

History of the Red Helmets Motorcycle Ride

The Idea is Born

In 1997, after participating in the National Law Enforcement Memorial Motorcycle Ride that honors fallen police officers and as both a past career and current volunteer firefighter for almost 40 years, I wanted to do something to honor my fallen brother and sister firefighters. I knew there was a National Fallen Firefighter's Memorial in Emmitsburg, Maryland, but I needed to find the person(s) who would allow a bunch of bikers to ride onto the Fire College campus in order to honor these fallen heroes. It took a couple of years of making phone calls in order to find who I needed to contact. Thanks to Chief Bill Killen I was able to reach one of Board of Directors of the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation who in turn directed me to Ron Face, Director of Security at the Fire College. My idea of having motorcycle ride to the memorial was accepted and plans were made to have the first of many rides to honor our firefighters.

It was the summer of 1999 and only a couple of months before the Memorial weekend in October, so with the help of T.L.Lewis, a fellow firefighter from Frederick County and Ron Face, flyers announcing the first annual RED RIBBON Ride were printed. Getting the word out was now the most important task. Help came from two people, my wonderful wife purchased red ribbon and cut several hundred sections which were to be handed out to all the riders, and Don Webster who printed a thousand flyers. I contacted the Maryland State Police and told them of the ride and asked for an escort to the Francis Scott Key Mall in Frederick where we would meet up with more motorcyclists and then head for the Memorial. Col. Dave Mitchellville, Superintendent of the Maryland State Police, a rider himself agreed to have several motor officers escort us to the Mall in Frederick. T.L. contacted the Frederick Sheriff's office and Frederick City PD for assistance as well.

1999 First Annual Ride

On Sunday, Oct.3rd, 1999, the first annual RED RIBBON Ride left the Crofton McDonalds at 7:30AM escorted by MSP and Col Mitchell. After hooking up with others in Frederick, we arrived at the memorial. I had not planned any ceremony, not enough time to set it up. A total of 125 motorcycles attended our maiden trip. Not bad with only a couple of month planning. Next year will be better.

I didn't want the usual T-shirt; instead a ride pin with year bars would be better. A friend of T.L.'s designed a pin to match the memorial in Emmitsburg. I couldn't find a sponsor for the pins, so the cost was my own. I wanted to least break even and if there was any profit, it would go to the Foundation.

2000 Second Annual Ride

Planning the 2000 ride became much easier when Kathy Evans, a Montgomery County Firefighters asked if she could assist with setting up and planning the ride. Kathy jumped in with both feet and took it upon herself to handle so many things; I can't begin to thank Kathy and her husband Bob. Kathy made arrangements with the Francis Scott Key Mall for staging, Boy Scouts to cut our new ride ribbons with "Fallen Firefighters" printed on them, refreshments in the Mall parking lot and helped plan the festivities at the Fire College. Kathy became my "right hand".

In 2000, the ride name was changed to RED HELMETS RIDE because of the significance of a red helmet for Courage. In addition to Kathy's assistance, Anna Arundel County Asst Fire Chief Scholz, Capt B Rose, and FF Dave Ritchie arranged for us to use and meet at the Anne Arundel County Fire/Rescue Hqts. in Millersville, MD for our starting point. The Arundel Alarmers provided refreshments on a VERY cold morning on Oct 8th, 2000. At 7:30am, the MSP and Anne Arundel County PD escorted us to Frederick and then to Emmitsburg, 175 strong.

2001 Third Annual Ride

In 2001, the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation came on board and offered their assistance by allowing us to come up on Family Day so we could have our own wreath ceremony and have an opportunity to meet with the families and friends of our fallen heroes. This was one of my primary goals in starting this ride. I wanted very much to let the families know just how much we care. Kathy again made many of the arrangements with fire apparatus along the route from Frederick to Emmitsburg, secured the mall parking lot, arranged for a picnic on the Fire College campus for the bikers and the families. The Foundation provided us with a wreath and "pipers" for our ceremony.

Oct. 6th, we again left AA Cty. F/R on a mild but wet midmorning for Frederick and the Mall. MSP and Frederick Sheriff's officers escorted our biggest turn out yet – 350 bikes. As we rode to Emmitsburg, we passed firefighters and apparatus and other all along Rt. 15. Upon entering the Fire College, we were greeted by more firefighters and Boy Scouts all standing at attention and saluting us. As we rode under the crossed Ariel ladders with a large American flag attached, a deep emotional feeling came over all the riders, especially me. After parking our bikes, we walked in mass to the memorial site. With bagpipers playing, we placed our wreath at the base of the Memorial. Chief Ron Siarnicki welcomed and thanked everyone for coming. Today, I felt we were able to pay tribute to all our heroes who have answered their last alarm.

Because of the Sept 11th tragedy, the 2001 ride had an even greater importance to the RED HELMET Ride. As a firefighter, I can only pray that our profession will NEVER suffer another loss as great.

2002 Fourth Annual Ride

This year's ride will again be honoring way too many lost heroes. Always remember, "It took 100 years to fill one wall at the Memorial. On 9/11, it took one day to fill one wall!!!"

Plans for the 2002 memorial weekend with the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation began in April. The RED HELMETS Ride would be an integral part of this year's ceremonies. Over many months of planning, securing permits, arrangements for apparatus, honor guards, bagpipers, escorts, etc., a final plan was set.

On Oct 5th, under warm and sunny skies, RED HELMETS Ride IV was held in the North parking lot of the Pentagon. It was a befitting location to have our Memorial because of what happened at the Pentagon. This year brought many firefighters and friends from all over the Country to ride. As the bikes started arriving, recruits from the Montgomery Fire training Academy directed them to the parking area, handed out the registration/release forms and the "RED HELMETS RIDE" ribbons. Both the Centerville (VA) and Springfield (VA) canteens provided refreshments. At 11:00am, the Ceremonies began with bagpipers and Honor Guard units from many departments marching before the stage area. Ron Thayer, VA State Firemen's Assoc Chaplain gave the invocation, "GOD Bless America" was sung as well as a special song honoring all that perished on 9/11. After speeches by the Executive Director of the NFFF, Hal Bruno, Chief Siarnicki, Mont CO Deputy Chief Clements and myself, our wreath was placed beside Branchville VFCo's wagon that was draped to serve as our Memorial. Again this years, Ariel ladders from Frederick Co FD and Woodsboro VFD formed an arch with an American flag attached for the riders to ride under as we left. At 11:30am, we mounted our bikes, 1000+ strong and started our through Washington D.C. passing by the Washington Marriott, one of the host hotels for the families, where we were greeted by many of the families of last year's fallen firefighters. I'm sure every rider felt a little chill as we paid our respects. The ride continued past the Law Enforcement Memorial ending at Harley Davidson of Ft Washington for refreshments.

For me this was a dream come true. To have so many riders honoring our fallen brothers and sisters was extremely gratifying. After 9/11, many labeled us as heroes, but the real heroes are those we honored that day. We are firefighters. This is our job; it's just what we do. In no other profession is our brotherhood more profound than in our firehouses. We are a family of thousands around the world and a little bit of each of us dies whenever one of our own answers their last alarm. It is my sincere hope, that our profession will never again suffer as great a loss.

2003 Fifth Annual Ride

On Oct 4th, 2003, the Fifth Annual RED HELMETS Ride held true to form with rain and overcast skies early in the day. However, 200 bikes with about 250 riders rode to the staging area now in the parking lot of the COSTCO in Frederick where we joined up with about 100 more riders and then headed to the Memorial. This year's ride had a very significant honor. The flag that has flown in honor of the fallen firefighters for the past 25 years was retired, and during our ceremony, a new National Fallen Firefighters Flag was presented by NFFF Chairman, Hal Bruno and raised by the Color Guard. I am extremely proud that the Foundation has made the RED HELMETS Ride an integral part of this special weekend.

2004 Sixth Annual Ride

Our ride this year had several special occurrences. This was the first year we were to escort the families from Frederick to Emmitsburg. While the busses carrying the families went directly to the Memorial, about 250 riders were escorted by several pieces of fire apparatus continued into and thru the Town of Emmitsburg so the local residents could enjoy the bikes. We then entered the Fire College campus again riding under the American flag stretched between Emmitsburg's (white) and Walkersville's (blue) ladder trucks where we were greeted by close to 100 folks all standing along the main road. This was a very moving and awesome sight.

The NFFF honored the attendees with the dedication of the redesigned Memorial; a seven foot stone monument is surrounded in a semi-circle of marble and granite. Our final special event was a tribute to an "almost 14 year old Mattie Stepanek. Mattie was the National poster child for the MDA. Mattie loved bikers and firefighters, so along with the Red Helmets wreath, a Heart shaped wreath for Mattie was placed at the base of Memorial.

Every year I do this ride, It is my sincere desire to let the survivors know that we (bikers will never forget the sacrifices made by them as well as the fallen firefighters.

2005 Seventh Annual Ride

What can I say, it rained HARD! Even though the weather didn't cooperate, there were 55 riders that paid their respects and showed support to the survivors. The Red Helmet ride is an important part of the Memorial weekend, and it means a great deal to the families. We did our ceremony and wreath laying as usual, and then it was time to find shelter.

2006 Eighth Annual Ride

With rain threatening AGAIN this year, 22 bikes left for Frederick. What a sight to see over 100 bikes in the COSTCO lot when rolled in. Riders from as far away as Jacksonville FL had come up to pay their respects. It shows that no matter the weather, there will always be bikers that want to show that they will never forget.

One of the objectives each year is to coordinate our arrival with having the families outside to see us roll in. We succeeded this year. What a feeling we all felt as the bikes passed thru a gauntlet of people. As always our wreath was placed at the Memorial.

2007 Ninth Annual Ride

This year's ride was outstanding, and the weather could not have been better; 80's with plenty of sunshine. Since the weather was with us, the turn out in Millersville was about 100 bikes. After arriving in Frederick to stage, I watched as more and more bikes arrived. I knew this was going to be great for the families. As we rolled up Rt.15 to Emmitsburg, reports of 2 miles of bikes stretched along the highway. As we entered the campus, there was a sea of family members lined up on both sides of the road greeting and applauding the bikers. A final count of over 500 bikers participated in this year's ride.

2008 Tenth Annual Ride

IT DID NOT RAIN!!!. The weather again this year was great. Bikers, 110+ rolled out of AA Cty F/R to stage in Frederick with another 450+ (Total official count 571). This will be great for the families. I know the families of the firefighters really appreciate the bikes rolling in. I wish I could relate just how much but I cannot express their emotions strong enough.

This year was our 10th Anniversary ride. Never did I imagine that this ride would mean so much. It is extremely gratifying to me to know the RED HELMET RIDE has been designated as the Official beginning of the Memorial weekend. In addition, this year's ceremony included the raising of a special American flag that has only been flown at special functions throughout the US since the 9/11 attacks. As the flag travels all over the US, it is under high security (locked case with escort). What an honor on both.