



WSMR memorial marathon eternalizes Bataan Death March

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People from around the United States and several foreign countries gathered March 27 at White Sands Missile Range for the 22nd Annual Bataan Memorial Death March to honor and recognize a special group of World War II veterans.

The Bataan Memorial Death March honors the 75,000 U.S. and Filipino troops who surrendered to the Japanese while defending the islands of Luzon, Corregidor and the harbor defense forts of the Philippines and then marched more than 60 miles through the Philippine jungle.

To honor their sacrifices, over 6,100 people participated in this year's marathon, making it the largest turn-out in the event's history. Also in attendance were 16 survivors from the original march who were on hand to greet participants at the start and end of the race.

"It's one thing to read about the survivors of Bataan in history books," said Col. Christopher Wicker, WSMR Garrison commander. "But when you get to shake someone's hand and you can see the scars going up their arms, it makes you realize the story's true and not just a fantasy made up by McGraw-Hill. It's something that really happened."

The POWs were forced to march without food or water resulting in the deaths of thousands due to disease, dehydration and starvation. The troops who could not keep with the rest of the marchers were executed on the spot by the Japanese soldiers.

"What they went through was unbelievable," said Chief Master Sgt. Barbara Krick, 49th Maintenance Squadron superintendent. "This is a great event that gives us the opportunity to honor the survivors. Seeing them out here supporting us makes me feel very humbled."

Chief Krick participated in the march as a member of an all-female senior NCO team from Holloman.

"I had some younger troops participate in the march last year and watching all of the young Airmen, I decided to put together an all-female senior NCO team," she said. "I wanted to prove to all of the Airmen of Holloman that if we could do it, they could too."

The memorial march offered two different courses -- a 26.2 mile trek and a 15 mile course -- that sprawls out over the high-elevation desert terrain of the missile range. Along the way, more than 750 volunteers distributed thousands of gallons of water and Gatorade, treated participants' blisters and provided the courses' support and security.

Although the participants of the march didn't encounter any of the obstacles that those in the actual death march encountered, the Bataan survivors said they truly appreciate the efforts of those that navigated through the desert terrain the race offered.

"I get a real inspiration from all of the marchers," said William Eldridge, a former machine gunner in Company M, 31st Infantry Regiment. "I appreciate that they came out to the event to help get the word out about the Bataan Death March because so many people don't know anything about it."



WHITE SANDS MISSILE RANGE, N.M. -- A participant of the 22nd Annual Bataan Memorial Death March holds a flag March 27, 2011, during a moment of silence. Three remaining survivors attended the opening ceremony. The event, attended by a record number of more than 6,000 marchers, commemorates the original Bataan Death March which occurred in the Philippines during World War II. (U.S. Air Force photo/Airman 1st Class Joshua Turner)

According to event organizers, each year the memorial march has gained more participants. Last year's march drew a record crowd of 5,400 with this year's topping that mark with more than 6,400 registrants -- a far cry from the 100 participants of the first memorial march in 1989.

The march offered many different personnel categories for participants to register in and was also broken down into different age groups. Military members and civilians could choose from the light category -- no weight, or the heavy category -- ruck equaling at least 35 pounds. Also, march participants could choose to do the Honorary Bataan Memorial Death March course which is approximately 15 miles.

Choice was a luxury the 11,796 'Battlin' Bastards of Bataan' didn't have, explained Colonel Wicker.

"They had to deal with it, they had no choice," he said. "People coming here to commemorate them have a choice and I applaud them for it. I have respect for what the survivors went through and I am thankful that they provide an example for all of the military here -- Active Duty, National Guard and Reserve -- and also for the civilians here who really aren't around military that much and really don't know what it's like to do something like this."

With many of the Bataan survivors in their 90s, WSMR commanding general, Brig. Gen. John Regan, explained the importance of honoring those survivors in attendance and those who are no longer with us.

"As time marches relentlessly forward, it is important that we take every opportunity to honor these heroes while we can," he said. "Please reflect on the events of the actual Bataan Death March and the enormous obstacles faced by the survivors. Think about the ultimate price paid by those who did not make it home."

The 23rd annual Bataan Memorial Death March is tentatively scheduled for March 25, 2012. For more information, contact WSMR Public Affairs at 575-678-1134.