

# WHISPER IN THE WIND:

## Rider's Legacy Saves Lives

By Rita Hess, Staff Writer



ruising from coast to coast on a

Harley in the summer of 2006 was a dream come true for 46-year-old Scott Johnson and his son, Michael. While traveling with fellow bikers from the Lighthouse H.O.G. Harley-Davidson group out of Huntington Station, N.Y., the pair saw America firsthand in a way others rarely get to do. Nobody imagined that a few short weeks after their return, young Michael would be planning his dad's funeral.

At 6'7" tall and 230 pounds, Scott Johnson was a big guy. While he laughed about

nicknames that referred to his size, such as Gentle Giant or Mr. Montana, his favorite title, by far, was "Dad." He loved his sons, Bryan and Michael, and devoted countless

hours to their hobbies as the boys were growing up. When Scott began riding





*Airmen ride their motorcycles while a video crew shoots footage for a new motorcycle safety DVD at MacDill AFB, Fla. The video will be a part of a safety DVD used by the military.*

USAF PHOTO

motorcycles about six years ago, he took them for frequent rides – often to a local Starbucks – every chance he had.

Since his accident, Scott's legacy lives on, thanks to his brother, Donn Johnson, who is retired from the Air Force and now works as a computer programmer and ironically, a Motorcycle Safety Foundation Ridercoach at Robins AFB, Ga.

"My brother was active in a lot of things," Johnson says of Scott. "He was involved with go-cart racing, and he and his boys raced some elaborate go-carts for awhile. He was also the Senior Communications Director of the ham radio operators for the TWA Flight 800 Airline crash and was one of the first people in the water after the crash in New York. When he bought his bike and eventually joined the Harley group, I had

already been teaching the MSF courses for about a year. I encouraged him to get into safety class and he planned to, but I honestly don't know if he ever did."

Johnson now tells the story of Scott's crash to students going through the Motorcycle Safety Foundation (MSF) training at Robins.

"He was traveling just 23 mph on his bike at the time of the crash," he explains, "and had been stopped at a light. When the light turned green, he accelerated away from the light. A woman on the other side of the intersection in a parking lot pulled out in front of him. He only had a second or two to make a decision, so he swerved to miss her – in fact, he did miss her – but during the swerve, he mistakenly let off the throttle. His bike went down on the right, bounced off the

footpeg and went over again on the left side of the bike, and he hit his head on the pavement."

On the cross-country trip with his son, both Scott and Michael wore DOT approved helmets. The night of the crash, however, he was wearing a "skid lid," a lightweight novelty helmet, most of which are not DOT approved. Would the proper helmet have helped?

"Nobody knows for sure," says Johnson, "but his chances would have been better. My point in class is that everybody chooses risk – it is about how much risk you are willing to accept. With a full-face helmet, chin guard and face shield, you have more protection. In my case, I wear a 3/4 helmet. I make a personal choice to accept more risk, knowing that if I go down, I may have severe damage done to my jaw, teeth, and face. But it's my choice. Riders make choices based on risk, and telling them about my brother helps drive that point home."

## **The Importance of Practice**

According to Johnson, Scott's story is very effective at saving lives. "About three months after one class, an individual came out to our range. He waited until break, and then he approached me and said that the things he learned during one of my courses and the things I said about my brother stuck in his mind. He said those

lessons had probably saved his life three or four times since the class, which made him want to learn more and practice more."

Practice, Johnson adds, is fundamental to safe riding. "My favorite analogy is that of a football team that loses on Sunday. The coach taps the players' shoulders and says, 'Don't worry about it, guys – we'll get them next time. And oh,

by the way, we're not having practice this week.' I ask my students, 'Would you bet on this team? If not, then why would you want to bet your life by not practicing the skills that are needed the most and used the least?' Our most important skills on a bike are stopping quickly and swerving safely. Those aren't things we do every day. But when we need those skills, we had better be able to perform them the very best

we can. How can we do that if we don't practice?"

Riders don't need to let a lack of cones or access to a range prevent them from honing their skills. For \$1.00, you can buy a MSF booklet that tells how to set up a parking lot for practice, and Johnson says a dozen tennis balls cut in half can be used as 24 cones.

"One day, about a dozen sports bike riders came by as I was setting up for one of my own practice sessions. They watched me and then asked if they could practice with me. They stayed for well over an hour and thought it was great. They'd never seen anyone practice those techniques."

Practice, however, isn't always enough, according to Johnson, and that's where an MSF coach comes in. "Some riders need help beyond what is available in the MSF classes," he says, "and I am always willing to come out on my own time to work with those riders. I do it free because I believe in it. Nothing is more satisfying than receiving an email from someone whose life was saved because of something they learned in one of our MSF classes. We try to change attitudes, break bad habits, and help riders understand that nobody else is looking out for their safety. They must do it themselves."

The MSF program at Robins is enormously successful due to the efforts of everyone involved. In fact, the Motorcycle Safety Foundation acknowledged their

*Patriot Guard Rider's motorcycle in Chicago, Ill. The Patriot Guard Riders is a national organization of motorcycle enthusiasts who attend funerals and honor returning veterans.*

DoD PHOTO BY STAFF SGT. D. MYLES CULLEN, USAF

## From the many online tributes to Scott Johnson from his friends and family:

*Dad, you meant the world to me...  
and I'm trying to follow in your size 12 footsteps.*

∞

*On our trip out west, you and Michael were an inspiration to all of us. To see father and son ride across this great country of ours is something that all fathers are inspired to do with their kids. You accomplished this, and it has given me the desire to do it with my boys. Thanks for this awakening you have provided to me, and I'm am only sorry I couldn't have told you this earlier.*

∞

*Life's rewards are the memories we share... You will always be the gentle whisper we hear in the wind...*

∞

*Dad, it's been a year. Today we visited the accident site, and placed some signs and flowers... We wish you could have been there.  
We miss you dearly....*





SMSgt Tony Levine, 315th Operations Support Squadron, demonstrates a cornering technique for the students of the motorcycle safety course. Sgt Levine was one of 11 rider coach candidates to complete the motorcycle safety instructor's course hosted by Charleston Air Force Base.

USAF PHOTO BY TSGT MARY HINSON

outstanding achievement and excellence in rider education and training by naming Robins AFB an Outstanding Military Base for 2006 Award Winner, one of only three bases worldwide, something Johnson says they worked hard to earn. "We are very active here, and we also travel to workshops or help others with their programs. We genuinely believe in what we do."

## Speaking Out

At the request of his nephew and the Harley group Scott rode with, Johnson spoke about motorcycle safety at his brother's funeral service. "The room was filled with 100-200 people, many of them riders. I said, 'Look at your family members and ask

yourself what you value in life. Your spouse? Your children? Your bike? Freedom? If you value all of those, then you need to do everything you possibly can to arrive home safe and sound.' It was a powerful moment."

By continuing to talk about his brother's crash, Johnson is helping save the lives of others and maybe preventing someone else from experiencing the same loss he and

his family endured. "I try to articulate that the death of a parent is different than the death of a sibling or a child. For me, losing a sibling is like someone reached in and grabbed a chunk of my side. A whole part of me is missing. Sure, I'd rather my brother still be here. I wish I didn't have to stand in front of a group and tell his story. But I know that talking about it has saved lives and will continue to save lives. He was the kind of guy who would literally give you the shirt off his back. Now my brother, Scott, continues to help others – it's just in a different kind of way." 🛡️

To see all Motorcycle Safety Foundation products, visit them online at <http://msf-usa.org/>

Airmen ride their motorcycles while a video crew shoots footage for a new motorcycle safety DVD at MacDill AFB, Fla. The video will be a part of a safety DVD used by the military. USAF PHOTO

