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My story begins with a call from Jim Bono, State Captain of the Patriot Guard Riders. Jim had seen an article on the Patriot Guard Riders that I had published just a few months ago in a local motorcycle magazine and it made a good impression on him. You can view the article at (www.digitalmagicbigshots.com/FromBehindLens). Jim invited me to learn more about PGR and join them on a mission to Posivio's funeral. I cleared my schedule and hit the road from Milwaukee on Friday, staying in La Crosse Wisconsin Friday night to pick up the trail on Saturday morning.

I met up with Rochester Road Captain, Tom Weller, in Rochester Minnesota at 4:30 AM. He gave me a seat on his new bagger and we led a small group of about 8 riders to the next stop. At each rally point we picked up a few more and a few more bikes and riders until we grew to a group of about 30. At each stop Tom had each rider sign a release and give their contact information and he briefed them on the mission.

Posivio was a Marine killed in active duty and the fear of the family and PGR was that Reverend Phelps may make an appearance at his funeral. Reverend Fred Phelps is a self-proclaimed minister and leader of the Westboro Baptist Church located in Topeka Kansas and has made a name for himself by showing up at the funerals of fallen soldiers and demonstrating.

His message is that God has killed these soldiers as retribution against the United States for its tolerance of homosexuals. The method of this demonstrating takes the form of stomping American flags into the dirt while being tied to the bottoms of the feet of Phelps' followers, mostly women and children, all being blood of Phelps himself. Even the children hold signs that proclaim "Thank God for Dead Soldiers" and "God Hates Fags" and "Thank God for IUD's". Some of the most offensive actions and statements that can be made to the mourning families and the veterans that come to honor the dead.

Phelps had posted on his site that he intended to demonstrate at Posivio's funeral and the Patriot Guard was on hand to protect the family from this message of hate and intolerance. Tom Weller stressed to each new group of riders

that the town of Welcome were on the edge of their seats at the prospect of having to deal with these hate-mongers. Tom explained to us that Reverend Phelps, a disbarred lawyer, was not just preaching hate, but running a business model. As much as any of the riders would want to, the Patriot Guard Riders absolutely forbid any contact between the Guard and the demonstrators. Tom makes it clear that Phelps is hoping that someone takes a swing or otherwise inhibits his First Amendment right to freedom of speech so that he can file lawsuits against the individual, the city, the county and the state. Tom says, "if you look, act, engage, or react to this individual you will lose your house and your bike and Phelps will have it all."

The Patriot Guard Riders will only appear at the invitation of the family of the deceased. They do not care if you are a "hawk" or a "dove"; pro or anti-war; veteran or civilian; rider or non-rider. The only requirement is that you want to show your sincere respect for our

fallen heroes, their families, and their communities. They do not seek to change the Constitution, they do not counter-protest. They only show support, respect and solidarity with the family.

Our small group of riders arrived at the final rallying destination early in the day. I stood in awe as our group of 30 was joined by another group of 20 led by another road captain, then a group of 50 rolled in, then a group of 30 and it went on and on until I lost count of how many were in each of the many groups that rolled into the Fairmont County Fair Grounds. VFW groups and community members were on hand with hot coffee, juice and bottled water for the riders. We formed lines and signed releases and drank coffee and laughed and hugged and shook each other's hands. We were all family here and I have to tell you, people who get up at that time of the morning to travel hundreds of miles to take up this task are some of the best people you will ever meet.

We had one last meeting where Tom Weller and Jim Bono once again stressed the importance of this mission. They told us how the family and community were thrilled to have us and how if we ever wanted to be invited to another funeral, there was to be absolutely no confrontation or acknowledgment of the Westboro Baptist Church.

The grieving Uncle of Robbie and Robbie's best friend would be at the front of the group leading us the final 5 miles into Welcome, MN. Robbie's Uncle, who had lived with Robbie while he was in California, was deeply moved, to tears even, as he watched the hundreds of bikers gather at the fairgrounds. I hugged him tightly and felt him tremble in my arms. He thanked me for being there, for us all being there and all I could do was say "you are so welcome" because by this time I was not just a reporter covering a story, I was a Patriot Guard Rider. I was moved to tears as well.

We left the Fairgrounds with nearly 500 bikes in tow. A police escort took the 3 mile long line of bikes down I-90 to the next exit and the town of Welcome. Citizens lined the route holding American flags and waving. Horns honked at us and over-passes held citizens with cameras and smiles. We rolled into town and broke into 2 groups. Half parked on the North end of the little town and half at the South. We set up our flags and made a procession to meet in the middle of Main Street where St. Paul's United Church of Christ sat, ready for the somber event ahead. By 10:00 AM a single shoulder-to-shoulder line of riders completely lined both sides of Main Street from one end of town to the other.

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