

When duty calls, these Riders hit the road

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John "Shamdog" Hammack, a New York commuter by day, hog-loving motorcycle enthusiast by night, is part of a movement.

As the New Jersey captain of the Patriot Guard Riders, the 44-year-old former army soldier from Ocean County coordinates local motorcycle diehards in impromptu honor guards at the funerals of fallen soldiers.

It all began in Kansas last August, when a group of American Legion Riders used their bikes to shield grieving families from anti-military protesters known as the Westboro Baptist Church.

Based in Topeka, Kan., the church explicitly links death and destruction — from military casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan, to Hurricane Katrina and Sept. 11 — to what it calls America's institutional protection of homosexuality.

The fringe group has used military funerals as a platform for protests, hoisting signs saying "Thank God for dead soldiers" and "Thank God for IEDs" (improvised explosive devices).

As church members began traveling to other states last year, so did the American Legion Riders. The idea took off, and the group launched formally as the Patriot Guard Riders in late October.

"Everybody says they're for the troops," said Hammack, tall with a lean build, square jaw and small glasses he set on the pavement as he tinkered with his Harley-Davidson Sportster. "But God help them if they have to get off their ass and actually be for the troops."

Hammack would test his mettle soon enough. Two days after signing on as the Patriot Guard's state captain at the end of November, New Jersey lost two soldiers. Hammack found himself scrambling to pull together a ride for the Dec. 3 funeral of 25-year-old Army Staff Sgt. Edward Karolasz in Hudson County.

It was the first New Jersey event to be posted on the Westboro Baptist Church Web site, meaning the church was encouraging a protest.

Donna Karolasz, Edward's sister, said her family was disturbed when they were told by a military liaison a protest was planned for her brother's funeral.

"We were like, 'What?' We didn't know people protest at military funerals," she said. "Of course we wanted (the Patriot Guard) to be there."

Hammack, a father of four and a member of the American Legion's Toms River Post, cast his net wide among motorcycle groups, calling on the American Legion Riders, Southern Cruisers, Rolling Thunder and Harley-Davidson stores.

"We're not by nature a tight-knit group," Hammack explained of his difficulty organizing bikers the first time. "If we were, we'd be in the bankers association."

Declan Quinn, 49, of Asbury Park was one of the first riders to hear about the Patriot Guard and commit to joining Hammack.

"It was 48 hours before (the funeral), and we were thinking we were the only two there," Quinn said. "That would look pretty sorry."

But on a biting cold Saturday morning, two dozen bikers lined the street outside Kearny's St. Stephen's Church. They were dressed in everything from black leather and bandannas to staid casual fare.

Former soldier Jim Rupinski, 36, of New Gretna in Burlington County, was one of them.

"You're going to have your crazy, far out people out there," said Rupinski, an engineer who signed up for the Patriot Guard when Hammack told him about the Westboro group.

Rupinski, who served in the Army for 11 years and rides a Harley-Davidson Road King Classic, said he is a sucker for group rides. "If there's a gathering, I'm usually there," he said.

But he said he also was drawn to the cause of the Patriot Guard because it helped "keep peace" between families and protesters.

On the day of Karolasz's funeral, a small area was cordoned off for the protesters. But, to the relief of Karolasz's family, it remained conspicuously empty, leaving the riders to provide a silent tribute.

"I was really happy they were there," said Donna Karolasz, 24. She said she was so moved by the Patriot Guard's gesture she told her boyfriend, "Let's go buy Harleys and join the Patriot Guard Riders. If I could do this for somebody else, I'd like to."

Westboro Baptist members see it differently.

Headed by the Rev. Fred Phelps Sr., immediate family makes up much of the congregation. As part of their condemnation of homosexuality, they believe God is punishing soldiers for the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy.

"This nation is a doomed nation," said Shirley Phelps-Roper, 48, one of Phelps' 13 children and a member of the church. "When you see those planes hitting the towers on 9/11, you're seeing the hand of God."

The Westboro members, said to number around 100, are "timely and topical" in their protests, Phelps-Roper explained.

Hammack described Westboro members as "really hateful people," but Phelps-Roper chafed at being called a "hate group."

"You want to call God a hate group?" she demanded. "If you want to call this a hate group, we'll wear that as a badge of honor."

Though most active in the Midwest, Phelps-Roper said the church's members try to attend as many funerals as possible.

"We've been all the way to the East Coast," she said. The group has protested in Marblehead, Mass., Washington, D.C., and New York City. Today they are expected to protest at a memorial for the 12 miners who died in the Sago Mine explosion in West Virginia. The Patriot Guard Riders will also be there.

"We've had the threat of (funeral protests) from New Jersey to Washington state (last) month," said Patriot Guard spokesman Jason Wallin, 32, of Windsor, Colo.

Wallin, an owner of four Harleys, said the Patriot Guard quickly has outgrown its formative rival.

Last week, membership topped 4,000, with 74 members in New Jersey, he said.

Despite the advantage in numbers, Hammack is not ready to underplay the threat from the Westboro Baptist Church.

"The threat is real," Hammack said. "They do go places. They've been in the area. They will be here — and we will be here."