

Pedaling with a Purpose Across America

VFW members from Ohio rode his bike across the country to raise money to replace a van for a West Virginia Post devastated by floods

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From the marshy coastal plains of the Deep South to the deserts and mountains of the Southwest, Tom Wiseman traveled across the southern U.S. on a fundraising mission for VFW Post 4419 in Clay, W. Va.

In June 2016, that part of the Mountain State was devastated by floods that left 24 people dead and hundreds of homes and businesses damaged or destroyed. The losses also included Post 4419's 15-passenger van that was used to take the county's veterans to receive health care and for other Post activities.

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After learning about Post 4419’s problem, Wiseman, a Marine Corps veteran who served during the Vietnam War, decided to take action by helping to raise funds for a replacement van.

“With everything that happened during the floods last year and the sacrifices of the service members from West Virginia during the Vietnam War, I knew I wanted to help them out,” said Wiseman, a member of VFW Post 3360 in Defiance, Ohio.

According to the West Virginia Humanities Council, 1,182 of the 36,578 West Virginians who served during the Vietnam War were killed, which is more than the reported national average.

‘A GREAT EXPERIENCE’

With help from the AMVETS post in Defiance, Wiseman decided that the best way to raise awareness and funds for Post 4419 was to ride his bike across the United States.

The 3,100-mile journey took him through eight states — Florida, Alabama, Mississippi,

Louisiana, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California — over the course of three months.

“This has been a great experience,” Wiseman said after finishing the trip. “One of the things I learned was how much people truly respect and care about veterans. There is a feeling in the country that I believe hasn’t existed since World War II.”

Wiseman successfully raised \$12,148.26 during his journey through pledged donations and funds collected along the way.

“I’ve had people come up to me during the trip to give me \$25 or \$50 after they find out what I’m doing,” Wiseman said. “I remember one gentleman telling me that he didn’t have a lot of money, but he gave me \$2 anyway.”

On Feb. 11, Wiseman embarked on the cross-country trip, which started in St. Augustine, Fla., on the Atlantic coast. Wiseman said he had already completed a couple of 500-mile cycling trips in the past — San Diego to Tucson, Ariz., and Columbus, Ohio, to Richmond, Va. — but nothing like what he experienced in the spring. Even though he was going to travel across the U.S. on his bicycle, Wiseman said he didn’t have much preparation.

“I’ve jogged about five days a week for the past 35 years, but I didn’t do any training on the bike before the trip,” Wiseman said. “I just took off. But, after about the first few days, I thought, ‘Gee, is this going to work?’ ”

It, of course, worked out just fine.

The route taken by Wiseman was the Adventure Cycling Association’s Southern Tier Route. Traditionally, the route takes cyclists from San Diego to St. Augustine, but Wiseman reversed the route, which instead ended in San Diego, where Wiseman’s time in the Marine Corps began.

ALWAYS A MARINE

In September 1969, Wiseman joined the Marine Corps and went to boot camp at Marine Corps Training Depot San Diego. Wiseman was then stationed for infantry training at Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton in California. In September 1970, Wiseman was sent to Vietnam. He served in Delta Co., 1st Bn., 5th Marine Regt., 1st Marine Div., as a radioman.

He said he spent most of his deployment in Vietnam's I Corps Tactical Zone north of Da Nang.

Wiseman said he felt a "sense of duty" to voluntarily enlist in the Marine Corps.

"It's what my father taught me," Wiseman said of his dad, who served in the Navy during WWII. "I felt I had an obligation to serve our country."

While he was still in uniform, Wiseman joined VFW Post 3360.

"My dad was a VFW life member," Wiseman said. "He was a big supporter of the VFW and told me that I needed to join the VFW. It was the best thing I ever did."

Wiseman was discharged from the Marine Corps in May 1971. Through the years, Wiseman served as a veterans service officer for several veterans organizations, including Post 3360. He is currently a public administration instructor at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. In fact, he taught an online course during his cycling trip across the country.

REFLECTING ALONG THE WAY

Having many hours to reflect and think, Wiseman took the time during his 3-month-long trip to think about some of the veterans who served in the armed forces.

"In my mind, I dedicated a lot of those miles to individuals who were prisoners of war or who were killed in action," Wiseman said. "That was really inspirational. To ride for someone like that, then remembering that I was riding to help raise money for Post 4419, was really special. It would often come up in my mind during the trip."

He said the trip "renewed" his hope for veterans organizations and the importance of their existence.

"The amount of support seen by veterans and veterans organizations was outstanding," Wiseman said. "A lot of Posts took me in along the way. They took me in and fed me."

Wiseman said some people would find out why he was riding across the country and offer him a place to sleep, when often there was no lodging around.

“My whole trip just shows that there are so many good people out there willing to help each other,” Wiseman said.

On May 16, after traveling for 95 days and more than 3,000 miles, Wiseman finally made it to San Diego. But, before dipping his feet into the Pacific Ocean to complete his journey, he made a stop at a local elementary school.

A CLASS PROJECT

During the trip, Wiseman was in contact with a fifth-grade class at High Tech Elementary, a school in San Diego. The class was taught by Janna Steffan, the daughter of Wiseman’s friend, Bill Steffan, a fellow Vietnam War veteran who joined the Marine Corps with Wiseman in the buddy program. The fifth-grade class followed Wiseman’s progress on his website. During the semester, the children completed a class project to provide refurbished bicycles to students and families that don’t have a bike. The children also learned about the history and importance of bicycles, as well as how they work, during the semester.

“I did a weekly [video call] with the class during the trip,” Wiseman said. “I like to think I had a little influence on their class project because of my trip.”

On the last day of his bike ride, Wiseman was accompanied by Bill Steffan and his son-in-law, Mark Anderson, for Wiseman’s ride from Alpine, Calif., into San Diego. As the three men approached the elementary school, the fifth-graders chanted and cheered for Wiseman.

“They were more excited than I was,” Wiseman said. “It was really neat to see that a lot of the kids made up signs and banners for my arrival.”

While at the school, Wiseman got to visit with the children whom he had been in contact with since the beginning of his journey.

BACK TOGETHER

Also at the school was a surprise. Wiseman’s brother, Tim, along with Tim’s wife, Ginny; son, Joel; and daughter-in-law, Emily; were at the school to surprise Wiseman at the end of his cross-country trip.

“It was a total surprise,” Wiseman said. “I had no idea they would be at the finish.”

After leaving the school, Wiseman, as well as his family and friends, headed to Ocean Beach, in San Diego, to finish the three-month trip and celebrate his accomplishment.

Afterward, Wiseman spent a couple of days in the San Diego County area with Bill Steffan and Ned Feeney, another friend who joined the Marine Corps with Wiseman and Steffan in the buddy program. The three Marine Corps veterans took a tour of San Diego’s Marine Corps Recruit Depot and reminisced about their time as Marines.

“The highlight of the tour was standing on the yellow footprints like we did our first night in boot camp,” Wiseman said. “Standing on those footprints brought back such special memories of the first couple hours of basic training.”

On his last day in California before heading home, Wiseman also spent some time at Camp Pendleton, where Wiseman and his friends’ trained in the Marine Corps.

HELPING CLAY COUNTY

Since returning home to Defiance, Wiseman has been resting, keeping in contact with Post 4419 and sending checks, which total all the funds raised, for the Post’s replacement vehicle.

“We were pleasantly surprised that he wanted to help us,” said Jim Lennox, Post 4419 Quartermaster and Army veteran who served in Korea and Vietnam from 1968-71. “When I told everyone during a Post meeting, they said, ‘We’re getting help in little old Clay County, West Virginia?’ ”

Lennox said the Post is still taking donations for other equipment destroyed in the natural disaster.

“Many people here in Clay County lost their homes during the flood,” Lennox said.

Including Lennox, who has since moved into new accommodations.

Wiseman said he plans on visiting the Post in the beginning of next year.

“It will be nice to spend some time and meet all the people there,” he said. “And, hopefully, I will be able to see their replacement vehicle.”

Wiseman said he hopes his trip made a big impact for Post 4419, just like, as he said: “It did for me.”

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