



77°

Group travels across U.S. to honor veterans

Freedom Ride



MAY 18, 2012 7:55 AM • BY WHEELER COWPERTHWAIT — WHEELER@ELKODAILY.COM

ELKO — The thunder rolled into Elko Wednesday night with a police escort and roared out of town Thursday morning with honk, a smaller escort and a single salute.

The Freedom Riders, on the National Veterans Awareness Ride, were treated to dinner Wednesday night at the Veterans of Foreign Wars Gasper J. Salaz Post 2350. The VFW, American Legion Post 7 and the POW/MIA Elko

Awareness Association all helped to put on the dinner.

National Veterans Awareness Ride National Coordinator Jerry Conner makes sure the ride goes smoothly.

“It’s organized to the minute,” he said.

When Conner addressed the assembly at the VFW Post, he said he was amazed by the reception Elko put on.

“If we get this kind of help along the whole U.S., we’ll be safer and 10 pounds heavier by the time we get (to Washington, D.C.)” he said. “We’ve got the whole damn town of Elko out here.”

The American Legion, POW/MIA Awareness Association and the VFW donated the food and their time to put the dinner on, American Legion Commander James Macpherson said.

Anyone who wants to join the ride can find the schedule at www.nvao.us.

Why we do it

The riders started Wednesday morning in Auburn, Calif., and headed to Reno’s Veterans Association Medical Center. They greeted every veteran and took the in-hospital vets on a walk, or a push in a wheelchair, around the neighborhood, spending the time to get to know them.

“We did a walk and roll,” said Mike Kline, 64, a veteran of the Vietnam War from Iowa.

“Sometimes we’re the only visitors (the vets) get for a whole year,” he said.

The group will ride to Washington D.C., by Memorial Day and go to the Vietnam Memorial Wall.

“The fact that I could stop and thank the vets, that’s why I got involved,” Kline said.

Kline, who was drafted into the military and served in 1964 as a medic in the 25th infantry division, added a thousand miles to his normal ride from Iowa to California and the capitol by taking a southern route.

“I rode from Iowa down to Texas,” he said.

In Amarillo, Texas, on his way to Auburn via a southern route, he was riding with a group of five other veterans. They stopped at a local restaurant and talked with an elderly couple.

By the time the group went to pay for their dinner, more than \$200 for the six of them, they found the elderly couple had already paid the tab, presumably just because they were veterans going on a cross-country tour to visit with other vets.

“We were just amazed that somebody would do that just because we’re vets,” he said.

In Reno, Kline visited with Carl, a vet with a paralyzed leg.

Kline went to the trailer the group hauls behind them and gave Carl a National Veterans Awareness Ride hat.

“The sun was shining so hard,” Kline said. “He was so shocked or happy or overwhelmed, I’m not sure what the right word is. You would have thought I’d given him a million dollars.”

How much the simple act of kindness meant to Carl, an embossed hat to keep his sensitive skin from burning beneath the spring sun, is why Kline rides.

Buzz

No one knows Paul Neeb by his first name on the ride. They all know him as Buzz.

For Neeb, from Ann Arbor, Mich., it’s the eighth time he’s done the run.

Neeb, 75, volunteered for the draft for the Korean War because his brother was there.

“The war was just winding down, so I didn’t get to go to Korea,” he said.

Neeb looked around the lobby at the veterans milling about, some eating their continental breakfast. “I don’t have the same hardships of these Vietnam vets,” he said.

Buzz’s time in Reno was spent with a 90-year-old woman who was a nurse during World War II.

“We talked for 15 minutes,” he said. “They’re so happy to have someone to talk to them. It can get pretty damn emotional.”

Each ride is dedicated to a vet who has died. This year the ride is dedicated to Neeb’s old

friend Craig, whom he rode with.

Neeb had lunch with Craig's widow and picked up Craig's old riding vest.

He will wear the vest for the length of the ride and Craig's widow will fly to the capitol and leave the vest at the wall, trying to find some kind of closure.

"It's going to be hard when we get there," he said.

Filling the void

While many of the Vietnam veterans felt the sting of coming home to an unwelcoming country, they had each other.

Carol Scamara, from Sonora, Calif., felt it from both the military and civilian sides.

"When you came out of the conflict, you didn't tell people where you were," she said.

The sense of belonging she, and other veterans, feel on the ride is part of the reason she goes.

"To go on something like this, where you're just accepted," is something she needed.

"It fills a little bit of a void," she said.

It's not just the veterans of the Vietnam era who want that belonging.

When Carol visited the Reno VA medical center Wednesday, she met with a veteran named Jerry in the breakfast room.

"Don't let them leave without me," he told her, referring to the riders.

Jerry couldn't leave without his vest though. The nurse fetched the vest and put it on him.

"He said, 'Now, I'm ready to go,'" she said.

Jerry looked down at his legs.

"I'm out of uniform," he said.

"I had to put the pin (a small metal National Veterans Awareness Ride ribbon) on his vest," she said. "It brought us all to tears. He just wanted to belong."

Carol and her retired Marine husband Larry are on the ride for the first time.

"(Larry) turned 65, so that's what we wanted to do," she said.

Larry is conscious of his age, both old and young.

"I need to go now because, health wise, if I don't go, I may never," he said.

But it isn't just his maturity he's conscious of.

Larry joined the Marines when he was 17 and went to Vietnam at 18, he said.

Carol chimed in: "He graduated as a sophomore in high school" when he joined at 17.

Larry's first tour was 18 months, in 1969. He went back for two more tours.

Larry went on to have a career in the military and finally retired in 1986.

"I'd always heard about the rolling thunder," he said. "My friend went two years ago and talked about how it was a life changing experience."

For Larry, it will be his first time visiting the wall. He will be leaving a poem for a dear friend who lost her brother, he said.

The poem isn't the only thing he'll be leaving; the Scamaras have been picking things up along the way since they started Tuesday.

"The wall stirs up the past," he said. "It stirs up a lot of guilt. Lots of friends were killed."

Larry himself would have been killed had it not been for a soldier who replaced him on patrol.

"He was shot and killed," he said. "He had just gotten there a month before."

[Top of Page](#) [Home](#) [Full Site](#)

© Copyright 2012, [elkodaily.com](#), 3720 Idaho St Elko, NV