

The 2010 Bataan Death March “No Mama, No Papa, No Uncle Sam”

By Thomas “T.O” Okazaki

I recently had the great honor and privilege of running the 21st Annual Bataan Death March Marathon on March 21st, 2010 as my 20th state, on my quest of completing either a marathon or ultra in all 50 States and the District of Columbia.

The Bataan Memorial Death March is a challenging march through the high desert terrain of White Sands Missile Range, N.M., conducted in honor of the heroic service members who defended the Philippine Islands during World War II, sacrificing their freedom, health and, in many cases, their very lives.

I chose to do this event to finally meet and thank in person the few remaining surviving veterans, whose numbers are dwindling rapidly each year. I also wanted to take on this difficult course through the desert that featured some grueling climbs, “The Sand Pit,” scorching heat, high winds and not to mention the home to a few giant tarantulas and rattlesnakes!

This was one of my more memorable destination marathon road trips in recent years. I love traveling through West Texas and the great Southwest with its high desert plateaus, tall cacti and wind-carved mountain ranges, stretching as far as the eye can see. As an extra treat, a fast-moving, late spring cold front dropped several inches of snow, turning the desert into a surreal winter wonderland, just past Odessa.

I divided the 14-hour drive into several days, stopping to sleep in my car in Big Springs late Friday night and then waking up early the next morning to plunging temperatures and strong arctic winds!

I enjoyed driving the 80 mph stretch of highway in far West Texas to almost El Paso, stopping once at a lonely truck stop/diner in Plateau to take photos of the snow-covered landscape and browsing for souvenirs in the gift shop. I wish now I had taken that sombrero and a pair of mariachis to entertain all of my friends back home, at my running club, The Lake Grapevine Runners & Walkers, in Grapevine when I returned!

Race packet pickup was located at the White Sands Missile Base, the birthplace of America’s space program, NASA, just east of Las Cruces, NM. All visitors to the base were required to be prepared to present a photo I.D., current vehicle registration and display a special entrance pass on their windshield that was issued to them when registering online for the marathon.

They had a record number register for this year’s event. Although the line was long when I first arrived in the afternoon before the race, it moved very quickly once you got inside the base community center.

Each participant was given a sharp-looking race shirt, a commemorative timing chip and a race certificate that was personalized and custom-made, along with a military dog tag. For a small fee, you could have the race certificate and dog tag framed together, which is what I ended up doing.

There were also tons of cool Bataan Death March Marathon race souvenirs on sale that included hats, key chains, shirts, coffee mugs, fanny packs, posters, bandanas and just about anything any enthusiastic, hardcore Bataan Death Marcher would want!

The majority of the civilian participants would be doing the Heavy Category, hiking the entire course carrying a backpack weighing at least 35 pounds!

This would require extra training, which some of my friends, like Dave Elliott of the North Texas Trail Runners did, by hauling a heavy backpack at the Cross Timbers Trail Run along the rugged shores of Lake Texoma in North Texas.

There were a number of scales available for marchers to double-check the required weight of their packs. It was recommended that people load their packs with canned food goods so they could be donated to charity after the race.

I opted instead, on this trip, to run the marathon event in the Civilian Light Category and go for time. This is still not an easy feat for someone from the flatlands of Texas. In addition to the desert heat and high winds, there is one huge mountain on the course that starts with a very subtle climb just after mile 6 and continues all the way to mile 13!

This is followed by a long and winding, downhill section for almost 6 miles, with spectacular views of the desert valley below, that really punish your quads.

Then if that doesn't finish your legs off, the area known as "The Sand Pit," featuring deep sand after Water Station 9, might just do the trick. I saw many runners and marchers struggling to get through there.

The course was well marked and features fully stocked aid stations that were manned by many friendly and cheering volunteers.

After the race packet pickup, I attended the pre-race pasta dinner, again on the base, at the Frontier Club. For only \$10 per person, it was an all-you-can-eat buffet, and it was open to all marchers, guests and event personnel. The atmosphere was festive and it was a wonderful opportunity to meet others who have traveled from all over the world to attend.

The Army definitely knows how to feed the masses! And this was just one of the many breakfast, lunch & dinner specials offered on the base during race weekend along with a free breakfast on race morning. What a deal!

In fact, when reviewing the race information handbook, one cannot help but be impressed by how much thought and effort was put into making this into a special event that included something for the entire family and a memorable experience for all.

There were a number of historical and informative seminars scheduled all weekend long, including an opportunity to meet the POWs of Bataan, along with a free showing of a movie, "The Great Raid" on Saturday night.

Rather than make the 25-mile drive back into Las Cruces, the public is welcome to stay at the base gym overnight and camp out there on a first-come, first-serve basis. There was also a parking lot made available near the start/finish area for campers and RVs. I opted to spend the night on the base, sleeping in my car again, and was treated to a spectacular sunset and the rugged beauty of the San Andres Mountains to the west.

For those arriving on race morning, it was highly recommended that you arrived early to avoid any traffic bottlenecks caused by possible security inspections at the base entrance.

The Opening Ceremony before the start of the Bataan Death March Marathon is definitely the most moving and solemn moment of the entire weekend. All the marchers assemble together to "Remember the Sacrifice" for those who fell at Bataan and honor the brave survivors through Reveille, invocation, remarks and a very moving roll call of those who had passed away just in the last year.

Then a group of bag pipers led out the first group of marchers, along with a handful of surviving POWs of Bataan and members of the Wounded Warriors, Medical Soldiers from the Walter Reed and Brooke Army Hospital who were injured and crippled in battle.

The morning air is cold and the sun is now coming up over the horizon, lighting up the clear blue skies of the desert. I shake the hands of the few remaining Bataan survivors as I head for the timing mats of the start.

As I start the first mile, with the rest of the marchers, I am thankful for having the opportunity to grow up as a naturalized American citizen after being adapted at age one and brought back from Japan, 52 years ago.

Many have made the ultimate sacrifice to enjoy the freedoms that we enjoy today in this great land of ours.

This is a must-do event. I have run over a hundred marathons/ultras across the United States and this was most definitely one of the best runs that I have had the privilege of being a part of.

I highly encourage and sincerely hope that you will make plans to do the Bataan Death March Marathon next year in 2011.