

January or February. Then I set up the original date to do this on April 1, sort of as an April Fool's joke, but the mission wouldn't allow it," Howerton explained. "Then we set it up for Tax Day, April 15. Again, the mission wouldn't let that happen. So, then we set it up for May Day [May 1]. We wanted it to be in conjunction with a day that a lot of people would remember."

Howerton and nine other soldiers set out on the run. They took with them water, fruit and Howerton's special drink; watered-down Gatorade. The soldiers served as the sergeant major's support crew, running team and force protection escorts. Along the way, six of the soldiers took turns running with him, but at times, Howerton ran alone.

Howerton, who is used to running mostly on tracks or rural roads, kept a good pace until he reached the one city along his route, Skopje, Macedonia.

"I had never run through a city before for this distance," he explained. "Most of my runs are on a quarter-mile track, half-mile track or on a trail. I couldn't figure out why we were running really good until I hit Skopje. When we hit Skopje, for some reason, I felt the pain. I felt like we weren't going anywhere; I wasn't getting anyplace. I was kind of cranky with my crew. I was thinking, 'Will we ever get through this city?'"

"Looking back on it, I realize this was the first time I had run through a major city. At that point in a distance run, you've got to concentrate on your running. I couldn't concentrate because

of the traffic and the people and the different noises. I just lost the concentration of running. It was very, very difficult. I lost a lot of time on the run because of that."

Along the way, Howerton only stopped for "potty breaks" and to drink. "I don't check my feet or change my socks when I'm running. The only time I change my shoes is when I'm on a 24-hour run on a quarter-mile track. My feet swell, so I go to a shoe that's a half size larger.

Howerton and his crew ran through the gates of Camp Able Sentry, Macedonia, eight hours and 45 minutes after leaving Camp Bondsteel, Kosovo.

The Camp Bondsteel to Camp

listens to music, but most of the time he meditates and focuses on the run; but running solely on Camp Bondsteel has been monotonous.

"The thing that really bothers me is when I'm running on Bondsteel and right outside the perimeter, I'll see a road going off into nowhere. I just want to see where that road goes."

Howerton keeps a log of how many miles he's run. While deployed, he ran 546 miles. To date, his personal best is running 100 miles in 17 hours, 25 minutes. His record distance for 24 hours is 115 miles.

Although Howerton has qualified several times for the Boston Marathon,

missions have always kept him from actually running in the race. His most famous race thus far was a three-day run across Tennessee.

"I thoroughly enjoyed that. I had done it one year and fell

out due to heat and stomach cramps," Howerton said. "So, when I went back to do it the second year, I had overcome that." Howerton ran 263 miles in three days, his longest distance for one race.

Since March 1989, when he began competing in ultra-marathons, Howerton has logged 17,516 miles.

Unlike marathon running, there is no training program for the ultras. Each runner must train his or her own way. For Howerton, no matter how much he trains, every run is a challenge, a struggle between body and mind.

"When I'm getting ready for a run, I tell a lot of people before this run that I'm going to do this run. Then as I'm running and the pain sets in — when the pain sets in, you're tired, you get weary, you want to quit and the brain's fighting the body — I remember that I told this person, this person and this person that I'm going to do this. If I don't make it, I have to go back and face those guys and I don't like that embarrassment."

Even before Howerton returned to Baumholder, he had already set his next goal. "My goal now is to do an ultra-run in Germany and to be able to win an ultra-run in Germany.

"As a Christian, God has given me a great ability to run. I couldn't do it without the support of the military, the chain of command, God and my wife — not necessarily in that order."

Unlike shorter races, the ultra-marathon runners are not divided into categories. Howerton will be competing against some runners half his age. Nonetheless, Howerton plans to compete and win.

"In ultra-marathons there are no age categories, it's first place or loser."

For Howerton, setting the example for soldiers is just as important as the competition.

"The soldiers that went with me said they had never known this distance before. I showed them that with the proper training and the dedication, you can do whatever you want to with God's will, Howerton said.

"Some of those guys set their own personal records by running 10 or 12 miles, more than they've ever run before. They are really pumped up about it now. They see that 'Yes, you can do this if you train for it.' They are pretty eager now. Some of them are really getting into running, because of it."

"In ultra-marathons, there are no age categories, it's first place or loser."

Sgt. Maj. Billy Howerton

Able Sentry run marked Howerton's return to ultra running, it also served as a teaching point for several of his soldiers.

To train for his run, Howerton ran five times a week, running 15 miles at least two times a week. His only cross training is bicycling.

"A lot of soldiers don't comprehend that to get this, you're putting in 10 to 15 miles daily. You're getting up early every morning to run. You're running late of a night, rather than watching TV. There's a lot of dedication, training and work that goes into it," he explained. When running, Howerton sometimes

Camp Able Sentry, Macedonia - 52.3 miles

Camp Bondsteel, Kosovo to



Sgt. Maj. Billy Howerton and escort maintain a steady pace and high spirits during the grueling 52.3 mile run from Camp Bondsteel to CAS.