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Laguna Niguel biker commemorates brother killed in Vietnam and other veterans by riding in Baja 1000 race



John Hodel of Laguna Niguel stands with his Honda CRF450X off-road motorcycle at his home in Laguna Hills, on Thursday, November 2, 2017. Hodel be racing solo in the Baja 1,000 on November 16, raising funds for veterans and honoring his older brother Mark Hodel, who died in 1968 in Vietnam. (Photo by Mark Rightmire, Orange County Register/SCNG)

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One day in the summer of 2015, John Hodel glanced at a sticker on the back window of his Ford F-350 truck.

It was from the 40th annual Baja 1000 race eight years before.

And in that moment, “The light just went on,” Hodel said.

He knew what he would be doing in two years. He would be part of the 50th running of the iconic 1,000-mile off-road race, even though he hadn’t raced since then.

Even though Hodel, a salesman for CoreLogic, a financial data and analytics company, would be 56 years old on race day and, admittedly, not what he once was.

Other things also became quickly obvious. He wanted to race for a charity as he had done in the previous race. And he wanted to do it in memory of his brother Mark, who coincidentally died nearly 50 years ago in a mortar exchange in Vietnam.

In a rush, it all started to come together.

“I thought, this is too good. This is too perfect,” he said.

And it was.

During a training ride on Sept. 30 this year in the Mojave Desert, the Laguna Niguel resident took a header over the handlebars of his bike, shattering his collarbone in five places.

No matter. In honor of his brother, Hodel says he will soldier on.

At 1 a.m. on Thursday, Nov. 16, Hodel plans to be astride his Honda CRF 450X at the start line for the Baja torture test, which is actually 1,134 miles this year, that winds from Ensenada to La Paz, Mexico. The race features off-road vehicles ranging from motorcycles to monstrous trucks.

Most racers are parts of teams that trade places at pit stops along the way. John Hodel will attempt to ride the race solo. He hopes to complete the event in 35 to 40 hours.

His older brother, Eric Hodel, 74, who is retired and lives in Lodi and San Felipe, Mexico, will be part of the chase team for the last half of the grueling run.

John Hodel will carry only a backpack, an abiding feeling of duty and his brother Mark Hodel's Purple Heart.

In John Hodel's words, "the three brothers will be together again."

In memoriam

Mark Hodel was 21 years old in March 1968, part of a mortar crew on a Navy Seabees construction unit that was mining gravel for roads and airstrips at the Detail ECHO camp in the Phu Loc district of Vietnam near Da Nang.

The bespectacled young man of deep faith was engaged to be married in two months.

He had shipped out to Vietnam in December 1967 just before the January 1968 surprise attacks of the Tet Offensive by the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong forever changed the nature of the war.

Eric Hodel, also a veteran, remembers his brother sending letters home from Vietnam. He said he believed he was contemplating entering the Christian ministry after his service.

"He'd be writing these heartfelt letters," Eric Hodel said. Even though his brother was at war, "He said he couldn't hate these people. He had a good heart about him."

On March 31, 1968, the Seabees construction team came under attack, which Admiral Thomas Moorer detailed in a letter bestowing a Navy Commendation Medal for heroism or meritorious service on Mark Hodel.

According to the letter, "Construction man Hodel immediately manned his mortar position to return continuous sustained counter-fire despite the barrage of enemy shells."

Hodel and his crew successfully repelled the first attack, destroying two enemy gun positions and "undoubtedly saving the lives of many Seabees and U.S. Marine Corps personnel."

However, five hours later, the attack resumed, and Hodel and his crew mates, while engaged in the fight, received "two direct hits from enemy shells."

Eric Hodel says he will always remember that day, in part, because it was the same day President Lyndon Johnson announced he would not seek re-election and had ordered peace talks and a halt to bombing.

John Hodel, only 6 at the time, does not remember his older brother that well beyond a few fishing expeditions together. However, he does remember that day.

He rode home from school on his Stingray bicycle, but when he got there he knew something wasn't right, because his mother, Mabel, wasn't her usual cheerful self.

Hodel said his mother sat him down and said, "Your brother's not going to come home."

Mark Hodel didn't own much, so he didn't leave much in material possessions behind. What survives him is legacy and connection.

A lasting gift

While still in high school, Mark Hodel was the first of the brothers to become interested in motorcycles. He cobbled money together to buy one and worked on them. The bike bug bit Eric Hodel, who in turn passed it on to John Hodel.

"We did bikes," said John Hodel, who is 18 years younger than his brother, Eric. "That was our nucleus."

Over the years, the biking tendon has stayed strong. Eric Hodel has raced in the Baja races six times, once winning his division, and John Hodel has competed seven times in a variety of distances.

But, "never solo," John Hodel said. "Not even close."

Hodel also traveled throughout North America on an 18,000-mile back-road trek on a Harley-Davidson in 1995 and wrote a book about it, "Lessons from the Back Roads."

In 2002, the brothers also traveled to Vietnam to the place where Mark Hodel had died.

The gravel pit was still in operation. John Hodel said he and his brother brought along letters, photos and mementos with plans to stage a private memorial. The only glitch — they were on private property. They were stopped and threatened with arrest.

"We went to do a ceremony and it lasted two minutes," John Hodel said with a laugh.

Return to Baja

After his epiphany in 2015, John Hodel began planning his Baja run like a military operation.

He formed and registered The Mark Hodel Veteran's Foundation, which he also calls [Stand for Vets](#). The goal of the organization is to assist veterans with "customized prosthetics, specialized wheelchairs, or providing other personalized services that will assist them in their mobility and well-being."

The nonprofit has already raised \$50,000, and added another challenge that has drawn \$7,000 in donations if Hodel finishes the race.

Hodel set up a training schedule and consulted with a nutritionist. As he said, "It was too perfect."

Then came the wreck that sent him catapulting through the air.

He nursed himself and his bike on an agonizing trip back to the town of Adelanto.

In its way, Hodel said the injury was a blessing.

"I was thinking about vets and what they go through when they're injured," he said. "This is kind of connecting me."

After having six screws and several plates placed in his collarbone, Hodel was told to recuperate for three months. Instead, he is going to race six weeks after the injury.

He says he really hasn't been able to work out or put any stress on the collarbone, so he has no idea what to expect in the race.

Eric Hodel says his brother told him, "This will make a better story."

The older brother had a different reaction.

"I was telling him 'This is crazy,'" Eric Hodel recalls. "Now, I'm helping him."

From 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Veterans Day, Saturday, Nov. 11, John Hodel will be at Mission Motorsports in Irvine, which sold him the bike will race on, for a Parking Lot Sale and to promote his race and charity.

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Greg Mellen is a veteran award-winning reporter with more than 30 years experience at papers in California and Missouri. He joined the Register newspapers with the Long Beach Register and now primarily covers Huntington Beach and Fountain Valley. He received his master's degree from the University of Missouri School of Journalism and was a faculty member and sports editor at the Columbia Missourian. In his free time he likes to read and dabble in fiction writing, which he tries to keep out of the newspaper.

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