.)

Diné made this warrior feel welcome (Navajo Times July 19, 2018)



Editor's note: The following is an excerpt from a report on the 2018 Run For The Wall held May 15 to 24 by a member who made his last run this year.

I-40 passes through the bottom of the Navajo Nation, Gallup being located just outside its boundary. I hold fond memories of the welcomes received from the Diné.

The Navajo revere those who serve in the Armed Forces, seeing us as warriors. I remember one occasion when The People waited in the cold, and later the dark, for our two-plus-hour-late arrival.

Our initial stop was just off I-40 at the senior center, a pause to greet tribal elders. Farther down the road our main welcome came at the Window Rock Memorial. The festivities there included ceremonies, Code Talker demonstrations and a meal. We each received enameled pins featuring the seal of the Navajo Nation. Remarkably, as we stood in the cold evening air during the formalities, I was given a quilt!

A few years later from RFTW Gallup, I embraced my friend Doc's offer to ride back that night to The Nation for a sweat lodge prayer ritual. Doc's intent was to bless the tobacco ties he was taking to D.C.

Before going to the sweat we followed the drum's beat to a gourd dance and a warrior's dance at a local gathering.

Later after the – non-denominational – prayer ceremony I was given an eagle's feather. All these happenings combined over the years to create within me a calming sense of welcome whenever I am in or near the Navajo Nation.

Saying I felt honored to ride the Missing Man Formation into Gallup was a gross understatement.

Jerry Eibert, aka Evo Red Santa Barbara, Calif.