

Rolling Thunder XXIV

Ride for Freedom  *Veterans Fight to Leave No Man Behind*

Washington, D.C., May 27-29—Thunder boomed throughout the Washington, D.C. area. It was as though cannons were saluting the upcoming Rolling Thunder event. Lighting danced in the dusky sky and “tears” fell from the heavens. As the time for Rolling Thunder’s Candlelight Vigil drew close, more and more people chose to drive in four-wheeled vehicles, leaving their bikes parked and dry. Then as quickly as it had started, the threat abated.

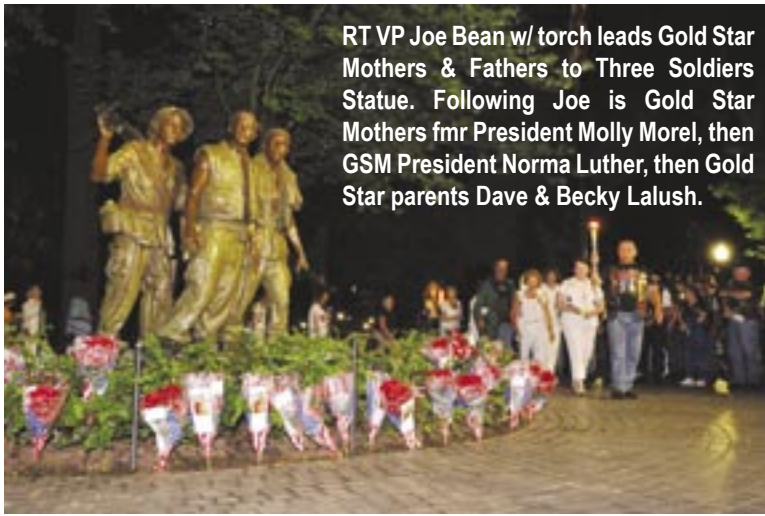
What a handful of folks from the Rolling Thunder National Organization started a few years ago had grown into several thousand attendees who came to pay their respects. Gold Star Moms and Dads, Blue Star Moms and Dads, and Gold Star Spouses, many with family members, all gathered around the “Flame” near the Viet Nam Veterans Memorial.

National Chaplain Tom Ransdell led the invocation, followed by the chaplain leading a dignified walk to the Viet Nam Women’s Memorial. Once again, Chaplain Tom led all in a moment of solemn remembrance. Flowers, in loving memory of our combat nurses, were placed on and around their memorial.

We then followed the flame to the Three Soldiers Statue, where a circle was formed by all and the “Light of Honor” was handed from one to another. A benediction concluded this Friday night ceremony and Rolling Thunder XXIV was underway.

Saturday was a full day. Harley-Davidson of Washington, D.C., held their annual Pig Roast, T-shirts were selling by the hundreds (with proceeds being donated to Rolling Thunder) and music filled the air. Behind the scenes, Jennifer Stipkala, the dealership’s general manager, worked with San Diego H-D owner and radio personality New York Myke to arrange for the use of a Harley for former Governor Sarah Palin from Alaska. The former governor is a Blue Star Mom and joined us for the run, along with her husband and two daughters.

Come Saturday evening, Rolling Thunder’s Open Mess was rocking! Joining us at the Hyatt Regency Crystal City were singer Nancy Sinatra, actress Chris Noel from Armed Forces Radio, Gold and Blue Star folks, and far too many others to name.



RT VP Joe Bean w/ torch leads Gold Star Mothers & Fathers to Three Soldiers Statue. Following Joe is Gold Star Mothers fmr President Molly Morel, then GSM President Norma Luther, then Gold Star parents Dave & Becky Lalush.



Nam Knights riders crossing Memorial Bridge



U.S. Navy Memorial Statue. Chuck ‘Sneakers’ Nesby & Gary Scheffmeyer, Pres. Rolling Thunder National



NY Myke Shelby (Owner of San Diego HD), Petrina Herman, and Steven Prager

Special guests were our wounded warriors from Bethesda and Walter Reed Hospitals. People and organizations that support the Prisoner of War and Missing in Action issue throughout the year were recognized, and awards were given to many deserving people.

Many veterans could not leave their respective medical facilities, so Rolling Thunder went to them. At VA Medical Center in Washington there was one great party and a fun time for our vets. There was much good food and good music. The singing was, well, we’ll pass on the singing. Oh Hell we will; it was great fun and great to hear! Lucy Walsh, a member of the Rolling Thunder Board of Directors, is responsible for the party we throw for the hospitalized vets and her crew outdid themselves again.

Sunday was a day to remember. It was abnormal from the get-go. People were going crazy. The mainstream media were drooling all over themselves to get shots of Sarah Palin, causing mass chaos and putting the riders in dangerous situations. On a positive note, the world-wide press covered Rolling Thunder XXIV which, to the best of my knowledge, had not been done in the past. Maybe all the news coverage will help us further our mission, to publicize the fact that many POWs and MIAs were left behind after previous wars.

After the demonstration ride from the Pentagon parking lot to the National Mall, some 400,-450,000 bikes strong, riders

and other participants gathered near the stage set up in the field between the Reflecting Pool and the Korean Memorial. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates was the keynote speaker. He is a caring and compassionate man. He accepted Bill Bell’s book, *Leave No Man Behind*, and a wrist band from First Baptist Church in Charleston, Arkansas, which he promptly put on. The secretary also accepted the same for President Obama. Mr. Bell dedicated and signed each book. Admiral Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs and U.S. Representative Allen West from Florida also received Bell’s book and wrist band.

Nancy Sinatra, Gordon Painter, 4TROOPS and Southern Fried Musicians put on a great musical tribute for the troops and everyone else present. It was a foot-stomping and sometimes a sing-along good time for all who were there. All the entertainers were very much a family, and the Gold Star Folks and the troops got to interact with them.

After visiting with Walt Sides, one of the four Rolling Thunder founders who organizes Thunder Alley, the official Rolling Thunder vendor site, along with Bob’s crew and RC, the Rolling Thunder National Quartermaster who runs the Rolling Thunder National booth, it was time to head back to the hotel. This body was beyond tired.

The police officer on detail at Thunder Alley was kind enough to stop traffic and help me hail a cab. Ali, the cab driver, was a real interesting fellow. A Pakistani immigrant, he’d been driving back in D.C. for 15 years. He told me that Memorial Day was a day that

Rolling Thunder XXIV

Ride for Freedom  Veterans Fight to Leave No Man Behind



Tom Adkins group from 'Task Force Omega' KY



Archangel Riders M/C from Elkridge, MD



The Palin family with Gold Star Parents Becky and Dave Lalush. Parents of Sgt. Michael Vernon Lalush, KIA Operation Iraqi Freedom March 30, 2003



SSgt. Tim Chambers saluting riders. He broke his right wrist a few weeks before RT and was wearing a special brace. He refused to get a cast until after Memorial Day, as it would have prevented him from offering this tribute.

resonated with him. He commented, "It is a solemn day and an honorable day. Rolling Thunder makes very much good noise." I gave him three Rolling Thunder pins for his children, and he smiled and accepted the gift. Pulling up to the hotel, Ali cleared his meter and told me that there was no charge. He thanked me again for the pins, and said, "May God bless you."

After a hot soak and some moments spent relaxing, memories of past Rolling Thunder events raced through my mind. We have had many speakers in the past, some of who were politicians. If only all the politicians were as honest and true as former Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell from Colorado who helped Rolling Thunder get legislation through Congress, then perhaps the POW and MIA question could be resolved in an honorable way. Former Senator Bob Smith from New Hampshire who previously served as the vice chair of the Senate Select Committee for Prisoners of War and Missing in Actions was in step right along with Senator Campbell. However, they

could not out-manipulate Senator John Kerry from Massachusetts who brokered a deal to allow commerce between the U.S. and the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam. Business is booming with Viet Nam, thanks to John Kerry, however, democracy is denied to the people of Viet Nam. Thanks, Senator Kerry.

What are the prospects of getting U.S. Army Sgt. Bowie Bergdahl back from Afghanistan or Pakistan? Sgt. Bergdahl is one of three known POWs still in captivity from our Southwest Asia campaign, and our military won't negotiate his release. The Army promoted him twice while he is a POW, but our military will not deal with terrorists. Perhaps we could get Senator Kerry to help out by fostering another trade or commerce deal with the enemy, thereby getting our brother, Sgt. Bergdahl, home.

Many good people have spoken at Rolling Thunder events in the past, and they were all in agreement with the mission of

accounting for all of those Prisoners of War and Missing in Action from all past wars. Most understood that Viet Nam veterans will not let the U.S. government or our citizens treat the U.S. military veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan the way we Viet Nam vets were treated when we returned.

This republic's veterans understand and can relate to a sentiment expressed by U.S. Marine Master Gunnery Sgt. George Curtis during a eulogy given at Aptuxet Post 5988 VFW in Bourne, Massachusetts, for a Marine who perished during Operation Desert Shield. Master Gunny Curtis said, "The very mortar which binds the foundation upon which our republic rests is nothing less than the blood of one million-plus men and women who have worn the uniform of the Armed Forces of the United States."

Master Gunny Curtis is correct. I would add to his point of view one of my own: Never in the history of nations have so many generations and so many millions owed it all to so few, and that American veterans and those of our allies are the purchases of peace. Every veteran has the right, the absolute right, to come home, even if it is to the family plot. May God bless the United States of America and all those who serve her in whatever capacity they choose.

Michael DePaulo, COM National Parliamentarian, Rolling Thunder®, Inc. Plt. Sgt. USMC, RVN

photos courtesy of Patrick J. Hughes U.S.M.C. ChuLai 67-68 Rolling Thunder®, Inc. National Photographer www.patrickjhughes.org www.youtube.com/mag12chulai



Canadian Veterans Group

Gerald McCullar, Viet Nam Vet from Washington, IL.



Gold Star Mother Terry Davis in the Special Forces side car



VNV/MC rider - his dead passenger is wearing an 'Agent Orange' t-shirt