

Desert Ruck March Honors Those Killed in Iraq and Afghanistan

A Student Veterans of America chapter at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas hosted a rucksack march honoring all troops who died in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars

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For the second year, student veterans at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) hosted a rucksack march to commemorate the almost 7,000 troops who died in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

Operation Battle Born was started last year by UNLV Rebel Vets, a Student Veterans of America chapter. Thirty-six groups of four or more people each walked 10-mile segments.

The journey took marchers about 370 miles, from Carson City, Nev., near Reno, to Boulder City, Nev., about 25 miles southeast of Las Vegas.

The teams covered about 70 miles each day and carried four 30-pound rucksacks filled with nearly 7,000 dog tags, one for each U.S. servicemember killed in the post-9/11 wars. Participants also visited VFW Posts along the way, including Post 1103 in Tonopah, Nev., and Post 12101 in Henderson, Nev.

VFW Administration and Economic Opportunity Director Tony Lowe participated in the march, starting at VFW Post 1103 and ending outside Tonopah. He said it is “beneficial” for VFW to help groups like SVA.

“It’s important for student veterans’ organizations, such as UNLV Rebel Vets, to help student vets not only make the transition from service to universities but to help them get jobs afterward,” Lowe said. “It can be overwhelming for veterans during their transition.”

As for the rucksack march, Lowe said he was “overwhelmed and humbled” to be a part of Operation Battle Born.

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“I am glad to be able to commemorate those who died in any way I can,” he said.

Derek Butler, an Air Force veteran of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, also participated in the march.

Butler, who graduated from UNLV in 2019 with a degree in social work, said the network of support at UNLV Rebel Vets helped him get through college and his transition from the military.

Butler said honoring those who died overseas should be more than just “lip service” and that more people should take the time to participate in events honoring fallen service members, such as Operation Battle Born.

“People take for granted the sacrifice of those who paid the ultimate price for us,” Butler said. “I am grateful for the opportunity to honor them.” UNLV Outreach Coordinator Dwayne Gordon participated in the rucksack march, too. He is a retired Air Force senior master sergeant who served for 25 years and said his job is to help transitioning veterans find opportunities that their education at UNLV offered them.

“Through this position, I found my mission,” Gordon said. “I enjoy helping veterans with their transition from the military to higher education and beyond.”

As for participating in Operation Battle Born, Gordon said it means “the world” to him.

“It’s just a way the UNLV Rebel Vets organization honors the fallen,” Gordon said.

This article is featured in the October 2019 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Dave Spiva](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.