One Department's View of America's 9/11 Ride

Rick Parfitt, Florida SouthWestern State College
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One Department's View of America's 9/11 Ride

By Rick Parfitt, Lieutenant, University of Pittsburgh Police Department

Police officers, firefighters and emergency medical services personnel have paid homage to fellow colleagues who have made the supreme sacrifice in the line of duty in a number of ways over a period of time. Most of the memorial programs have been held by each particular public safety service for its members.

President John Kennedy officially declared May 15 of each year as the national observance of Peace Officers' Memorial Day and the week it falls in as National Police Week; but not until 1982 was the first National Peace Officers' Memorial Day service held. In 1991 the National Law Enforcement Officers' Memorial was dedicated in our nation's capital.

Tragic events at times have been cause for national mourning and one such tragedy, the Great Chicago Fire on October 9, 1871, which killed over 300 people, was the impetus for National Fire Prevention Day. Originally proclaimed by President Woodrow Wilson as National Fire Prevention Day in 1920, the observance was made weekly by President Calvin Coolidge in 1925. Appropriately, the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation has used the end of this week to honor fallen firefighters at an annual ceremony held at the National Fire Academy in Emmitsburg, Maryland since 1981, but it was not until 1990 that Congress made this the official National Memorial to Honor Fallen Firefighters.

Historical events have also led to the places of memorializing fallen heroes. Emergency Medical Services personnel have officially honored their members who have died in the line of duty since 1992. The National EMS Memorial Service is held annually, the third week of May, which is National EMS Week, but it was not until a 1998 Joint Resolution of Congress recognized the National EMS Memorial Service, held in Roanoke, Virginia as the nation's official EMS Memorial. Roanoke is recognized as having the nation's first independent volunteer rescue squad in 1928, a forerunner of today's EMS system.

As can be seen, our nation has honored its police officers, firefighters and EMS personnel in ceremonies individualized for each public safety service at different sites around the country, but the services have remained somewhat esoteric. An unfathomable tragedy has led to a unique memorial service. Never in our nation's history have we experienced the loss of so many public safety personnel in a single event or single day, as we did on September 11, 2001. The United States has suffered disasters in which Americans have died in great numbers, and some of those places have become national memorials to those events, such as the Johnstown, Pennsylvania flood. But at the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 America lost 415 uniformed officers and emergency medical personnel in a matter of minutes: 343 firefighters and 72 police officers perished attempting to save others.

As a result of this unprecedented tragedy, each of these national memorial sites held services honoring their fallen heroes the following year, but a group of motorcyclists, wanting to show their concern and lend support, got together two months after the attack on America and rode from the White House to the World Trade Center Ground Zero site. The goal of the more than 250 motorcyclists was to spend money to help the economy of New York City. A year later this group, numbering 700 plus 32 police motorcycle escorts, raised and donated money to the New York Police Department and the Fire Department of New York.

America's 9/11 Ride Foundation, Inc. was officially established in 2003 and set its mission to "actively support those who put their lives on the line for each of us every day." The third ride in August 2003 became the largest police escorted ride in the United States with one hundred forty-three uniformed motorcycle officers from the United States and Canada, including 11 states and 39 police depart-

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ments that escorted more than 1,000 bikers to the crash site of Flight 93 in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, where a monument was placed, then on to the Pentagon crash site and finally Ground Zero in New York City.

The Foundation-sponsored ride, which is open to all motorcyclists, uses the proceeds raised to make donations to surviving family members and public safety agencies that answered the call on September 11, 2001.

In August 2004, the University of Pittsburgh was invited to participate and sent its four motorcycle officers on the 1,000 mile ride. Starting in Somerset, Pennsylvania, the riders visited Shanksville’s Flight 93 crash site, soon to be a national park. Donations were made to the local fire departments that responded to what is probably the worst disaster in Somerset County. The University of Pittsburgh officers were part of a group of 200 uniformed motorcycle officers escorting 1,000 plus riders from Shanksville to the Pentagon and Washington, D.C. and finally to Ground Zero in New York City.

Asked by Police Chief Tim Delaney to give their thoughts on this experience, the officers described the events of America’s 9/11 Ride, of what seems to have become a traveling memorial, to honor and support those who answer the 9-1-1 call. Unlike individual services honoring America’s public safety personnel, America’s 9/11 Ride honors them all at once. The police escorted ride involves firefighters, EMS personnel and many ordinary Americans who ride to show their support.

The four University officers who rode shared their experiences and thoughts of an event that I’m sure none will forget. Officer Sam Salvio watched as riders arrived from different areas of the country, but was most impressed by the officers from Canada. The Ontario Provincial Police Motorcycle Drill Team’s skill was made even more meaningful by their display of the American flag over the Canadian flag on their bikes. He said that people stood along the route and cheered with some waving flags; children were seen waving flags twice as big as themselves. These ordinary people were participating in the Ride in their own way.

Officer Mike Bennett similarly described how exciting it was watching people wave flags and cheering from overpasses, porches, cars and even tractors. Officer Kevin Nemec was impressed by the number of people who approached and told them of some personal interest in the University of Pittsburgh. Officer Jim Kenna had people approach and tell of their family ties to the Pittsburgh area. He further described the ride that coursed through six states and the District of Columbia, where people would come up to them asking what they were doing. In one particularly moving experience while at Ground Zero a woman approached and asked what they were doing and when he told her, she cried.

The ride into New York City was perhaps the most moving leg of the journey. Officer Salvio described his most moving experience of the Ride when he spoke to a New York City police officer outside Radio City Music Hall about the unimaginable events of September 11, 2001. The officer took off his uniform hat and inside was a photograph of the officer’s childhood friend, a fellow New York City police officer who died that day. Officer Nemec came away from Ground Zero with a “weird feeling” he could not explain. Looking into his rearview mirror at one point along the Ride officer Bennett described motorcycles as far as he could see; it was estimated that the ride covered ten miles with two riders abreast.

Officer Nemec had a close connection to the Ride as his brother, Director of Operations for the Scott Township, Pennsylvania EMS and a crew of paramedics accompanied the ride with an ambulance. True to their calling, they assisted riders feeling ill and even assisted at an accident scene along the way.

The officers described this traveling memorial in personal ways they will likely never forget; they were thankful for the opportunity and for Chief Delaney permitting their participation. They were proud to be part of the experience to represent their police department in honoring all those who answer the 9-1-1 call.

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About the Author
Richard A. Parfitt has been a Lieutenant with the University of Pittsburgh Police Department for the past 5 1/2 years, serving as a patrol supervisor. Prior to that he spent 21 years in municipal policing for Connellsville, Pennsylvania.

He has an Associate in Applied Science (Law Enforcement and Police Science) degree from Westmoreland County (Pennsylvania) Community College, a B.A. (Administration of Justice) from the University of Pittsburgh and a M.A. (Social Science) from California University of Pennsylvania. He is also a graduate of the FBI National Academy, 195th Session.

Parfitt is a member of IACLEA and the American Society of Law Enforcement Trainers. He has been an instructor with the Pennsylvania Municipal Police Officers’ Education and Training Commission and for the Constables Education Training Board/Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency.