

# Veterans rally through Redmond

Riders find brotherhood, camaraderie on back of a motorcycle

BY NICK ROSENBERGER  
Redmond Spokesman

As the sun baked the gravel near the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 4108 building in Redmond on August 20, a brotherhood of veterans came together to share their stories and passion for motorcycles during the regional rally for the Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association.

Tony “Goonie” Cox, a member of CVMA’s Oregon Chapter 29-6 knows just how meaningful this brotherhood can be after serving in the Korangal Valley in Afghanistan as an advisor to the Afghan military.

The Korangal Valley was one of the deadliest military campaigns during the war in Afghanistan, so deadly that it was nicknamed “the Valley of Death.”

Cox went to Korangal twice and both times got shot at incessantly. Cox knew they were going to get hit traveling to or from the dangerous valley.

“It was just something you had to get used to,” he said. Despite this, he loved his time working with Afghans. Returning home, however, he saw a disconnect between his experience and what fellow Americans thought he had done.

“Civilians ... they don’t understand what you went through,” he said. “They see things in the movies and they think that’s how it is and it’s actually completely not. Most movies get it completely wrong.”

Coming back from conflict zones like the Korangal Valley can be difficult and deadly, as PTSD and other invisible wounds follow soldiers home. The Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association, in turn, was created to build a brotherhood of veterans helping veterans.

“It’s hard to let that guard down,” Cox said. “But around other veterans, they understand you, they get you. You can let that guard down around them and be yourself.”

While members of the organization ride motorcycles, they’re focused on helping all veterans — not just those who ride or were in combat.

Their main goal, Cox said, is to help veterans in their communities in any way, shape or form.

He said if a veteran in an old soldier’s home just wants to hear the rumble of the bikes, CMVA will drive by. If a veteran needs an ADA ramp for their home, CVMA will get the supplies and build it. If CVMA has the funds and a veteran needs their water bill paid, the organization will cover it. When a veteran has reached the end of their lives, CMVA will escort them to their final resting place.

“Whatever we can do to help the veterans in our community,” he said, “that’s what we’re about.”

CVMA, Cox said, is the fastest growing veteran service organization in the country



Joey Taylor plays with his 12-week old puppy named Bailey during the Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association Regional Rally at the VFW Post 4108 on August 20 in Redmond.

Nick Rosenberger/Spokesman



Duane Klassen sits on his bike during the Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association Regional Rally at the VFW Post 4108 on August 20 in Redmond.

Nick Rosenberger/Spokesman

and has detachments across the state. They’re working on growing their Central Oregon detachment because Cox said “there’s a need here.”

The organization has few requirements to join. As long as interested veterans have a motorcycle over 500CCs and have served in a combat zone, they’re welcome. It doesn’t matter where the bullets were flying as long as they received hazard pay, Cox said.

They also accept active duty

members. Women can become full-patch members, which is different from most motorcycle organizations. But CMVA is focused on bringing everyone together into a giant brotherhood and sisterhood.

This camaraderie draws many to its ranks, like Ben “Whiplash” Nelson, a Marine Corps veteran and a lifetime member of CVMA. He said when he was in the Marine Corps, it felt like he had people’s back and they had his back. Be-

ing in the organization, he said, re-instills that in life.

When he gets back from riding, he said it feels like he’s completed a mission.

“It’s like I went out, I cleaned my soul, I’m ready to live life again,” he said. “It just blows the problems right out of your body.”

This is a common feeling veteran motorcyclists call “wind therapy.” While it can be difficult to describe, the euphoric feeling of riding a motorcycle on a wide-open road can help veterans take their minds off their experiences.

“You get the wind hitting you and it just calms you down, mellows you out,” Cox said. “Everybody has a different way of doing that.”

“It’s cheaper than going to a counselor,” said Joey Taylor, a tattoo artist and a member of the V-Twin Project — a non-

profit focused on giving away motorcycles to veterans and active service members. In 2023, the group hopes to give away seven motorcycles.

After his friend Sgt. Kevin Ross took his own life, Taylor started the Silent Ride in 2015 — an annual event on the third Saturday of July that draws hundreds of riders to the Stonehenge Monument in Washington. They meet up at Biggs Junction and cross over the bridge into Washington at the same time.

“We have a ceremony up there,” Taylor said. “We have a list of names of veterans that’ve taken their own lives. We have speakers, therapists, counselors, veterans tell their story.”

Six years ago, they had a minister and therapist named Rob who had almost 500 people hold hands and talk about the human connection. Taylor can

still feel that moment. “He said something that still stuck with me,” Taylor said. “We’re only as sick as our secrets.”

While wind therapy might be the way to flush these secrets away on the highways, there is also “dirt therapy” to flush them away in nature.

Bryan Mitchell and JJ Morell, both veterans, attended the CVMA regional rally as volunteers for Veterans Back 40 Adventure and are focused on taking veterans out into the wild on dirt bikes.

Mitchell said they try to provide an outlet for guys to get off the couch for the weekend, ride bikes with their military brothers and sisters and sit around a campfire sharing stories. He said a lot of veterans feel like outsiders in public and this dirt therapy gives them an opportunity to feel like they belong.

“You’re back in the woods, up in the mountains, you’re riding along a river all day, it’s incredible,” Mitchell said. “It’s therapeutic.”

Ultimately, Veterans Back 40 Adventure aims to help veterans find purpose, a community of other vets to talk to and somebody to call if they’re having a bad day.

“Too many guys are taking their lives these days,” Mitchell said. “We’re just trying to provide outlets for them.”

Mitchell and Morell have seen it work, too. Every once in a while, they’ll get a phone call or email from someone who attended one of their events saying it changed their lives after being on the edge. It’s difficult when you lose one, Morell said, but every single person they’ve saved is another life saved and is absolutely worth it.

“We’re all volunteers,” Morell said. “Every piece of blood, sweat and tears that we put into this is because we love what we do. We see it work.”

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