

Ride For the Children of the Fallen,

September 13, 2008

My husband and I have just returned from a remarkable journey. We wanted to share these thoughts and experiences with all of you, and what inspired us to travel.

I am a Gold Star mother. My son, Capt. Derek Argel was deployed to heaven on Memorial Day of 2005. He shared that mission with Major Brian Downs, Capt. Jeremy Fresques, SSGT Casey Crate, and Capt. Ali Abass. My life forever changed that day, as well as all of the families, and the children that were left behind. It is still hard to imagine that the news of their deaths is even real.

Within thirty days of the accident, our family was contacted by the Special Operations Warrior Foundation (SOWF) that Derek's son Logan would have a complete college education covered by the foundation. We were so grateful and thankful for this news, as this is what Derek would have saved for and provided for his son. As I shared this news with others, they expressed confusion as they thought this was provided for by the government. We tried to explain that some but not all would be provided. We found ourselves explaining that the death benefit does not go far when a family may have to move from a base, purchase a home, and the surviving spouse find a job while dealing with their grief.

I asked my husband if we could go on the road to spread the word about SOWF and the wonderful service they have provided since 1980. Today, we returned from a one month, 6,000 mile motorcycle trip to do just that. We are not official spokespersons for SOWF, nor would they ever ask a member of a fallen soldier's family to raise funds or help with a project. We explained that we needed to do this as Derek would be doing the same for the children of his fallen brothers if he were here.

We set an arbitrary goal of \$105,000 to coincide with the Harley 105th Anniversary that we visited. The amount is also the approximate cost of a college education when Logan is old enough to go. To date, we have raised about \$32,000 and we plan to continue until we reach our personal goal.

Our personal journey began before we ever started the ride on August 15. With the help of the Vietnam Vets of Santa Barbara and local merchants, we had a successful BBQ on Memorial Day weekend. Parents of Air Force Academy graduates donated items and purchased tickets even though they lived too far away to attend. They began to email and call and offer a place for us to stay during our trip. Two months before our trip began; we received a call that Families United For Our Troops would sponsor our gasoline for the trip. People we had never spoken to emailed and called from around the country to offer their help in fundraising and events.

Prior to our take off, friends and family were worried. I don't ride a motorcycle, and the last time I rode was five years ago. Everyone thought the undertaking was too much. They questioned why we chose to fundraise through a motorcycle ride. I explained that so many of the folks that raise money for SOWF do very special things that are somewhat

daring and require much energy. I read about the man against horse event, the mountain climbers, etc. So many of the men that raise these funds are themselves Special Ops Warriors, raising funds for the children of their fallen brothers. I wanted to do something daring myself, and something that tested me mentally and physically in their honor.

Our ride started by getting to our friends home in Brea to spend the night. I had not ever been on the LA freeway, and that was a test on the first day. We rode from their home to San Diego for the SD Harley event that night. A Veteran, NY Myke, owns that dealership. He and his general manager Ty Miller were so good to us in planning the trip and helping in any way possible. The Holleys who are also Gold Star parents joined us there. Myke donated the proceeds of the soda and water sales to SOWF, and we met some wonderful people. Our next stop was Yuma, where we were greeted at the Harley Dealership by the news, and presented a check from the owner. The most remarkable thing happened. The live news was there at 5:00, and a special family was viewing. They came to the dealership while I was speaking to the local paper. She wanted to offer her story about SOWF. Her husband was killed in 1985, and her son was provided a full college education. She was happy to tell the paper about how grateful she was for everything they did for her family.

Tucson and Las Cruces HD dealers both presented checks and Mayor's proclamations when we arrived. The governor of New Mexico proclaimed the two days we rode through as Capt. Derek Argel Days in his state. In Clovis New Mexico, we were presented a check from the Elk's Lodge. We were so grateful to see some Combat Controllers and PJ's that new Derek from Cannon AFB.

After a rest at my uncle's in Branson, we made our way to Columbia MO. The VFW Post in Fulton were all so kind. We had the opportunity to speak to the media and to the members of the Post about our ride. Mid-America Harley presented us with a check, and serviced our bikes. Thanks to Sgt. Mac who arranged all of this, and a great reception at his home.

In Springfield Ill, we were met by Oscar from the Patriot Guard Riders. He rode several hours from his home on his son's birthday just to meet us and escort us to St. Charles. He had a banner on his windshield honoring Derek, Jeremy, Casey, Brian and Ali. He later gave us that one and another for Todd's bike. If it were not for Oscar, we would have been completely lost in the Chicago area. He presented us with a check, and went home to enjoy part of his son's birthday. We spent the evening with Joe Cantafio who took us out for our first Chicago pizza. Joe is a remarkable patriot who lost his nephew in Iraq. He takes his band over to entertain our troops and does troop support concerts all over the country. The next morning, Oscar made the long ride from his home again to escort us to the Wisconsin border and turn us over to the Wisconsin and Michigan Patriot Guard Riders. That afternoon, we rode to four dealerships in the Green Bay area to spread our message. We spent the night in the home of two wonderful people, that were like family to us when we left. They made a donation and invited us back to stay anytime.

In Milwaukee we spent the night at the home of Del and Net's sister and brother in law. Del and Net are with the Wisconsin PGR, and stayed with us the entire time. Both families were wonderful. Todd sold our tickets to put in the kitty for SOWF, and we put our banner up on the lawn at the Summerfest Grounds. Net grabbed a couple of news crews that were walking by and told them they needed to hear this story. She managed to get us on two news segments in Milwaukee. What great friends! Her family housed and fed us, and we wish we could have spent more time with them.

When we arrived in Junction City Kansas, it was just as I had pictured it. Maggie and Dean opened their beautiful farmhouse to us, and made all of the arrangements for the fundraiser at the dealership the next day. When we arrived, two large roasting pans were filled with home made Sloppy Joes. These were served for a donation the next day at the dealership where Dean has worked for 10 years. From 1-6, we visited with people and told them about why we were riding. The next town over had been leveled by tornados, but these wonderful people still came out to make our visit there a success. The Mayor proclaimed our visit, "Capt. Argel Day."

The next day, we were met in Limon, Colorado by the 10th Special Forces Motorcycle Club. They escorted us into Colorado Springs and right to the home we were staying at for our visit. These were great men who wanted to help with our cause in every way. The conditions were not the best for riding, but they honored their commitment to meet and escort us.

In the morning, we met at the Air Force Academy to meet up with the 23rd Special Tactics Squadron from Hurlburt. Since there are only 400 Combat Controllers in the military, it was such an honor to have 25 fly out to the Academy to speak. I was overwhelmed by the honor to speak with them in the cadet classrooms, and learned more about the career my son was in. I regard each of them with the highest respect and gratitude, and know they are suffering the loss of their fallen brothers as we are. They are the "tip of the spear" and most of America will never know the risks and challenges they face to insure our freedom. I consider them each my family, and my sons.

Friday was more than we expected. The cases were dedicated to Jeremy and Derek, after which memorial push-ups were done. Logan joined in with all of the men, and did his push-ups with honor in memory of his dad. The news people were on hand to cover our ride, and we were grateful again for the opportunity to talk about SOWF. That evening, we had a wonderful event at Thunder and Buttons, where Derek's boxing coach came to meet us, as well as some of the other AFA staff. The 10th Spec Forces Motorcycle Club came and their children helped pass the hat to raise funds.

Leaving Colorado Springs was hard, but we pressed on to Durango where we met with the Harley Owners Group who took us to dinner and made a donation. Everyone was very interested to learn about SOWF. In Williams, AZ the next evening, our room at Wild West Junction was donated. One of the owners was a SEAL, and they were all very kind. They made a donation to SOWF, and took brochures to leave at the VFW. The place was closed, but they left our key under the mat and made us feel like family.

The ride to Las Vegas was windy and tried my strength in many ways. I wanted to pull over and stop many times. It was a blessing that we had a time commitment to meet the Marine Corps Motorcycle Club to escort us across the dam and into Las Vegas. We were guided in by them and members of the Viet Nam Vets MC, and taken to the Leatherneck Club and museum. We were met by Chere who organized the event in Las Vegas. Chere is a Blue Star Mom who is the Nevada Rep for Families United and Blue Star Moms. I cannot say enough about her efforts and other Blue and Gold Star moms who made our event there very successful. The Henderson Nevada VFW hosted our event, and we were joined by Jeremy's wife, Lindsey and two former cadets who knew Derek. Chere's husband is a pastry chef who made the great deserts for the event. Chere is a mural artist, who will be coming to Lompoc. She will design a mural for our home, and participants will paint a section for a donation to SOWF. This will be a tribute to all on the Memorial Day crew.

The next day, we attended a tree planting in Las Vegas for a fallen SEAL at the high school he graduated from. Although we were there for the mother, she insisted we speak about SOWF and our ride. The staff asked for some brochures and information to pass on to other staff members. This mother lost her son only one year ago in a training accident.

It is difficult to summarize our trip in words. We met so many wonderful people all over the country. Todd and I live within 60 miles of some of the wealthiest people in the country, and yet, we don't hear from them for support. On this trip, we met people who gave what they could in some of the hardest hit areas from natural disasters. These are the people that warmed our hearts and opened their homes to our message. In Yuma, a man offered me the last four dollars he had before his next check. I told him I couldn't take it, and he insisted. He said he really wanted to help and to please take it. Each small town and large city we visited, had many packages for the troops programs, but they had no idea there was something to help the children of the fallen.

We consider our trip very successful in the good people we met, and the effort they made to give what they could. These are the people we will remember and hold in our hearts.

Our ride will be the final chapter in my book, Letters for Logan. For those that made their donations on line, Logan will have a copy of their messages. Our web page has been updated with amounts raised, and will remain up until October 1. If people wish to make an online donation, or read about our daily trip, they can still do so. The page is www.firstgiving.com/debbiargel.

Thanks to all who have given from your heart and soul and opened your homes to us on this ride. After the flag is folded, and people go on to their daily lives, I will remember those that have helped make the children of our fallen warriors lives a little easier. They will know that there are people out there that appreciate and honor their father's service. Each day, our emails are filled with prayers for the troops and a request to pass them on. It is our wish that these prayers are followed by actions that actually support the families of those that have made the ultimate sacrifice. Deb and Todd

