



# TRIBUTE TO THE TROOPS

## Military honored during Sturgis Motorcycle Rally

Motorcycle racing was the genesis of the inaugural Black Hills Motor Classic, which took place in Sturgis, South Dakota, in 1938, with nine racers competing. The very next year brought the start of World War II, and due to gas rationing in support of war efforts, the rally didn't take place for a few of those war years.

Now known as the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally, the event still acknowledges both active and veteran military personnel in a variety of ways, time and again proving that motorcyclists are among the strongest sources of support for those serving, or who have served, in the U.S. Armed Forces.

One of the most impactful military veteran-related activities during the rally is the Veterans Charity Ride, now in its fifth year. When retired U.S. Army paratrooper Dave Frey went on a solo ride to Sturgis in 2014, he met a fellow veteran and they began talking about other vets that deal with various

issues upon their return to civilian life. This prompted Dave to find a way to use motorcycles to help vets with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, sleep disorders, traumatic brain injury, and other medical conditions that may cause difficulty in assimilating back into civilian society.

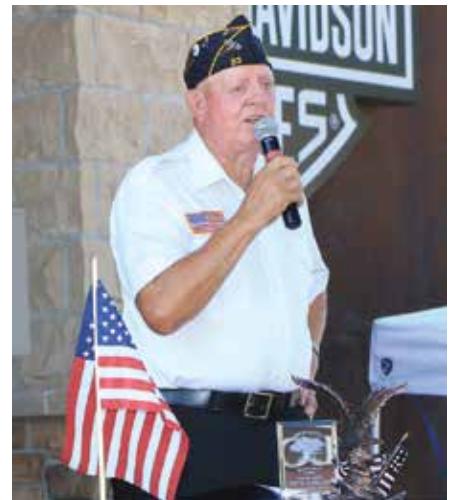
Each year since 2015, Dave and the Veterans Charity Ride, with the support of Indian Motorcycle and Champion Sidecars, take wounded and amputee veterans to the rally. The 2019 ride launched from Salt Lake City, Utah, and arrived in Sturgis where the veterans rode through the Black Hills and attended various events, helping fulfill the organization's mission to use

motorcycle therapy and other programs to provide healing opportunities to vets from all branches of service. It's clear from listening to some of the ride participants that they have benefited greatly from sharing the open road with other veterans who have experienced the same traumas and are facing the same challenges.

Another organization that figures prominently at the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally is Motorcycle Missions, founded by Krystal Hess, who dealt with her PTSD by getting involved with motorcycling. Her own experiences led her to form the 501(c)(3) charity that helps veterans and first responders suffering with PTSD and suicidal ideation through riding and building motorcycles. This year at the rally, two Indian Chief Darkhorse customs built by vets and first responders were brought to Sturgis to show, one of which took second place in the V-Twin Wild class at the *American Iron Magazine/Dennis Kirk Garage Build* bike show earlier in the week. Both bikes were later raffled off, bringing in nearly \$100,000 to support their cause.

The City of Sturgis designates Tuesday of rally week as Military Appreciation Day, and this year's activities, presented by the VFW, kicked off with the 19th annual Dakota Thunder Motorcycle Run that departed from Ellsworth Military Base for a 58-mile ride to Sturgis. Upon their arrival at the Sturgis Rally Point, riders joined other current and former military personnel as well as rally attendees for a program that included a speech by South Dakota Army National Guard, Ellsworth Air Force Base, and VFW commanders. At precisely 3:00 p.m., the annual Main Street flyover, part of an approved 28th Bomb Wing training mission to honor all who have served in the military, took place. However, this year, two Ellsworth B-1B Lancer bombers flew over Main Street in rapid succession! After the flyover, US Marine Corps veteran William E. Atyeo of Sturgis was honored, continuing an annual tradition of acknowledging a veteran on stage.

Evidence of rally ridership support for the military was evident throughout



the entire Black Hills region, as was the military community's support for the rally and the community. A number of veterans' organizations set up tents on Main Street and Lazelle Street to provide information and assistance for veterans and those interested in supporting our military. AARP, which had a presence on Main Street for several days during the rally, donated \$5,000 to the Disabled American Veterans Black Hills chapter. And the VFW was one of 20 official Sturgis Rally sponsors.

The Sturgis Buffalo Chip hosted another significant military-related rally event: The 28th annual Freedom Celebration where Thursday, August 8, was set aside to acknowledge all those who have served. That afternoon, a Veterans' Charity Auction took place to benefit America's Mighty Warriors

and the Warrior Dog Foundation. In addition to many donated items for the silent auction, a 1990 FXLR painted with a military theme was auctioned live, bringing in \$20,000! Somebody got themselves quite a deal; with the superb customization and stunning graphics, that bike had to be worth quite a bit more.

One of my most poignant experiences during the auction was meeting Debbie Lee, CEO of America's Mighty Warriors. Debbie is a Gold Star mom, the mother of Marc Alan Lee who was the first Navy SEAL killed in Iraq. Marc, who served in the same platoon as Chris Kyle of *American Sniper* fame, was killed in a firefight against insurgents in 2006, and was awarded the Silver Star and a Purple Heart for his heroic actions while serving.

Marc's last letter home read, in part, "Ask yourself when was the last



time you donated clothes that you hadn't worn out. When was the last time you paid for a random stranger's cup of coffee, meal or maybe even a tank of gas? When was the last time you helped a person with the groceries into or out of their car? Think to yourself and wonder what it would feel like if when the bill for the meal came and you were told it was already paid for. More random acts of kindness like this would change our country and our reputation as a country." With Marc's final words as inspiration, Debbie founded America's Mighty Warriors, an organization that provides programs to improve the quality of life, resiliency, and recovery of service personnel and their families.

Later that evening, on the main stage at the Chip, the Bob Hanson Distinguished Service Award was presented to Armed Forces members Rick Benjamin, William Skavdahl, Eugene Murphy, Brooks and Rich Schild, and "Distinguished Patriots" Scott and Deb Whitman. Bob Hanson, a World War II vet, was seriously wounded, captured, and sent to a German prison camp. He was awarded the French Legion of Honor Medal in 2016 at the age of 96, and passed away in 2017.



After the awards, combat amputee USAF Senior Airman Justin Day received a custom trike designed for his special needs. In 2018, while clearing and securing space in an ISIS-

controlled area in Afghanistan, Day stepped on an IED that resulted in the amputation of his right leg above the knee and amputations of fingers on both hands. The look of exultation on Day's face when he accepted the trike was a joy to behold, and I doubt anyone in the crowd was able to hold back tears.

The final presentation that night was that of Special Operations Wounded Warriors who gave Retired Navy SEAL Master Chief Oscar Sosa Jr. a Belgian Malinois, specially trained by Baden K9. Reaper One's name was chosen in remembrance of Retired Navy Seal Master Chief Ron "Reaper One" Bellan who served as a Navy SEAL for more than two decades and is on the Special Operations Wounded Warriors board.

A tribute of a different type is Freedom Field, an area near the Buffalo Chip Crossroads where nearly 1,000 American flags wave in homage to fallen service personnel. The flags surround a memorial stone honoring all branches of the military as well as POWs. This is a silent yet powerful statement of support for all those who have given their lives so that we may enjoy the freedom our great country has to offer. ★