

County's Blue Star Salute earning national attention

By Wade Coggeshall

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— CLERMONT — Word has a peculiar way of getting around.

Ralph "Zoc" Zoccolillo, committee chairman of the Indiana Blue Star Salute, gets many e-mails. But one he got in March really stood out.

It was from Staff Sgt. Joseph Beyer, who was serving in Iraq with the Indiana National Guard as a MEDEVAC crew chief with Company C 2/238th General Support Aviation Battalion based in Shelbyville. His family, who lives in Plainfield, was honored in the county's first Blue Star Salute in 2006. He saw an article in the Hendricks County Flyer about this year's event and e-mailed Zoccolillo to offer a Blackhawk helicopter from his battalion to fly in for the ceremony.

It's that kind of commitment, both from organizers and honorees, that have made the Indiana Blue Star Salute a national phenomenon. Zoccolillo, who has years of non-profit experience, was asked in 2005 by American Legion Avon Post 145 to establish a local Blue Star Salute. He referenced the National American Legion's guide for the program, a practice that started during World War I. Citizens would hang a 15x20-inch banner with a blue star on a field of white with a red border in their windows to symbolize that a member of the household is currently serving in the military. After the tradition fell out of practice during the Vietnam War, the American Legion adopted a resolution in 2000 to re-establish it.

"Once I got the program in my hand, all I had to do was read the first three pages to know this was something I could sink my teeth into," Zoccolillo said.

This year's edition is 2-7 p.m. Saturday at O'Reilly Raceway Park, 10267 E. U.S. 136. Gates open at 1 p.m. with an opening ceremony at 2 p.m. Some 1,500 motorcyclists from groups including the American Legion Riders, Rolling Thunder, Patriot Guard Riders, and the U.S. Military Vets MC will roll in simultaneously. Their ride begins at noon at the Coachman Restaurant and IndyWest Harley Davidson in Plainfield. They'll be escorted nearly 40 miles through the five towns that have American Legion chapters.

The first year the ride encompassed 80 bikers and one mile.

"It's the word of mouth, and it's been well-organized and escorted," said Rick Haberman, state communications director for the American Legion Riders, in explaining the Indiana Ride for the Salute's exponential growth. "That's what people like — making sure it's a safe ride and not a nuisance. You're able to show the community what you're there to do. When you have that many together nonstop, we know we're able to spread the good word."

So it goes with the rest of the salute. The first one only involved Avon Post 145 and honored 55 families. The second one involved all five American Legion posts in Hendricks County and honored 175 families. This one — what Zoccolillo calls the largest Blue Star Salute in the country — will honor more than 500 families from every corner of Indiana.

"It's explosive," Zoccolillo said of the event's growth. "A lot of incredible things are happening. It's going to be great for the families; something they deserve for what they go through on a daily basis."

New this year is a memorial tent that honors all 138 Indiana soldiers who've died in the Iraq War. A video screen will continuously show photos of each soldier. There will also be wreaths with each troop's rifle, helmet, and boots. Third- and fourth-graders from Brownsburg have made a butterfly tree for the exhibit, which includes a butterfly named after each fallen hero. The first 138 motorcyclists in the ride will fly flags specially made for each soldier, which will be formally presented to Naval Cadets to be placed in the memorial. A Naval bell also will be rung for each fallen soldier.

"It's going to be an absolutely beautiful ceremony," Zoccolillo said.

Other attractions include inflatables and a rock-climbing wall for children. The Colts, Pacers, Ice, and Indians mascots will all be there. Skydivers carrying the American, POW, and Blue Star flags will make a special landing. And various military equipment, including Blackhawk and Apache helicopters, will be on display.

A main ceremony at 5 p.m. includes a keynote address from Robert Spanogle, national adjutant of the American Legion. Sen. Connie Lawson and Indianapolis Mayor Greg Ballard will also be there, and perhaps Gov. Mitch Daniels and Colts Center Jeff Saturday, if schedules permit.

With this year's location being O'Reilly Raceway Park, there also will be, of course, racing. Of note is a Blue Star Salute race at 7 p.m. Two special cars will compete in a drag race. The winner will be presented with a specially-made trophy by the Hembree family, whose father/husband Greg is currently on his third tour in Iraq.

The entire event is free and open to the public, made possible by O'Reilly Raceway Park and corporate sponsors like the Indianapolis Colts, Hendricks Regional Health, and Clarian West. Donations for the American Legacy Scholarship Fund, benefitting children of soldiers lost since 9/11, will be accepted.

"We have many partners," Zoccolillo said. "They were all there from day one. Without those sponsors we could never have an event such as the one we have today."

And it's all done to honor families enduring the upheaval and unpredictability of war. Haberman is especially excited for this year, not just because of the number of participants but the fact that the honorees will have a high perch in which to see the motorcade entering the park.

"That's what makes it right there, why you want to do it every year," Haberman said. "That's what it's for; it's for them. For them to see that many bikes, it's a tremendous sight. You're in awe. Last year the families were stunned at how many kept coming and coming. This year it's going to be even better."

For Zoccolillo, it blows his mind when military families thank him and his fellow Legionnaires, when all they're trying to do is honor them.

"We're trying to say thank you to the families, and they say thank you to us," he said. "That first hug you get, then you understand why you're doing this."



Zoccolillo hopes that feeling spreads beyond Indiana's borders. The national American Legion is filming Saturday's spectacle to make a professional video that'll be distributed to its 15,000 posts. Pretty soon, Blue Star Salutes may be ubiquitous from sea to shining sea.

"We won't just be honoring 500 families," Zoccolillo said of the prospect. "Perhaps we'll be honoring 50,000 across the nation. That would be a dream."

For registration and more information, visit the website at www.hcbluestar.org.
wade.coggeshall@flyergroup.com

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