

BY STAFF SGT. MATTHEW BATES ✦ PHOTOS BY STAFF SGT. DESIREE N. PALACIOS

A WALK TO REMEMBER

AIRMEN WALK MORE THAN 800 MILES
TO HONOR THEIR FALLEN TEAMMATES

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MADE FOR WALKING”
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Twelve Airmen completed the last leg of a memorial rucksack march through Ft. Walton Beach, Fla. to Hurlburt Air Force Base to honor 12 fallen special tactics teammates killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. The march began at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, covered 824 miles and captured the hearts of people all along the route.

LEFT, RIGHT, LEFT

Their target was more than 800 miles away: Hurlburt Field, in the heart of the Florida panhandle.

“These boots were made for walking,” Staff Sgt. David White smiled as the famous lyrics flickered through his mind. “That thought is the understatement of the year,” he said. But, funny as it was, his boots actually were made for walking; which was good, because it turned out he was doing a lot of that lately.

And a lot meant nearly 200 miles. His body was reminding him of this fact with every step, every painful, aching step.

He didn’t even recognize his feet any more. He knew they were his, but they looked like they belonged to someone else. Blisters were forming on top of blisters, creating a miniature mountain range right there on his feet.

There were no tourists on this mountain range, though. The only visitors here were pain and occasional numbness.

But, he kept going. He kept putting one foot in front of the other, tuning out the voices telling him to stop, telling him he was being stupid, and telling him it just wasn’t worth it.

Because, thing was, it was worth it. And no amount of pain or weariness could tell him otherwise.

This walk, this long, seemingly endless walk, wasn’t for him. This walk was for Tim.

FORWARD, MARCH

His first steps took place 10 days prior, in the early morning hours of Oct. 6. Sergeant White and 11 other special tactics Airmen stepped off together from the home of the Combat Control Selection Course at Lackland Air Force Base’s Medina Annex in San Antonio.

“We wanted to show that in Air Force special operations, you are never forgotten,” said Master Sgt. Ken Huhman, a member of the 342nd Training Support Squadron at Lackland and one of the event’s organizers.

The men were walking to honor their friend, Staff Sgt. Tim Davis, a combat controller who was killed in Afghanistan in February 2009, and 12 other special tactics Airmen who were killed in either Iraq or Afghanistan since operations began there.

During the walk, each man wore a 50-pound rucksack strapped to his back and carried a memorial baton with the name of one of the fallen Airmen engraved on it.

The route was chosen not for its distance, but for its symbolism. “All special tactics Airmen begin their training at Lackland and end it at Hurlburt,” said Staff Sgt. Jesse Schrader, one of the memorial marchers from the 23rd Special Tactics Squadron at Hurlburt Field. “It just seemed fitting to walk that route.”

Even walking was chosen for its significance. “Tim loved to ruck,” Sergeant Schrader said. “So, we thought, what better way to honor him than by walking, doing something he loved.”

In its planning stages, the memorial walk was meant to be a low-key, behind-the-scenes event. It was just a group of buddies wanting to honor another.

But by trip’s end, the men would conquer more than miles; they would enter the hearts and minds of a nation.

LEFT, RIGHT, LEFT

The plan was simple. The 12 men split into six teams of two and walked

FORWARD MARCH



The special tactics Airmen performed most of the march in relay teams that walked around the clock. They joined together at the end of the trip in a show of solidarity for their fallen teammates.

from Texas to Florida using a relay system. While one team marched, the other five would rest. After 15 or 20 miles, another team would take over for the one marching, and so on, until they reached Hurlburt Field.

This way, during the 11-day journey, a team was always walking, no matter the time, the weather or the temperature.

For the first five and last five miles, the 12 men would walk together as a team, starting and ending as one.

"It was important that we started and ended together," Sergeant White said. "It signified our bond and the teamwork it takes to do something like this."

But even after they split up, the teams were never really alone. A small convoy of military police, support and medical personnel were always right alongside the men as they marched.

And so, before dawn on Oct. 6, the men stepped off as one and began the long journey ahead of them shrouded in darkness.

The darkness didn't hide them for long, though. Once people started hearing about the special forces Airmen who were walking from Texas to Florida, interest grew from a small smattering to a full-fledged frenzy.

In towns large and small, people lined the streets and shouted words of encouragement. School kids and veterans, mothers and businessmen, teenagers and factory workers all came out to catch a glimpse of these men, to witness and, in effect, become part of their journey.

Flags were waved.

Backs were clapped.

Tears were shed.

"I never imagined so many people would support us," Sergeant White said. "It's just been overwhelming."

The media took interest, too. Local and national television crews, photographers and journalists recorded the team's progress as they marched.

"At first it seemed surreal," Sergeant Schrader said. "But then we

were like, this is awesome. By doing this march we were saying, 'Hey, we haven't forgotten about our guys who died over there,' and now, because of the attention, neither will all the people who know about what we did."

The outpouring of support helped the marchers, too.

"When you're tired, having people cheer you on and give you water and encouragement, it just makes it that much easier to keep going," Sergeant Schrader said.

AT EASE

And keep going they did. Until, on the afternoon of Oct. 16, the 12 men reached their destination.

But they didn't reach it alone. Several family members of the fallen special tactics Airmen walked the last few miles to Hurlburt Field with the team.

It was a gesture of unity, support and appreciation.

For these family members, this walk was symbolic of a journey they had been taking for years, a journey through pain and despair that led to hope.

"I feel very honored," said Sally Sheldon, Sergeant Davis' mother. "I'm very proud of all these young men and what they've done."

What they did was nothing short of a miracle. They walked for 11 days, through five states and more than 800 miles, all to honor their friends and teammates who didn't come home.

"It feels good to be done, but it just brings home all the harder why we were doing this in the first place," Sergeant Schrader said.

Still, though bruised, battered and tired, the men couldn't help but laugh and smile. They'd accomplished what they set out to do, what at one time seemed impossible.

And they'd done it for Tim.

So, yes, these boots were made for walking.

And that's just what they did. 🐦

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Staff Sgts. Jesse Schrader and David White, both from the 23rd Special Tactics Squadron at Hurlburt Field, Fla., walk a stretch of road in Navarre, Fla. The Airmen were met in many of the towns they walked through by local citizens waving flags and cheering them on in a show of support the Airmen said was a welcome surprise.



As the 12 Airmen completed the last leg of their more than 800-mile memorial ruck sack march through Ft. Walton Beach, Fl. into Hurlburt Air Force Base, they were joined by media members, more special tactics Airmen and some of the family members of the fallen that they marched to honor.