



Aussie firefighters run across US in 9/11 tribute

Monique Ross

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Melbourne firefighter Paul Ritchie will run across the United States as a tribute to those who lost their lives in the September 11 terrorist attacks. (*Tour Of Duty*)

A team of Australian and American firefighters are preparing to embark on a 7,400-kilometre run across the United States to remember the September 11 terrorist attacks.

The runners leave Los Angeles, on the west coast of America, on Thursday for the 31-day run to New York City.

They aim to complete their journey on the ninth anniversary of the deadly suicide attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon.

They will take their first steps at 8:46am (local time), which coincides with the time the first hijacked plane struck the first of the Twin Towers.

The event, dubbed Tour of Duty 2010, aims to ensure September 11 will not fade into the history books and also pay tribute to emergency services workers around the world.

The man behind the tour, Melbourne firefighter Paul Ritchie, has been in the fire service for around 22 years.

Like many people, he will never forget the events of September 11, which claimed the lives of 2,976 people including 411 emergency services workers.

"I remember the event very clearly. Being a firefighter, it's always stuck in my mind," he told ABC News Online.

"It's something that is really related to what we do and it was something I really wanted to do with a passion - to commemorate 9/11 and all the emergency services workers that were taken from us."

Mr Ritchie says emergency services workers played a vital role in the aftermath of the attacks.

"Down at the World Trade Centre they all worked together ... for two or three months before they were ordered out of the site," he said.

"They worked for seven months - then I know [New York's] mayor Rudy Giuliani placed an order to remove the firefighters there so they could clean the site.

"But it didn't work - the firefighters still stayed there and worked on tirelessly."

Melbourne firefighter and event co-ordinator Jon Sculley said he will be running for three reasons.

"First and foremost is to honour and remember the fallen firefighters and emergency service workers of September 11," he said.

"But also the civilians from around the globe who had their lives taken.

"It's also an opportunity to acknowledge people who serve globally. Every day there are people who give their time so other people can live safer, happier and healthier lives.

"We are very aware of that in our role, of what people do - military, police, ambulance, nursing - we want to run to thank them for their time and effort."

For many of those taking part in the marathon journey, preparation for the challenging run started months ago.

"I came over about six months ago and drove the course to make sure we were welcome and that it could be done," Mr Sculley said.

Extreme heat

The runners will face many physical challenges as they approach New York City.

"We've been training for probably 12 to 15 months," Mr Ritchie said.

"Most of the guys are reasonably fit now, given the conditions and the weather conditions they've had to endure during their training.

"I think the heat will be a major factor - when we go across the Nevada desert we are looking at experiencing 50-degree-plus heat, so it's going to be an interesting experience."

Mr Sculley agrees the physical side of the run will prove difficult.

"It is going to be challenging - it's high altitude, extreme temperatures and high humidity," he said.

"There are 36 runners - 16 Australians and 20 Americans - and if you look at the group they are varying in ages and abilities.

"I've been doing what I can to make sure I get on the road. Often with runs like this you get fitter as you go along, so I'll just take it as it comes and I'll do my share when the time comes along."

Emotional challenges

But Mr Sculley says for many, the emotional challenges will prove more difficult.

"Once we get on the road, this could grow into something quite large, like a snowball.

"We know that certainly in New York it will be very, very emotional.

"Even this morning we met a firefighter from Chicago who had lost one of his brothers, so we had a minute's silence for him.

"[Firefighters are] quite a stirring group of people. They are very unique in their makeup.

"I am looking to each day unfolding and just enjoying each day as it comes. But there is no doubt it will be an emotional journey."

The marathon journey will be run as a relay, with the runners divided into three teams.

Mr Ritchie says each team will run for six hours in relay, sharing the load in short bursts on the road.

He says depending on the heat, the teams will spend six hours running and then 12 resting, so there are runners on the road 24 hours a day.

"There's a special brotherhood, a kindred spirit that we have with the American people," he said.

"It's a fantastic feeling being among firefighters of America.

"For the Australian people to come together and show that we have a common bond ... is something quite special to be a part of."

Wide support

Mr Sculley says the team has been shown great support so far, with the run attracting support from former prime minister John Howard, comedian Jerry Lewis and actor Hugh Jackman.

"We had a great send off in Sydney as a group when the Australians got together for the first time," he said.

"John Howard spoke and there is a young girl, Annabelle Priftis, coming along to sing for us across the land."

Ms Priftis says she is honoured to be a part of the tour.

"I'll be singing the American and Australian anthems on the run," she said.

"Not every day, but at most of the official functions and in the major cities that we arrive in."

Proceeds from the run will be donated to a number of different charities including burns units across Australia and the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation in the US.