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(<http://patch.vnvlvmc.info>)

Conventional Wisdom Regarding Motorcycle Club Patches

The term *colors* is used when referring to a motorcycle club's patch. They are typically identified by two *rockers* and a *center patch*. The rockers are usually curved bars with the top bar designating the club name and the lower bar designating the location of the club. The two *rockers* are separate from the middle, larger graphic *center patch*, hence the term *three-piece patch*. Motorcycle clubs differ from riding clubs or other types of motorcycle organizations as they traditionally have "prospecting" time (a probationary training period) required before the club members decide to accept the individual into the group and that the individual fits in with the group (the "fit" needs to be both ways) and allow him to wear or "fly" the colors of the group. Most club colors will also have MC printed on the rocker or as an additional small, rectangular patch, sometimes referred to as a "cube" to further distinguish it as a motorcycle club rather than another type of organization.

- A one-piece patch can signify many different types of clubs. These clubs can be MC and have the MC on the patch itself, or a family club, riding club, AMA-sanctioned motorcycle club or political action/biker rights organization. Some require little more than filling out an application (which is actually a release of liability), agreeing to comply with a standard of behavior and mailing a check for a patch or T-shirt (ex. Southern Cruisers Riding Club, Patriot Guard Riders).
- A two-piece patch *may* identify a motorcycle club in transition, awaiting approval from the dominant club(s) to become a three-piece patch. These clubs are sometimes, *not always*, in the process of becoming an associate or support club. Some autonomous clubs will wear a two-piece patch as a matter of choice (ex. California Military Veterans MC).
- A three-piece patch signifies that the club is an "outlaw club" by definition *but not necessarily a 1% club* and not necessarily territorial. With very few exceptions, the club has been approved by the dominant club in the state or other distinct territory (AO or "area of operation") and has earned the right to fly their colors by following protocol and earning respect. Or, *they are the dominant club in the area*. It is in the best interest of everyone who rides to know and understand the difference. The hierarchy and traditions in the MC community are not without purpose. They are valuable for maintaining order and avoiding trouble.

Three-Piece Patches (the historical perspective)

The American Motorcycle Association (AMA) was founded in 1924 by motorcycle manufacturers to promote motorcycle riding in America. Their goal was to sell motorcycles. In order to do so, it was necessary to give them legitimacy as both a mode of transportation and recreational activity. They cooked up classifications and rules, staged events and, essentially, invented a sport. They sanctioned groups of riders from the same area that rode together as motorcycle clubs. At events, the AMA gave awards for the best-dressed club so groups began wearing matching outfits with the name and graphic emblem for their motorcycle club stitched on the back of shirts and jackets. The origin of the motorcycle club patch was as dull and unobjectionable as a bowling shirt.

During a Fourth of July event in 1947 in Hollister, CA members of the Booze Fighters MC and Pissed Off Bastards of Bloomington (POBOBs ... who would become Hell's Angels MC in San Bernardino the following year) made front-page headlines with a sensational news story about drunken lawlessness and the takeover of a sleepy Central California town by rowdy motorcyclists. The AMA published an article shortly after the episode denouncing the offensive bikers stating, "99% of all of their members are law-abiding citizens and only 1% are outlaws". Thus began what are today referred to as outlaw motorcycle clubs and "one percenters." These clubs were not sanctioned by the AMA and were banned from attending AMA events. Which was, apparently, cool with the bikers. The titles of "outlaw" and "one percenter" were embraced and worn as a badge of honor.

In order to designate themselves as an outlaw club, they defiantly cut their AMA club jackets or shirts into three separate pieces, as described previously, and sewed them on the back of leather jackets or vests fashioned by cutting the sleeves off a denim work jacket. Hence the origin of the "cut", the term used today when referring to a biker's vest regardless of whether it is denim or leather. Outlaw motorcycle clubs organized their own events, held races and hill climbs without safety rules or classifications threw parties and did the exact opposite of what the AMA had done for nearly twenty-five years: There were no Best Dressed awards. The goal was speed. The trophy was life on the edge. They modified ("chopped") down their bikes leaner and meaner, to go faster and look different, tossed the mufflers, guzzled beer, and demonstrated "wild" behavior which, with the help of a willing press and Hollywood character studies, created the cultural icon of the rebellious outlaw biker.

A fictionalized version of the Hollister "raid" later became the storyline for a movie titled *"The Wild One"* starring Marlon Brando as leader of the fictional Black Rebels Motorcycle Club and Lee Marvin as leader of The Beetles. Brando's character helped build the Hollywood template for tragic, malcontented youths (*Mildred: What are you rebelling against, Johnny? Johnny: Whaddya got?*), Marvin's character, Chino, was based upon the Booze Fighters MC's infamous Wino Willie. And so it went. More movies, more headlines, more pulp fiction, more bikers, more fear.

The Process (condensed version) The three-piece patch is awarded in three parts as a prospective member earns the privilege to wear the full patch. A "hangaround" is someone who is eligible for membership and has been invited to attend club events and runs, but wears no part of the patch. If he is sponsored by a full member and approved by the club members he may wear the bottom rocker and is considered a "prospect" or "probate". If he successfully completes the training period and is approved by 100% of the members, he is allowed to have the top rocker and the "center patch" or club insignia. His colors are then complete and he is considered to be a full member or "patch holder." *The traditional, or "old school," three-piece patch MC is one that adheres to established protocols, traditions and a code of conduct.*

The gray area gets wider (and weirder) A dramatic increase in the number of recreational motorcyclists in recent years has clouded the issue of what differentiates a *motorcycle club* from a *riding club*. Some military or veteran's motorcycle clubs (referring to themselves as either MC or VMC) are actually AMA-sanctioned, non-outlaw clubs, wearing colors while not engaging in the established MC tradition of prospecting. These clubs may simply require evidence of prior or current military service (some are specific to a branch of the military or a particular time/place served) and ownership of a motorcycle for membership. While the wisdom of this practice in the larger context of the MC community could certainly be questioned, they do provide a pleasurable group riding experience for many individuals and couples, and often accomplish many patriotic and charitable objectives.

Territorial motorcycle clubs aren't under any obligation to keep up with which clubs prospect their members, thereby educating them in established customs and courtesies, and which

clubs don't. All too often, they find out when a patch holder violates a point of protocol (eg. "steps on his dick") and creates a situation impacting the entire club or chapter's ability to ride free. The function of looking after veterans' MCs and RCs and making sure that they are properly schooled *may* be delegated to one particular military/veteran MC in the area. This is at the discretion of the dominant MC and is *sometimes* determined by the size or seniority of the club in relation to the other military/veteran clubs in the area. More often than not, this dubious distinction is earned by actions; a demonstrated commitment to MC customs, courtesies and protocol; and a history of taking care of business which, at times, can be unpleasant. This role among military/veteran clubs sometimes provides a hard reality and is often viewed with mixed feelings.

Law enforcement motorcycle clubs (LEMC) often DO engage in the practice of prospecting, providing them with the knowledge and understanding of protocol necessary to become functioning entities (and, occasionally, intelligence gatherers) in the MC community. They pretty much do their own thing while maintaining a code of ethics consistent with their profession. Strangely enough, LEMCs seem to experience considerably more rejection from individuals among their own ranks than from other bikers. It's as though bikers know that they're cops, but other cops don't know that they're not bikers. Go figure.

Several organizations have designed (or re-designed) their colors so that the rockers are joined with their center patch to create the appearance of a one-piece patch (ex. H.O.G, Warrior Brotherhood VMC). Some veterans advocacy groups wear colors and ride motorcycles (or not) yet they are quick to point out in their statement of purpose or website that they are not a motorcycle club (ex. Rolling Thunder, American Legion Riders). These groups, more often than not, earn respect by showing respect and often function well in the greater community context. Occasionally, a riding club or military/veterans motorcycle club will claim that they are not an MC, and then behave otherwise. This typically results in the aforementioned unpleasantness.

Health Tip: Do not presume that since you paid \$150 for the design on the back of your vest that you are entitled to wear it any old time and any old place that pleases you. The privilege of flying club colors is known to have been revoked for an entire organization due to the actions of a careless or arrogant individual. In certain cases, he was in the company of friends with names like Jack Daniels and Jim Beam at the time of the indiscretion. No excuse. When you wear a patch, you are representing the whole club. Even if you are not wearing your patch at the time of an indiscretion, but are known to be a part of a club, your actions will reflect on the club.

The Diamond Patch The diamond patch with "1%" worn on the front of a "cut" (vest) with the three-piece back patch signifies the club is either a 1% or 1% support club. They may not be the dominant club in the area but will almost certainly be sanctioned by the local dominant. There have been situations where the dominant is not a 1% club but those are rare indeed. The number "13" is also sometimes worn in a diamond patch. It is alleged to represent the thirteenth letter of the alphabet, "M" which stands for marijuana. Or maybe it's just a cool number. Rightly or wrongly, law enforcement organizations (LEO) regard the diamond patch as an outward, visible indicator of criminal activity within the motorcycle riding community. *More often than not, LEOs lump all three-piece patch motorcycle clubs together with faulty generalizations.* While the best propaganda usually contains some element of truth, the distortions are often so outrageous that if they weren't oriented toward spreading fear, they would be comical.

Nomad Rocker Some MC members have earned the right to wear a "NOMAD" bottom rocker. This is only when that member maintains a lifestyle within the common definition of the word nomad.

(no-mad) A member of a group of people who have no fixed home and move according to the seasons from place to place in search of food, water, and grazing land. A person with no fixed residence who roams about; a wanderer. It is a valued distinction of lifestyle that only a few can truly live up to, and as such, causes unfavorable notice when seen used by those most obviously not living up to the common meaning. By definition a "NOMAD", more often than not, will be traveling alone and needs an ability to represent, maintain & otherwise survive under circumstances unusual from the norm.

Summary

- A little common sense goes a long way in the motorcycle club community. Be honest with yourself and others. If you are not prepared to fully accept the responsibility of wearing an MC patch, explore other alternatives for a group riding experience.
- Being a motorcycle enthusiast or having prior military service does not, in itself, prepare an individual for wearing a three-piece patch. The trial and error method of learning MC customs and protocol is not recommended. *Absolutely everyone prospects to earn a VNVMC/LVMC patch. No exceptions.*
- Consider very carefully any ideas that you and your pals might have about starting a motorcycle club. In all probability, a group already exists that would suit your style and the important work has already been done. Please, for God's sake, do NOT buy fake rockers or a diamond patch on eBay or at the flea market and sport 'em around town. It's just not worth it.
- Questions that could be interpreted as intelligence-gathering will not be well-received ("*So, how many guys are in your chapter?*" isn't a good question under any circumstances. "*Hey. Does that '13' on your vest mean that you guys smoke pot?*" probably isn't a good one either). Never, ever interrupt patch holders while they are conversing with one another and stand at a respectable distance while waiting to be acknowledged. You may be surprised at how much some basic courtesy is appreciated.
- *MC members understand the meaning and importance of respect.* They demand it for themselves and their club brothers; they provide it to patch holders outside of their own club until given a reason to do otherwise. Regardless of what's on your back, or how you got it, it is of the utmost importance to show an appropriate degree of respect to those who earned their colors in the old-school tradition.

Viet Nam Vets / Legacy Vets MC is not a 1% club and we do not claim territory. Geographical distinctions within our Club (AOs) are for organizational purposes. We're not a criminal organization nor do we have any intention of becoming one. We are not concerned with disputes, territorial or otherwise, between other clubs. We owe allegiance to no colors except those of the flag of the United States of America, and those which we proudly wear on our backs. We fought our wars and have no desire other than to RIDE FREE.

This article is a synthesis of the author's personal experience; elements of the original *Thirteen Pages* by Viet Nam Vets MC; and historical research (including *History of the Three Piece Patch*, originally published by **HellBentForGloryMC**; an article titled **Motorcycle Menace** by Dr. Ross Fuglsang, Morningside College Dept. of Mass Communications; and information obtained from a comprehensive internet resource titled **Motorcycle Club and Riding Club Education**).