

Downshifting: Veterans Charity Ride to Sturgis

When the world gets to be too much, a face full of wind atop an Indian motorcycle is a better prescription than a fistful of antidepressants.

By Johnny Killmore Photos by Jason Goodrich

The last time I did this someone shot at me. But that was a lifetime ago. And instead of a dilapidated five-ton truck, I'm at the controls of a blacked-out Indian Chieftain Dark Horse, outfitted with a Champion sidecar. Instead of my .50 cal. gunner, Sanchez, beside me, there's a photographer. Still, I'm geared up in the heat, listening to the engine idle. I've got a few thousand miles to go with several strangers who are about to become my close friends. We'll share a series of adventures that only we will understand. Yet this isn't a convoy through Iraq. This is the Veterans Charity Ride to Sturgis with Indian Motorcycle.

Featuring nine days on the road from Los Angeles to the famous biker rally in South Dakota, we will hit everything from hail to 114° heat along the way. Twenty veterans from four branches of service are on this ride, along with film and support crew, united by a love of adventure on two (and three) wheels. But there is another thing that unites this group: scars. While wheelchairs and prosthetics make some of the scars obvious, most agree it's the damage inside their heads that is hardest to deal with. A lot of these vets don't leave the house very often because of a lack of ADA compliant ramps but due to anxiety and PTSD. "The legs are the healed wounds," says Neil Frustaglio. "It's the wounds inside my head that are still healing." And the Veterans Charity Ride exists for that exact reason. You don't need to be a combat vet to know what motorcycle therapy is. When the world gets to be too much, a face full of wind is a better prescription than a fistful of antidepressants. No one knows this better than Dave Frey. He's one of the founders and leader of the VCR, he was heading to Sturgis on his own when he ran into other vets from his old Army unit and got to talking about how great it would be if disabled vets could get this same taste of freedom and the open road. Now in its third year, the VCR is doing just that. Up and over the Angeles Crest Mountains, I'm in familiar territory. A California native, descending into the desert toward Vegas still brings back memories of Iraq. Mainly it's the heat. 113° in Baker. For the double amputees like Josh and Neil it's even worse, so I don't complain. They have about the same amount of blood but so much less surface area to radiate body heat from; they get both cold and hot more easily. We dunk cooling vests in ice chests at each fuel stop, but it only does so much. Neil and Josh are all smiles though, riding together on an Indian Scout sidehack, fitted with a hand-shifter and Rekluse clutch. They take turns riding and did a bunch of the conversion work

themselves. Riding behind them makes me smile. They keep throwing water in the air, trying to hit me. I can see them headbanging to Slayer whenever I pull up beside them for photos. To hell with the heat, we're free and on our way to Sturgis. The day ends with a party at the Indian dealership in Las Vegas, then plenty of beers at the hotel. Day Two starts with a run on the super-slab. It's a familiar and boring run north on I-15. We clip the corner of Arizona and curve through the Virgin River Gorge. Finally some new scenery, I use it as an excuse to kick down a few gears and make the bike work. As we arc through the curves on I-15, tracing the Virgin River, I'm surprised that a heavy cruiser with a sidecar can hold a line so well... especially with a photographer sitting backwards in the chair. It's a lot of fun, and it's no doubt easier that shooting while riding like other photographers on the ride. Hell, there's even time to look at the scenery and the river far below. It's short lived though and we shift into the perpetual road construction of St. George, Utah. I won't complain though because the temperature is only in the 90s and I know where we are heading next: Zion.

Zion To Moab

There is a weird thing about Zion for me. The only other time I was here was right after I got back from Iraq. I was planning a massive road trip via email while I was still deployed. It was January and we were freezing, but the place was pure magic. Zion will always be a healing place for me; a road where you come in with a heavy load and leave unencumbered. Now, over a decade later, I was back for much the same reason: to clear my head and reconnect with the country I left, supposedly to defend. The convoy of Indian motorcycles move through the gentle curves with ease, adding to the beauty in front of me with flashes of chrome and gloss paint. We plod along Highway 9, exchanging one surreal view for another, hardly able to believe it. We stop to check out Checkerboard Mesa. I take a minute to call my mom. "I bet you didn't think racing sidecars and riding through the canyons like an idiot was ever going to pay off, did you?!!" She laughs a genuine laugh I haven't heard in years. She also tells me I've been popping up in social media posts. She's seen a smile on my face she hasn't seen in years. Not the one you give for photos, but the one you have when you're in your element. Talk that night in Bryce Canyon at the lodge is of long waits at Veterans Affairs for wheelchair parts, frustrating visits from workers looking to reduce benefits, and working with county veteran's offices to help keep the VA in check. It isn't depressing talk, it's





ADVERTORIAL



ADVERTORIAL

just how things are. By the end of the night I'm convinced a good wife and a good dog are another solution to any of life's problems. Most problems are in our head, and combat vets spend a lot of time there. The perfectionism bred by the military, combined with nothing ever being good enough, can make living inside your head a dark place. Several of the guys mention how good their wives are at grounding them back in reality, or reminding them not to be so hard on the kids. And a good dog is much the same. They sense your frustration rising and lay their head in your lap. Keith's dog will even grab him gently by the hand and pull him outside. These aren't trained service dogs either; the waiting list is long and everyone wants "someone who needs it more" to have access first. Selflessness dies hard in combat vets.

In the morning we are on the road early, leaving Bryce Canyon for Moab by way of the Grand Escalante Staircase. The 20 bike motorcade stops fairly frequently, the engines ticking softly in the still-cool morning air. We chat a bit at these stops but I mostly take in the views. On the move, every rise in the road reveals another panorama.

When we get to Moab I have my first taste of how significant the Veterans Charity Ride has become. A chapter of the Patriot Guard Riders has come out from Colorado, about 40 strong, to escort us into town. They fly huge American flags and are themselves led by a police escort. We ride in on the tail of a storm, water spraying up from our tires and the final, lazy rain drops still falling. In town, a flag line is there and we are met by the mayor, Sheriff, Police Chief, and other community leaders. Usually, when that much of a town's brass shows up about some bikers, it's to run them off. But the city of Moab had a touching ceremony and an \$8,600 donation they had been collecting for months.

I wasn't expecting to be sitting on a stage with Frey and all the riders, and when two little girls handed me some pictures they had drawn for us, I was genuinely touched. I thought back to the Iraqi kids that would follow us around looking for food or an energy drink; they'd go crazy if you gave them a pencil.

By now, most of those kids would be from their mid-teens to mid-20s. How many took up the cause? No way of knowing. We ended the day at the Red Cliffs Lodge, a paradise about 25 minutes outside of Moab. We'll spend the next two days here, soaking in the views and beating up some Polaris UTV's with professional offroad racer Casey Currie (sorry about that, Casey).

Bob's Bar

The first night at Red Cliff's Lodge was when I realized we had a lunatic in a mobile bar with us. When Bob Hudson heard about the ride, he decided to come along. A retired vet himself, he lived in a sweet RV. Perfect. I thought little of it until I saw the party lights lit and a few people milling around. One of the photographers, Jonathan Shelgosh, fills me in on a 14-mile detour down a dirt road he took with Bob in the RV. After a miscue with the GPS, ol' Bob decided there was no easy place

to turn around and, after all, every road leads somewhere. After nearly having his laptop fly off the table a few times, Jonathan gave up on trying to get any work done and looked out the windshield to see a river crossing. Not a stream. A river. Bob found low gear and bounded in, no idea how deep it was or how firm the riverbed. Jonathan tried some logic about trying to take a four-wheeled house through an unknown river in an area with no cell service, but the response was something like, "shut up with all that whining and pour me a scotch!" I started hanging out at Bob's all-terrain bar as often as possible. Hunter Thompson wishes he did things that crazy. The second river crossing didn't give him any pause either. Maybe it was the scotch?

Airborne George

I woke up still wearing my boots, sleeping in a plank position with my head half off the foot of the bed. Damn that Bob knows how to party. Luckily Red Cliffs Lodge has strong coffee and a decent breakfast buffet. I shower, take some ibuprofen, and I'm back in the game.

Today I get a chance to ride two wheels. The 2017 Indian Roadmaster is a full dresser in the truest sense. GPS, infotainment, heated grips, electrically adjustable windshield... even an altimeter. With 111 cubes and only 25° of rake, the bike moves with urgency and steers with ease. Cruise control eases the strain on my broken wrist (long story) and my mind wanders to the cargo in my saddlebags. Since leaving LA, we've been carrying the ashes of George Wittie. A member of the 82nd Airborne, George's family asked us to take him with us on the ride, spreading his ashes along the way. Needles Overlook, with its panoramic views and sheer, red cliffs, will be a perfect place for Airborne George to take one final jump.

On the way, a wasp somehow makes it up Richie Two-Chairs' pant leg. A paraplegic, Richie has no way to know the little bastard is going to town on him. Fortunately, Doc (Robert Pinkham) is piloting his sidecar, and he gets the bike pulled over in short order. We aren't sure if Richie is allergic. He has the shakes and is sweating but is it the heat? Shock? Richie suddenly yells out, "I can't feel my legs!" and we're rolling on the ground laughing. Richie is never far away from a joke and he is always smiling. After pulling out the MyMedic kits we were given the night prior by a ride sponsor, Doc gives Richie some Benadryl just in case and we're back on the road.

I search the FM dial for a station as we approach the overlook. Wagon Wheel by Old Crow Medicine Show is on and it matches the gentle bends perfectly. I crank the volume and bang a downshift. The big Indian carries George and I to the Overlook like a southbound train, and after a short ceremony the winds carry half of Airborne George to the heavens. The rest will ride on to Sturgis for a final goodbye.

Colorado To The Black Hills

I could have stayed in Moab another month, but





ADVERTORIAL

the road was calling. In fact, it calls us into some heavy winds as we move into Colorado. We use a decent amount of I-70, but we grab frontage roads regularly to keep the pace relaxed. The folks at Rever throw us a party below their offices in Eagle CO and the day seems like an easy one. The next day we hit Loveland Pass, where the winds are strong but don't phase us as we stop to take in the view. Rain drops hit us when we stop for lunch, and by the time we come back to the bikes we know the rain gear has to come on.

By the time we are pulling out of the parking lot, fat drops of rain give way to tiny hail stones. Out on the interstate it turns back to rain and the right lane is flooded. The narrow sidecar wheels push right through the puddles but I worry about hydroplaning my front wheel. In the poor visibility we get separated. The group isn't back together until we arrive in Denver. There we share a hotel with a 450-person strong women biker's convention. It's pandemonium. Drunken she-beasts stagger the hallways and surge into the hotel bar, cackling and screaming over each other. I have no idea where Bob has parked the RV so I just head to the room.

The next morning is when I notice James for the first time. Now, of course I've noticed him on the ride already. In fact, I try to stay near him when we are in towns because he has a great mix of music coming from his stereo. I mean this is the first time I notice him praying.

James did 22 years in the Army and came out with a Bronze Star among other things. He is usually very quiet, but when he speaks you get the feeling it's heartfelt and worth listening to closely. Each morning, he quietly moves from bike to bike, praying for it and the riders' safety.

I come up and stand near while he prays over my bike. Not too close; you don't want to sneak up on a combat vet with his eyes closed. Even at six feet away I surprise him when he opens his eyes. By the last day of the ride though we'd pray side-by-side. I'm not even Christian, but when you have someone looking out for you like that, I can only see it as an honor. Knowing someone has your back means a lot.

Leaving Denver, we run out of scenery. We've come down from the high country; most of the mountains are behind us until we get to the Black Hills, 300 miles to the north. Not that Wyoming is ugly. It's just that the eastern part is a letdown after so much beautiful country.

Pounding a Monster at every fuel stop keeps me awake partly from caffeine and partly from constantly needing to take a leak. The hypnosis wears off shortly before we get to Hot Springs, SD. It's a postcard town with the Fall river running through it. The Red Rock River Resort is smack dab on River St. The building is from the 1800's and the bar is cash only. The proprietor heads off to bed and tells us to lock up when we're done.

Sturgis

It's only 90 miles to Sturgis. So much has been written about it I see no reason to add to it. The riding is as good as everyone says. The traffic and crowds are as bad as everyone says. American Flat Track was as epic as ever. Indian Motorcycle gave us VIP treatment at the Buffalo Chip to watch the action. I was in my element.

But I remember the quiet times more than anything I saw on Main St or at the Chip. For example, the Mystic Hills Hideaway has a small pond with an island in the center. A cross sits on it. There, we said a final goodbye to Airborne George. I remember the beers by the fire and the quiet conversations with friends. I remember waiting for Neil to push his sidecar back from a parking space on his dual prosthetics and someone suggesting we help him. "He doesn't need any help," we replied. "If he needs help, he'll ask."

Having limitations doesn't mean anything; we all have them. Do we make them into excuses and accept mediocrity, or do we bump into those limitations and see if they don't roll a little further back than we thought? I look at everything different when I'm home. There was no six-step process, no miracle cure. Hell, there wasn't much of a structure.

Just put people together on motorcycles and give them the road and each other. A lot of people don't want to talk to a shrink, but they'll talk to other vets. Looking back, I can tell the VCR isn't just about getting on the road, it's about getting out of your head. Dave Frey and his team have a damn good recipe for that, and the VCR is only phase one, but it is a big one.



ADVERTORIAL

