

Run for the Wall visits Mount Vernon

Riders are greeted warmly by local residents

BY TRAVIS MORSE
SENTINEL NEWS STAFF

MOUNT VERNON — Hundreds of motorcycles made their way down Broadway in Mount Vernon Tuesday morning, as the annual Run for the Wall ride came through town.

Run for the Wall (RFTW), in its 34th year, is a cross-country motorcycle ride that starts in California and ends at the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. Mount Vernon is the only Illinois stop for RFTW each year.

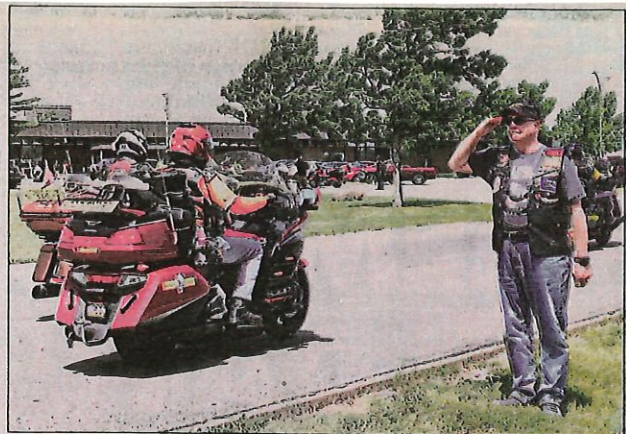
The mission of Run for the Wall is to promote healing among all veterans and their families and friends, to call for an accounting of all Prisoners of War and those Missing in Action (POW/MIA), to honor the memory of those Killed in Action (KIA) from all wars and to support our military personnel all over the world.

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Sentinel Photo/TRAVIS MORSE

RIDING FOR VETERANS — More than 270 motorcycles came roaring through Mount Vernon on Tuesday as the annual Run for the Wall cross-country ride returned to town. After refueling at the Huck's station, the riders came to Mount Vernon Outland Airport for a fried chicken dinner and honoring ceremony.



Sentinel Photo/TRAVIS MORSE

SALUTING THE RIDERS — Vietnam veteran Ken Stange of O'Fallon, RIGHT, salutes the Run for the Wall riders as they enter the Mount Vernon Outland Airport parking lot on Tuesday.

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"It's been an incredible experience," said RFTW rider Donna Buck from Maryland, an Air Force veteran. "It's very important because the main thing about this journey is, we started out as friends and we ended up as family throughout the journey and it's healing."

The RFTW riders stopped in Mount Vernon to refuel at the Huck's station at 34th and Broadway. They then proceeded down Broadway to Mount Vernon Outland Airport where they were given a fried chicken dinner and other amenities, and where a

ceremony was held to honor their journey.

As is typically the case when they go through Mount Vernon, the riders were welcomed by several people along Broadway who were waving American flags and cheering for them.

"It's awesome," said RFTW rider Bob Weaver, a Vietnam veteran from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. "The people, like (the ones) here, they treat us great. It's a very warm, it's a very emotional thing. It's great. ... Veterans and young men and women that are in the service, they need all (of) the support (that) they can get. It's hard times right now."

Ken Stange of O'Fallon is a former motorcycle rider with Run for the Wall who on Tuesday stood at the entrance to the Mount Vernon Outland Airport parking lot, saluting the riders as they came by. He said that RFTW is a very significant program for veterans.

"The program's incredibly important because we've got to keep the POW/MIA/Killed in Action alive in Congress," Stange said. "We've got to keep funding research down in Hawaii for all the DNA so that we can account for Korean veterans, Vietnam veterans and those others (veterans who are) Missing in Action from the Gulf War."

A dedicated committee, along with students from several area schools, helped provide the fried chicken dinner and other amenities for the riders when they reached the airport.

The honoring ceremony at the airport featured an invocation by Rev. Jeremy Hamson, the posting of colors by the American Legion Post 141 Color Guard, remarks by Nick

Henges for RFTW, a gun salute of three volleys, the playing of taps, a benediction by Rev. Hamson and the retiring of the colors by the Post 141 Color Guard.

"I'm excited to see it every year and we've already had a lot of thank-yous and everyone seems to be enjoying themselves and enjoying the great weather," said Airport Director Chris Collins.

RFTW rider Greg Flippen said that this was his first time going on the ride and that it is the most remarkable thing he has ever done. No matter what people see on the national news or hear from "coastal opinions," the heart of America is still America, Flippen said.

"This is a very emotional trip," Flippen said.

Estimates are that there were about 275 motorcycles on this year's ride and roughly 350 people to feed at the airport gathering. Several of the riders brought their spouses on the same bike and there were also support vehicles that traveled with the motorcycle riders.

In the lead up to each year's event, funds are raised by local volunteers to provide the fried chicken lunch and to help pay for the riders' fuel. A number of organizations, businesses and individuals donate time, money, products and/or services to the event.

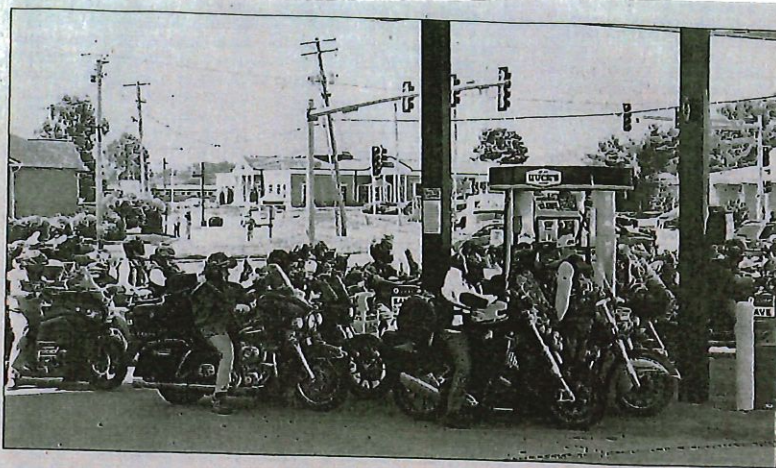
After lunch Tuesday at the airport, the riders embarked east on Route 15 to Wayne City where they got back onto I-64 to continue their journey towards Washington, D.C. for Memorial Day.

For more information on Run for the Wall, visit the organization's website. tmorse@morningsentinel.com



Sentinel Photo/TRAVIS MORSE

A FINE TRIP — The Run for the Wall riders had a fine day for riding on Tuesday, with sunny and clear weather.



Sentinel Photo/TRAVIS MORSE

FUELING AT HUCK'S — Hundreds of motorcycles stopped to refuel at Huck's gas station on Tuesday during the Run for the Wall ride through town.



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Sentinel Photo/TRAVIS MORSE

RUN FOR THE WALL — Run for the Wall starts in California and ends at the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. Mount Vernon is the only Illinois stop on the ride each year. The riders stop in Mount Vernon to refuel and to have a chicken dinner at Mount Vernon Outland Airport.