

Area men ride with Rolling Thunder

By DAVID GREEN

Riding his Harley around the perimeter of the National Mall in Washington, D.C., past thousands of waving and cheering well-wishers lined at least eight deep along the curb, Vietnam veteran Jim Clark felt a strange emotion taking over his mind.

"I felt as though I was finally being thanked," he said. "Any place we stopped that weekend, someone was saying 'Thank you for your service.' It really choked me up at times."

For a Vietnam vet—a soldier from the conflict that didn't lead to an open-arms welcome back home—the Rolling Thunder demonstration on Memorial Day weekend makes a veteran feel as though what they gave in the 1960s and 70s was finally appreciated.

Rolling Thunder makes a statement every year on the Sunday before Memorial Day about the importance of remembering American prisoners of war and those missing in action from past military conflicts—of never giving up the effort to account for those who went missing.

But the event is much more than that. There are opportunities to build camaraderie and make new acquaintances. There's history to explore and new sights to discover.

Jim was one of three Morenci Legion members who traveled to D.C. for this year's demonstration and returned home with good memories. Getting there and back, of course, was half of the adventure.

Rolling Thunder—named after the 1965 bombing campaign against North Vietnam—made its first appearance in the nation's capital in 1988 when about 2,500 motorcyclists from around the country converged in Washington. It's grown every year and the recent gathering involved more than 30,000 bikers—many with a passenger.

For Gary Valentine, his journey this year was a repeat showing.

"I went by myself five years ago," he said. "I wanted to go one more time while I'm still able."

He's tried to interest other veterans he knew to join him and he finally found two companions—Doug Miles of Morenci and Jim, a former Morenci resident.

Gary said that he got active in the Morenci Legion post after his children grew up and left home. It irks him that so many people think of the Legion only as a bar. He knows the group serves as an important lobby for Veterans Administration hospitals and for veterans issues in general. A visit to a V.A. hospital is an eye-opening experience, Gary said.

When the Legion Riders organization formed in Morenci, he combined his love of motorcycles and his dedication to the Legion to become part of that group, also.

Doug Miles said that he's owned a dozen dirt bikes since the 1970s and now he's on his second Harley.

He had thought about attending Rolling Thunder, but never spoke with anyone else who was interested.

"When I found out that Gary wanted to go again, I told him, 'Let me know if you're going to do it. I'm in.'"

When Gary approached Jim about the trip, Jim declined and said that maybe next year he would do it. But the more he thought

about it, the more the phrase "live for today" came to mind.

"At our age, you never know," he said. "And I'm really glad that I went."

Jim figures he's ridden a motorcycle just about every year of his life since he was discharged from the Army in 1971. That made him a perfect candidate for Rolling Thunder.

The annual demonstration is mostly made up of veterans on motorcycles, but neither is a requirement. In fact, that's a good way to miss the main program with guest speakers. The event follows the old saw "hurry up and wait."

The men stayed in a hotel near Patriot Harley Davidson, one of several places for riders to congregate. From there, riders are released in groups with a police escort to reach various parking areas at the Pentagon. That led to another wait of about four hours.

It took 45 minutes to empty that parking lot of bikes, Gary said, and there was another lot yet to follow. It's not a continual release because breaks in the traffic are scheduled to allow pedestrians to cross streets.

"When you participate, you miss the whole spectacle," Gary said.

Sure enough, the speakers' stand was being dissembled when they reached the main part of the demonstration.

Gary says he would like to go again as a pedestrian and watch everything going on. It's surely a weekend he would recommend.

The men didn't ride all of that distance without spending some time looking around the nation's capital.

Gary has been to Washington many times because his sister works for the government. There's so much history to study; the National Archives is his favorite building.

For Doug, half a century had passed since he was in D.C. on his class trip.

"It was 50 years since I was there," he said. "I sat on the banks of the Potomac looking at the Washington Monument thinking about how I saw it as a senior."

Jim's absence from the capital was nearly as long. He was there in 1970 with his wife before he headed out for deployment.

"The trees around the Mall are huge now," he said.

He might return with his wife yet this summer, and Doug is sure he will visit again with his wife—but they will travel by car.

Jim and Doug looked up the names Gary Teeter and Richard Jones on the Vietnam Wall. All three of them felt the eerie sensation of the impressive Korean War monument.

"We met several people who had been to Rolling Thunder every year," Jim said.

At their hotel they met a nurse who was involved in the evacuation from Saigon. And there were the countless thousands who lined the streets and draped flags from overpasses. And don't forget the Marine who stood at attention saluting the entire parade of bikes, as he does every year, but this time he paused to be married, kissed his bride and snapped back to attention.

"I'm really, really glad that I went," Jim said, and that sentiment was echoed by his companions.

"It really makes you appreciate the Memorial Day concept," Gary said. "And the older I get, the more I appreciate it."



NEW ACQUAINTANCES—Morenci Legion Riders Gary Valentine, Doug Miles and Jim Clark met a former nurse who was involved with the evacuation during the fall of Saigon. Part of the enjoyment of participating in the Rolling Thunder ride comes through meeting others from around the country who gather in Washington, D.C.



BIKES BY THE THOUSANDS—Motorcycles as far as the eye can see line a road waiting for the ride around the National Mall in the nation's capital.

"I was a little awestruck when we made the ride around the Mall," Jim Clark said.

Thousands of people line the streets and overpasses as veterans pass by.



FLIGHT 93—The memorial for Flight 93 is only a few yards off U.S. 30 in Pennsylvania. From the left, Jim Clark, Doug Miles and Gary Valentine stand on a trail of dark brick that marks the flight path of the doomed airliner.

A visit to Flight 93 Memorial

Back roads are the way to travel, Gary Valentine said—you see more and it's much less stressful. The men followed U.S. 50 on the 600-mile trip to Washington, D.C.

"We traveled 487 miles the first day," Jim Clark said. "That's the farthest I've ever ridden in one day."

They chose U.S. 30 for the trip home—a good choice except that it passes through Pittsburgh. But there's a bonus to the

route. The national monument dedicated to Flight 93 on 9-11 is just off to the side of the highway.

It's an impressive, well-designed memorial, the men said, that's certainly worth visiting.

Just taking the trip to Washington, D.C., and back can make an American appreciate what he has, Gary said.