

## **Soldier Ride – Miami to Key West, Florida ( by Rick Boethling)**

When I was offered an opportunity to participate in the Wounded Warrior Project's Soldier Ride from Miami to Key West, Florida, I thought, a bike ride in Florida in January? Why yes, of course I will do that. I really had no idea what I was in for. It turned out to be much more than just a bike ride.

I met the group, including RAAM racer, Dan Schindler (Team 4Mil), in Tavernier Key to begin the sections that I would ride over the next two days. As I waited in the Coral Shores High School parking lot, police cars and fire engines began arriving. Next, came a group of children holding hand painted signs greeting the riders. The riders rolled in, with the handcyclists leading the way, to a huge cheer from the onlookers. There were about 30 soldiers and another 40 supporting riders. The injuries to the soldiers included several single and double amputees. Some soldiers were able to ride diamond frame bikes however, several were using handcycles. It was quite a way to join the ride and this was just the beginning.

We continued down the Keys to the Dolphin Research Center, being greeted by people every stretch of the way. When we arrived at the research center, the soldiers were given the opportunity to swim with the dolphins. I had no idea that there were so many different types prosthesis, as I observed them being removed and put back on in order for the soldiers to go for a swim. Smiles graced the soldier's faces and many tear-filled eyes were watching, enjoying the experience of seeing soldiers, that are in various stages of rehabilitation from devastating injuries, embracing the experience like someone opening a gift. The staff at the research center was incredible.

Next stop was the 7-Mile Bridge. Once we were all gathered at the DAV on Marathon Key, there was a brief ceremony honoring the soldiers and then we fell in line behind the police escort leading us over the bridge. The soldiers led us over one of the most beautiful stretches of road in this country. Some of the riders were telling stories and laughing, while others were quiet with their

thoughts. As we crossed over the bridge the sun was beginning to fall from the sky and we regrouped to load onto the bus which would take us into Key West for the night. The bus ride was filled with laughing, joking, silence and even some singing and dancing. Off to the BOQ, which I learned was the Bachelor Officer Quarters and dinner.

The next morning we gathered at the Navy Base on Boca Chica Key to begin the final ride into Key West. I knew that Key West was a Navy town and I heard this ride was well received. I underestimated how well. As the large police escort led us down Eaton Street into Old Town Key West, there were the usual groups of people gathered cheering and thanking the soldiers for their service. When we made the left turn on to Duval Street, the main tourist area, the crowds were crazy! There were people standing shoulder-to-shoulder several people deep on both sides of the street shouting their thanks to these riders. It was a stunning sight. It was near useless to try to contain my emotions as we paraded down the street to the Truman Naval Annex. The mayor of Key West, among the many others, greeted us. After a quick lunch we had a bike tour of Key West, highlighting some of the military history. We wrapped up the ride with dinner at Jimmy Buffett's, Margaritaville.

I went to Florida to do a ride for a good cause and I came away with much more. I was amazed by the gathering of people everywhere we rode—young, old, military and civilian alike—the supporters were out in force. I realized that no matter our personal stand on the wars our country is fighting, there are people serving their country, often far from their homes and families, who are returning seriously injured, both physically and psychologically. Many give their life. These young men and women are doing their job, just like the rest of us. The difference is their job puts their lives at risk. These soldiers are ordinary people, generally very young (20-25), coming back to society with some serious wounds. It is all of our duty as fellow countrymen and human beings to help welcome them back and assist them in their recovery and inclusion in society. This ride was not about war or fighting, left- or right-wing politics; it was about showing compassion and caring towards others, striving to be better! I, as a cyclist, am happy that they

chose the bicycle as means to bring people together and I hope that RAAM can continue to support and be a platform for many great causes and ultimately use the bicycle to bring us all a little closer.

\*Soldier Ride is a Wounded Warrior Project initiative that provides adaptive cycling experiences for wounded warriors, as well as opportunities for the public to ride along with the warriors and show their support.

\*The mission of Wounded Warrior Project is to honor and empower wounded warriors.