

Lodi native competes in Baja 1000 motorcycle race to support veterans, honor slain brother

By John Bays/News-Sentinel Staff Writer | Posted: Saturday, October 28, 2017 3:00 pm

Lodi native John Hodel was 7 years old when his brother, Mark, was killed during a mortar attack on his camp in Vietnam on March 31, 1968.

A member of the United States Navy Seabees Construction Battalion, Mark returned fire from his mortar position to protect his comrades, destroying at least two enemy gun positions and inflicting heavy casualties before receiving two direct hits from enemy mortar shells, an action which earned him the Purple Heart as well as the Navy Commendation Medal with a "Combat V" for valor.

Although John, now 56, has since moved from Lodi to Laguna Niguel, in Orange County, he has kept his brother's memory alive by founding the Stand for Vets/The Mark Hodel Veteran's Foundation, a nonprofit that assists wounded veterans by funding customized prosthetics, specialized wheelchairs and other services to assist their mobility needs and overall well-being.

John, along with the eldest Hodel brother, Eric, also share Mark's passion for motorcycles.

"(Mark is) the one that kicked it all off and got us going, then John followed him. I've been riding since 1965, and competing since about 1970," Eric said.

It is this same passion that inspired John to compete in the SCORE International Baja 1000 motorcycle race, which takes place on Nov. 16 in Mexico's Baja California Peninsula.

Although John and Eric participated in the 1,300-mile race as part of a team in 2007, and John has raced in other events hosted by SCORE, this will be his first solo attempt.

"I've been racing motorcycles for over 35 years, including seven races with SCORE, but never solo, always on teams. My longest solo race was about five hours, and the Baja 1000 is closer to 40. I'm going to try to barrel through it, taking 15-minute naps here and there, but the intent is that you don't sleep," John said.

John began training for the race more than a year ago, hiring a retired U.S. Marine as a personal trainer in April to coach him through weight training and running to ensure that he is in proper physical health for the physically demanding course. While training in the Mojave desert on Sept. 30, he suffered a crash at approximately 45 miles per hour that resulted in multiple injuries, one of which required surgery.



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John Hodel, founder of Stand for Vets, will be taking part in the Baja 1000 motorcycle race to support his nonprofit. The group assists wounded veterans by funding customized prosthetics, specialized wheelchairs and other services.

“I flew about 30 feet and landed head/shoulder first in the road and was flipped over onto my bike. My collarbone was broken into more than four pieces and I had bruised ribs. One week later, I had a plate and seven screws inserted to pull the bone together and increase healing. The doctor would have liked 3 months, but all I had was 5 weeks. I figure, our veterans have to work through their pain and injury, perhaps this was meant to be so that I would, too,” Hodel said.

While John races his motorcycle from Ensenada, Mexico to La Paz, Mexico, Eric will drive a chaser car for the second half of the race, hauling a second motorcycle to be used for spare parts only, as John must finish the race with the same motorcycle with which he started. With pit stops every 50 miles, John can fuel up with gasoline, food and water that he will have purchased beforehand.

Despite their age difference, Eric is looking forward to spending time with John, something the brothers do not get to do as often as they would like.

“My brother and I, considering our 18-year age difference, get along well, we like a lot of the same things. This is a great opportunity to get together and do something we both feel is worthwhile,” Eric said.

Part of the John’s motivation for competing in the race is to raise money for Stand for Vets. He has raised approximately \$47,000 so far, and hopes to raise \$100,000 by race day. All of the money raised will go directly to the all-volunteer foundation, which will continue accepting donations long after the race ends.

Raising funds to help veterans is one of the things John looks forward to most about the race, along with the sense of adventure that comes with exploring the unknown.

“There is no way to prepare for staying on a motorcycle, in the desert in a foreign country, for 40 hours straight, so everything will be new and a challenge I’ve never faced before. I have a strong Christian faith, and I am excited to see how God will work through this amazing experience. That is an excitement that is hard to explain,” John said.

For those considering competing in a motorcycle race, John advises them to be cautious, considering the costs as well as the potential safety risks, although he wholeheartedly endorses the hobby.

“Do it only if you have a passion for it. It is expensive and dangerous, but few things give you a thrill as riding a motorcycle. I would say racing is not for everyone, but just riding a motorcycle is an unbelievable feeling. In 1995, I did an 18,000 mile Harley ride across North America and actually wrote a book about it, called ‘Lessons From The Back Roads.’ It’s on Amazon, and all profits will go to the foundation. A majority of the best memories I have in my life have been on two wheels. I highly recommend it!” John said.

For more information, visit www.standforvets.org