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Deployed servicemembers run half marathon in Afghanistan

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Thirty-three runners take off at the start of the shadow version of the Marine Corps Historic Half marathon at Forward Operating Base Delaram II, Afghanistan, May 20, 2012.

By STAFF SGT. BRIAN BUCKWALTER Regimental Combat Team 6 FORWARD OPERATING BASE DELARAM II, Afghanistan - Runners half a world apart shared something in common May 20 - running the Marine Corps Historic Half marathon.

Thirty-three runners participated in a shadow version of the 13.1-mile race at Forward Operating Base Delaram II, the same day the race is also held in Fredericksburg, Va.

In Afghanistan, the race started at dawn so participants running against a clock could also try to outrun the desert heat.

First Lt. Michael Bell, who helped organize the event, was excited to see the hard work of putting the event together come to fruition.

"We had our opening prayer. The sun's coming up. We're in Afghanistan. It's like, alright, this is actually happening now," he recalled with going through his mind just before the race started.

Navy Lt. Rebecca Murphy proposed the idea of the shadow half marathon earlier in the year.

She said she got the idea after she noticed a lot of people don't run for exercise on deployments.

"I thought this was a good way to maybe get some people out running and get the cardio up instead of just throwing weights around in the gym," said Murphy, a 7-time marathon finisher. "I think it worked. I think the incentive to get a finisher's medal and getting a nice shirt really does help for people."

Murphy, Bell and other organizers on base worked with Marine Corps Marathon staff in Virginia. They helped with the registration process and mailing out medals, t-shirts, race bibs and other goodies in time for the race.

The 13.1-mile course looped around the base's gravel and dirt roads twice. Navy corpsman and Marines handed out water and sports drinks at the five aid stations located along the route. Drivers in lead and chase vehicles ensured people stayed on course and weren't injured.

Experience levels ranged from seasoned runners like Murphy, who runs 30 to 40 miles per week during training, to first time half-marathoners like Petty Officer 2nd Class Antonio R. Saenz.

Murphy, who won in the female division with a 1:48:51, said she ran her first marathon for the challenge and "kind of got that runner's high and just stuck with it."

The furthest Saenz had run before today was 10 miles. He signed up with a friend in March and has been training nearly everyday since. He finished at 2:06:50.

"It felt good compared to when I normally run (in the mid afternoon) when it's hot outside," he said after the race.

Captain Patrick Sullivan won the men's division in 1:37:21. He said he kept his mind on the end the whole time.

"I was thinking how dry the air was, and how thirsty I was and how good some water at the finish line would be," he said.

Other runners had different strategies for staying in the race.

For Murphy, it was music.

"I kind of stinks we can't run with headphones," Murphy said referring to a base regulation. "But, I kind of sing to myself. I've got a sweet 80s playlist up there," she said pointing to her head.

For Saenz, it was thinking about his wife and kids back home.

"You're right there with everyone else going through the same pain. You're not out there by yourself. I think that's what gets you through," said Bell who ran in 1:48:51.

Sullivan, who has three marathons and last year's Historic Half under his belt, says the race was a good way to break up the routine of deployment.

"It's just good physical fitness," said Sullivan. "It's good to go out with your friends and do something that's healthy, and it's a fun activity."

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