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## Cyclists share memories, honor military fallen during trek through Illinois

**Rob Stroud**

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The Gold Star 500 bicyclists wave to those who lined the streets as they arrived in Mattoon on Wednesday.

JOSEPH RESSLER, HERALD & REVIEW

MATTOON — Cyclists in the annual **Gold Star 500** bring a caravan's worth of supplies, including bicycle parts, with them as they pedal across Illinois in memory of fallen military service members.

Among the most essential supplies for this mission are glossy business-style cards that all the cyclists and support volunteers carry. Each card includes a portrait photo of one of the more than 300 service members from Illinois who have died since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

The endurance bike ride's participants share these cards with the many people they meet while making stops at schools, veterans group posts, and other locations during their five-day, 500-plus-mile journey.

"I love it. It's a great feeling of being surrounded by love and people who care. People want to know our stories and want to know about our kids," said Gold Star mother and ride volunteer Judy Hopper, a native of Montrose. She wears the card for her son, Marine Sgt. Nickolas Hopper, on a lanyard.



Gold Star mother Judy Hopper, a native of Montrose, displays a business card in memory of her son, Marine Sgt. Nickolas Hopper, during a dinner for Gold Star 500 cyclists and volunteers Wednesday evening at the Mattoon American Legion.

ROB STROUD, JG-TC

Hopper spoke about her son Wednesday evening as the Gold Star 500 made an overnight stop in Mattoon. He died Sept. 8, 2007, at age 27, from wounds he sustained on June 20, 2005, in Iraq.

While the Gold Star Mission records the particulars of each service member's death, this nonprofit organization also tells the stories of their lives through the ride, memorial scholarships and personalized Fallen Hero videos.

The video for Sgt. Hopper includes footage filmed at the home where he grew up in Montrose. Hopper said she talked in the video about her son's favorite tree in their yard. She said he climbed this old maple in his youth and used it to help with bow hunting practice as a young man.

In addition, Hopper said her son's young adult years included competing on the Mattoon Area Family YMCA's swim team and attending Lake Land College.

The Gold Star Mission card for Sgt. Hopper shares that, "Nick was the most compassionate, kind, generous person that I ever knew. He was a loving father and devoted husband."

Hopper said she has been overjoyed to see his son, Andrew, now 19, ride in the Gold Star 500 last year and his nieces, Jesse and Tajia Gonzales, take part this year. She said it has been great to share the experience with them.

"For a whole week, it's kind of like camping. You get so close to these people," Hopper said, adding that spending time with other Gold Star families helps with the grieving process.



Eastern Illinois University ROTC Panther Battalion students Isabel Spear of Mattoon, Logan Weber of Newton and Trendan Campbell of Mattoon and volunteer Tony Kolbeck of the Springfield area assemble cots Wednesday afternoon in the Mattoon Area Family YMCA's Bock Gym in preparation for the Gold Star 500 ride making an overnight stop there as it crosses the state in memory of fallen military service members.

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The 2024 Gold Star 500's approximately 50 cyclists stayed overnight at the Mattoon Area Family YMCA and dined with the volunteers at the Mattoon American Legion, where the VFW assisted with the meal. Eastern Illinois University ROTC students set up the cots at the Y and helped serve the meal.

Plans for Thursday included stops in Arcola and Pesotum on the way to an overnight stay at Normal Community High School. The riders will then spend Friday night in Princeton en route to the closing ceremony Saturday afternoon at the Rockford VFW. The ride began on Tuesday in Metropolis.

Barry Tobias, president of the Gold Star Mission, said they **change the route every year** to include different communities that have lost service members. Tobias, of Sherman, said they always look out for opportunities, such as school visits, along these routes to share the stories of the fallen.

"That's what Gold Star is about, making those stories live on," Tobias said.



The Gold Star 500 bicyclists ride into Mattoon to spend the night at the YMCA on Wednesday. The five-day, 510-mile journey across Illinois memorializes fallen service members and supports their families.

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Army veteran Rico Suave, who noted with a laugh that he has no connection to the 1990 hit song of that name, is among the new riders this year. Suave, an avid endurance cyclist, said he traveled from his home in Washington, D.C., for this event.

Suave said he experienced the loss of fellow soldiers during his 21 years in the Army. Consequently, the veteran said he has been particularly impressed by how the Gold Star 500's cyclists conclude every stop by saying aloud, "Always remember, never forget."



Rico Suave of Washington, D.C., fist bumps other Gold Star 500 riders as they arrive at the Mattoon Area Family YMCA on Wednesday. "The most important thing to me is keeping the memory alive," said Suave, who served active duty in the Army.

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The veteran noted this mantra is then repeated in Polish by a delegation of cyclists from Poland who take part every year, honoring the strong ties that their military has to the Illinois National Guard.

"One of the most important things you can do is to keep the legacy alive of those who have perished," Suave said.