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[TradeOnlyToday](#) > [Industry News](#) > [Other](#) > HULL OF A TOUR: Kinship and camaraderie at Rolling Thunder

HULL OF A TOUR: Kinship and camaraderie at Rolling Thunder

Posted on May 26th, 2015 Written by [Wanda Kenton Smith](#)



ON THE AMTRAK AUTO TRAIN FROM LORTON, VA., TO SANFORD, FLA. — My post last Friday from Gettysburg, Pa., covered a marvelous afternoon and evening with my former teacher and Civil War aficionado Richard Mancini for a personal tour of the historic battlegrounds.

I wanted to add how amazed I was by the vast number of monuments erected in this area — more than a thousand! Without a doubt, this afternoon was one of the highlights of the entire tour and we're all still talking about it.

Friday, we experienced a spectacular five-hour, action-packed joyride into Charlottesville, Va., among the most beautiful scenery and vistas of the entire tour. The weather was perfect: sunny, bright and a brisk 55 degrees. We donned jackets and hopped on the breathtaking Shenandoah Skyline Drive at Front Royal, Va., climbing to an altitude of 3,526 feet.



A young soldier is deep in thought before leaving from a Pentagon

parking lot with other riders during the Rolling Thunder XXVIII First Amendment Demonstration Run on Sunday.

We ran like a strand of sparkling ribbon, all colorful metal and chrome, turning in tandem against the twisting terrain while overlooking the splendid Shenandoah Valley. This is the type of spirited ride bikers love best, with plenty of gusto to get the blood and adrenaline pumping. Within minutes, we all just eased into the groove — I refer to it as “in the pocket” — when you move so smoothly and naturally, totally in sync with your machine. Nirvana!

We pulled into Charlottesville around 3:30 p.m. and headed directly to Monticello, the beloved home of Thomas Jefferson. Unfortunately, only a few tickets were available for the last tour of the day, so our group split up. Some did the tour; others walked the manicured gardens and grounds and heard a presentation on slavery; others hung out and watched the movie. We rounded up at sunset, tired but blissfully content after a phenomenal day in the saddle.

On Saturday we made our descent into Washington, D.C. We motored lazily through the lush and nostalgic Virginia countryside for a few hours, passing a bevy of postcard-perfect small towns and working farms dotted with orchards, horses and cattle.



Bikers gather on Sunday in a Pentagon parking lot to participate in the Rolling Thunder XXVIII First Amendment Demonstration Run.

As we edged closer to the nation’s heartbeat, however, the back roads gave way to busy, bustling highways and we were eventually jarred to the razor-sharp intensity of big-city riding. We rode to the hotel in Maryland, changed to street clothes and then hopped on the Metro like the tourists we’d become, surfacing in the center of Washington. Some toured museums, while others wandered around the National Mall. We later hooked up and took the Metro to Crystal City at the gathering spot for Rolling Thunder XXVIII.

Fellow rider and writer Marilyn DeMartini and I are writing stories for motorcycle publications, so we met a few key members of the national chapter, and also had the opportunity to meet and briefly interview Navy Cmdr. Kirk Lippold (Ret.) who commanded the guided-missile destroyer *USS Cole* at the time of the terrorist attack in Yemen that killed 17 American sailors. What a story he shared about this incident!

Our crew dined together in Old Town Alexandria and then made it an early night. As participants in the

official Rolling Thunder XXVIII First Amendment Demonstration Run, we knew we had a very long day ahead.



Tour rider and writer Marilyn DeMartini interviews Navy Cmdr. Kirk Lippold (Ret.), former commanding officer of the USS Cole.

In case you're unaware, Rolling Thunder is not a motorcycle rally, as many believe, or simply a large gathering of bikers. It is the largest peaceful demonstration in the nation, designed to specifically address and bring awareness to ongoing Vietnam POW and MIA issues, as well as to provide a platform for patriotism in recognition of all who defend this country, encompassing all military and all engagements.

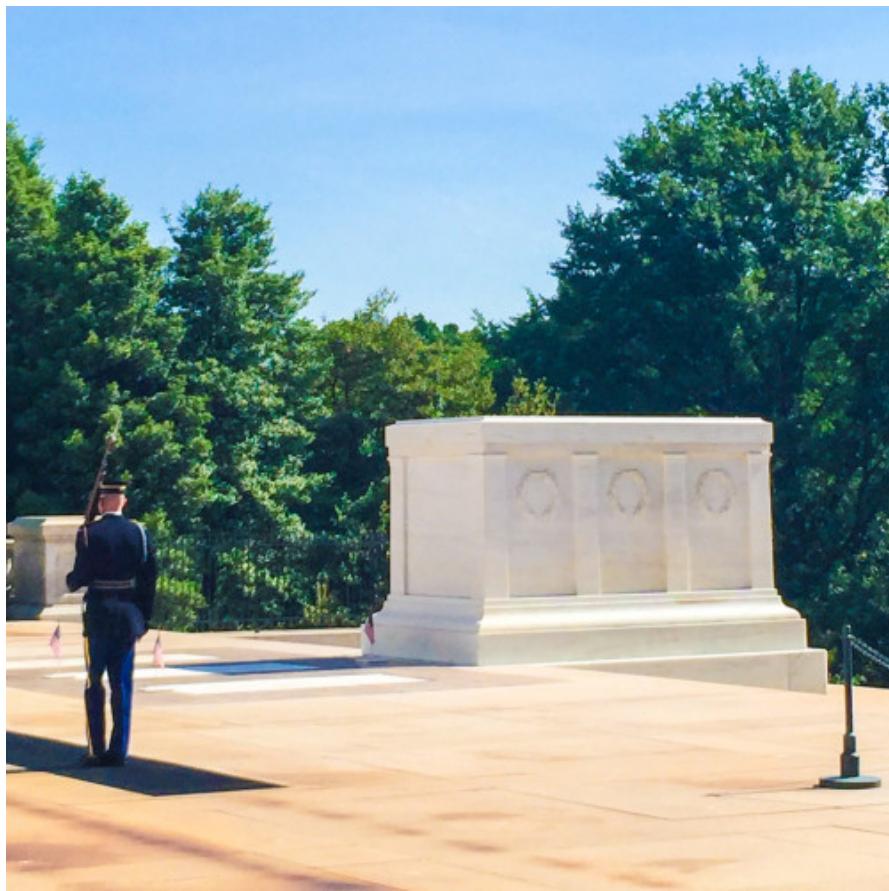
Hull of a Tour: The Freedom Ride was swallowed into this amazing campaign. We rode with what has been estimated as 750,000 bikes — I thought it was 100,000 bikes and a crowd of more than 750,000, but I was wrong. There were close to a million riders! All four parking lots at the Pentagon were packed to the brim, and it took well over four hours from the first to the last rider to finish the route, which wound over the Memorial Bridge onto Constitution Avenue and Pennsylvania Avenue, then up Independence Avenue, where the ride concluded at West Potomac Park, adjacent to the Vietnam Memorial Wall.

We waited several hours with thousands of bikers in our lot. People milled about, talking motorcycles and talking life. There were old retired warriors and young soldiers alike, couples, diverse ethnicities, kids riding with dads or moms, and for me an impressive number of women riding solo. In pockets everywhere there was a lot of buzz and excitement, along with feelings of kinship and camaraderie. Bikers generally share that type of esprit de corps, but it was especially palpable with the common purpose that brought this particular group together from all parts of the nation.

When we were finally given the signal to rev up the engines, we left the lot in an amazingly orderly fashion, especially considering the size and scope of the crowd. As we hit the highway, we were greeted by an onslaught of cheers from hundreds of thousands of spectators who ringed the streets. They hollered, waved flags, saluted, held homemade signs, and took photos and videos.

It was an amazing celebration and display of support. I have never experienced such a powerful explosion of patriotism in my entire life! The welcome many never received when returning home from Vietnam was shown in long overdue abundance. I was touched to the core to be a part of such an

emotionally moving tribute.



On Memorial Day tour riders visited the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery.

Most of our group didn't stay for the festivities, though a few did and visited the Vietnam Memorial Wall. Andy Lindstrom, of Hurricane Deckboats, shared with me that DeMartini witnessed a soldier sobbing at the wall. She just walked up and held him tight for a few moments. No words were exchanged. The embrace said it all. That's the kind of emotion that this event triggered.

This was the original and official culmination point of Hull of a Tour: The Freedom Ride, but a few of us decided to ride to Arlington National Cemetery on Memorial Day. We left early in the morning, got on a trolley there and visited the amphitheater where the 147th Memorial Day observance was being held to honor the fallen members of America's armed forces.

Timing prevented us from staying for the official wreath-laying event presided over by the president, but we did pay our respects at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and observed the changing of the guard. Flags were displayed on every tombstone throughout the cemetery, and 10,000 small flags were distributed to guests. For us, it was the ultimate spot to be on this significant day.

And then, the time had come for us to head to Lorton, Va., headquarters of the Amtrak Auto Train, where we loaded our bikes onto rail carts and settled in for a 17-hour ride home. This was another first — and it's been flawless so far! For the past several hours, I've been sitting comfortably in my sleeper compartment, writing away and reflecting on the past fantastic 10 days of my life.

Boaterz n Bikerz of America: Hull of a Tour: The Freedom Ride was much more than a motorcycle and biking tour of 2,000 miles. It was a moving adventure that grounded me to my American roots,

reconnected me to my family and reignited a flame of patriotism and appreciation for all those who protect and defend our nation. Best of all, the opportunity to experience it with old and new friends was especially meaningful. Those on the ride have shared a unique experience that has bonded us together and created a unity that will never be forgotten.

Thank you to our title sponsor, Freedom Boat Club, platinum sponsor Hurricane Deckboats, and media sponsor Soundings Trade Only, as well as our Freedom Boat franchise hosts in Sarasota and St. Augustine, Fla.; Savannah, Ga.; Myrtle Beach, S.C.; and Annapolis, Md. We couldn't have done it without you!

By the time this posts today, the Auto Train should have arrived in Sanford, and once again I'll be riding like the wind en route to my home in southwest Florida. Whether you revved it up or followed our journey through this blog, thank you for riding along!

And before you ask, the answer is yes. We're already talking about Hull of a Tour No. 3!