

Op-Ed: Hollister—Where History Rides On, and Why the Torch Must Be Passed

By Elizabeth “Liz” Perez

This past weekend, from April 11 to 13, we had the honor of attending the American Legion Riders (ALR) Convention in Hollister, California—a small town with a thunderous legacy. For many of us, this wasn't just another gathering of riders. It was a ride through history, a reconnection with the roots of veteran biker culture, and a moment to honor those who served our country and kept our freedoms rolling forward.

It was also my first time attending an ALR Convention—and let's just say, they sure know how to make a newcomer feel right at home. Bikes, brothers and sisters in arms, and they sure had more patches than a leather vest.

I'm a U.S. Navy veteran, having served from November 1997 to 2005, and officially separating in 2006 after my time in the Navy Reserves. I attended the convention with my husband, Elias Rodriguez—a retired Navy SEAL and proud ALR member—and our friend and fellow rider, Butch Rafferty. Butch served in the Marines for 27 years and retired as a Warrant Officer. All of us proudly represented Vista, California American Legion Riders Chapter 365—and yes, we brought our best riding gear and our worst veteran jokes.

We broke bread and swapped stories with veterans from every era—World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War, Iraq, and Afghanistan. We laughed at jokes that would make most civilians tilt their heads and say, “Wait... what?” But in that room, we got each other. We talked about life after service—the good, the bad, and the unexpectedly hilarious. We leaned on each other the way veterans do.

And no matter what generation we came from, we found common ground. Service unites us. Being American unites us. Politics stayed outside the door—what mattered in that room were country, camaraderie, and care for our veterans, service members, and their families. That's the power of the American Legion Riders.

Hollister itself is more than just a name in motorcycling history. It's the birthplace of the American Legion Riders—a national brotherhood and sisterhood of military veterans who ride not just for the thrill, but for purpose: patriotism, remembrance, and community service. This movement, which now spans the nation, began in a town that has always worn its veteran pride on its leather sleeves.

Long before the infamous “Hollister Riot” of 1947 (which was more dramatic media fiction than fact), Hollister was home to deep-rooted traditions of World War II veterans returning from battlefields and forming bonds over shared experience and horsepower. Competitions between Harley-Davidson and Indian Motorcycle riders were legendary. These weren't just weekend warriors—they were war heroes searching for community and healing in the post-war years.

At the center of this legacy is Johnny's Bar & Grill, originally called The New Deal. It was named The New Deal in honor of President Roosevelt's program. Stepping into Johnny's today is like stepping into a time capsule of American veteran and motorcycle culture. We had the pleasure of meeting Peter Logan, the new owner, who is committed to carrying on the spirit of the original founders. We also connected with Paul Logan, whose deep knowledge of ALR history and the original 1947 rally helps bridge generations through stories that carry just as much mileage as the bikes themselves—built to last for generations.

That 1947 rally—later fictionalized into *The Wild One* starring Marlon Brando—wasn't about rebellion. It was about returning home. It was a biker rally organized by veterans, for veterans, and it marked the early seeds of what would become the American Legion Riders.

Founded officially in 1993 in Garden City, Michigan, by Chuck “Tramp” Dare and Bill “Polka” Kaledas, the American Legion Riders started as an idea to unite veterans who shared a love of motorcycles and a passion for service. Since then, ALR has grown into a powerful, nationwide force. With each ride, flag escort, and community fundraiser, they promote American Legion values, honor our fallen, and serve veterans and their families with grit and grace.

Each chapter operates under a local American Legion post and follows national guidelines. ALR riders must be members of the American Legion, Sons of the American Legion, or Auxiliary, and ride motorcycles 350cc or greater. Their impact is undeniable—from the annual Legacy Run that raises scholarships for children of fallen post-9/11 service members, to their everyday presence at funerals, parades, and patriotic events.

The Current Threat: A Decline in Membership

As much as we celebrated our roots and brotherhood this weekend, there’s a growing concern we can’t ignore:

The American Legion and ALR are facing a critical threat—declining membership.

As current members age out, we’re at risk of losing a powerful institution built by veterans, for veterans. The torch needs to be passed. And it must be passed now.

We’re calling on the post-9/11 generation—Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, Millennials and Gen Z—to step up. Not just to join, but to lead. To recruit. To ride. To organize. To breathe new life into an organization that once helped our elders find purpose, brotherhood, and healing.

Because this isn’t just about motorcycles.

It’s about mission.

It’s about remembrance.

It’s about never letting a generation of veterans go unseen, unheard, or unsupported.

So, as we rode through Hollister this weekend, we weren’t just revving engines. We were honoring history. We were paying tribute to the WWII vets who laid the foundation for what this place—and this organization—means today. We were standing in the same space they stood, sharing the same pride, and preparing to carry the torch forward.

To the next generation of veterans: We need you.

Let’s ride with purpose.

Let’s continue the mission.

Let’s make sure the legacy of the American Legion Riders keeps rolling strong for generations to come.