

LAST STOP

Standing for Those Who Stood for Us

by KEN SCHMIDT

As I rounded the spectacular U.S. Marine Corps War Memorial of the second flag-raising on Iwo Jima, I had to wonder who I'd be riding with into Arlington National Cemetery, to provide support at gravesite services honoring a retired U.S. Army officer none of us had ever met. Several Patriot Guard Riders (PGR) already on site waved me into their group. "Welcome to your first mission," they said with backslapping hugs and handshakes. "We're glad you could join us."

Twenty or so more riders pulled in, most wearing patches and mission pins identifying them not only as very active PGR volunteers, but as former members of the military. A few, like me, never served or were also on their first mission. Ages spanned from early twenties to "let's just say retired." I met a father and son. There were two men on trikes and a gal on a Sportster® model. A few rode bikes of non-Milwaukee pedigree, and one even drove a car, but no matter; today we were all the same.

The road captain announced the mission parameters: We'd be riding in two columns into the cemetery and eventually to the gravesite where we would, in his words, "stand in formation

at a distance, letting the family know that we support them in their time of loss and that we're proudly standing to honor someone who stood for us." He added, that if need be, we would provide a silent shield between the mourners and any persons attempting to ruin the sacredness of the proceedings (the less said about them, the better).

We rolled toward the cemetery, where guards recognized the group and waved us through the gates. Onlookers raised their cameras as we rode to the gravesite to stand vigil and await the ceremony.

Upon cue, we snapped to attention. To the beat of a lone drum and the measured clapping of horse hooves, the caisson bearing the flag-shrouded remains of the deceased began slowly rolling toward us. As it approached, the road captain ordered, "Present arms," which prompted immediate, rigid salutes from the former military members. To see these guys, some of whom served decades ago, standing tall and saluting made my eyes mist. Their pride never wanes.

Standing at ease, we watched a gravesite ceremony that everyone should witness. The U.S. Army Band played "America The Beautiful," as the burial flag was snapped and folded with exquisite precision by the U.S. Army Honor Guard, then presented to the family. A seven-marksman firing party raised and discharged their weapons three times in perfect unison. A lone trumpeter then played "Taps," which you're probably hearing right now. We remained in formation until the ceremony ended and the family of CWO4 Albert "Al" Jackson, 86, U.S. Army, Retired, Fayetteville, North Carolina, departed.

I found it very telling that when I told the volunteers that I'd be writing something for *HOG*® magazine, many came up to me and said, "Please don't mention me. Today is about a family and the loss of someone we should all stand up for."

But I think you should know this.

Ted spoke of how the volunteer work he and his wife, Ann, do with seriously injured young warriors makes him "appreciate the blessings in my life." Bill told of the anguish felt while escorting remains of young warriors killed in action but also of the sheer joy of escorting "Welcome Home" buses bringing warriors home to their families. Robbie said the only place he feels the kind of brotherhood he had treasured during his war service was through his volunteerism in the PGR. Bruce said that when the mother of a fallen hero comes over to shake his hand and say thanks, "that stays with you." Dennis said he had done more than 300 missions with the PGR and will keep doing them as long as he can stand. George said that when old heroes die, PGR members frequently outnumber family at the service, and "that's very comforting to them." Roland said he had returned from Vietnam to coldness and wanted to make sure that no other vet would ever feel unwanted or unappreciated. What I heard most frequently throughout the day, though, was, "When a family asks for us, we're there."

The Patriot Guard Riders is a 100 percent volunteer organization that honors fallen military heroes, first responders, and honorably discharged veterans, operating in every state. All that's required for membership is your willingness to show respect. You can join by visiting www.patriotguard.org.

KEN SCHMIDT is a H.O.G.® life member and longtime Harley-Davidson enthusiast.

