

Memorial march grows from humble beginnings

By Monte Marlin

White Sands Missile Range Public Affairs

Reprinted with permission from Las Cruces Sun News

The concept for the Bataan Memorial Death March started with a young ROTC cadet and a bet over pizza.

The credit for what has become America's largest military march belongs to Major Ray Pickering, now studying at the Army's Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

It was 1987 and the Las Cruces native needed a special project for the spring semester of his senior year in the New Mexico State University Army ROTC program.

"Before going to NMSU, I had been an enlisted soldier and I knew about the Nijmegen March in the Netherlands," he said.

The Nijmegen International March is a grueling 100-mile, four-day trek, which annually attracts thousands of military participants.

"I thought maybe we could do a 25-mile or so military march and offer some awards," he said. Also, well aware of the history of Bataan Death March and the role of New Mexico National Guard's own 200th Coast Artillery in the Philippines, he thought dedicating the march to soldiers who lived that horrific chapter of World War II would be a fitting gesture.

Pickering proposed the idea to his academic advisor, Captain Floyd Quintana, who thought it had merit.

"He challenged me to do a pilot march. If I could get enough people to show up, proving the concept was good, then we could do a memorial march in the spring," said Pickering.

Quintana then made the task a little more interesting.

"He said if I got the 25 people to sign up, he would buy me a pizza a month until I graduated. If I didn't get them, I would owe him a pizza a month," Pickering said.

The pilot march took place in December 1987 with 24 people signing up.

"Captain Quintana said that 24 was close enough and we could go ahead with a memorial march in the spring. But, he held me to that bet. Pizza is pretty expensive for a college kid," he said.

"I had forgotten all about that. I guess I did make him pay," laughs Quintana, who is now deputy commander of Transatlantic Program Center, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Winchester, Virginia, and will soon be promoted to the rank of colonel.

Lieutenant Colonel Dave Hoffman, the head of the ROTC Department at NMSU, also liked the idea. Before going to NMSU, Hoffman was assigned to the TRADOC Analysis Command at White Sands Missile Range, working for Colonel Gerald Schurtz, who is now retired and living in Las Cruces. The colonel's father, Deming native Major Paul Schurtz, was one of the soldiers of the 200th Coast Artillery surrendered to the Japanese in the Philippines. He died on the hell ship Oryoku Maru when the U.S. Navy, unaware of the prisoners aboard, torpedoed the ship.

Throughout the 80s and early 90s, the younger Schurtz worked to ensure Bataan soldiers received long overdue Bronze Stars and Purple Heart awards for their actions in World War II.

"Because of my experiences with Gerry Schurtz, Ray Pickering's idea really struck a chord with me. I thought, 'This is fantastic,'" Hoffman said.

"Captain Quintana felt that we shouldn't be so bold as to call it the Bataan Memorial March until we asked permission of the Bataan survivors. So, the first memorial march was called the Hugh Milton Memorial March," Pickering said.

Milton was a former New Mexico A&M (now NMSU) president. During his military career, he served in the South Pacific, earning the Silver Star for his service in liberating Japanese prisoner of war camps the Philippines.

That first official memorial march was conducted in the spring of 1988.

The route was about 22 miles long, starting at NMSU and heading east through the Organ Mountains, ascending Baylor Pass.

"It wasn't like it is now," Quintana said. "We didn't have a bunch of aid stations. Maybe we had a checkpoint right before going over the mountain. I remember Ray and I took a block of fudge to eat along the way."

About 134 people entered the march, mostly ROTC cadets from NMSU and other regional colleges, New Mexico National Guardsmen, and active duty soldiers from White Sands and Fort Bliss.

The event ended with a chili cook-off at Aguirre Springs. Everyone got a T-shirt and awards were given to the winners.

Deemed a success, the march became an annual event and was renamed the Bataan Memorial Death March in 1989 with about 300 people signing up that year.

In 1992, because of insurance and liability issues, the march was moved to the federal property of White Sands Missile Range. That year, both the White Sands and the New Mexico Army National Guard officially signed up with the NMSU Army ROTC Bataan Battalion to sponsor the event.

WSMR's 259th Military Police Company took on responsibility for organizing the event. The company's commander Captain Eric Nikolai and his staff selected the original 25-mile White Sands route. In 2000, the route was extended to marathon length, 26.2 miles.

Now in its 14th year, the Bataan Memorial Death March attracts an ever-increasing and diverse crowd. More than 3,200 people, both military and civilian, participated in the 2001 march, traveling from 45 states and seven foreign countries.

Hoffman, who is retired from active duty and is now a senior systems analyst for TRAC-White Sands, reflects on the impact of the march.

"What the march has done is provide a degree of illumination of a rugged time. I think because of the way the survivors returned to America, they felt people didn't look at them the same way as they did other soldiers," Hoffman said. "What happened hurt them so badly. The memories were sort of like a non-terminal disease that they can never get rid of. With the memorial march, I sensed the survivors' sincere appreciation that they were remembered."

"I read in a book once, 'They will never die as long as we don't forget them.' I figure if 10, 20, or 30 kids learn something about Bataan by being in the memorial march, the history will not be lost," Hoffman said.

"I'm proud of what the memorial march has become and what it has done to keep the legacy of Bataan soldiers alive," said Pickering. He adds that his role in its creation is one of his most satisfying life accomplishments.

As fate will have it, when Pickering finishes Command and General Staff College, his next duty assignment will be with the Army Research Laboratory at White Sands Missile Range.