

Patriot Guard Riders Honored By Governor

By ALAINE GRIFFIN | Courant Staff Writer

MIDDLETOWN - In June, nearly 200 bikers sat on their Harleys, ready to keep anti-war protesters away from family members grieving at 1st Lt. Keith Heidtman's funeral in Norwich.

The funeral for Heidtman, who was killed in Iraq, was one of several soldiers' military funerals and public military events members of the Patriot Guard Riders have attended through the years. Sometimes they go to provide volunteer security for soldiers' families. Sometimes it's just to show their patriotism.

Today at the second annual Middletown Motorcycle Mania, the state's nearly 500 Patriot Guard Riders will be honored for their service. This week, Gov. M. Jodi Rell issued a proclamation recognizing the Patriot Guard's efforts, saying the group has "an unwavering respect for those who risk their lives for America's freedom and security." Cathy Duncan, an organizer of Middletown Motorcycle Mania, said Rell's proclamation will be read at today's event and will be followed by the reading of the names of the Connecticut soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Duncan said last year's event - which attracted more than 900 bike registrations - was a patriotic event, in part because of the participation of the Patriot Guard. So when the idea of recognizing their service at today's event came up, "We felt it was a perfect match," Duncan said.

Rell spokesman Adam Liegeot said the governor witnessed the "sincere respect" the Patriot Guard has for the military during the most recent welcome-home ceremony for troops.

"The Patriot Guard Riders filled the state armory gymnasium last Sunday morning waving flags and applauding the soldiers who have recently returned from Afghanistan," Liegeot said. "Gov. Rell believes these words of recognition are a small but fitting tribute to a group that has shown strong and unwavering support for our men and women in uniform."

Patriot Guard member Scott Wilderman said about 70 percent of the members are veterans. The members - men and women, young and old, Republican and Democrat - "truly care about these young men and women who have died and their families," he said. When families request their presence at military funerals, Wilderman said, their mission is to provide respectful security for loved ones who want to be shielded from protesters.

"The governor's recognition is validation that we've done a great job," Wilderman said.




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