Bataan

April 20 2008

Susan Blatchford (Civilian Female Light 45 - 4:31 3ag), Tobin Blatchford (Military Male Heavy, 19, 6:53), Brian Peacock (Civilian Male Light 70, 5:16, 3ag). Those are some of the facts. Other facts include a big hill – 1500 feet, deep dry sand and a winning time of 3:09; the last marcher took 14 hours. Also “Military Heavy” means uniforms, boots and at least a 35 pound back pack. And then there was the heat and the wind.

But these challenges were nothing compared with the march in the Philippines for which this annual marathon at White Sands NM is a symbolic memorial. The following paragraph from the race Bataan Memorial Death March history tells some of the story.

*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 They fought with outdated equipment and virtually no air power.*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.*

*They were marched for days in the scorching heat through the Philippine jungles. Thousands died. Those who survived faced the hardships of a prisoner of war camp. Others were wounded or killed when unmarked enemy ships transporting prisoners of war to Japan were sunk by U.S. air and naval forces.*

Susan’s son Tobin attends James Madison University and is attached to the ROTC at the University of Virginia. Brian drove the 400 odd miles from Prescott AZ with 20 members of the Embry Riddle Aeronautical University Air Force ROTC and four women from the ERAU Army ROTC – they were all “Heavy.” None had done a marathon before and they had only trained up to 12 or so miles. They all had an experience that will last a lifetime.

3500 marchers converged on White Sands Missile Range for the weekend activities at the end of March. Also present were some Bataan survivors who spent all weekend shaking hands. We camped: imagine a youthful bunch of airmen putting up tents in a big wind on a rocky surface that defied penetration by even the hardest of pegs. We slept, we woke, we anticipated the challenge ahead.

The race started with full military protocol and a fly over by a F117 Stealth fighter. The first few miles were fun – gentle downhill on dirt roads. Then came the big blacktop hill along with the sun. Half way up was a mister, most refreshing. At the top of the black top hill we turned onto the dirt paths. Now we had more hill and sand sun and wind in our faces. Just along this stretch there was a barbeque – all you can eat and some partook. At last the hill started down, winding and sandy. Camaraderie abounded; blisters grew, backs were abraded by the straps of the 35 lb load. Only another 10 miles to go with rolling hills. Then we came back on to the blacktop with half the pack still on the way up the hill. In the distance we saw the water towers of the military base as we turned onto more dirt road, this time the sand was soft for a few miles, which blew our estimates of our last six miles pace by at least 50 %. Trudge, trudge, and more trudge through the sand, no running for a while. At last we came to the water tower by way of a two mile long stone wall – symbolic of the metaphorical wall faced by all marathon runners from time to time. A mile to go, gotta run, smile for the picture. The end is near. So is the beer.

Our soul mates finished in ones and twos and sometimes whole bunches keeping each other’s spirits up. The heavies took off their packs and had them weighed – many were heavier than when they started. Some went to the medical tent for an IV and assurance that they would not die today. Others went to the massage tent where the jolly masseurs and masseuses told them to relax, fat chance. Then they took off their boots to survey the battle ground. Blisters, some bleeding, some not yet popped. Finally food and drink, a shower and universal euphoria. What a day. What a memory.