

**Glorious day for Old Glory**

*World-record flag line highlights emotional day*

By JODIE TWEED

Staff Writer

CAMP RIPLEY - It was a moving sight that even brought tears to the eyes of Minnesota National Guard's Adjutant General, Maj. Gen. Larry Shellito.

More than 600 motorcyclists, most of them members of the Minnesota Patriot Guard, rode together into Camp Ripley Monday, surrounded by a sea of people and flags. The parade of red, white and blue - along with plenty of leather and chrome - ran for two miles, as Patriot riders rode from the nearby Minnesota State Veterans Cemetery to Infantry Division Road in Camp Ripley. The riders parked along Infantry Division Road, lining this main thoroughfare into the camp with flags and bikes for about three-quarters of a mile.

The goal was to create the longest Patriot Guard flag line, establishing a new world record with the Guinness Book of World Records held in conjunction with the annual community open house at Camp Ripley Sunday.

Starr Marshall, ride captain for the Brainerd Sector of the Minnesota Patriot Guard, said counters estimated Sunday's flag line at 1,396 people, a conservative count since there were at least 100 more people who were in attendance but not standing on the line when it was counted.

Marshall said about 400 riders left Pillager together Sunday to ride to the veteran's cemetery where they met up with an additional 200 riders who all rode together into Camp Ripley. She said it was particularly moving when a Gold Star family - a family that had a loved one killed in Iraq - was holding up their son's name at his grave when they rode by.

"It was amazing," Marshall said of the flag line. "I'm still overwhelmed by the whole thing. I started crying in the cemetery and I don't think I really quit until it was over."

Mills Fleet Farm donated 5,000 hand held flags to flag line participants Sunday and the Little Falls Exchange Club loaned 1,000 large flags to the event, which lined the streets in the cemetery and Camp Ripley. Many of those who attended Sunday's event were families but the flag line also included veterans and auxiliary members from area VFW and American Legion posts.



The Minnesota Patriot Guard is a non-profit group that attends funeral services of fallen American soldiers, creating a line of flags to show their respect and honor and to support the families and communities. They also have provided their services at troop deployments and welcome home ceremonies and other events. The Brainerd Sector has 270 members.

"This is unbelievable," said a white-bearded rider from Outing known as "Santa," who was wearing red pants and a Santa Claus-themed

shirt. He said he couldn't give his real name since it would ruin it for children who know him as Santa Claus. "Look at the diversity of the ages of these people. It blows your mind. Some look like roughneck dudes and some are doctors."

"I really get teary-eyed," said Jonny Tuinstra, who lives near Verndale, of the motorcycle parade. "I grew up with this, I come from a long line of military, my father and daughter were career military. I'm just glad to see all the young people here."



"It was very impressive," said Gary Fanjoy, an American Legion Post No. 46 member from Little Falls. "I hope they continue doing this."

"I think this is awesome," said Dale Tougas of Pillager. His son, Evan, left Sept. 13 for this second deployment to Iraq. Tougas also was active duty National Guard and retired from Camp Ripley.

"I love this support. I think he'd be impressed," Tougas said of his son.

"I was speechless when I turned the corner," said Judy Babler, a kindergarten teacher from Pelican Rapids who also is a Patriot rider with her husband, Bob, a Vietnam Veteran. "We didn't think it would be this big."

The Bablers joined the Minnesota Patriot Guard after Staff Sgt. Joshua Hanson, 27, of Pelican Rapids, was killed in Iraq in 2006.

"It's all about honoring the troops first," explained Rick Johnson, a Patriot rider from Fort Ripley. "If we can establish a world record, that's great. It's just to honor those who have given the ultimate sacrifice."

Marshall said Patriot Guard members will meet with Camp Ripley officials during the next couple of weeks to fill out an application for the Guinness Book of World Records to establish Sunday's flag line as a world record. A helicopter flew over the flag line and photographs were taken from the air that may help them get a more accurate count, said Marshall.

In addition to the flag line, Camp Ripley opened its gates to the community so residents could get a closer look at what goes on there. It also is held to show appreciation for the community's support and the sacrifices of veterans and service members of the Minnesota National Guard.

Col. Richard Weaver, Camp Ripley post commander, welcomed the crowd at a ceremony at the camp Sunday. He thanked area community members for their support of the training of soldiers at the camp. He also thanked the Patriot riders for their support of the troops.

Maj. Gen. Shellito also thanked the Patriot riders. He said he was attending a funeral of a fallen Minnesota soldier and riding with the family to the cemetery when they drove past lines of Patriot riders holding flags. He said that image has been implanted for life into his memory. He said family members remarked that "Someone does care."

"I'm so proud of you," said Shellito. "The most beautiful sound is those bikes and it's what I'll always cherish."

The open house included entertainment by singer/songwriter Cody James, singer Paula Vazquez and the 34th Infantry Division Band.

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