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RELEASE #2007-11-20-02

Nov. 20, 2007

U.S. ARMY EUROPE SOLDIERS IN AFGHANISTAN RUN 24-HOUR RACE IN HONOR OF COMRADES WHO DIED IN VIETNAM

By 2nd Lt. Monika Comeaux
American Forces Press Service

FORWARD OPERATING BASE FENTY, Afghanistan -- "On the 8th of November, the angels were crying as they carried his brothers away. ... There were few men left standing that day," sings the country duo Big & Rich in their ballad commemorating the fall of 48 American Soldiers from the 173rd Airborne Brigade in 1965 in Operation Hump in Vietnam.

Forty-two years later, members of the 173rd -- now part of U.S. Army Europe's Southern European Task Force and currently deployed here in support of Operation Enduring Freedom -- were joined by other servicemembers and civilians in honoring the Soldiers lost during Operation Hump by participating in a 24-hour running relay. The event celebrated unit cohesion, teamwork and esprit de corps, officials said.



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Soldiers pass off a bayonet used as a baton during a 24-hour running relay at Forward Operating Base Fenty, Afghanistan, Nov. 8 that commemorated the loss of 48 Soldiers of the 173rd Airborne Brigade who died during Operation Hump in Vietnam in 1965. The bayonet was used to symbolize the image on the 173rd's crest.

Participants ran along a nearly three-and-a-half mile route lined by miniature American flags and handed off a bayonet -- the symbol depicted on the 173rd's unit patch - to one another in lieu of a baton.

One Vietnam veteran -- Rick Petersen from the facility engineer team here -- was among the runners.

"I think it is a great idea. I think it is great that everybody is going to come out here and support one another. It is great for camaraderie," said 2nd Lt. Kate Fullenkamp, a quartermaster officer and platoon leader in Company A, 173rd Brigade Support Battalion.

Fullenkamp's platoon of 40 entered with two seven-person teams. There would have been more volunteers, but mission requirements did not allow all of her Soldiers to participate, she said.

"We had more than seven people who wanted to do this, but we picked the best seven," said Pfc. Ikechuku Odi, a combat engineer with Road Clearance Patrol 4, Company A, 70th Engineer Battalion, deployed from Fort Riley, Kan.



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Pfc. Brian Fitzsimons finishes his lap as Spc. Joseph Behm (right) takes off for his, during a 24-hour running relay on Forward Operating Base Fenty, Afghanistan Nov. 8 in honor of 48 of the unit's Soldiers who died in Vietnam on the same day in 1965. Both Soldiers are in U.S. Army Europe's Company B, 173rd Brigade Support Battalion.

Odi was convinced his team would turn in the best time in the event.

"Our tactic is simple -- run as fast as you can," he said, after completing his first lap in a little over 22 minutes.

"Some people are out here for the physical aspect, ... but there are people that are out here because it is fun and you enjoy it and you will always remember it, for sure," Fullenkamp said.

The rules of the run were pretty simple. "Basically it is a 24-hour relay with seven-man teams. One runner must be running at all times," said 1st. Sgt. Drake F.

Sladky, Company C, 173rd Brigade Support Battalion. An avid sportsman, Sladky was one of the masterminds behind the event.

Sladky said many members of the 173rd wanted to organize another run after running a 10-kilometer race shortly after the unit's arrival in Afghanistan. Originally they were aiming for New Year's Day, but when they received a disk containing the music video for "8th of November" from a member of the 173rd Association, "we knew that we had to do some sort of race in commemoration of that date," Sladky explained.

"Everybody in the company helped out, mostly by getting sponsors for the race day and organizing the registration," Sladky said. As a result, a total of 21 teams signed up.

"We were really lucky. We started early and got sponsors. ... The 173rd Association sent the race T-shirts. Niles Harris (the Vietnam veteran injured on Nov. 8, 1965 who was the inspiration for the country song) sent about 200 autographed T-shirts," Sladky said.

Some of the shirts ended up as prizes, but the majority were sent to the 173rd's subordinate units deployed to other forward operating bases that couldn't participate in the run. Prizes included golf clubs, shirts, hats and a more. No team went home empty-handed.

Odi was right when he said he thought his team was going to win. His team completed a total of 51 laps, covering, fittingly, just over 173 miles in 24 hours. The team consisted of combat engineers Staff Sgt. Luis D. Rivera, Pfc. Ikechuku Odi, Pfc. Vincent A. Fiorillo, Pfc. Joshua M. Contryman, Sgt. Eric E. Chappel, Sgt. Bradley J. Edmonds, and Spc. Tin T. Tran.



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