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## Student Veterans to Honor William Miner Through Memorial March

Feb-20-2012

Survivors of the 1942 Bataan Death March could not have envisioned anyone voluntarily making the grueling 26.2-mile journey.

But 70 years later, thousands of active and retired military personnel, as well as civilians, are in training to do just that. And a group of student veterans from Eastern Illinois University plan to be involved. Michael Ruybal, EIU's coordinator of Veterans and Military Personnel Student Services, said he and six others plan to participate in the Bataan Memorial Death March (<http://www.bataanmarch.com/>), held annually across the rugged desert terrain of the White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico. This year's commemoration, to take place March 25, will mark the second consecutive year of EIU's involvement.

The seven prospective marchers are all members of the Black Knights of the Embarras, a veterans group first established on Eastern's campus in 1952 by students returning from the Korean War. According to Ruybal, the Black Knights wanted to participate in this year's memorial march in order to "pay respect and honor a former EIU professor of history and Veteran Services director, William D. Miner."

Miner, who died in 1998 at the age of 83, was a veteran of World War II and a survivor of the Bataan Death March. He was an Army veteran and prisoner of war for 39 months during World War II.

The Black Knights will also be marching in honor of EIU alumnus and fellow Black Knight Dave Peontek, whose father, Henry William Peontek, was a Bataan survivor. "Mr. Peontek, who passed in 1994, suffered from severe PTSD, having nightmares nightly of his Japanese captors attempting to execute him and his fellow soldiers," Ruybal said.

The Bataan Memorial Death March, which began in 1989, honors those World War II heroes who were responsible for the defense of the islands of Luzon, Corregidor and the harbor defense forts of the Philippines. On April 9, 1942, tens of thousands of Americans and Filipino soldiers were surrendered to Japanese forces, and were forced to march for days in the scorching heat through the Philippine jungles. Thousands died.

Since its inception, the Bataan Memorial Death March has grown from about 100 to thousands of participants from across the United States and several foreign countries. Some participate in the full 26.2-mile march, enabling them to experience, in part, what soldiers endured during their long forced trek through the Philippines; others participate in a smaller, less intense 14.2-mile version.

"I'm hoping our participation will continue to build 'esprit de corps' within the veterans program here at Eastern," Ruybal said. "The event builds team work, collaboration and personal pride, along with self accomplishment for the individuals.

"But, most importantly, it is an activity for veterans to take part of, in remembering those who came before us and, in some cases, made the ultimate sacrifice for this nation. We do this to remember and to pay respect," he added.

In addition to Ruybal, this year's prospective marchers include men and women ranging in age from their twenties to their fifties, and representing all branches of the U.S. military: Anna Boehlefeld, Davis; Shannalee Karrick, Ashmore; DeNel' Howery, Charleston; Michael Bird, Villa Grove; August Lamezyk, Radom; and Greg Schoonover, Sullivan.

The Black Knights are currently in the process of raising the \$7,000 it will take to get this year's participants to New Mexico and pay for room/board and registration costs. Anyone wishing to contribute may do so by sending a check made payable to the Black Knights, care of Michael Ruybal, Veterans Services, Eastern Illinois University, 600 Lincoln Ave., Charleston, Ill. 61920.

Additionally, a fund-raising pancake breakfast will be served from 6 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 25, at the Charleston VFW, 1821 20th St. The cost is \$5 per individual. Tickets may be purchased in advance through EIU's Veterans Services or at the door.

Questions? Contact Ruybal at 217-581-7888.



*Shown, from left to right, front row, are Shannalee Karrick of Ashmore and Anna Boehlefeld of Davis; from left to right, back row, are "Gus" Lamezyk of Radom, DeNel' Howery of Charleston, Greg Schoonover of Sullivan, Tommy Hamilton of Carbondale and Michael Ruybal, EIU coordinator of Veterans and Military Personnel Student Services. Not pictured is Michael Bird of Villa Grove.*