

RUNNER'S WORLD

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Operation Relay Run

Home from Iraq, soldiers race through historic battlefields.

By Kelly Bastone | March 2, 2009

You'd think that after three deployments to Iraq, Army soldier Jessica Ohle would have had enough of battlefields. But in Baghdad reading Runner's World one evening, Chief Warrant Officer Ohle learned about a new relay this April that would stretch from Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, site of the Civil War's bloodiest battle, to Washington, D.C., her hometown. She imagined running the race with her Army buddies as a way to celebrate their December 2008 return to the United States. So while still in Iraq, she recruited a team of fellow soldiers. "We couldn't possibly get through a day in Iraq without the guys to our left and our right," Ohle says. "So it leaves a big hole in our lives when our battle buddies are no longer there."

The 200-mile [American Odyssey Relay Run Adventure](#) was dreamed up by Bob Fleshner, a history buff and veteran of relays such as Reach the Beach in New Hampshire. Teams for the American Odyssey relay include up to 12 runners, who each run three four- to seven-mile legs. The fastest groups will finish in 20 hours; slower ones will need closer to 35 hours. Ohle expects that Team 525, so named because they all serve under the 525th Battlefield Surveillance Brigade, "won't be competitive." Instead, the race will offer them one last hurrah: While at Fort Bragg in Fayetteville, North Carolina, they'll receive new assignments that will send them in various directions.

"People usually think about war in a sterilized, analytical way that's all about statistics," says Chief Warrant Officer Todd White, 36, a member of the team. "We'll have a different perspective on the battlefields and war monuments, a more visceral understanding of what those guys were going through."

Running for Peace

Every member of Team 525 runs regularly—the Army requires it—but only half consider themselves "real" runners. Ohle, 41, didn't start running until after she graduated from college and joined the Army. "My first mile at basic training took me 10 minutes," she says.

Before long, those runs offered her an escape from the stress of military life. Eating, sleeping, even showering as a group made Ohle yearn for the solitude of a [long run](#). While deployed in Baghdad and Balad, she ran five to six times per week and completed military races ranging from the 5-K to the [half-marathon](#). Her eight-minute pace has also helped Ohle earn respect among her mostly male peers.

"Fitness is highly valued here," she says. "I'm the grandma of the team, but I can outrun some of these younger kids."

As the relay team's captain and its most serious runner, Ohle designed the training regimen her teammates have used to prepare for the relay. A few ran in Iraq, logging miles around the lake at Baghdad's Victory Base Compound. Ohle didn't face combat while in Iraq, but most members of Team 525 did—which made it difficult to pursue a regular running routine before they returned to Fort Bragg.

Ohle's comrades say coordinating relay logistics—something that can confound civilian runners—seems simple to soldiers accustomed to synchronizing battle operations. "We've been through a lot together, so we already have a sense of team," says Chief Warrant Officer George Masterson, 32. And the long, fun-deprived deployment heightened their readiness to turn this relay into a traveling party. Ohle's promise of adult beverages motivated some of the soldiers, like Sgt. Nicholas Walters, 22, who signed on to fill the team's last remaining vacancy.

Ohle expects that touring Antietam Battlefield in the dark, dashing past the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials, and ending in the shadow of the Washington Monument will stir up emotions. "Running with friends past some of the most significant sites in the country, culminating in reentry to my hometown," she says, "will probably make me cry."