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Legion Riders Give Guardsmen Proper Sendoff

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I once heard a quote about man's inability to learn from his mistakes. To loosely paraphrase it, the quote claims that history teaches us that we never learn from history. Man repeats his mistakes time and again.

American Legion Riders in Maryland are determined to never repeat at least one mistake in our nation's life: the poor treatment U.S. servicemembers faced before, during and after their tours of duty in the Vietnam War.

In recent years, American Legion Riders in the Department of Maryland have participated in send-offs and welcome-home celebrations for U.S. military members deploying to, or returning from, Afghanistan and Iraq. Most recently, riders from Disney-Bell American Legion Post 66 in Bowie, Md., joined with Southern Maryland District Post 293 American Legion Riders to salute 400 members of the Maryland National Guard's First Squadron, 158th Cavalry Regiment. The unit will undergo its final training at Fort Dix before finally deploying to the Middle East.

A send-off ceremony began at the Navy-Marine Corps Memorial Stadium in Annapolis and included Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley and Department of Maryland Commander David Schaaf. Afterward, soldiers said goodbye to their families and boarded six buses bound for Fort Dix. A Maryland State Police motorcade and more than 70 motorcycles driven by veterans, including American Legion Riders, escorted the soldiers to the Maryland-Delaware state line.

When the buses crossed over, the Legion Riders pulled to the side of the road, dismounted and stood at attention, saluting the buses as they passed.

Seeing U.S. servicemembers off is an important role for The American Legion, says Post 66 member Richard Beckwell, a Vietnam War Air Force veteran. He and other Vietnam vets learned from their war, he added, and won't let the same antipathy occur toward U.S. servicemembers today. That's why they escort and honor deploying units.

"We've done several of these in the past couple of years, and now it's to the point where we're being invited to attend," said Beckwell, American Legion Riders assistant director at Post 66. "What I'm trying to do is to get other Legionnaires to understand that we're not just supposed to be there to welcome these guys when they come home. They need to know before they go that we care. I was 24 once, too, and I was going overseas in harm's way. They need to know we support them and that we're going to be here for their families while they're gone. I want these guys to understand what we, as The American Legion, are doing for them. We have programs that can directly help them – programs like the American Legacy Fund and Heroes to Hometowns – and they need to know this."

Beckwell says the ceremony included many powerful moments. "I made eye contact with a staff sergeant, and when he looked back at me there was sort of an unspoken look that told me, 'Four hundred guys are going, but they're not all going to come back.' When we had dismounted and were saluting the buses as they passed, the salute said to them, 'Good luck, goodbye and farewell until you come home.' It hit me that there was a chance that while I was escorting them to their next duty station today, tomorrow I may be escorting them to their final resting place."

Beckwell, who has been riding motorcycles for 43 years, believes the Legion Riders have a big role in the future of The American Legion.

"I'm a walking billboard. I have a big American Legion Riders eagle on the back of my vest," he said. "I really believe in National Commander Morin's 'Back to the Basics' philosophy. We've got to get back to telling people who we are and what we can do for them. Being visible as Legion Rider is a good way to do that."

Whether you wear a suit or a leather vest, whether you have a crew cut or hair down to your shoulders, whether you drive a Harley or a Lincoln – it doesn't matter. What matters is the heart inside the Legionnaire. The American Legion Riders are sending a message to the soldiers heading overseas and to their families left behind: you are not alone.