



Patriot Guard Riders salute the military's fallen with their silent presence

By Anne Neville - NEWS STAFF REPORTER
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As she stands silently at attention, Debbie Johnson's presence says thank you. She holds a crisp American flag in a line of Patriot Guard Riders assembled to honor a soldier's sacrifice.

The tiny gold star on her vest says much more.

Johnson, whose son, Staff Sgt. Aram Bass, was killed in Baghdad in November 2005, is one of the local ride captains with the Patriot Guard Riders, a group that exists to honor and thank veterans and active duty soldiers.

It's the best-organized disorganized group you'll ever see, united only by its slogan: "Standing for those who stood for us."



Sharon Cantillon/Buffalo News
Image 1 of 3

The members, men and women of all ages and from every walk of life, stand with flags outside a funeral home or on the road into a cemetery, or escort a hearse on a phalanx of motorcycles or in cars.

"There are no meetings, no dues; you don't have to be a veteran — you don't even have to ride a motorcycle," says David Cullen of Salamanca, assistant state captain, who served in the Air Force for 22 years. "The only reason we get together is for this. We're a cross-section of America. All you have to do is want to come and honor the fallen. It started with motorcycles, but we have people come in cars, too. However you want to get there is how you get there."

"The way I would put it is that we are a group of patriots and some of us ride motorcycles," says Johnson. "What we have in common is not the motorcycles, but the respect for people who have made the sacrifice by being in the military."

The Patriot Guard Riders got its spontaneous start in August 2005. The Westboro Baptist Church in Kansas organized anti-American protests at the funerals of soldiers killed in action. A few members of a Kansas American Legion Riders chapter decided to attend soldiers' funerals with large flags and block the grieving family's view of the signs carried by the church members.

By October, the group had gone on several “missions” and had a name — the Patriot Guard Riders.

Less than three years later, anti-American protests at funerals are rare. “From time to time, they do show up at missions,” says Joe Shiah, a ride captain from Tonawanda. “I have personally never seen them, but even if they did show up, we absolutely do not confront anybody.”

Debbie Johnson, of Niagara Falls, first heard about the Patriot Guard Riders when she went online to check her e-mail months after her son was killed. “With all we had been through, we would have never considered there being protesters” at her son’s funeral, she says.

“But the Patriot Guard has now gone so far beyond that — they don’t even mention the protesters now,” she says.



Harry Scull Jr./Buffalo News
A Patriot Guard Riders honor guard leads the hearse containing the body of Jonathon Cote to his memorial service May 2. The body of Cote, a veteran, was found 17 months after his 2006 kidnapping in Iraq. Patriot Guard Riders met his coffin at the airport and continued their honor guard until his burial.

Image 2 of 3

What they do

Patriot Guard Riders do a variety of things to honor people who’ve served in the military, with one huge caveat: They do only what the family wants.

The group learns about active- duty deaths from the Defense Department Web site, then contacts the Casualty Assistance Officer assigned to the family.

“The CAO talks to the family,” says Cullen. “If the family says yes, they pass me the family’s number and I go meet them and explain what we do and find out what they would like us to do.”

When a veteran dies, “normally the best thing is to approach a friend of the family, or sometimes a relative contacts us,” says Cullen.

Some families prefer a small, private service, so they decline, says Cullen.

But if they would like Patriot Guard Riders’ silent, respectful presence, the group will accompany the mourners every step of the way.

“We will escort from the funeral home to the church, we’ll stand outside the church during the cemetery, we’ll escort from the church to the cemetery, we’ll stand in the cemetery until the family leaves, if they want,” says Shiah.

To coordinate their missions, the group meets at a staging area beforehand to get direction from the ride captain. He or she explains what they will do at every step. Most important, he tells them that they are now just Patriot Guard Riders.

“Part of the briefing instructions are that as of this minute, nobody has an agenda, nobody has an opinion, nobody has a problem, all we have is respect for this soldier and their family,” says Shiah. “Then we turn off all cell phones, remind them there’s no smoking, and to keep talking to a minimum.”

Patriot Guard Riders who stand in flag lines “are making big commitments,” says Shiah. “They will be there for five or six hours on a visitation day, which can be two days, plus a funeral, if the family wants us from start to finish, is an all-day deal.”



File photo
Debbie Johnson of Niagara Falls, top, is a member of the Patriot Guard Riders, a group that gathers to thank veterans for their service. She's also a Gold Star Mother whose son, Aram Bass, was killed in Baghdad in 2005. Above, Patriot Guard Riders stand with flags outside the funeral home during services for Pvt. Dwane A. Covert Jr. of the Town of Tonawanda in November 2007.
Image 3 of 3

But even someone who has only a short time to give is appreciated, says Cullen. “If you can come and stand for a half-hour or an hour, do that.”

“We expect members to bring a pristine 3-foot by 5-foot U. S. flag,” says Shiah. But the group also prepares for impromptu assistance. “We usually have about a dozen extra flags, because we’ve had people walk up to us and ask if they can join us. “We say, ‘Sure, we have a flag for you right here, you are welcome to join.’ ”

The families often thank the Patriot Guard Riders, says Shiah. “I have not yet met a family who wasn’t extremely grateful that we were there. They are very appreciative — they will come and shake every one of our hands, although it’s not necessary.”

“They thank us and try to buy us coffee and stuff, and we don’t want any of that,” says Cullen. “We come to do this, and then we go away.”

The local group has done missions for repatriated remains of Vietnam veterans, as well as for veterans of every modern war.

Homefront help

The group also organizes to help veterans through its “Help on the Homefront” program. “That’s for people who have come back [from military service] and need something,” says Cullen. “It might help to get a [wheelchair] ramp on their house or financial assistance because their benefits are hung up somewhere or something like that. We take all the money we take in donations and all of it goes to helping these soldiers and veterans.”

Last fall, the group escorted an elderly veteran in a nursing home as he visited a World War II museum.

The group also escorts soldiers to the airport and meets returning soldiers with their moving display of red, white and blue.

“Last fall, the troops came down to the armory at Hornell,” says Cullen. “We met them down by Painted Post and gave their bus an escort about 50 miles back to their home base. We had a group of motorcycles, their buses, and then a large group of motorcycles. We don’t hold them up. As soon as they get there, we just go.”

‘I can be there’

When Debbie Johnson joined in March 2006, there were only 6,000 Patriot Guard Riders. Now they number 140,000 nationally, with 2,000 members in New York State.

Johnson says she is far from the only Patriot Guard Riders member who knows in her heart what it’s like to walk behind the flag-draped coffin of a child, parent, spouse or sibling.

“There are other families [in the group] who have lost sons from this area,” says Johnson, “and nobody else knows it.

"When I stand there with the group, I can be there for another family," she says. "I can absolutely understand what they're going through. You look at each other, and you know what the other person is feeling. You don't even have to say anything. It gives me an opportunity to just say thank you."

Despite her own grief, Johnson, who is now a ride captain, briefly feels better when she is with her fellow Patriot Guard Riders.

"I don't know that healing is the word for it," she says, "but it gives me a moment to not think of myself."

During motorcycle season, Cullen, one of the most dedicated members of the group, travels to "everything within 100 miles," he says.

"David is awesome," says Johnson. "There are those like David who log thousands of hours and thousands of miles doing this, but there are others who show up once in a while. We're still people who work, who have families."

Cullen is often asked why he dedicates so much time to the Patriot Guard Riders. "And I always say, 'A better question is, why aren't there more people doing this?'"

"If there ever was a time you thought you should have said 'thank you' or you should have said 'job well done,' this is the organization to join," says Johnson. "Now is the time you can do that."

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To request a Patriot Guard Riders escort for a funeral or to register as a member, go to www.pgny.org . For information about the national organization, go to www.patriotguard.org .