

2021 Falklands Ride of Respect

The idea for the Falklands Ride of Respect came about originally due to our involvement in riding to the outlying graves around Arnhem, a task the Airborne Forces Riders have had the honour to perform since 2014. Later, Jimmy O'Connell was researching his book 'Three Days in June' about the battle for Mount Longdon, and he asked me to find a grave in Lanchester in County Durham. I soon found the grave of Pte Stewart Laing of Anti Tank Pln 3 Para but the thought that I had been unaware that he was laying only a short distance from a road I had travelled countless times shocked me, and I reasoned that there must be others who do not know where their friends are buried. The research that followed was the basis for the 2019 3 Para Ride of Respect where we visited all of the 23 graves, raising funds for SAMA and awareness of the Falklands fallen.

More research followed into where all of the other Falklands graves were in the U.K. This was a relatively easy task as the Falklands war was the first time that families had been given the option of 'bringing them home' therefore the funerals were well documented in newspapers and Regimental journals and websites. In 2020, in between lockdowns, we rode to all of the remaining Falklands graves in the U.K. This was a much longer ride than the first purely due to geographic spread but we completed it over eight days, met many more people and families, and raised yet more money for SAMA than the previous year. It should be noted that both of these rides were entirely self-funded by the riders themselves.

Shortly after the 2020 ride we took the decision to put these rides together and do one big Falklands Ride of Respect in 2021. Immediately it became apparent that this was a huge undertaking compared to the two previous rides, and that it would have to be done over a much longer period, more so for safety reasons as well as distance and time. Following many months of carefully planning routes from location to location, estimating timings, distance and fuel consumption, as well as rations and accommodation, it was clear that the ride would have to take place over 16 days at the beginning of August and that we would have to raise funds to cover our own costs as well as charitable fundraising.

The charitable fundraising bit was relatively easy as we used a Just Giving page online and the funds donated go direct to SAMA. However, having had two years of these rides behind us we knew that we would need to raise around £1500 per rider just to cover expenses ! To offset the costs we were able to get sponsorships from a number of businesses and friends which helped massively. Stena Line provided our Irish Sea crossings for free which was very much appreciated especially as both Charlie and myself had been on Stena ships in the Falklands 39 years ago. We also hit on friends to provide some overnight accommodation and we even held an online auction from The Last Post veterans bar which raised a good amount. By the time we were about to start the ride we had enough to cover our costs with a bit of spare which would be donated to SAMA once the task was done. The weeks leading up to the ride dragged by. All our battle prep was done, equipment had been checked many times over, the bikes were ready but just like any real operation there was that nervous feeling of apprehension waiting for the off.

In planning, and following lessons learnt from previous rides, we had limited ourselves to around 200 miles a day with time for breaks and no early starts or late finishes. This was important from a safety point of view, but we knew a 16 day ride is a marathon and not a sprint, and the riders had plenty of tasks to complete along the way and to do that well, we had to be able to function properly. One small but significant task was that at the end of every day riding we would raise a dram to the fallen. This was at the specific request of a good friend Bill Nicholson, a fine retired Sapper SNCO who can no longer ride but wanted us to do this as his contribution. Bill provided four bottles of very good single malts, and each rider with an engraved glass so who were we to argue ?. Bill also went above and beyond the call of duty on the ride by meeting us in his camper van at Spean Bridge where he had bacon sarnies on the go and was doing a bit of fundraising for SAMA82 !

The first day of the ride started with us meeting Chris Lewis (ex 2 Para) and his girlfriend Katy who are walking the U.K. coast raising funds for SSAFA. Chris has been walking for around five years now and by coincidence was passing down the Durham coast that day. The day went well, and ended in Edinburgh hosted by the Airborne Engineers Association Scotland who had arranged to rededicate the headstone of Cpl Scott Wilson RE who was killed on Mount Longdon. Charlie and I were also presented with AEA President Certificates for our charitable fundraising for SAMA and the Arnhem Flower Children. It was an excellent first night!

I could give a day by day account of the ride but to be honest, it would probably be very boring and tedious, much like the ride itself. However, there were many memorable moments. Shortly before the ride started, a biker - John Savage (ex Light Infantry Bugler) messaged me to say that he would be touring Scotland at the same time as us and could he join us? John eventually stayed with us for three days and played at every grave and monument we visited. This was particularly special for the families, and we are very grateful to John for that. John also later met us in South Wales. We were escorted through Scotland by the Royal Marine Riders and our visit to Northern Ireland went well and we were met by a large contingent of RBL Riders there. We relied heavily on local guides in some cases, and Fraser Phillips, Moore Campbell, Dunky Lang and Geof Burrows all deserve a mention for keeping us on track and taking us the scenic route to relieve the boredom.

Overall, the weather was pretty good for the full two weeks although when it rained it really chucked it down, but we soon dried out. In fact, it was so warm I never actually put my waterproofs on once, and found that just a tee shirt under the bike jacket was usually more than enough to wear. Being 'on the road' for two weeks did bring its logistical challenges in terms of doing the dhobi , but we found an innovative way of blow drying the gear each night in the Premier Inn using the handy fan in each room. We had chosen Premier Inn as the overnight location of choice due to their availability, good standard and cost. We booked the rooms early and got some as low as £25 per head. Of course, we did keep costs down by staying with friends as well, but we found that by using Premier Inn we had our own space, and could have an early night when needed.

We did have a couple of minor mechanical and electrical issues with the bikes but these were quickly fixed without any loss of momentum. Thank you to everyone who helped. It was in the plan that if any rider had a breakdown he would be left behind

to catch up later and this worked well as each rider knew the score, had a copy of the full plan and in good Airborne style, were happy to fend for themselves if need be. This did cause a bit of consternation among some other riders with us as the 'biker creed' says that you don't leave anyone behind, but once it was explained that this was all part of the plan and we had to try to keep to our published timings it was fine.

Each day seemed just like the last and sometimes we got confused as to which day we were on. We had started to do the live Facebook feeds early in the ride and this helped to keep us on track, especially when people complained if we didn't do one ! We had not realised how popular these were but we noticed that the Just Giving page donations were increasing, and we were getting more 'likes' as we progressed. We were also starting to pick up small but niggling injuries such as pulled muscles and strains, and towards the end of the first week tiredness was starting to show by some small mistakes being made. This was to be expected and our regular evening de-brief and dram was a much-needed source of a bit of ribbing and leg pulling to restore the equilibrium and team harmony, as was piping Charlie on board the Golden Galleon each morning. Media interest in the ride was slightly better than expected, certainly at a local level and this was good for the local awareness aspect. We had fantastic assistance on the media side by the SAMA Office staff Joanne and Marie, as well as help from the SAMA Trustees Tom Herring, Chris Howe and others who were also there to meet us at various places around the U.K.

The ride ended on Day 16 at the graveside of The Governor - Sir Rex Hunt - in North Yorkshire and we were met by many family and friends. This was a great way to end the ride but Phill Damant had a further 300 miles to go the following day back home to Devizes in Wiltshire. While it was over for three of us, we could only really relax when we knew Phill was home safe.

So was it worth it? It certainly was. We achieved our aims of Remembrance - Respect - Awareness - Support in many ways, and now many more people know where the Falklands graves are. We also raised a considerable amount of money for SAMA and at the time of writing stands at just over £10,000 when the funds of the Just Giving page, funds collected on the ride and what remains in the Admin Fund are taken together. We also met many families of the fallen and veterans of 1982. In every case they thanked us for raising awareness and for remembering the fallen. It was our honour to do so.

In February 2022 Charlie and I hope to travel to the Falklands on a veterans pilgrimage, and while there ride to the last 15 graves on land on a couple of borrowed motorbikes, and hopefully also pay our respects at sea to those still on patrol. We do not intend to mount a big ride around the U.K. next year as there will already be a lot on for the 40th Anniversary. However, we hope that bikers around the U.K. will make their own Falklands Ride of Respect to visit the graves and memorials in their own areas or regions using the location data which we will provide to SAMA to be published on the SAMA website shortly.

It would be impossible to thank and mention everyone who we met and rode with us throughout the ride, but in every case, we encountered nothing but support, friendship, brotherhood and kindness from everyone we met. It was truly humbling

and we thank everyone for that. On behalf of the 2021 Falklands Ride of Respect Team - Charlie McColgan, Phill Damant, Tony McKie and myself, thank you to everyone for your support.

Paul Moore
President
Airborne Forces Riders