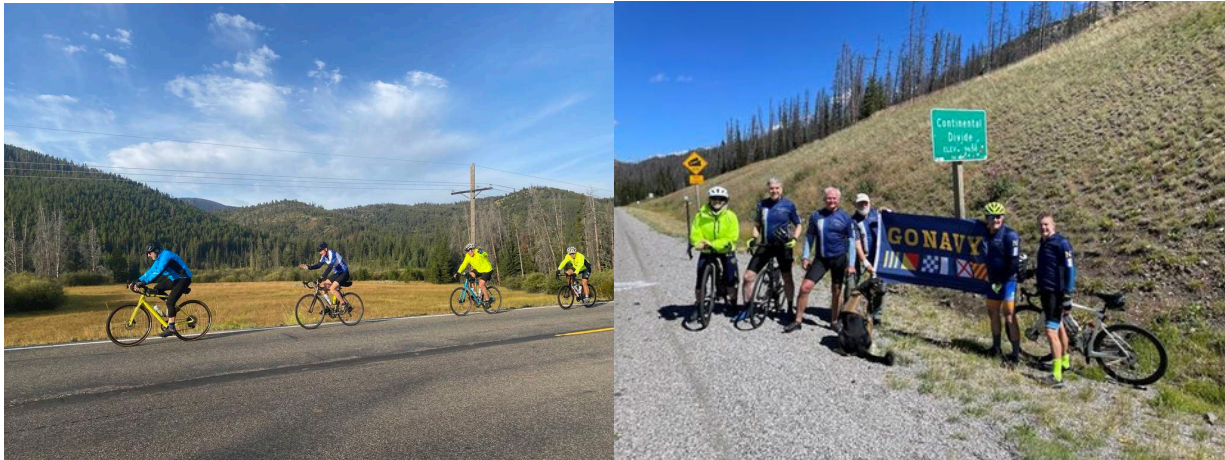


Naval Academy Classes of 1973 and 1983 bike across the country to raise money, honor deceased classmates

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Two Naval Academy classes have spent the last several weeks on a bike journey from the Pacific Northwest to Annapolis to honor their class reunions.

The Class of 1973, whose 50th reunion trek began in Astoria, Oregon on Aug. 4, is using the trip to honor at least 137 classmates who died since joining the academy during plebe year. Meanwhile, the Class of 1983, who started their ride in Whidbey Island, Washington Aug. 23, is raising money for various veterans' organizations to honor their 40th reunion.

To the knowledge of the class leaders and the Naval Academy Alumni Association and Foundation, this is one of the first times a class has done a cross-country reunion bike trip.

While the Class of 1973 started discussing the project and soliciting interest from classmates in 2019 and the Class of 1983 in 2018, they learned of each other's plans about two years ago and started coordinating. On the final day of their rides, Oct. 5, which starts reunion week, they will journey together from Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia to the Naval Academy for a completion celebration.

"No matter how much someone intends to prepare for something like this, it's not unusual for people to have not prepared enough," Leland said on a phone call from

Onawa, Iowa, at the western edge of the state riding on his ElliptiGO, an elliptical on wheels. “Within two days you’re just jumping into a lot of climbing.”

Each day of the ride the group honors a few of their fallen classmates, recounts memories of them and wears tribute tags dedicated to the individuals they’re riding for that day.

“Sleeping, eating, riding and tributes is pretty much the focus of our days,” Leland said.

Along the way, the group has encountered family members of the classmates they are honoring, all of whom are men, as women were not admitted to the Naval Academy [until 1976](#). Meeting their spouses and children has been a deeply meaningful aspect of the experience, they said.

“I’m just in such awe of their fortitude and their strength and their determination,” said Cathy Ayres, whose husband, Jim Ayres, died of a heart attack in 2004 at the age of 52, and was honored by the riders on Aug. 24. “It was so overwhelming to think that here my husband is on this journey with them, even for one day.”

Ayres, who lives in Whitehouse Station, New Jersey, said she was touched the riders found a way to carry her husband’s spirit with them to the 50th reunion and admires the planning and the physical effort involved in the biking feat.

“My face is in my hands most of the day, saying to myself, ‘Doug hasn’t even sat down while he’s riding,’” Ayres said.

Kim Dailey in Virginia Beach, Virginia, said she cried when she learned about the trip. “They’re going to do this ride for all our guys,” she told her friends that day. Dailey’s husband, John Dailey, known by friends as Dails, died in 2012 at the age of 61 after battling an aggressive form of skin cancer for three years. The group will honor him Saturday.

“It’s building momentum as they get closer to Annapolis. More and more people are joining in on the [online] conversations,” Dailey said. “It’s not just a ride ... it’s becoming much bigger than I think they even dreamed.”

The riders are funding their own trips including hotel stays and meals, which is costing the five members around \$90,000 in total, Leland estimates.

Unlike the Class of 1973, the class of 1983 will be picking up riders along the way. By the last leg of the trip between Arlington and Annapolis the crew expects to have 83 or so riders roughly between the ages of 61 and 65. Twelve riders will do the entire trip coast to coast, said John Hults, one of his class ride’s organizers. Hults said Whidbey Island, Washington was chosen as the starting point because they wanted to begin and end at naval facilities and the island is home to a naval air station. They expect their ride to cost them about \$180,000 in total.



USNA Class of 1973 (from left to right) Bikers Ron Bowman, Tom Tesoriero, Doug Leland, Dave Haefner and Bill Montgomery. (Courtesy Photo)

The team kicked off the 3,423-mile trip by dipping their rear bike wheels in Puget Sound and will complete it by dipping their front wheels in the Severn River.

The Naval Academy's recently retired superintendent, Vice Adm. Sean Buck, a 1983 graduate, will ride the last day with the group and another classmate, Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro, will be at the final day ceremony and reunion, Hults said.

For the Class of 1983, their mission is to raise money for various charities that work on veteran-related issues including the Wounded Warrior Project, Intrepid Fallen Heroes Fund and Navy Marine Corps Relief Society. They've already collected around \$400,000, nearly doubling their goal of \$250,000. The group also has a larger 10-year fundraising goal of \$1.983 million to reach by their 50th reunion.

Part of the motivation for the journey for the Class of 1983 was to give back to others involved in service after experiencing a privilege as lofty as attending the Naval Academy.

In terms of landscape, both crews said Grand Teton National Park in Wyoming was a definite highlight.

"It's stunning. It's surreal. It looks like a graphic artist designed it and it's so cool when mother nature outperforms CGI," Hults said on a call from Jackson, Wyoming.

Other days have presented challenges including a 90-mile, rain-soaked trek through Idaho for the Class of 1973 and smoke emanating from the Sourdough Fire in the North Cascades in Washington for the Class of 1983.

“Either through divine providence or just sheer will it seems like we’ve made it through so many obstacles,” Hults said.

Neither group said they could achieve this journey without support personnel that have helped along the way by doing things like hauling bikes and helping fix flat tires. Both classes spent years planning for their rides with the 1983 group estimating it took about 1,000 hours of collective work just this year to nail down hotel reservations, routes, rest stops and more.

“It’s an enormous logistical challenge,” Hults said. “There have been so many points over the last five years where this could have gone sideways. It just wouldn’t have happened if some critical thing didn’t fall into place and every time somebody steps up and does that thing.”

An important commonality between the two rides is that both classes are reflecting on the teachings and honoring the memory of [Heinz Lenz, a physical education teacher](#) at the academy from 1957 to 1994. The Class of 1983 followed a red Corvette at the start of their trip as an homage to the energetic German native who used to declare, “OK, ‘83 now follow the man in the red Corvette,” to signify that the students in the Class of 1983 should follow the upperclassmen in red T-shirts leading the run.

Lenz’s son, Alan Lenz, a former Navy chaplain and Naval Academy Class of 1983 graduate, conducted a blessing in Washington for his classmates at the start of their ride and will preside over a ceremony for both classes in Annapolis at the end.

“It is incredible what these two classes — only a decade apart from each other — are doing,” Naval Academy Alumni Association and Foundation spokesperson John Schofield said in a statement. “Their support of veterans, the honoring of their classmates and their resiliency on the road are special not only for the alumni community to see, but also for the individual communities the classes interact with on their way across the country.”

The alumni said they hope this journey will inspire current midshipmen to think big when it comes to their reunion plans.

“There’s a message there too for the brigade right now,” Leland said. “Part of the responsibility I see here is not only memorializing those who have gone before us but also setting an example and raising the bar for those who are going to follow.”