

**Bataan Death March, March 30, 2008
White Sands Missile Range, New Mexico
Marathon, heavy weight division, 35 lb. minimum pack**



No mamma, no papa, no Uncle Sam – it was on the t-shirt and it haunted me.

"We're the Battling Bastards of Bataan,
No mama, no papa, no Uncle Sam,
No aunts, no uncles, no cousins, no nieces,
No pills, no planes, no artillery pieces,
And nobody gives a damn!"

by Frank Hewlett, 1942



It was due to the hopelessness of the situation. From the web site: *"The Bataan Memorial Death March honors a special group of World War II heroes. These brave soldiers were responsible for the defense of the islands of Luzon, Corregidor and the harbor defense forts of the Philippines. The conditions they encountered and the aftermath of the battle were unique. They fought in a malaria-infested region, surviving on half or quarter rations with little or no medical help. They fought with outdated equipment and virtually no air power. On April 9, 1942, tens of thousands of*

American and Filipino soldiers were surrendered to Japanese forces. The Americans were Army, Army Air Corps, Navy and Marines. Among those seized were members of the 200th Coast Artillery, New Mexico National Guard." And there was no one was there to rescue them.

I had signed up for the civilian heavy weight division, which means carrying a 35 lb. minimum pack for a marathon distance, in sand, up hills and on some roads. Which, I found out, was the hardest thing I had ever done, but with help of thoughts of the Iraqi & Afghanistan amputees and the original survivors, it was nothing. And when I returned to work on Tuesday, it was almost like it all didn't matter to my co-workers, but it did to me. One can't explain the experience – one had to be there.

We stayed in Las Cruces in a KOA camping cabin, Las Cruces being approximately 25 miles from the start, Alamogordo, as the alternative, about 40. I'm all about the closest place, especially when they suggest you get there at 4:30 a.m. Sunday, and the race starts at 7:00 a.m. First things first Saturday a.m. – packet pick-up, or in-processing, as it is called at the Missile Range. Events were scheduled



for the entire weekend, from documentaries, movies, meetings, golfing (golfing?), and survivors sharing their experience, breakfasts and a pasta dinner. The in-processing was military style organized and went very smooth, presenting the 'marchers' with their certificate prior to the march, so that it could be signed by the survivors on the way out. Memorabilia was for sale, with a lengthy line. I didn't stay for any movies or speeches, oh I wish I had.

After a rather fit-full mostly sleepless night, up I was to get to the base at 4:30 a.m. There was a rather smooth entrance to the Missile Range with marchers lining up already. I overheard one guy say he got there at 3:00 a.m. One of the reasons for the early arrival is that you have to get through the ID-required entrance. I found some breakfast and a spot to sit, shivering and waiting for the celebration to start. There was an opening ceremony, honoring those who didn't and those who did survive at Bataan, honoring them with Reveille, an invocation, a very moving roll call followed by an F-117 flyover by the Air Force's 49th Flyer Wing from Holloman Air Force Base. We were told to help one

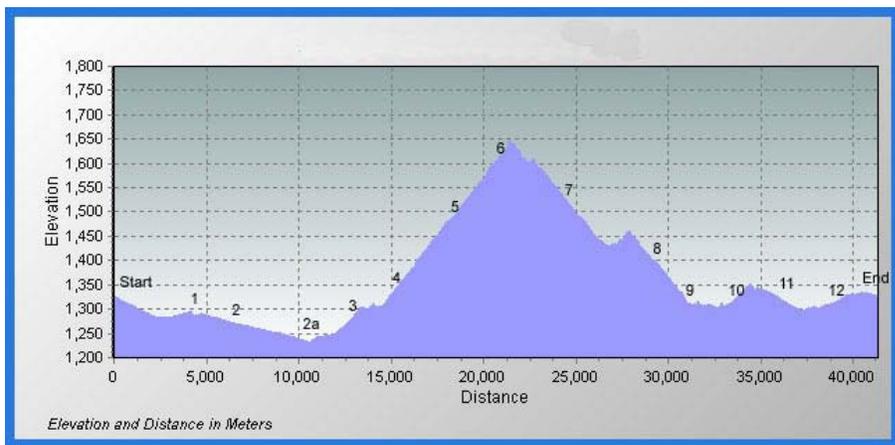


another along the course, not to quit and remember the spirit of the event. There was also a parade of the survivors and amputees. Moving amongst the crowd I caught a glimpse of Jay Norman and made my way to wish him well. I also met Anita Fromm who was with Jay. I guess the race had started, as we were moving along and came upon the survivors sitting along side the course, shaking our hands and wishing us well. It was a lumpy throated, wet eyed and a very inspiring start to the march. It took me 10 minutes to get to the chip-timed starting mat.

I was pumped, adjusted my pack and was on my way. We had a bit of asphalt prior to the sandy dirt jeep road trail. It was a comfortable start, exciting, with lots to view in the way of desert and competitors. I saw several amputees and tried to keep them in mind whenever I was feeling down. There were two distances and we were all together for this portion, until we reached the road, where the 15 miler marchers would head back to the finish, along the road. It took me 2:48 to get to the 8-mile mark.

I felt like running several times during this portion, but thought I better save it for later. The weather had been a bit cool prior to sunrise and now it was warming up. I had my NTTR running hat on, with a dark underside to the brim, shading my eyes. My sunscreen was on, I had plenty

of water and could feel the exhilaration of the event.



There was a crowd gathered at the turning point (waterstop #3) for the 15 milers. They headed one way along the road and we headed the other, up hill! And uphill! Hmmmm – there was the course profile right on the website and I nary a glanced at it! Or maybe I did, but thought those were feet, not meters! The aid stations, being approximately 2 miles apart, on the map gave an indication of a rather long uphill climb, first along the roadway for about two miles, where you could see the winners (including Anita!) on their way back – what a pleasure to see!. Then the course weaved up the mountain through the sand, past relics of old ranches, with beautiful views of the mountains, snow visible on one. I was getting initiated along the way – beware, they told me of the sand pit after the mountain. Sand had already taken down numerous runners, to blistering feet. My trekking poles came off my pack and were put to good use. My food supply was getting low with just water, Gatorade, bananas and delectable refreshing oranges offered at the aid stations. This was one of the only times I really gobbled up what I had brought with me, wishing for more salty foods or a cool apple. I took



several 'pack-off' breaks for 7-10 minutes, to get something out, put something in my pack, bathroom breaks. I was carrying a hand-held and had two more in my pack, which I switched out when needed, with added water from the aid stations.

Fatigue was setting in as the mountain seemed never-ending and teasing. I huffed and puffed and dug in my trekking poles, thinking of the amputees and the original marchers, the survivors, tried not to think of those that weren't. Could the youth of today survive such a horrendous march? There were enough military

in the event, with packs that gave me some hope. I was worried I might not have enough food, and remembered an electrolyte tablet every hour.



At the top of the mountain I smelled food and saw a picnic going on! A gentle survivor greeted me with a soft hand hold, smiling and cheerful. The line to the food was long and the time was precious and on I went, knowing the downhill had to be close. It finally happened and we got a reprieve for a couple miles before a twisting turning uphill took away our fantasy. The miles went by slow, precariously slow. I could have quit, I really could have. I had to focus, focus on those who had it much harder than this, no food, water out of drainage ditches, no support. I knew

how much more I had. And every time I took the pack off, it was harder and harder to get back on. Military personnel on 4 wheel drive vehicles were patrolling the course and picking up the weak.

I knew that before mile 19 we would be back on the road. I put away the poles and made my way down more quickly than the last 3 hours. Another aid station and back to the base . . . or so I thought. I wondered where the extra miles would lead. The dreaded sand pit, the one I thought we had gone through once, twice, three times already! We turned away from the base and headed back out into the hills, uphill, through the sand. I couldn't stop to get my poles; I had to push on and on and had to think positive. Then winds kicked up, marchers were covering their faces with scarves, I even got blown around a bit, with the weighted pack!

As we get closer to the base, we snake around it, around the housing and I was breathing hard and traveling slow, just two more miles, just one more mile, just 0.2 mile to go! And through the finish line, with a chip time of 9:46!!! Weighed in my pack at 38 lbs., dropped off my rice and beans for the needy, a suggested load for the pack, got my meal ticket, and went off for some food.

The survivors didn't really have an end. They had no lunch at the end, no support, no water. No shower after. Most went on to prisoner of war camps, for years still. No one came and got them and picked them up, took them out to eat, for a beer. It was over for me, but it's not really over. I may go back and listen to the very few left who can tell their story. Before they are gone.

