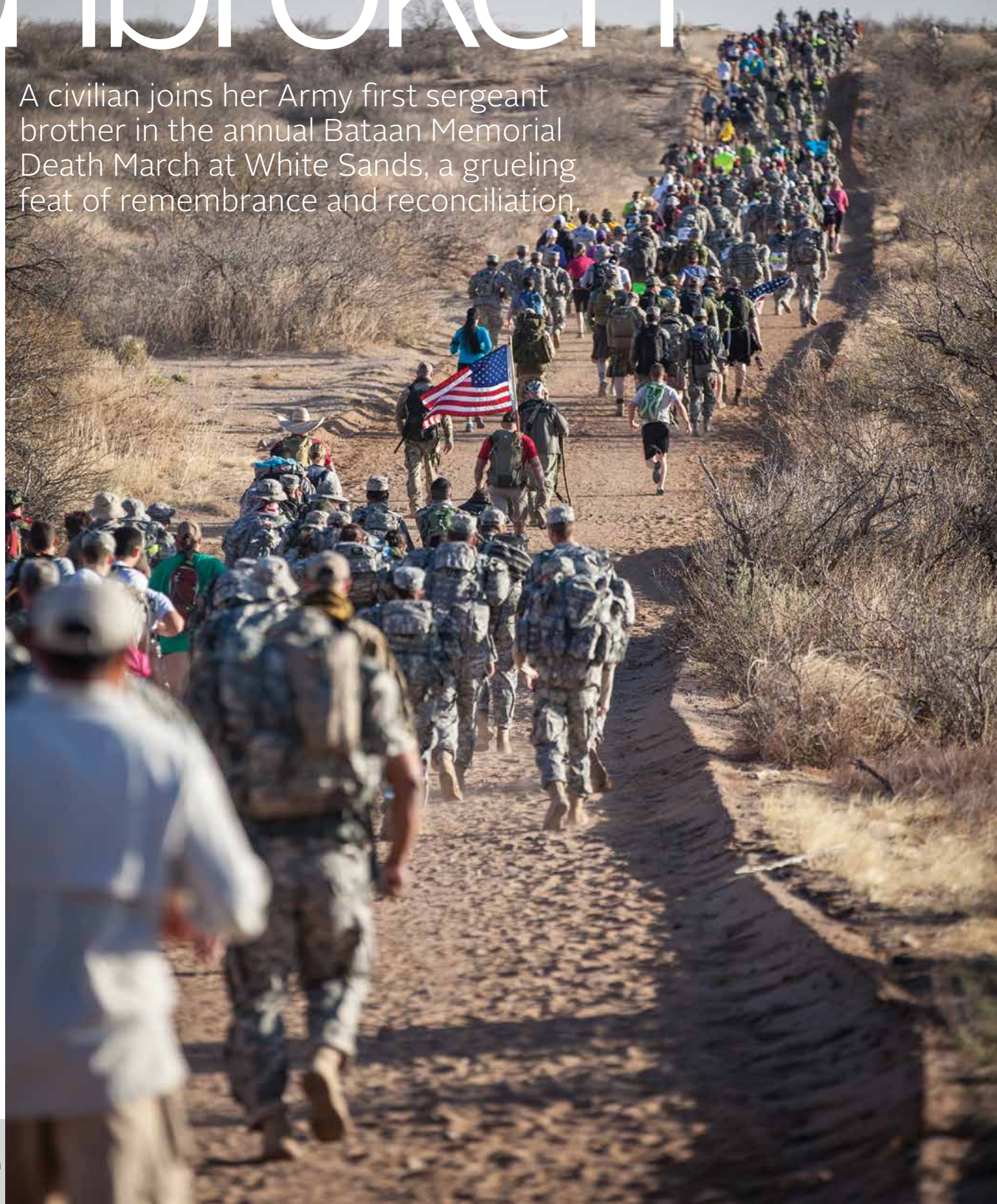


# Unbroken

A civilian joins her Army first sergeant brother in the annual Bataan Memorial Death March at White Sands, a grueling feat of remembrance and reconciliation.



March, walk, run—whatever it takes to go 26.2 miles through the desert.  
*Facing page:* Oscar Leonard, a Bataan survivor, attended last year's march at age 95.

# in NM



BY STEPHANIE PEARSON  
PHOTOS BY JEN JUDGE

Under an American flag the size of a billboard, a Sunday morning crowd of more than 6,000 waits in the predawn darkness at White Sands Missile Range for the 26.2-mile Bataan Memorial Death March to begin. To the west, the half-moon illuminates the jagged outline of the Organ Mountains. The majority of participants are civilians, but I'm drawn to the 500 soldiers, mostly men, who are marching in the "military heavy" division and wearing full combat uniforms, including boots and 35-pound rucksacks. They look battle-worn and tough, and I feel insignificant and unprepared, shivering in shorts and running shoes near the back of the pack.

I'm here with my brother Tim Pearson, a U.S. Army first sergeant, who's stationed at Fort Bliss, 65 miles down the road in El Paso, Texas. Tim enlisted at age 19 and, 22 years later, he's been through deployments in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Kuwait. But that's nothing, he says, compared with the hell soldiers lived through in World War II. In April 1942, after General Edward King surrendered the Philippines' Bataan Peninsula to the Japanese, the largest surrender in U.S. history since the Civil War, almost 80,000 U.S. and Filipino soldiers were forced to march more than 65 miles to an internment camp. The slog lasted 10 days, and the disease-ridden and malnourished prisoners were largely denied food and water. Those who fell behind were bayoneted or beheaded. By the end of the journey, thousands of men had died.

The memorial march, which has been held at White Sands for the past 25 years, is a tribute to the 1,800 Bataan prisoners who were from New Mexico. After the men were liberated in 1945, only 900 returned to the state. A third of those died from disease, drink, or suicide within a few years.

As the Organ Mountains turn pink against the rising sun, Major General Gwen Bingham, the commanding general of White Sands Missile Range, pays tribute to the estimated 100 remaining survivors of the Bataan Death March, 10 of whom are sitting on the stage next to her.

"The conditions at Bataan were horrific," Bingham's

voice booms over the loudspeaker. "Those who survived faced atrocities. May we vow to never forget. May the spirit of Bataan dwell in you today."

Taps plays as the marchers solemnly move en masse toward the starting line. Tim is clearly in his element, but I'm beginning to wonder if I can handle not only the physical aspect of the march, but also the heavy emotional overtones. I ask the man standing next to me, an Army veteran named Mike Bilbo, who is wearing an exact replica of a World War II-era 200th Coast Artillery uniform, how many times he's done this.

"It's my sixth time," he says. "I go slow to memorialize what happened. I usually finish at sundown." As the crowd separates us, he tells me, "Just remember—what you are about to do is quality suffering."

At 2:30 a.m. on the morning before the march, I lay sleepless on Tim's couch. It was my first visit to his apartment in El Paso, which was filled with military memorabilia. He had rented it two years earlier but had spent much of the time since deployed to Kuwait. Before dinner, I tried on his bulletproof vest, helmet, and chest rig. The total weight was roughly 50 pounds—even without his M4 and 9mm pistol and ammunition—and it made me dizzy with claustrophobia.

"In Afghanistan I sat with all this gear in a Humvee—a tiny little coffin-box with computer monitors in front of me," Tim told me as I tore off the equipment. "I rode eight to ten hours every three days without being able to stretch."

My brother's job for 15 months in Afghanistan, during Operation Enduring Freedom, was senior food operations sergeant for the 2nd Battalion (Airborne), 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team. It was his mission to put hot meals into the mouths of 700 soldiers spread throughout the Kunar Province, which included the Pech River and Korengal Valleys—the latter known as "the Valley of Death" because 42 Americans died and hundreds more were wounded there between 2006 and 2009. To do his job, Tim would shuttle via helicopter or ground convoy between remote operating bases. During one of those convoys, the Humvee in front of him hit an IED. The blast demolished the front rig, and the soldiers were sitting ducks along the exposed mountain road, easy targets for snipers hidden in the precipitous ridges above, but miraculously, everyone walked out alive.

"We were out in the middle of nowhere with nothing, and it was definitely the hardest 15 months of my life," Tim had told me at dinner. Even so, he tried to downplay his experience compared with other veterans, including infantrymen from his own unit in Afghanistan.

I lay sleepless because that story and others he's told me over the years made me realize just how foreign and unsettling the world he inhabits is to me. Tim and I are



From top: Soldiers and civilians at the opening ceremony. The author and her brother join a marcher in military-heavy uniform.



A young soldier exhibits gung-ho spirit. Facing page: A flag-bearer in Bataan-era uniform.



not from a military family. We grew up in Duluth, Minnesota, in a household where the only march we knew was Dad's 1965 walk from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, behind Martin Luther King Jr. A Lutheran minister, Dad was a peace activist and a liberal ideologue, which is why he and my mom adopted Tim and his older brother, Jon, from a Korean orphanage in 1973. Tim was 10 months old, Jon and I were three-year-olds, and I have two older natural siblings. The five of us grew up in the most peaceful decades in recent American history. War wasn't in the Pearson lexicon.

Tim never intended to enlist. "Growing up in our family, there was no way I was going to join the military," he told me. "I just wanted to go to college."

The trouble, however, was that Tim had a bad habit of taking things that didn't belong to him. After the second time he landed in juvenile detention, he decided that the Army might provide the discipline and structure he needed to stay out of trouble. So, on a whim, Tim and a buddy went to the nearest recruiter and enlisted.

"I was lucky, because the Army straightened me out," Tim said. "And going to Afghanistan changed my life forever. I learned how people bond together in combat. As soon as we were hit by the IED on the road up the Korengal, the guys had total disregard for their own lives to make sure the soldier sitting next to them was safe."

As I stared into the dark, I waffled between admiration and unease, pondering the gaping rift between civilian and military life. My brother was lucky. After more than two decades, the Army *had* straightened him out. The flamboyant guy I used to know, who could pathologically charm almost anyone out of almost anything, had turned into a thoughtful father of two. Plus, after two dangerous deployments, he was still alive, with no major physical injuries other than bad knees.

Others hadn't been so lucky. I thought of Oscar Leonard (see p. 47), the 95-year-old former prisoner of war I met during the official opening ceremony yesterday at White Sands. As an operative in the Counterintelligence Corps, the Army's precursor to the CIA, Leonard survived as a guerrilla for a month in the Bataan jungle before he

turned himself in. He was subsequently interned at five Japanese camps from 1942 to 1945. I asked if it was difficult to be here.

"It takes a certain amount of time to get over all the stress," Leonard said, his bright blue eyes flashing. "It was about 30 years before I could face any of it, and even now it bothers me to talk about it." He still has nightmares from the war, but he's been coming to the march for the past eight years. "I've had doctors tell me that if everything that happened to me over there were true, I would not be alive. I never went to any kind of memorial until 1984, but then a fella who claims I saved his life told me that these events relaxed him and took away his hatred."

Tim has told me numerous times that a civilian will never understand what a soldier experiences in combat. Perhaps that has something to do with why his marriage ended in divorce soon after he returned from Afghanistan. Nevertheless, it bothers him when he feels judged by people who see him in uniform. "Don't judge me or hate me or feel sorry for me or expect that I have PTSD because I was in combat," he said. All he asks is that Americans support their military, particularly in times of war. "People get so caught up in their own issues that they take their freedom for granted."

It's true that I will never understand what it's like to be a soldier in combat, but I don't quite understand how to be a supportive sister, either, which is why I said yes when Tim asked me to do the march with him. With the media buzz about PTSD, I'm hyper-aware around him, asking dozens of touchy-feely, personal questions, trying to detect even the smallest symptoms, which drives him crazy.

As I tossed and turned that night, I decided that Tim and I had done enough talking. It was time to start walking.



Six miles into the march, we're ankle deep in a sandy arroyo. The sun is high in a brilliant clear sky, and scrubby cacti surround us. I've just passed three brothers in full uniform who have photos of their father in a Navy uniform attached to their rucksacks, inscribed with the words "For Our Dad, CV-3 '43-45." CV-3 is shorthand for the USS *Saratoga*, an aircraft carrier that was badly damaged in the Battle of Iwo Jima. For a while I match steps with Linda Wright, a secretary

from Tombstone, Arizona, whose uncle, Joseph Hayes, was a Bataan survivor. "He carried his buddy during the Death March, but then my uncle couldn't carry him any longer, so

the Japanese beheaded him,” Wright says. “When my uncle came home, he drank and was a totally different person. He died within two years. I’m doing this march for him.”

I’m beginning to understand why there are more civilians than soldiers here. They feel the same way I do—that this grueling hike is a way to honor a soldier, living or dead.

At mile eight, we’re still slogging through the arroyo, packed tightly together like a sloppily marching battalion. Tim, silent since we started, weaves in and out of clusters of soldiers like a man possessed. I follow his lead, hopping out of the arroyo onto firmer ground to gain traction, occasionally losing Tim in the crowd as I slow down to talk with anyone who looks like they have an interesting story.

A double amputee is crutching his way through the sand on prosthetic legs. His name is Colton Carlson, and he’s a Marine from Pueblo, Colorado, who lost his legs when he stepped on an IED during a clearing operation in Afghanistan. After rotating through a couple of field

As we flip back around and turn onto a dirt road, I listen to the crunch of boots and wonder at the varying shapes and sizes and ages in this march. One woman who looks at least two decades older than me, in her mid-sixties,

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is doing the most painful-looking, hip-tyrating speed walk I’ve ever seen. She keeps leapfrogging ahead of us until Tim finally gets annoyed and starts walking faster to stay ahead of her.

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“Are they [messing] with our minds!?” Tim cries out profanely, replacing his stoic sense of communal commemoration with the more immediate intensity of pain and frustration. But almost as quickly as it flashes, his anger subsides, and he manages to put his aching knees in perspective. “At least I don’t have malaria and won’t get beheaded if I fall behind,” he says.

We march on, passing what looks to be a graveyard for defunct planes and helicopters. As we struggle toward a reprieve from the sand and beating sun, we pass a soldier on the sideline giving tough love to a companion hunched over in misery, trying to redistribute the weight of his massive rucksack. “C’mon, cupcake!” he urges. “Only two miles to go. It’s time to finish this party!”

Tim and I take that as our cue to start running. In the heat and dust and sweat and blisters of the moment, I’m feeling no great insight, only relief, when we finally cross the finish line. But in the days after the march, I reflect that for 22 years I’ve watched my brother suffer through the angst, frustration, separation, humiliation, frequent boredom, and occasional terror wrought by war and life in the Army, often wondering how and why he does it. Yet in our desert march, I finally caught a glimpse of what keeps him going. Beyond his obvious and deep bond with his fellow soldiers, no matter which war they fought in, he also has the silent satisfaction that he’s risked his life for his country. Recognition is the least I can offer. ❖

Stephanie Pearson is featured in “Storytellers,” p. 8.

After the march, Tim and Stephanie Pearson share a well-earned celebration.



hospitals, he landed at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, where he stayed for a year.

“I decided everything would end up best if I went into it with a good attitude,” he says. At Walter Reed, Lance Corporal Carlson hooked up with an organization called Warfighter Sports, which offers sports rehabilitation programs in hospitals throughout the United States for wounded veterans. His goal is to climb South America’s highest peak, 22,841-foot Aconcagua, within a year. “But first I have to get through this,” he says, sinking with every step into the unforgiving sand.

When we finally exit the arroyo, the course hits flat pavement that climbs up a long hill with no end in sight. Tim flips around and starts marching backwards. It’s an old Army trick, I learn, and it works wonders in taking the pressure off the blisters forming on my big toes.



## NEED TO KNOW

The **26th Annual Bataan Memorial Death March** will take place on Sunday, March 22, 2015. Participants must register online by March 10. Fees vary from \$95 to \$450, depending on your chosen category: individual, team, civilian, military, heavy, and light divisions. Participants can run or walk the course, but be prepared for changing temperatures, weather, and terrain, from sand to rough gravel to pavement. There are ample water, food, and medical stations along the course, but it is remote and exposed, so bring a hat, jacket, and sunblock. For comprehensive information, visit [bataanmarch.com](http://bataanmarch.com).

An Operation Enduring Warrior team marches in support of wounded veterans.