

# 'ENJOY THE FEELING OF THE WIND'

A former sailor and Marine in Wisconsin help blind veterans experience the thrill of the open road on the back of a motorcycle. They have plans to expand the event in 2018.

BY MARCELLA JONES

A sinuous line of motorcycles skims along a southern Wisconsin road, led by a phalanx of police cycles. As they roll by, the backs of brilliant orange vests on the passengers reveal the words "Blind Rider."

It's an impressive and inspiring sight, according to coordinators of the second annual VIPER ride (Visually Impaired Patriots Experiencing the Road).

Headquartered in Greendale, Wis., the VIPER ride was founded by TJ Oman, a retired Navy lieutenant commander who is a life member of VFW Post 6498 in Milwaukee, and John Carter, a blind former Marine radio operator. They say the VIPER ride's mission is to "engage with blind and visually impaired veterans from Wisconsin to provide a day of motorcycling, socializing, food and entertainment."

Utilizing military aviation squadrons as a model, Oman and Carter organize participants into three categories:

- Tailgunners are the hosted blind and visually impaired veterans

who travel as passengers.

- Pilots are experienced motorcycle owner/operators who serve as drivers and escorts.
- Groundcrew are volunteers who fill myriad support roles during the event.

Carter said the ride "is very exhilarating" and opens the vets to new relationships, helping stave off depression.

"Blind people for the most part lose their travel independence," he said.

He added that "being able to get out on a motorcycle, enjoy the feeling of the wind, enjoy that activity and the camaraderie of people" is what the ride is all about.

Testimonials like Carter's suggest that the VIPER ride can improve a blind-ed vet's mental health. Results of a May 2013 National Institutes of Health study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* drew a direct link between functional vision loss and depression in adults older than 20 years old. It provided further evidence that visually impaired vets can have a propensity for isolation and spiraling depression.

In 2017, VA counted 129,491 legally blind and 1,015,595 "low vision" veterans enrolled in its health care system.

## 'WAVES' OF HILLS AND VALLEYS

On the morning of the August 2017 ride, warm greetings and a continental breakfast welcomed the blind vets at the staging pavilion on the grounds of the Clement J. Zablocki VA Medical Center in Milwaukee. At sign-in, each rider received a helmet, a high-visibility safety vest and a lanyard with his or her name and emergency contact information. After food and coffee, Tailgunners paired with their Pilots, mounted up and were ready to roll.

Upon leaving the VA in the morning, the cyclists passed a saluting Marine. They passed another as they departed the midway point for the return journey.

Motor-patrolmen from state and county police agencies escorted the ride, stopping and controlling all traffic for total right-of-way passage the entire length of the trek.

The 100-mile trip roamed country roads leading to the midway stop in

Visually impaired veterans, known as "Tailgunners," enjoy the thrill of the open road courtesy of their "Pilots" during the second annual VIPER ride in August 2017 in Wisconsin. The event gives blind and low-vision veterans the opportunity to experience a day of motorcycling, socializing, food and entertainment, which anecdotal evidence suggests helps stave off depression associated with vision loss.

PHOTO BY DOUG LENTZ



PHOTO BY JASON KEMLEY

World War II veteran James Widmer receives assistance with his motorcycle helmet from VIPER Groundcrew volunteer Dawn Troyer prior to the 2017 VIPER ride in Wisconsin. Widmer, 91, who served with the 77th Infantry Division on Okinawa during the war, was recognized as the oldest Tailgunner at the second annual event, which began at the Clement J. Zablocki VA Medical Center in Milwaukee and covered more than 100 miles.

rural East Troy, Wis., about 40 miles southwest of

Milwaukee. While there, the riders and crew enjoyed food, fellowship and live music. Scores of people, including Boy, Girl and Cub Scouts, lined the road and parking lot clapping and cheering the riders into their rest and food stop.

At lunch, one of the vets gave a grin and related his favorite part of the ride — the undulating sensation of going up and down "waves" of hills and valleys.

Donald Simms, of VFW Post 2923, in Milwaukee, Wis., served two tours of duty as a Marine in Vietnam. He spoke slowly and carefully about his experiences, both in Vietnam and on the VIPER ride.

"I got some shrapnel in my stomach," he answered when asked if he was wounded in service. "But I saw guys dying and losing limbs and such on Hill 54. Mine was just a scratch compared. I never reported it."

Then his face lit up as he said, "I'm amazed at how nice everyone is here, at all the attention being paid to us. We're being treated like such special people."

Indeed, everyone present gave constant attention to all the vets, both while they were on cycles and on the ground.

## BIG PLANS FOR 2018

Glenn Rapanos attended the 2017 VIPER ride as a first-time Pilot. As a sailor, he served aboard the *USS Shasta* from November 1990 to June 1991 in the Persian Gulf as part of the *USS Ranger* battle group.

Rapanos first heard of the VIPER ride at VFW Post 4308 in Lake Villa, Ill., where he is a life member. He works at Naval Station Great Lakes and volunteered for the ride with three of his buddies from the 2nd Brigade motorcycle group.

Before this year's ride, Rapanos' Tailgunner had requested a "comfortable" motorcycle. The 6-foot-4-inch Rapanos accommodated his guest with what he calls a "full-bagger" bike.

"The only thing my Tailgunner is missing is the remote control for the TV," Rapanos joked.

A veteran of many motorcycle runs, he spoke glowingly of his experience on the VIPER ride. Rapanos said it's the first time he's been a part of a ride that had a practice run for the drivers in the weeks beforehand.

To avoid any potential problems during the actual run, Oman said he and his crew worked tirelessly for a full year prior to the ride to make that seamlessness happen.

After two consecutive, successful events and passionate participant feedback, the VIPER team is planning to expand the 2018 ride. They want to include veterans with other disabilities — such as traumatic brain injuries and amputations — who are physically unable to ride a motorcycle. Oman also is in discussions to expand the VIPER ride to other parts of the country.

At the 2017 ride, James Widmer, 91, an Army vet of the 77th Infantry Division who said he spent time on Okinawa in WWII, was recognized as the oldest Tailgunner. Army vet Mike Kanitsch traveled the farthest to get to the event. He rode a Greyhound bus for 43 hours from Mesa, Ariz., to be part of it.

At the midway lunch, Rapanos talked about his gratitude for everything being done for vets through the VIPER ride. Then, scanning across his fellow veterans as the live music revved up, he added, "We're veterans 365 days out of the year, not just Veterans Day and Memorial Day. We're veterans every day of our lives." ✪

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