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Programming note: See what happened when the Phelps family came face to face with the Patriot Guard Riders, "Paula Zahn Now," 8 p.m. ET.

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Dodge City showdown

By Ed Lavandera
 CNN

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DODGE CITY, Kansas (CNN) -- This past Saturday morning I found myself in a five-car caravan cutting across the Kansas plains with about 30 religious protesters. In the back of a truck, there were signs that read "Thank God for IED's" and "Thank God for Dead Soldiers."

I was with the Phelps family. They've launched a disturbing campaign to tarnish the funerals of fallen soldiers.

This is a painful drama playing out at dozens of military funerals across the country. The group is led by Fred Phelps.

He and his family have picketed and heckled military families at more than 100 funerals since June. They say the soldiers are fighting for an army that represents a country that accepts homosexuality.

I have spent a great deal of time in the last few weeks tracking the movements of Fred Phelps and his family. Saturday, I followed him and his family from their home in Topeka, Kansas, to a funeral in Dodge City, Kansas.

Fred Phelps is the pastor of Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka. The congregation is made up mostly of his family. Phelps has 13 children, 54 grandchildren and 7 great-grandchildren.

He describes himself as an "old-time" gospel preacher who says, "You can't



Members of the Patriot Guard Riders rally during a memorial for soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division killed in combat.

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preach the Bible without preaching the hatred of God."

Phelps and his family have made a name for themselves by showing up at high-profile events preaching their hate-filled brand of Christianity. They blame homosexuals for the destruction of America.

This past weekend's target was Army Sgt. Jessie Davila.

Davila was killed February 20 in Iraq by a suicide bomber. He served as a Marine after graduating from high school. He returned to civilian life, and had a daughter. But he was always a soldier at heart, so two years ago he joined the Army National Guard and was three months into an Iraqi deployment when he was killed.

This is also very much a story about another phenomenon the Phelps protest has created. That's the birth of a group called the "Patriot Guard Riders." They're a volunteer group that came together after hearing that so many military families were being blindsided by the protesters.

More than 400 motorcycles thundered toward this showdown in Dodge City this weekend to make sure Sgt. Jessie Davila's funeral was not overshadowed by the Phelps protest. They converged from small towns all over southwest Kansas to support Sgt. Davila's family. One group leader says, "I knew we would have a crowd, but I didn't know it would be this big."

The procession of rolling thunder escorted Davila's family from memorial services to the grave site on a quiet hill.

In the end, Sgt. Davila's family says they were only able to hear a little bit of the Phelps protest. Davila's mother, Linda Claus, says she's grateful for the Patriot Guard Riders. But she also wants other military families to be aware that this could happen to them.

"When people begin to know what they're (Fred Phelps' family) really doing -- killing the American Dream -- they won't be around very long, because nobody's going to let them. They'll drown them out. They'll be gone," Claus said.

Since CNN started airing reports on these funeral confrontations a few weeks ago, the Patriot Guard Riders say its membership has almost tripled. And more than a dozen states are now considering legislation that would restrict protesting at funerals.

The Phelps family vows to continue these protests. They might be outnumbered, but the way the Patriot Guard Riders see it, it only takes one of them to dishonor the memory of a fallen soldier.

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