



Airmen finish 860-mile trek for fallen comrades

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Air Force Special Operations Command Public Affairs

10/25/2010 - HURLBURT FIELD, Fla. -- Their journey is over, but their cause unfortunately goes on.

Their feet hurt with each step. Their skin burned under the oppressive sun. Their clothes were drenched with sweat, and they were exhausted from each carrying a 50-pound rucksack across five states. Yet their spirits remained as high as when they first began their trek 13 days before.

Hundreds of people gathered outside the Special Tactics Training Squadron at Hurlburt Field, Fla., Oct. 21, to welcome the marchers. At first, it seemed like a regular homecoming: flags, families and well-wishers thanking them for a job well done.



Surviving family members, a few wounded Airmen and members of the Air Force Special Operations Command, join fifteen Special Tactics Airmen on the final stretch of an 860-mile memorial march from San Antonio, Tex. to Hurlburt Field, Fla., Sept. 21, 2010. (U.S. Air Force Photo by Master Sgt. Russell E. Cooley IV/Released)

Each of the marching Airmen carried one or more wooden batons decorated with a small plate. The plates bore the names of fallen Airmen. For them, there would be no homecoming.

"For those who understand, no explanation is necessary," said Chief Master Sgt. Antonio Travis, Air Force Special Operations Training Center chief enlisted manager and one of the marchers in the Tim Davis Special Tactics Memorial March. "And for those who don't understand, no explanation will suffice.

"I will try to explain for those who don't: Love. Family is love. Love for family is why the men volunteer to do this."

Chief Travis carried a baton for Senior Airman Adam Servais, 23rd Special Tactics Squadron, who was killed Aug. 19, 2006 in Afghanistan. His baton, like 19 others carried, represented the Airmen killed in action who couldn't be there, including Staff Sgt. Tim Davis, 23rd STS, who was killed Feb. 20, 2009. The march, an idea set forth by two special tactics Airmen, Capt. Sam Schindler and Master Sgt. Kenneth Huhman, was named in honor of Sergeant Davis after he was killed in Afghanistan.

The batons for combat controllers symbolized the passage through the special tactics training pipeline after Basic Military Training at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, until the day they earned their scarlet berets at Hurlburt.

"I didn't have the honor of knowing two of the names called out, but I knew each and every other one," Chief Travis said. "Some of them were dear friends, my leaders and my Airmen. There's not a single fiber of my being that could imagine not stepping up and saying 'Yes' for my family."

He then completed his speech with a variation of the Airmen's Creed, beginning with "These are America's finest Airmen" dedicated to those the march memorialized.

"They never left an Airman behind, they did not falter, and they never failed, and, God willing, we will never fail in remembering them," Chief Travis said.

The first march, held in October, 2009, went on to involve 10 Airmen to honor the legacy of 12 of their fallen brethren. But as poignant as the event became, the following year sadly produced more tragic episodes, not only for their special tactics family, but their fellow Air Commando and pararescueman jumper warriors.

In addition to their memories, the legacies of past combat controllers and their fellow Airmen were represented in the march.

"Let us not forget that, to date, we've lost 749 special operators who have given their lives in the defense of this

country," said Maj. Travis Woodworth, STTS commander. "We honor our fallen, because we truly are a family."

The recent passing of Senior Airmen Daniel Sanchez, 23rd STS, and Mark Forester, 21st STS, who were both killed in action in support of Operation Enduring Freedom Sept. 16 and 29, respectively, left a fresh reminder in the minds of the marchers of how their own lives could be on the line in combat.

"If you look over the course of our nation's history, there has been a very small segment of our population that has been asked to do the types of things we are doing today," said Lt. Gen. Donald Wurster, commander of Air Force Special Operations Command. "One percent of the U.S. serves in the armed forces. Of that group, an incredibly small fraction performs the duty of close combat and engaging the enemy. And a large portion of that force [in the Air Force] is in AFSOC, particularly in special tactics. And look around: kids are going to school, people are going to work and our nation is secure, thanks to the people who do this."

Kristy Jefferson is the widow of Tech. Sgt. Will Jefferson, a 21st Special Tactics Squadron combat controller who was killed March 22, 2008. She marched for the last five miles of the route with Sergeant Huhman, chief of the combat control selection course at Lackland, who carried her husband's baton.

"It just fills my heart up," Mrs. Jefferson said. "This is just one more thing to make sure they're never forgotten."

After completing the 860-mile march from Lackland to Hurlburt Field, they said they would have selflessly repeated it countless times over so that none of their comrades' memories will ever be forgotten.

"No word can really sum up the feeling..." Sergeant Huhman said. "But seeing the family members--this is what it's all about. It makes the rest of the walk seem like nothing."

The following names are those of the Airmen memorialized in this year's march.

Special Tactics Airmen:

Master Sgt. William McDaniel
Staff Sgt. Juan Ridout
Tech. Sgt. John Chapman
Senior Airman Jason Cunningham
Staff Sgt. Scott Sather
Capt. Derek Argel
Capt. Jeremy Fresques
Staff Sgt. Casey Crate
Senior Airman Adam Servais
Tech. Sgt. Scott Duffman
Tech. Sgt. Will Jefferson
Staff Sgt. Tim Davis
Senior Airman Daniel Sanchez
Senior Airman Mark Forester

6th Special Operations Squadron:

Maj. Brian Downs

8th Special Operations Squadron:

Maj. Randall Voas
Senior Master Sgt. James Lackey

Air Combat Command pararescue:

1st Lt. Joel Gentz
Tech. Sgt. Michael Flores
Senior Airman Benjamin White