Man's long trek brings message of remembrance

By Niesha Lofing

Sacramento Bee: Eddie Gray goes through a lot of shoes.

About one pair every 1,000 miles to be exact.

He eats dehydrated food, and there's always a protein bar tucked in the right-hand pocket of his orange fleece jacket.

Home is a tent and a sleeping bag he carries in his 70-pound backpack.

Gray, 33, has chosen life on the road.

A Marine who left active duty as a lance corporal in 2000 following an injury, is walking the perimeter states of the U.S. to raise awareness about veterans' issues and see America.

"I wanted to meet the people I served for, the people buddies have died for," he said.

Gray began his quest April 3, starting from his hometown of Ashland, Mont.

He had decided 10 years ago to make the walk, with the goal of spreading awareness about veterans' health care.

Hospitals and patient care for veterans need to improved, he said.

"They do the least amount of care for veterans," Gray said. "These men and woman, they gave their freedom, their lives for their country. They deserve better."

Gray's quest brought him to Sacramento on Tuesday. Gray, who is of North Cheyenne heritage, met with Lt. Gov. John Garamendi and members of local Native American tribes. He planned to leave Sacramento on Friday and make his way down Highway 128 to Highway 121 to Napa, then to Santa Rosa where he'll stay before traveling south on Highway 101.

Gray said he walks an average of about 25 to 35 miles per day, even in the rain and snow.

"I just keep walking," he said.

He does much of his walking at night. Some nights he doesn't stop, not even to eat. He covered on 125-mile stretch without stopping, he said.

Gray has a little AM/FM radio that he carries to keep him company. He had an iPod when he began, but gave it away. Someone gave him a CD player, which he passed on to a homeless vet. Same goes for a DVD player and other things people have given him along the journey.

"I help a lot of people along the way," he said.

He even gave away a pair of his mileage-worn shoes - to an elementary class back in Montana. Nike has sponsored Gray and provides his footwear.

Monetary donations are used to replace supplies. Gray also receives help from various veterans groups, such as the Veterans of Foreign War, American Legion and United Service Organization posts.

Though he is a distance running. the roughly 10,000-mile walk has already taken a toll on his body. Gray, who has run the Boston and New York marathons, said he often feels the mileage adding up in his knees and ankles.

He has dislocated his knee. His trek through the Seattle area in the rain left his feet so battered and bruised that he had to take five days off.

"It's a sacrifice," he said. "I'm sacrificing myself again, but this time (it's) to help my fellow veterans and people."

He strives to meet with governors in every state he visits. He said he has spoken with President Barack Obama's staff to set up a meeting with Obama.

When he completes the trip - likely in 2010 - he said he plans to write a book about the experience.

He hopes to inspire others the way his journey and people he has met along the way inspired him.

"What I'll take away is the sense that our country is great. People are great and can do so much for others," Gray said. "It just makes me happy to be part of this country."

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