

Force and Valor JUNE 2006 Volume 1 Number 1

The Long Walk by MARYANNE MOLL

The 53-kilometer march began from two different points. On May 12, at seven-thirty in the evening, over six hundred SAF Troopers marched from Camp Bagong Diwa in Bicutan, led by the Crisis Response Group of the Rapid Deployment Battalion. The force headquarters followed, consisting of the Command Group and the Directorial Offices of Personnel, Intelligence, Operations, Logistics, Community Relations, and Finance, together with the Airborne Class. The Third Battalion and the Force Support Battalion followed, with the First Battalion securing the rear.

Under a signal number two typhoon, the march progressed throughout the highly populated streets of Lower Bicutan to hit the ten-kilometer mark along C5 highway after two hours. Several control points were set along the way, each four to seven kilometers apart, and were manned by ushers who monitored the progress and speed of the

troops. The second smaller part of the march began at five-thirty in the morning of the same day at the SAF Training School Annex in San Isidro, Rizal. The SAF Troopers, 256 strong, marched over small hills and dense woodland to cover a distance of almost 50 kilometers. They had seven control points on their route, which were not specified by name but by grid coordinates. Along a certain point in the route, they were to patrol specific areas known to harbor armed dissidents of the New People's Army. The group along C5 attracted a lot of attention from passing motorists. In the wake of political turbulence after the incidents of February 24 and 26, where the government was able to intercept a coup being plotted by



several oppositionist groups, the SAF has been in the public eye. The media was quick to cover the event and air the public's qualms about seeing 600 SAF Troopers in full uniform and battle gear walking along a highway during the night of a typhoon, but the Commander, PCSupt Silverio D Alarcio Jr, was just as quick to give reassurance that this was a peaceful march which would test the equipment, system, and endurance of the SAF, and would prove that the SAF spirit was alive. But more than a systemic, organized march, it was a symbolic walk home.

The SAF did not have a permanent address until the mid-nineties. From 1983, it had transferred bases several times, which was understandable for a small unit of the Philippine Constabulary that was initially composed of barely 60 personnel, which were routinely deployed to different areas, as was their duty. Thus the SAF in its early years, plainly speaking, really could not quite settle.

When it was formally activated, the unit was already operating from the roof deck of the national headquarters building in Camp Crame, which was then the base of the Philippine Constabulary. With only around 60 men at the time of its activation, the force grew into a battalion minus sized unit, and was organized into a first battalion, which stayed at the roof deck, and a line company, which was stationed in Camp Mariano Castañeda in Silang, Cavite. Camp Castañeda then was the Philippine Constabulary Training Command that had stable and hardy buildings whose more fragile parts had gone to semi-ruin. Most of the basic structures themselves were usable, but most of the bunks had been corroded by rust, the window panes have all but shattered, and there were wild goats living in some of the empty rooms. Camp Castañeda was chosen as the most ideal place for the SAF headquarters because it was isolated and at the same time only an hour's drive from Metro Manila. The camp had a large land area, and it had creeks, low hills, and rolling plains that were perfect training areas for PC Ranger trainees. The state of the buildings and other facilities did not faze the SAF men. They went right down to work sanding and repainting the bunks, clearing the rooms of mud and grass, hosing down the mildewed and discolored walls, and eventually succeeded in making the place habitable.

The SAF was based in Camp Castaneda when the EDSA revolution broke in February of 1986. After coups and during the administration of President Corazon Aquino, the country was under constant threat of coup de etats and other destabilizing activities, and the SAF's location proved to be an operational inconvenience, so the battalion was moved back to Camp Crame by November 1986, and was housed in the buildings of the Narcotics Command, Kiangan Hall, and the PC Sosia. It was only a year later when the Battalion transferred to Camp Bagong Diwa in

Bicutan, Taguig City, and occupied what is now the area of the BJMP. This setup would not prove lasting. After the creation of the fourth battalion, the SAF moved back to Camp Crame and stayed inside the gymnasium until the end of 1990. In the early nineties, the force moved its base once again, this time to Fort Bonifacio. Shortly after, it moved back to Camp Bagongdiwa and shared the present area with the NCR Command. After a while, as the size of the force grew, arrangements were made for it to occupy its present headquarters. The stay in Camp Bagong Diwa was the longest. There the brigade headquarters and the battalions saw many operational and administrative developments, but as the force grows to keep up with the demands of national security, it needs larger space and more facilities for training. Internal Security Operations itself requires training in an actual mountain environment, and the rolling hills of Baras, Rizal is the perfect training ground for the courses. Along Boso-Boso, Rizal, after a long stop for rest and breakfast-lunch, the force began to march again at 12 noon to its final destination, the bivouac area in Baras. The troopers' uniforms were wet, their feet were starting to swell and had blisters and, and inside their combat boots there were sanitary pads to help cushion the swelling and slippage. Several already rode on the escort vehicles but most stayed upright to walk. Boso-Boso was only 11 kilometers from the bivouac area, the rain had stopped, and the worst was over. It was the home stretch. Three hours later, after having marched for a total of 20 hours, the troops were finally home.