



# Rolling Thunder<sup>®</sup>, Inc.

A non-profit organization for  
POW/MIA's and all American veterans

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## The Rolling Thunder Story

By Anne Nicholson

### The Beginning

In the fall of 1987, in a little diner in Somerville, New Jersey, two Vietnam veterans met to discuss their personal concerns about the prisoners of war (POW's) and military service personnel missing in action (MIA's) from the Vietnam War. Having honorably served their country, and having taken an oath to "support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies..." and to "...bear true faith and allegiance to the same," they were dismayed at how their brothers were left behind in captivity by the very leaders who sent them into battle, brothers who fought for America's freedoms who then found themselves alone without anyone to fight for them. These two veterans discussed the more than 10,000 reported sightings of live Americans living in dismal captivity, which intelligence reports were generally ignored by the government and mainstream media. Those two veterans were Artie Muller and Ray Manzo.

The era of the Vietnam War was a dark time in our nation's history. The country became divided over issues of peace and war, and a distrust of government grew. In the years following, patriotism continued to wane as apathy and complacency set in. It was unfathomable for most that a civilized government such as the United States could knowingly leave their sons behind at the mercy of their cruel captors, or erroneously "kill on paper" those classified as MIA. Any talk of the government's failure to positively identify the remains of those killed or missing in action by deceptively returning misidentified bones to unsuspecting families only sounded of paranoia to most. It seemed that everyone wanted to ignore the facts and forget our heroes. That is, except for Artie and Ray.

### The First Rolling Thunder Demonstration

Artie and Ray were ordinary men who understood they had a right to have their voices heard, so they proceeded to lay down the plans for a demonstration at the Capitol building in Washington, D.C. during the 1988 Memorial Day weekend. They reached out to their families, fellow veterans and veterans' advocates to unify and form a march and demonstration in the nation's Capitol. They would announce their arrival with the roar of their Harley Davidsons, a sound not unlike the 1965 bombing campaign against North Vietnam dubbed *Operation Rolling Thunder*. So they would call themselves "Rolling Thunder," a title that would endure time and be trademarked in 1990. Word spread quickly and by Memorial Day weekend in 1988, approximately 2500 motorcycles from all over the country converged on Washington, D.C. to demand from our leaders a full accounting of all POW/MIA's. As they made their stand that day in front of the Capitol, Artie and Ray reflected on what they had accomplished that day and the support they received from their friends and other compatriots-in-kind who came to support the cause. This was Rolling Thunder's first demonstration, and only until all POW/MIA's are accounted for, it would not be their last. On that day, the foundation was laid for the annual "Ride for Freedom" to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall (also referred to as the "Ride to the Wall").

Ordinary individuals created an extraordinary unity that would only gain strength with time. The commendable efforts of Rolling Thunder have brought them into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Since the first demonstration, Rolling Thunder has been actively involved in the POW/MIA cause relating to wars and conflicts subsequent to the Vietnam War. After the horrific September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on America and the War in Iraq, Rolling Thunder will continue to work to ensure that all future service personnel are accounted for. With well over 2000 MIA/POW's from the Vietnam War, 41 from the 1991 Persian Gulf War, 14 from the Bosnia conflict, and those unaccounted for from other military operations and the War in Iraq, their mission is sadly far from over.

## **Rolling Thunder Today**

Rolling Thunder's increased notoriety has not been without its consequences and critics. Since motorcycles have become synonymous with the Rolling Thunder name, it has created a misconception of the organization's true objectives and purpose, and has sometimes overshadowed their many accomplishments and contributions to veterans and our communities. For those who know and support Rolling Thunder, they are keenly aware that the organization's advocacy of the POW/MIA issue does not begin and end each year with Memorial Day weekend. Rolling Thunder members are active year-round promoting legislation to increase veteran benefits and resolve the POW/MIA issue from all wars, and their generosity of time, food, and clothing to veterans and their local communities is continuous throughout the year (*see, Fact Sheet*).

## **Non-Profit Status & Membership**

Rolling Thunder was incorporated as a class 501 C-4 non-profit organization in 1995, and is headquartered in New Jersey. Today, the organization has over 7,000 members throughout the United States, with a few in Canada, Australia and Europe. There are over 50 chartered Rolling Thunder chapters in the continental United States, and the numbers continually grow. The Rolling Thunder membership is comprised of veterans from all wars and times of peace. Their veteran members have earned such distinctions as the Medal of Honor, Medal of Valor, Bronze Star, Silver Star, Purple Heart, and others. Their membership also consists of non-veteran advocates of all ages, generations and backgrounds. Rolling Thunder also teaches the values of patriotism and community service to its youth. The National Chapter of Rolling Thunder has almost 80 junior members (ages 18 and under) who actively participate in visits to the local VA hospital, food and clothing collection for homeless veterans, and fundraising.

## **Constitution and By-Laws**

The Constitution and By-laws of the organization strictly govern the chapters, with committee members working on issues that include Government Affairs for the POW/MIA issue, Gulf War and Korean War Affairs, Veterans/Community Assistance, School Education, and overall public awareness of the POW/MIA issue and veterans' needs. The Constitution prohibits alcoholic beverages at any Rolling Thunder sanctioned event, and violators could be subject to retraction of membership and even the dissolution of a chapter.

## **Mission Statement**

Skeptics of the POW/MIA cause say that any efforts to retrieve POW's are in vain. Some government officials feel it is senseless to risk the lives of soldiers to search for "old bones," as one senior military official put it when responding to a proposal to conduct a search and rescue of Lt. Commander Michael "Scott" Speicher (USN), the first casualty of the 1991 Persian Gulf War. When Scott's plane crashed in 1991, he was assumed dead and classified as KIA. He was "killed on paper." Years later, convincing evidence revealed Scott survived the crash, and in an unprecedented move in 2001, 10 years after Scott's plane went down, the U.S. Navy reclassified Scott from KIA to MIA, then more recently to POW as evidence of his survival and captivity in Baghdad grew. Again, people found it hard to believe that we would leave a son or daughter behind, but it happened. Unfortunately Scott's story is not unique, as there are many others from past wars who suffered the same heartbreaking fate as Scott, and there is convincing evidence that some POW's from Vietnam are alive today and even possibly from the Korean War. Is Scott still alive in 2003? We don't know, but just because we don't know doesn't mean we forget about him, or forget about the others whose status remains MIA or POW. It's easy to just go on with our lives and not think of those poor souls left behind, but we can't forget. If it were your husband or wife, brother, daughter, son or friend, would you forget? Could you forget? Scott's tragedy validates Rolling Thunder's position on the POW/MIA issue, and further strengthens their mission statement that vows "...to publicize the POW/MIA issue, educate the public that many American prisoners of war were left behind after all past wars, help correct the past and to protect future veterans from being left behind should they become prisoners of war or missing in action, and secondly to help American veterans from all wars."

Rolling Thunder will continue to fight for the timely return of all POW's and the continued investigation into the fate of all MIA's. from all wars. Rolling Thunder passionately follows the Army Ranger Creed that vows: "I will never leave a fallen comrade to fall into the hands of the enemy..." Rolling Thunder will continue to grow and gain strength as long as even one person remains unaccounted for.

For more information about Rolling Thunder, or to learn how to become a member or supporter, please contact Rolling Thunder National headquarters at (908) 369-5439.

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