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Crowd cheers on flag runners

By LORENZO PEREZ, Staff Writer

RALEIGH - The cheers of children and the barking of Marines welcomed the volunteer horde of runners carrying the U.S. flag to the State Capitol on Wednesday.

Any concerns Michael E. Burr and other organizers had about luring volunteers for their cross-country run to honor victims of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks seemed misplaced. Where one pack of local runners let off as the flag was passed in front of the Capitol, a handful of others stood by, eager to jog alongside the Marines leading the next leg.

"It's just taking off beyond our wildest imagination" said Burr, the New York-based American Airlines pilot who proposed the relay run. "You wave the flag, and people get behind it."

More than 100 people gathered in front of the Capitol to cheer as the flag runners jogged east up Hillsborough Street to Meredith College, where the Golden Knights, the U.S. Army parachute team, met the runners.

The flag that passed to Marine Staff Sgt. Mike Pecha on Wednesday morning started its journey in Boston on Oct. 11, the one-month anniversary of the attack. Since then, volunteers have passed the flag along as they have run south down U.S. 1. The relay has continued nonstop, 24 hours a day, with as many as 50 runners pacing the flag on different legs.

Runners will continue south with the flag to Augusta, Ga., where they will veer west toward their final destination, Los Angeles International Airport, where they are scheduled to arrive Nov. 11. (The route and details are available at <http://www.flagrun.org>).

Symbolically at least, the relay run is meant to complete the routes of the two



N.C. State University student Megan Wright, left, watches about two dozen Marines and others follow Staff Sgt. Mike Pecha as he carries the U.S. flag down Hillsborough Street in Raleigh. The run is part of Flag Across America, a cross-country relay.

Staff Photo By Sher Stoneman

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TOMORROW: High 78 °F; Low 54 °F. Sunshine and delightful.

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hijacked airliners that crashed into the World Trade Center. Money raised during what is being called Flag Across America will go to charities supporting victims of the attacks.

"We will show we are greater than the sum of our parts," Burr said to applause at a brief ceremony on the Capitol steps. "We will show we are one nation, indivisible under God."

Dan McLaughlin, 54, heard about the run from television reports and decided to head downtown with a friend to run a couple of miles with the flag.

"Personally, I think it's important that we keep going as a country, but it's also important that we show our strength as individuals," said McLaughlin, a financial adviser and avid runner from Raleigh. "I'm doing this because I have the freedom to do it, not because I have to do it."

"I think it's neat we can do something like this," he said. "It's too bad it has to come on the tail of such a tragedy."

Amy S. Grant, 35, was just finishing her leg as McLaughlin prepared for his. Grant, the youth ministry director at White Memorial Presbyterian Church in Raleigh, fell in with the flag runners about four miles from the Capitol, as they jogged south on Capital Boulevard.

With people cheering and drivers honking in support along the route, Grant had no trouble cruising up the steps of the Capitol.

"It was the easiest run I've ever run," Grant said.

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