

POW/MIA ceremony

Hundreds turn out to show service members not forgotten in Citrus County

By Eryn Worthington

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INVERNESS - Their eyes filled with tears, but their heads were held high as nearly 200 Rolling Thunder Florida Chapter 7 bikers and guests stood clapping as ex-prisoners of war (POW) and those once missing in action (MIA) made their walk of honor to the front of the crowd.



STEPHEN E. LASKO/For the Chronicle

Citrus County Sheriff's Office motorcycle division escorts 100-plus motorcycles from the county fairgrounds in Inverness to the Inverness Elks Lodge No. 2522 where a memorial service was held in recognition of the country's prisoners of war (POW) and missing in action (MIA). Several surviving POWs were in attendance. Many members of Rolling Thunder Florida Chapter 7 participated in the ride.

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Almost everyone would agree that these heroes deserved the grand welcoming at the National POW/MIA Recognition Day Saturday at the Inverness Elks Lodge No. 2522 in Hernando.

"It is time that we set aside to look at the future and to make a promise to all of the families who have soldiers who are unaccounted for that they will be accounted for," said Rolling Thunder Florida state liaison Ray Thompson. "We want to thank all the ones who have served and captured and prisoners of war because of their sacrifice."

Their day began nearly an hour prior to the ceremony at the Citrus County Fairgrounds. They were escorted through Inverness, up North Croft Avenue and then across the newly renamed POW/MIA Highway, part of County Road 486.

Exalted Ruler of the Inverness Elks Lodge Mike Orndorff was flattered to have the escorted parade end on the Elks' grounds, as veterans are a part of the Elks' mission of operation.

"The Elks fraternal organization is built on a pillar of charity, justice, brotherly love and fidelity," Orndorff said. "It is very befitting that we are gathered here today on the Elks grounds to pay honor and respect to our American veteran heroes, as the Elks have a pledge which reads, 'So long as there are veterans, the benevolent and protective order of Elks will never forget them.'"

Veterans made personal sacrifices that are incomprehensible to many, said Commander Richard "Bud" Allen of the Aaron A. Weaver Chapter 776 Military Order of the Purple Heart.

"Our POWs and MIAs honorably served and made personal sacrifices about what we will never fully comprehend," Allen said. "These warriors served effortlessly and did whatever was necessary to

survive the ordeals of war. We all knew going into combat that the possibility did exist for us to become POW or MIA. Fortunately for most of us that didn't happen. Today we honor these veterans for their ability to survive and to honor and never forget those still missing in action."

On behalf of the Citrus County Board of County Commissioners, Commissioner Scott Adams proclaimed Sept. 20, 2013, National POW/MIA Recognition Day in Citrus County.

"I want to thank all of the veterans here today and for everything they have been through and what they have sacrificed for our country," Adams said.

Congressman Richard Nugent agreed with Adams that our country has the best military in the world.

"My wife and I have three sons serving our country," Nugent said. "What gave Wendy and I hope was that we have the best trained, equipped and motivated military on the face of the earth. We could go to sleep at night knowing that our kids had a fighting chance to come home. We have an American duty and obligation to make sure that POWs and MIAs are never forgotten. We are the only country that cares about their military."

Without saying a word, hundreds of attendees formed an unbreakable hand-to-hand link while singing "God Bless the USA" by Lee Greenwood.

Once the song was over they dropped hands and then stood in honor of the POW/MIA Remembrance Table Ceremony, which concluded before the cookout.

Lecanto High School Army ROTC presented the colors. Angela Vick sang the national anthem and the Boy Scouts of America presented the POWs and MIAs roses during the Roll Call.

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