

Miraculous Escape for Group in Devastating Hailstorm

Assemblies of God U.S. Missions Motorcycle Chaplain Duane Gryder recently took part in the 2024 Run For the Wall®, an annual event which honors veterans and their families and friends with a 10- or 11-day cross-country ride from Ontario, California, to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C.

Gryder says he was one of seven chaplains—six of them being AG ministers with four of them also being AG U.S. missionaries to bikers—accompanying riders on the Central Route, which is one of four routes the RFTW organizers offer.

However, on May 19, the fifth day of the 3,000-mile journey, Gryder and a mass of about 250 riders on the Central Route ran into an unexpectedly vicious storm while traversing the plains of central Kansas on I-70. High winds, sheeting rain and hail as large as golf balls—some even larger—pummeled the riders.

Yet, it was the very ferocity of the storm that may have ended up sparing riders serious injury or possibly even loss of life!

THE JOURNEY

Gryder, an AG chaplain with U.S. Missions since 2005, explains that the RFTW originated in 1989 as an effort by a couple of Vietnam veterans who traveled across the heartland of America on motorcycles, talking to local radio, television and newspapers about the fact that there were thousands of men and women still unaccounted for from all our wars.

“Our motto is, ‘We Ride for Those Who Can’t,’” Gryder says.

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But it's more than just a ride. Gryder, who started doing the RFTW in 2009, explains that as they ride, people will often line overpasses, waving flags and cheering the riders as they pass by underneath. The riders also have planned "detours" off the interstates in order to ride through communities, where they're warmly welcomed and sometimes even take part in cities' memorial ceremonies.

"An important part of the ride for chaplains is our ministry of presence," Gryder says. "There are some people taking part in this ride who have never been able to deal with the stuff they've been through, suffering with PTSD. Having a chaplain readily available to confide in is really important—we've prevented a number of suicides on that run."

THE STORM

Gryder says that at every stop, the immediate weather forecast is closely checked.

"If rain is predicted, we put on our rain gear before heading out," he says. "We can't really pull over a group that big on the side of the road just when it starts raining—that would be impractical and really dangerous."

The route for May 19 was from Limon, Colorado, to Junction City, Kansas.

"It's pretty desolate on that stretch of I-70, so there are not a lot of places to seek refuge if the weather gets bad," Gryder says. "But we check the weather at every stop. At the last stop, it looked like we were going to get hit by some rain—my app said moderate rain. It was nothing like that!"

I-70 through western and central Kansas is notorious for high, straight-line winds, even when there isn't a storm. Dust storms at times drop visibility to nearly zero and even cause

portions of the highway to be closed.

Gryder says that due to the forecast of rain, riders had put on their rain gear at the stop before. However, when the storm hit, it moved quickly from moderate showers to something far more intense.

"It formed into a supercell pretty quickly," Gryder says. "The wind was blowing so hard and switching directions that it would blow a bike that weighs over 1,000 pounds (counting the rider and their luggage) from one edge of the road to the other over and over. Some were blown off the road or blown over and we had to get them up to keep going."

Then the rain began sheeting down followed by hail. At first the hail started out as more of a nuisance, but then it became deadly.

"We rode off and on through rounds of hail for over an hour, with it coming down consistently about the size of a golf ball—and some were bigger than a tennis ball!" Gryder says. "We were so focused on staying upright that at one point I thought someone had actually punched me in the middle of my back before I realized that was impossible—I had been struck by a large hailstone."

One of the rules for participating in the RFTW is that all riders are required to wear helmets—in this case, likely sparing lives or at least concussions as the hail knocked out a number of riders' communication sets and even split one rider's facemask down the center.

"During this time, leadership decided that we shouldn't turn and go through Russell like we normally would," Gryder says. "There was a big convenience store coming up on I-70 that had a warehouse in the back where all of us could pull off and take shelter."

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Battered, covered in red welts from the pounding hail, and one rider even suffering a broken finger after a direct hit by a large hailstone, the riders finally made it—more or less—safely off the road.

One might wonder how the severity of the storm the riders passed through may have spared lives. Gryder says he wouldn't find that out until later in the day.

CLOSE CALL

While the RFTW riders were navigating the wind, rain, and hail out on I-70, just a few miles to the north of I-70, near Russell, there were bigger worries than the wind, rain and hail.

Unknown to any of the RFTW riders, a tornado had formed and was ripping its way east across the countryside straight toward Russell!

"Later that day, after it was clear to leave the store, we stopped at a Walmart," Gryder says. "The greeter, who evidently had heard other riders talking about their experience as they entered, spoke to me and we talked for a bit. Then he stated, 'You know the miracle in this, right? Had you turned to go into Russell, your group could have run into the tornado that went through there!'"

According to a press release, the tornado sirens started going off in Russell around 3:30 p.m. At 4 p.m. the storm took out the power to the entire city. Although many vehicles were damaged by the storm, which also knocked down trees and power lines and damaged homes, no loss of life or serious injuries were noted.

However, Gryder says there are number of variables, but he

believes riders could have been on that road to Russell, depending on where they were in the pack, around the time of the tornado if leaders hadn't decided to continue on. A group that large, even when going through a community, can be spread out over a mile and a half. In other words, a pretty large target. And even though the tornado apparently dissipated before striking the city, the falling trees and tree limbs, power wires, and flying debris in addition to the rain and hail, could have easily resulted in serious injuries.

REFLECTION

Gryder says that he's thankful that the storm ended up keeping the ride from going through Russell that day, although it is a community the riders look forward to visiting.

But even though the support by so many means a lot, for Gryder what means the most to him is having the opportunities every year to counsel individuals during the course of the 10-day ride.

"I cannot really discuss the cases due to our commitment to confidentiality, but (counseling) encounters have dealt with everything from just being stressed to carrying guilt from things that happened in the heat of battle years ago," he says. "We share comfort and hope. I just cannot give specific examples, though I wish I could because seeing Christ in action as He heals hearts and calm people's mind is an amazing thing to watch."

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