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Mud, sweat and cheers

It's one thing when your name is mud. It's another when your entire body is caked with it.

But if you're like the dozens of Sumterites who participated in Saturday's Ultimate Challenge Mud Run at McCrady Training Center in Eastover, you just might like it.

Hosted by the U.S. Marine Corps' Columbia Marine Foundation, the annual event, which is in its 16th year, took place all day, with 1,800 teams of four people departing at 20-second intervals from dawn until almost dusk. Participants sloshed through 4.2 miles of all-terrain mud spread throughout the woods and the base's training center, while crawling, climbing, jumping and swimming over 30 obstacles.

The obstacles bore titles like Belleau Wood, Mt. Suribachi, Funchilin Pass and A Shau Valley — all significant battles, places and items from Marine Corps history. They ranged from 6- to 10-foot hills of dirt and mud, water holes as deep as 15 feet, trenches, culverts and more typical military obstacles, like the Stairway to Heaven ladder climb and several cargo net crawls — all in the mud, of course.

Sumterite Molly Matthews, who works out regularly and trained for the event, called it her "hardest physical challenge to date."

"The most difficult obstacle was definitely having to walk the narrow log across the deep ravine," she said. "This took a lot of courage."

Team captain Laura Beth Jones, a certified personal trainer in Sumter, competed in her first mud run in 2007.

"It was one of the most physically and emotionally challenging events that I have ever participated in," she said. "You are forced to use your brain as you think through each obstacle, your heart as you gather your courage to try it, and pure muscle as you run, jump, and pull yourself over obstacles that are at least 3 feet taller than you."

Matthews and Jones were part of an all-female team from Sumter called "In Christ Alone," which came in 39th place in the women's division and 744th overall, with a time of 1 hour, 8 minutes, 1 second. Their husbands' team, "Sons of Thunder," came in 147th overall with a time of 53:35.

"After being fatigued from running, I was surprised how much I enjoyed wallowing in the mud pits on the many water obstacles," said Jones' husband, Mike Jones. "It was unnatural, and yet strangely natural."

Cristian Badiu, program director at the Sumter Family YMCA, participated in two mud runs — one in the morning, the other in the afternoon.

His first team, "Semper Lutea," included Andy Reynolds, Rick Jones and David White and came in 33rd overall, with a time of 46:37. Badiu's second team, "Coterminus Runners," which he ran with Tripp Ballard, Todd Warrick and Thomas McElveen, came in 359th, with a time of 59:19.

A surprise for many during the run was the 10-foot, feet-first drop into a pit of muddy water that was 15 feet deep. Participants then had to swim to the other side.

"I was already breathing hard and then I reached the top of the hill and heard the Marines yelling, 'Just jump in and get ready to swim,'" said Laura Beth Jones. "Because my breathing was not under control, I inhaled the muddy water. I came up with my nose burning and my feet feeling like bricks."

Teamwork, Jones added, was the key.

"You really have to work together and never leave your teammates behind," she said.

Registration ranged from \$30 to \$40 per person and filled up weeks before race day. Proceeds benefit Marines and their families from the Columbia area who have been wounded or killed while serving in active duty, as well as local college scholarships named after Marines killed during service and local events which promote the Marine Corps in the community.

A total of 1,717 teams completed the course. The overall winner, "The Competition," took just 35:11 to reach the finish line. The last team, "Dirty Monkeys," finished in just under three hours.

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