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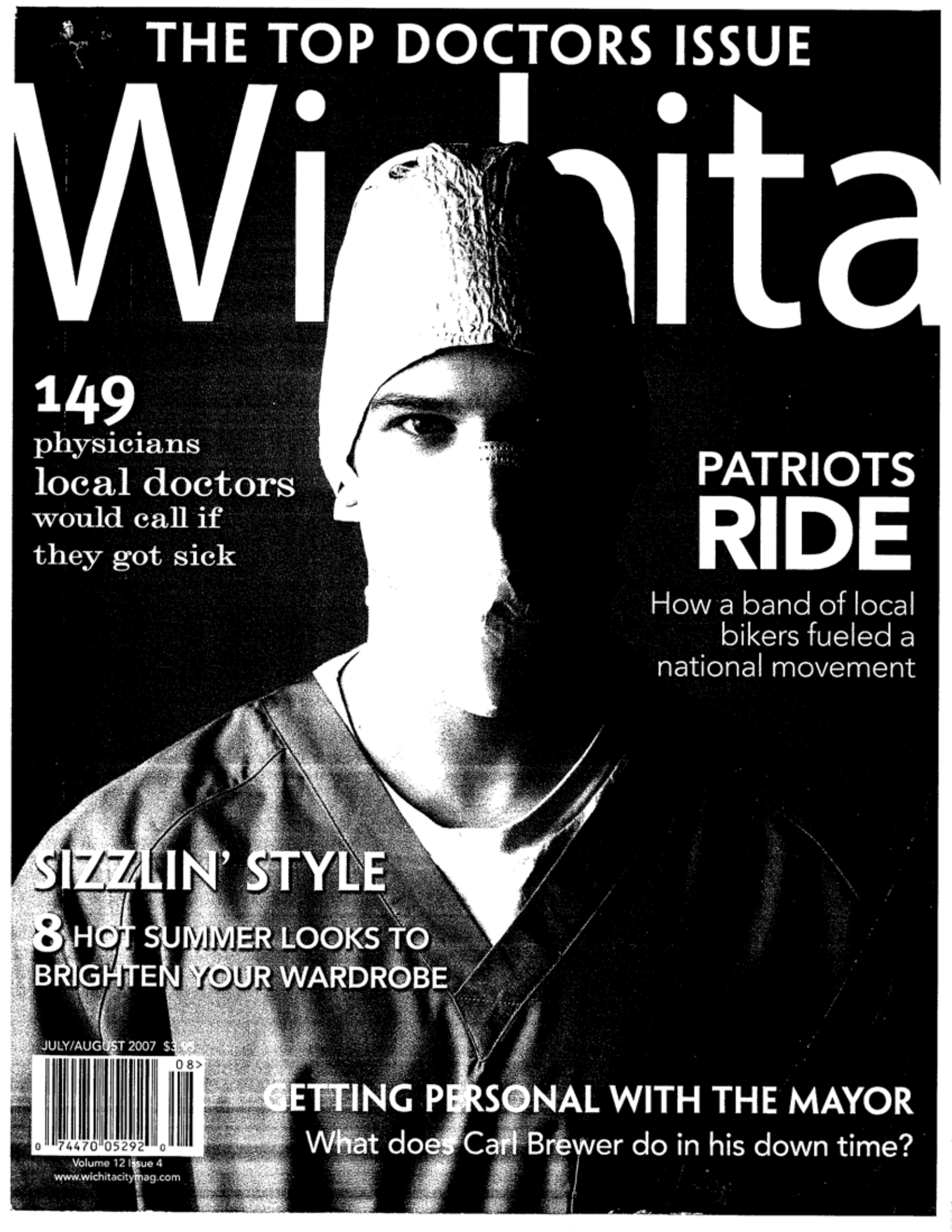

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Volume 12 Issue 4
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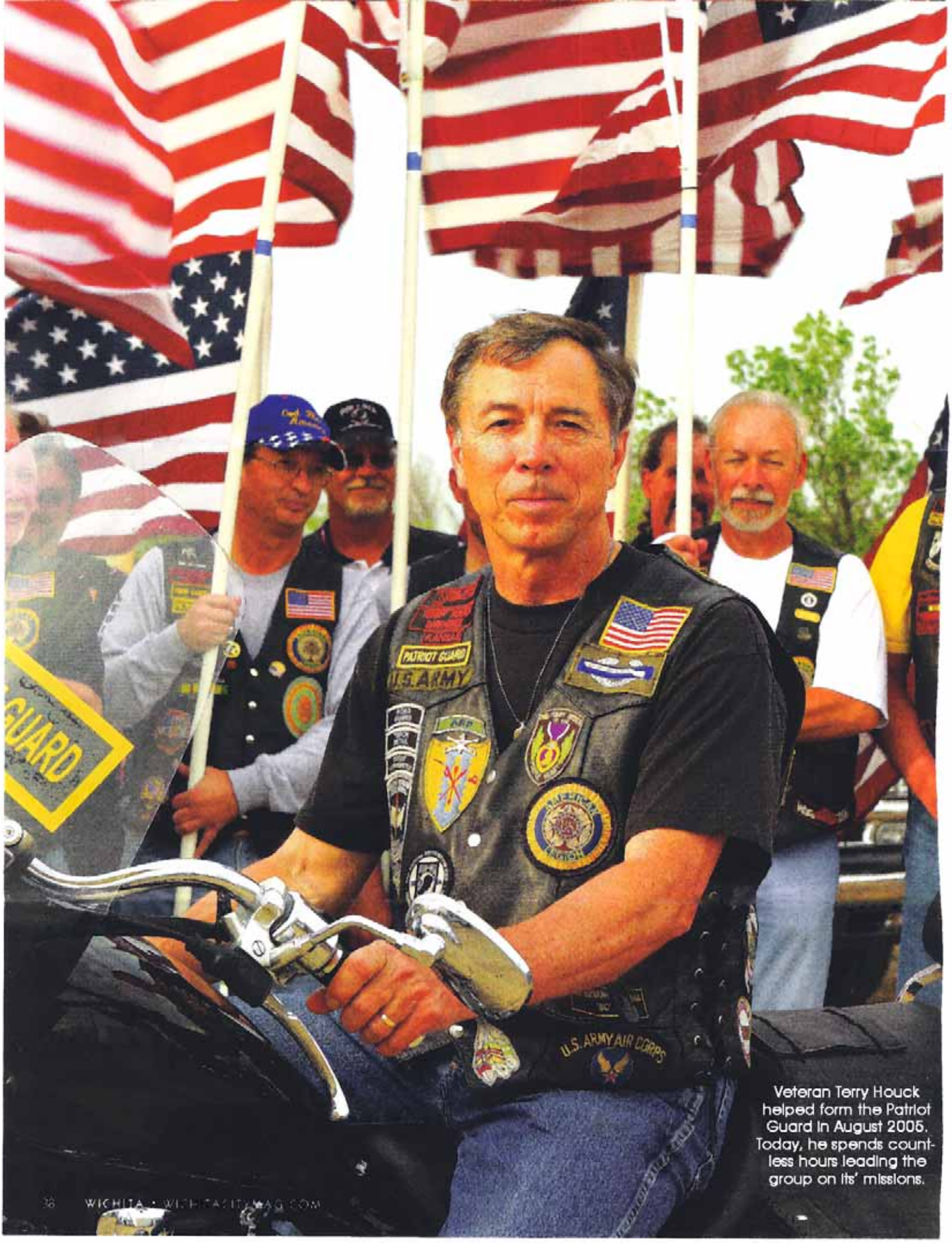

Veteran Terry Houck helped form the Patriot Guard in August 2005. Today, he spends countless hours leading the group on its' missions.

A Patriot Guard member salutes a photo of Sgt. Alex Funcheon, a 21-year-old soldier killed by a roadside bomb in Iraq in late April.

Nearly two years after it began, the Patriot Guard has grown into a national movement to honor U.S. soldiers with respect and humility >>>

An American Mission

By Jarrett Medlin

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ZE BERNARDINELLO

>> Patriot Guard members vary in age, political beliefs and background. What they share is a commitment to honor U.S. soldiers. They take off work and endure the elements to hold flags at fallen soldiers' funerals.

The procession of motorcycles and American flags stretches nearly a mile long. It passes intersections blocked by police and saluting drivers standing next to parked cars. It winds up and down hills, around curves and beyond sight. The motorcade moves at 25 miles per hour in rows of two through Bel Aire and into northeast Wichita. It comes to rest at Central Christian Church, where the riders park, grab American flags mounted on 10-foot poles and line up at the property's edge. In less than five minutes, more than 200 people stand shoulder to shoulder and form an avenue of flags along East 29th Street. They stand to honor 21-year-old Sgt. Alex Funcheon, a fresh-faced soldier who was killed by a roadside bomb in Baghdad, Iraq on April 29.

Across the street, a clutch of protesters from the Topeka-based Westboro Baptist Church begins to pace the sidewalk. They hold signs that read THANK GOD FOR DEAD SOLDIERS and GOD HATES FAGS–messages to convey their belief that God is killing soldiers to punish America for condoning homosexuality. Although the Patriot Guard didn't expect the protesters on this particular day, the group is prepared. A set of bagpipes begins to wail as the members silently stand their ground.

Some have arthritis. Some are skipping work to be there. Some have life-long scars from battles in Vietnam, Korea, Grenada, Bosnia and Iraq. Nonetheless, they stand shoulder to shoulder and form a human barrier to shield the deceased soldier's family from seeing the picketers' signs. "Those protesters went away a long time ago, as far as we're concerned," says Dennis Scoffham, a veteran nicknamed TaTonka. "Now it's an honor and respect thing for fallen soldiers."

Boasting more than 84,000 members from all 50 states, the Patriot Guard has expanded far beyond its origins in Mulvane, a town of 5,600 people 30 minutes from Wichita. In Kansas alone, the group includes more than 4,500 riders, comprised mostly of veterans and patriotic motorcycle riders. Nearly two years after its formation in August 2005, the group has grown into an entity of its own. In its short existence, the Patriot Guard has formed its own mission statement, a code of conduct and lobbied for Governor Kathleen Sebelius to sign legislation discouraging funeral protests. (Sebelius signed the measure on April 12, but the law won't take effect until the Kansas Supreme Court or a federal court upholds it as constitutional.) Still, the Patriot Guard's purpose continues to grow.

THE PURPOSE

On his first mission for the Patriot Guard in November 2006, the hardest part for Major David Poage, an Iraq war veteran and Army Reserve officer, was staying on the road. Poage's eyes filled with tears as he navigated his Harley-Davidson Road

"THE GUARD HAS KEPT ME ALIVE," SAYS FARRELL BELT, A VIETNAM VETERAN. "I'M PROBABLY TOO OLD TO BE DOING THIS, BUT IT MAKES A GUY FEEL LIKE A MILLION BUCKS."

going to the funeral of 23-year-old Sgt. Willsun Mock in Harper, a town of 1,500 an hour from Wichita. He watched as a truck driver climbed out of the cab to salute the motorcade. When Poage arrived at the funeral, he found it difficult to approach Mock's family. "It never gets any easier," says the 47-year-old veteran. "In fact, you catch yourself avoiding certain pieces of it because it's so painful. But it's a necessary thing."

Overseas, the Patriot Guard's flags and stickers adorn many U.S. tanks and helicopters. When a soldier is killed, the armed services will often contact a Patriot Guard chapter near the soldier's hometown. "They tell us it's such a relief knowing we're here for them," says Poage. He still recalls the reaction of Staff Sgt. Ian Newland, who traveled to Wichita with 20-year-old soldier Chad Marsh's casket in February. When Newland saw the large group of veterans and bikers holding flags, he was overwhelmed with emotion. With tears in his eyes, he shared how important the Patriot Guard's efforts are to troops overseas. "It means a lot more to us over there than it does to you here," he told the group.

Within the Patriot Guard, members who served in combat have a special bond. "I've gone to many of these funerals, and what happens out there is something thousands in therapy couldn't accomplish," says Poage. "These guys are able to do some self-healing."

Farrell Belt, a 64-year-old Army veteran with cancer and a prosthetic leg, says the group gives him a purpose. "The Guard has kept me alive," he says. "I'm probably too old to be doing this, but it makes a guy feel like a million bucks." Belt still recalls protesters spitting on him when he returned from Vietnam, and he wants to prevent the same thing from happening to today's troops.

Even though some of the Patriot Guard members may not agree with the war in Iraq, all of them have the utmost respect for the troops. "There are people among us who have drag-out arguments when it comes to politics," says Poage. "But why divide us? We're there for the family and the soldier."

THE LOSS

Two days before Sgt. Funcheon's funeral, on a rainy Sunday morning, a group of Patriot Guard members gathers in a parking lot near Mid-Continent Airport. Ominous clouds threaten on the horizon and tornado warnings flash across the radio airwaves, but the group stands and waits to escort Funcheon's flag-covered casket to the mortuary.

Just before noon, Sgt. Funcheon's parents, Bob and Kathy Funcheon, arrive in a van. They clutch an 8-by-10-inch photo of their son. They thank the Patriot Guard for their support before a chaplain huddles the crowd together to pray. Afterward, the group passes around the photo of Sgt. Funcheon. Some salute the picture while others shed tears. The Guard members offer their most sincere condolences to the Funcheons. "Families are going to grieve, but they're going to know there's a lot of support," says Poage. "It reassures them that they're loved."

THE FIRST MISSION

Terry Houck still recalls the Patriot Guard's first mission. It was October 11, 2005 in Chelsea, Oklahoma. He and his wife, Carol, heard about the Westboro Baptist Church's plans to picket the funeral of 29-year-old Sgt. John Doles, who was killed in an ambush in Shah Wali, Afghanistan. Houck gathered a group of 43 riders from Kansas and met more along the way. When they arrived at the funeral, more than 40 police officers were waiting. "The police were calling us counter-protesters," recalls Houck. Although they felt a strong mixture of anger and disbelief, the Patriot Guard reacted peacefully by forming a human barrier between the picketers and the church to shield the soldier's family. "The police realized we were at the funeral to be solemn, reverent and respectful to that family," says Houck. Now the Guard finds fewer and fewer police at funerals.

Today, Houck, a three-time Purple Heart recipient known as Darkhorse (a name taken from his military unit during the Vietnam War), spends countless hours arranging missions. After getting a request from a soldier's family, he stays up late into the night to coordinate rides with police and military personnel. A Guard member also drives along the route and maps out a drive plan, noting every detail down to loose gravel and potholes. Then, they'll settle on a staging area, such as a gas station, American Legion hall or a motorcycle dealer and post it online. Houck puts out a warning on short notice, and he never knows how many people are going to show up.

By now, the Patriot Guard has become well-known throughout Wichita. Drivers sometimes pull over if they see a group of motorcycles coming down the road with their lights on, says Houck. Citizens occasionally walk up and shake their hands as a way to say thanks. One member says he's even had someone offer to buy cigarettes for him when he stopped at a gas station. But the Patriot Guard doesn't accept donations, says Houck. The group's sole purpose is to honor troops.

THE STAND

The Patriot Guard stands for nearly three hours during Sgt. Funcheon's funeral service. By now, the protesters have disappeared, but the Guard remains. Some members take turns holding flags while others remain at their posts in steadfast silence. "At our age, standing around for a long time in the cold or the heat, we've gotta watch one another and make sure no one collapses," says Houck.

The funeral service ends, and Funcheon's family and friends begin to filter out of the church. The Patriot Guard members load the flags into the back of a truck and climb onto their motorcycles. They then lead the funeral procession to Kechi Cemetery. Along the way, they pass a fire station in Bel Aire where firefighters stand in front of their truck with lights flashing to honor the fallen soldier. As they pass Heights High School, where Funcheon attended, students and teachers wave American flags and salute.

The procession ends at Kechi Cemetery, where the Patriot Guard surrounds the service with the 10-foot flags. The sounds of a military gun salute and taps fill the air. The Patriot Guard stands and watches in silence.

"A lot of us are veterans, but a lot of regular citizens feel overwhelmed when they go on a mission," says Jerry Allen, a long-time Patriot Guard member known as Jarhead. "Holding a flag, that's a feeling you'll never forget. It will stay with you forever and ever."