

Ten Days in May

1 Jan 2018 - It's early morning....I welcomed in the New Year knowing I had to get up and make my hotel reservations. I decided to go All the Way with the [Run For The Wall](#) this year. I've been on the [forum](#) reading what others have posted, asking questions, reading the [President's message](#), the messages from the [Central Route Coordinator](#), the [Southern Route Coordinator](#), the [Midway Route Coordinator](#), the [Sandbox Route Coordinator](#), the [frequently asked questions](#). I have a good feeling about this, but at the same time, I'm a bit wary. I've never ridden this far, haven't spent much time riding in formation. The forum said to make my hotel reservations as soon as the list is released, and today is the day. It's only noon here and I have already had to work alternate hotels in a couple of the stops. But I did get into the host hotel in Ontario. When I'm done with the reservations, I must get downstairs and get with the walking. I need to get in better shape; I'm never going to be an Olympic athlete, but I need to improve my endurance. I've already spoken with my dealer and planned on getting my bike in for inspection, maintenance and servicing. The folks on the forum provided me a checklist. Time to start checking off the items on the list. IS IT MAY YET?

11 May 2018 – It's finally MAY!!!! Time to get this show on the road. As I head to California, I know it will take me three days to get there. Good chance I'll meet other riders on the way. Bike is loaded, filled with gas. See you in California.

13 May 2018 – I'm excited as I approach the host hotel in Ontario, CA.



This has been a long time coming. When I came home from my tour, it seemed like nobody cared, nobody appreciated what the last year was like. Even my dad, a combat vet, didn't have much to say. I've carried all these emotions over the years; but now, it looks like I may have found a group I can really relate to. As I traveled in, I reflected on the last 6 months of preparation; the exercise, the safe riders' course I took again, having my dealer go through my bike knowing it was going to be a

6,400-mile plus mission, the time spent on the RFTW forum asking questions, being called an FNG again. Wow, I'm an FNG again. But through it all, through all the discussions on the forum, in talking with others at the monthly luncheons, I belong here. This is my place. This was meant to be.

As I pulled into the hotel parking lot, the first thing that struck me was that it looked like a biker

convention. Motorcycles and people everywhere. I parked my bike and went in to check in the hotel. There were several folks in line, talking, introducing themselves. I saw obviously old friends hugging, laughing. The lady in front of me introduced herself. I noticed from the number of All the Way patches on the back of her vest she had done this before! As we talked, I told her this was my first year. The next thing I knew, I was in a bear hug, and received a Welcome Home. I nearly cried. I was finally home. Tomorrow I register; tomorrow my journey begins.



14 May 2018 – Registration opened at 0900, and the lines were long. Again, everyone talking, sharing stories, experiences, jokes. I'm cranked about getting starting. Is it Wednesday yet? The folks at registration gave me my next Welcome Home. Registration was a bit of a blur, but the



Registration Team got me through it. I'm beginning to realize these folks get it. I saw riders wearing hats of different colors, some with brassards that read Road Guard, Chaplain, Platoon Leader, Assistant Platoon leader, Tail Gunner. It's not hard to see that our founders were vets. I've never received so many Welcome Homes. And I got an FNG pin that I

am to wear. Geez, they advertise that I'm an FNG. I'm standing around the lobby and suddenly I hear someone yell "FNG" and this burly, bearded guy hugs me and gives me an enthusiastic Welcome Home. He's wearing Platoon Leader brassards. We talk for a few minutes, and I'll be darned, this guy is my Platoon leader. Whoda thunk? He fills me in on the important meetings I need to attend, asks if I made sure my bike is ready, do I have enough meds; all of the questions the folks on the forum said I needed. I feel good. Just like my service days, my Platoon Leader cares about me and takes his responsibility seriously. The feeling of belonging is starting to take root. I get my bike blessed at 1100 and spend the rest of the day talking with others, walking around and visiting some of the vendors in the parking lot.

15 May 2018 – 0830, I'm at a mandatory Central Route FNG rider's meeting. The different colored hat folks that I learned were part of the leadership contingent are all around. Safety, Safety, Safety. It seems like every sentence contains the word. We meet the Route Coordinator and the Assistant Route Coordinator. Hmm...They're wearing black hats—hope that isn't symbolic. Staging, Chaplains, Fuel Team, Road Guards, Ambassadors – we hear from them all. All are patient with our questions. I get the feeling these folks are determined to make this mission a resounding success.

At 1500, the 1st Division Marine Corps. Band starts playing out front. What an inspiration and a



reminder of our service. What sharp Marines!! At 1600, there is a presentation of the Colors, the National Anthem, and then a Combat Hero's Bike Build presentation. So many people involved in this mission; so many people taking care of our Vets. So many riding for those who can't. The motto is beginning to take on meaning.

A two-hour safety meeting follows. Wow. We go over every facet of the mission. Health, well-being, hydration, meds, riding in formation. I know I read the same messages on the forums, but now the RFTW leadership is going over it all. I find myself

getting caught up in the moment. Tomorrow we begin; the 10 Days start in the morning.

16 May 2018 – 0500 – Day One begins. Last night I checked my gear at least twice. I even repacked some of what I already repacked. Talking with others, I picked up a few more tips on packing. This is it. Let's pack the bike, check out and get to the staging area. As I head over, I hear the rumble of a hundred

bikes with the same intent. As we pull into the parking lot, I am suddenly overwhelmed. What did they say about staging? – Oh yea, slow down, head on a swivel. The first flagger asks what route and points me in the right direction. Man, there are bikes everywhere. Another flagger keeps me on track. Finally, I see the Staging Team member with my platoon number.



She helps park me, looks at me, gives me a big smile, a good morning and a Welcome Home. First hurdle: that wasn't so bad. Now for breakfast. Time flies and soon we are called to the Riders Meeting. I'm seeing a trend here. The presentation of the Colors, the pledge of allegiance, the National Anthem.



Introduction of the leaders.

Recognition of the volunteers. Then it hits me. All of this is put together by volunteers—all patriots. Holy Smokes. I really feel at home. We break out into our individual platoons and meet again with our platoon leadership. Everyone okay? How far are we going? ALL THE WAY!!!

Finally, we're on our bikes, motors running, leaving by route and platoon. Flags waving. Thanks to the California Highway Patrol, we leave the staging area and get on the Interstate in spite of all the morning traffic. Safety! I owe the CHP a big thank you! Focusing on the group, my platoon, the person riding beside me. Getting in the groove and focusing. Focusing....

The next thing I know we pull off at the exit for Barstow. Oh yeah, first fuel stop. Suddenly, I remember, highway pegs up. We turn in and flaggers are all directing us to fuel lines. Again, it looks like bikes are everywhere, but I begin to see organization in the chaos.



Fuel cap off, cash in hand, soon it is my turn. I'm handed the nozzle, fill the tank, hand the case over, duck-walk my bike forward while starting the motor, and I'm off. Another flagger directs me out of the station and down the road. Ahead, I see Staging. As I'm looking for my platoon stager, the flaggers are pointing me in the general direction. There she is! Staged safely, another good morning, noise, bikes and people everywhere. Heads up. Pay attention. Don't add to the chaos. As I watch the last bike being staged, I realize the Fuel Team

gassed 300 motorcycles in around 20 minutes without incident. WOW! I heard the stagers talking, one down, 48 more to go 'til we are home in DC.

The horn sounds and we are off. Down another Interstate, this time moving out across the desert. It is heating up; glad I drank some water. Soon, another fuel stop, another staging. More water. I'm beginning to get a bit more comfortable with it all. There's that horn again. Off to Needles for lunch.

Lunch is in the park downtown. I'm amazed. Subway sandwiches, ice cream, townspeople everywhere determined to meet our every need. Volunteers. All giving to help ensure our mission is successful. The people, the businesses, the youth groups, all giving. I'm stunned at the support—the giving.

After a couple of more stops, we eventually arrive in Williams for the night. The VFW has a spread laid out for us that is fit for a king. Volunteers, welcoming us home. A lot to process; a lot to be so very grateful for.



17 May 2018 – Wow. The town of Williams closed half of the downtown stretch for our staging. Staging is a bit challenging this morning as we are facing the sun. And it is 38 degrees.

Again, breakfast is donated, prepared by volunteers who, without a doubt, worked months to plan and prepare this food. Provided to us free of charge. To support the Mission. Even though they aren't riding with us, in a sense, they too ride for those who can't. I begin to realize we could never accomplish this mission without the volunteers.



The mayor of Williams welcomes us at our morning rider's meeting, we discuss the days ride, emphasizing safety, explaining the 50/50 raffle and then we break out to our platoon leader meeting. Again, we talk about riding safely, our Platoon Leader ensures everyone is okay and comfortable, meets and greets the new arrivals that registered and joined us today. The care and compassion for our health and safety is evident in all our leadership's thoughts and actions.

We head out of the mountains towards lunch at Holbrook, Ariz. We arrive at the American Legion to music from a rock band composed of high school students. Super cool!!! Inside, again, volunteers. I find the donation jar and make sure I do my part to help this effort. A group of school students leads us as we recite the Pledge of Allegiance. The students sing patriotic songs, and all too soon, we are off to Gallup, N.M.

We arrive at Red Rock Park, welcomed by Native Americans cheering our arrival.





our families and homeland. Brotherhood that crosses all borders. No race, no color, no gender, no religion.... Warriors.... Words escape me.

18 May 2018 – Alarm goes off at 0500. I slept hard again last night. I head over to Red Rock Theater.

It's dark and again, I enter the Staging area slowly and carefully. I see my platoon stager holding up my platoon number and I'm off to enjoy another breakfast.



Before I do, I realize the Road Guards and Staging team were here, organized and ready to go when I arrived. It hits me that they are up and out at least an hour ahead of me. Volunteerism. I ask my staging team if they need a cup of coffee, something to eat. They thank me as I bring back a cup of coffee.

Now I'm off to eat breakfast. Again, we have our morning riders meeting discussing the day's ride, emphasizing safety, working the 50/50 raffle and then

we breakout to our platoon leader meeting. Again, we talk about riding safely, our platoon leader ensures everyone is okay and comfortable. He meets the new arrivals that registered and joined us today. Brotherhood, safety, care and compassion. I am finding it all, every day, in all we do.

It's cold when we head out—115 miles to our next stop. Pull in, fuel, stage. I'm seeing a pattern emerge here. I stop for a minute to watch the fuel/staging dance. Coordinated chaos, but with safety paramount.

The New Mexico State Police escorts us out and through the traffic of Albuquerque toward Santa Fe.



People are on the overpasses and fire trucks, all waving the Stars and Stripes. Cheering us on our mission. Suddenly, I realize that we represent them in our mission as well. We ride for those who can't. While our mission is about veterans, it is about the people, the families of our vets. About patriots. After lunch, donated by Santa Fe Harley, we head up toward Eagle Nest, nestled in a beautiful valley at 8500 feet elevation. This is the start of riding curvy mountain roads. They weren't kidding.



Soon we arrive at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. What started out as a memorial by a father whose son died in an ambush in Vietnam, it is one of the most beautiful memorials I've seen.

We honor those who came before us, and soon it is on to dinner provided by the town of Eagle Nest. Donated. More food than one can imagine. Desserts. More Welcome Homes than I ever believed existed.

19 May 2018 – It's chilly in the mountains. Again, the Road Guards and Stagers are out and getting us organized. Breakfast, again donated, leaves no one going hungry. As we do every day, a group safety meeting, followed by a platoon safety meeting, emphasizes the nuances of this day's ride. We will be departing through a mountain pass: areas of light, sunlight, little light. Challenging, but we are up to it.

It's donated gas in Raton with a welcoming ceremony by townsfolk and veteran's group. Three hundred bikes are filled with donated fuel from the Independent Riders of Raton. You know they worked all year raising funds just for us. Words fail me. Soon, we leave



headed to a donated fuel stop in Pueblo, Colo., courtesy of American Legion Riders Post 2. Then it's on to donated lunch at the Fountain, Colo., fire station, courtesy of American Legion Riders Post 38. On to Limon, Colo., with fuel donated by American Legion Riders Post 1985 and 15. There's rain ahead so I change into my rain gear. Sure enough, before we reach Goodland, we get hit with a good old-fashioned Kansas rain storm. Glad I changed into my rain gear at Limon. We don't stop to change. The mission continues. Goodland, like so many other towns, welcomes us with open arms. Great food prepared by volunteers who spent countless hours preparing for us. To keep us on our mission.



20 May 2018 – It's Sunday, Day 5, and our Chaplains provide us a nondenominational service. Body, mind and soul. The leadership has thought of it all. We are well cared for.

We fuel in Oakley with quick staging before heading to the Oakley town park for another donated lunch, this time by several VFW posts. Again, volunteers. I again find the donation jar. I feel compelled to help those who help us. It's on to fueling at Bunker Hill, donated fuel by ABATE #6. I'm really seeing a trend here. While RFTW is about the mission, it is so much bigger than just the riders. It is hard to imagine the thousands of hours of donated time and tens of thousands of donated dollars that go into each year's mission.



Again, people on overpasses across Kansas. Sometimes it is just one or two folks standing alongside the road; sometimes it is dozens of patriots waving flags as we approach.



Entering Junction City is an experience I'll never forget. A hero's welcome awaits with people lining the streets with flags, cheering and clapping for us. Welcome Home!

21 May 2018 – I'm glad I exercised and prepared for this mission. I'm tired, and we are only halfway through this mission. Today, we ride across the Kansas Turnpike with tolls donated by several volunteer groups. Then through Kansas City with an escort by the Missouri State Police and we arrive in Concordia, Mo., for fuel and lunch. Again, lunch is donated. The welcome is overwhelming, the lunch is incredible. Too soon it is off again with a Missouri State Police escort down I-70. We fuel and break at Columbia and soon we are at Wentzville. After an incredible dinner courtesy of the VFW, I'm again hitting the pillow hard.

22 May 2018 – Breakfast (donated), a rider's meeting and a platoon meeting take on a new dimension today. We are heading into morning St. Louis traffic. Safety is paramount. Head on a swivel; don't take on a four-wheeler. You will lose. Lots of truck traffic; don't cut them off. They're out here trying to earn a living.



Following a ceremony in Wentzville at the first Vietnam Veterans memorial built in America, we depart.



Finally, we arrive at Jefferson Barracks VA hospital. Time to visit with our brothers and sisters.

The vets, nurses and staff are waiting for our arrival and I've never felt more welcome. After an emotional visit, we are off too soon. We ride for those who can't. After a stop in Illinois for yet another donated lunch provided by an incredible group of volunteers and a gas stop in Indiana, we arrive in Corydon, Ind. Much like so many other towns, we receive a hero's

welcome in Corydon. People line the streets, flags waving, horns honking. We stage in the park and are provided a dinner of fried fish, provided again by volunteers. Much like so many of us served our country, volunteers continue to serve. Whether vets or not, it is about serving and supporting the mission.

23 May 2018 – I got this. Staging in the dark, no worries. Riders meeting, platoon meeting. Safety. Appreciating the work of the Road Guards, Fuel Team, Staging Team; seeing how the Ambassadors stop and greet the folks on the overpasses, in the towns, at the meals. At a loss for words about the volunteers. I feel a sense of calm coming over me as I realize I never really was alone. I find myself seeking a Chaplain to discuss my feelings, the overwhelming emotions. Someone I know will understand. We find a quiet place to talk; he understands. He listens, not judging, but helping me grasp the enormity of what I am feeling and experiencing. Of what I saw at the VA hospital yesterday; of what I might see again today. Finally, I am ready for today.

At the Rex Robley VA Center, we are again greeted by vets, staff, nurses. Popcorn is in order here and I gratefully take some. From there we head to Waddy then to Frankfort, Ken., and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.



Describing the emotions of this memorial is difficult—you just must see it. Again, I feel a sense of calm; of knowing we are not forgotten, that those who gave all are not forgotten, that our service wasn't in vain.



Following an incredible lunch at Mt. Sterling, with more donated fuel, it's on to Nitro, W.V., again staging right smack in the middle of downtown and a Welcome Home from a grateful public. I keep hearing about tomorrow, the Capitol, then Rainelle. I'm not sure I want this to end.

24 May 2018 – Day 9 – It can't be Day 9. This mission is going all too fast. Following breakfast, during the riders meeting, we discuss the road from Charleston to Rainelle. It is a challenging ride with switchbacks, elevation changes when you least expect them, coal dust, leaves on the road. Be alert. We have our platoon meeting and we are off to Charleston, the state capitol. I've been hearing that we



stage in the center court of the state capitol, but I didn't believe it until it was happening. Following a governor-issued proclamation for Run for the Wall day, we visit the WV Veterans Memorial. Another safety meeting. And we're off. And they weren't kidding. I'm glad I took the time to work curves and low speed riding.



One of the most challenging rides I've ever experienced leads us into what must be the most patriotic town in America. The elementary school kids and staff are lining the street chanting "USA, USA, USA," waving flags, greeting us.



Following a short parade through the town, we stage in front of the school and head in for a lunch I'll never forget. I didn't remember the lunch tables being so small or so close to the floor. I manage though. After we eat, we get to meet and interface with the children. They ask us questions, we talk about our service, and we get to sign their autograph books.



The children have a competition to see who can collect the most autographs each year. Then comes the ceremony. Each year, the Central Route collects donations and raises funds to support the school. This year, we collected more than \$20,000 that will go to provide things the school might not normally be able to afford. There is a long story connecting Rainelle to RFTW. The RFTW website can tell the story better than I, suffice to say this little town touches the heart of every participant every year.

25 May 2018 – Day 10 – No way. This can't be it. I'm exhausted but not ready for it to end. We stage, rider's meeting and platoon meeting, then it is off to fuel and a donated lunch in Staunton, Va., courtesy of Shenandoah Harley and the local HOG group.



It's warm, East Coast warm and I feel the humidity. All too soon, we are off to Toms Brook, our last stop before DC. We are met by the Virginia State Police. The RC has another safety meeting. We are heading into DC traffic on what is a three-day weekend. Holiday traffic prevails. Don't argue with a car; you will lose. Soon we are off, our escort and Road Guards providing for our safety. There is significant truck traffic on I-81, and as we merge onto I-66, the closer we get to DC, the more traffic we encounter. Head on a swivel. Pay attention. All too soon, we are pulling into the host hotel, our Staging team doing their thing one last time. We are home, the emotions are overwhelming.



We are hugging, there are more Welcome Homes than I can count. Complete strangers, but part of the mission. There is a brotherhood I cannot describe. We arrived. Tomorrow morning, as an FNG, I will be going to Arlington National Ceremony to participate in a wreath laying ceremony. 400 of us will ride into the hallowed ground of ANC to pay our respects to those who preceded us.



26 May 2018 – It's 0715. I can't remember when I've slept so hard. I shared a couple of beers with other riders in the hotel bar, went to dinner and fell out. The camaraderie is amazing. We sat and swapped stories last night, made new friends, even talked about next year. But now it is the Arlington National Cemetery mission. We are staging for yet another mission—a mission of and for FNGs. The Arlington County police are providing an escort for all 400 of us. We hold a rider's safety meeting where the police lay out the safety rules. Don't

even think about moving into the left lane; the escorts use it to move, at high speed, from the back to the front to block intersections. Keep up, don't rubber band, keep your distance but don't put too much distance between you and the rider in front. A familiar message that has been reiterated across the country. The RC explains the process in the Cemetery. We come in as a group. We MUST leave as a group. If you want to visit other graves, you will have to come back. Turns out we are the only motorcycle group allowed to ride in. But we MUST leave as a group. A single straggler could cause



us to lose our privilege to ride in. I was selected to be one of the four that will lay the wreath. I am wearing the required dark polo and tan slacks. We arrive, have a meeting with the Ceremonial Guard, and the next thing I know, I am marching forward with three others to lay the wreath. There are hundreds in RFTW vests watching us, hundreds of other civilians watching us. Four of us representing our mission. Four of us standing proud for those who can't. We are laying a wreath at perhaps the most solemn memorial in our country, recognizing those who came before

us, Riding for Those Who Can't. The emotions are nearly overwhelming. We represent.

As we ride out, we head over to the Lincoln Memorial for an RFTW group photo. There are more than a couple thousand of us. All four routes are together: Central, Midway, Southern and Sandbox. The

photographer is urging us along, giving instructions. Finally, the group photo is complete and we head over to The Wall.



We lay a Mission Accomplished plaque at The Wall. This year's mission is complete. There is a tradition that FNGs are FNGs until their pin is turned upside down at the Wall. My RC is standing there, turning the FNG pins for those who ask. This is a solemn moment. I went All the Way. I am no longer an FNG. I too Ride for Those Who Can't.

One of the other riders is talking about visiting the other memorials while we are here. We walk over to the WWII memorial, the Korean War memorial, and many of the other memorials in this area. We pay our respects to those who served before us. The Greatest Generation. And then it hits me; we truly do Ride for Those Who Can't. We represent the best of the best; never left behind; never forgotten. I see a lot of RFTW vests at every memorial. We represent.

Remembering that Memorial Day is about those no longer with us—those who paid the ultimate price. We Ride for Those Who Can't.

30 May 2018 – I am safe at home. 6,574 miles. I immediately get on Facebook and see other riders checking in. I do the same. I think I'll fill out an After-Action Report and send it in. What the heck, I'm no longer an FNG. Let me provide some feedback. Then it is downstairs to exercise again. Next year is coming soon and I need to be prepared. I find myself thinking of next year. I'm thinking I need to investigate this volunteer thing. How can I help? As I think about next year, I find myself asking, "Is it May yet?"

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