

WALKING AWAY THE WAR



"I want to simplify my life more..."

- Jordon Haun

LOCAL VETERAN HIKES APPALACHIAN TRAIL AS PART OF PROGRAM

By Tommy Knisley, Staff Writer • tknisley@erwinrecord.net • Photos contributed



Photo by
Tommy
Knisley



In 1948, a young soldier named Earl Shaffer told a friend he was going to hike the entire Appalachian Trail as a way to help cope with the horrors he had witnessed in World War II.

Today, what started out as one man "walking off the war" has become known as the Warrior Hike program, an initiative that helps soldiers returning from combat readjust to a civilian life.

Jordon Haun, of Erwin, graduated from Unicoi County High School in 2006 and was an Army Specialist in Iraq from 2007 to 2009. He recently just returned from Afghanistan in February, after being stationed there for eight months while working with a private contractor.

Haun is at mile marker 340 of the hike and says that the hike has helped him a little more each day. He and his comrades made a stop in Erwin on Friday at Uncle Johnny's Hostel, a popular location for hikers.

"The hike has been very strenuous," said Haun. "Hiking up hill, you become exhausted. Going downhill, you just get sore."

Haun compared the extremely physical nature of the Appalachian Trail to a form of therapy, saying it forces people to 'relive these emotions.'

"You sometimes hate it in the moment," said Haun of the hike. "It draws you in though. It forces you to go through the emotions you might experience in combat, relive them, and deal with them. It's been great so far."

Haun had initially planned on hiking the Appalachian Trail anyways upon his return from overseas, but then heard about the Warrior Hike program from a colleague. He initially thought he was too late to apply.

Haun managed to get signed up in time, but the hike didn't make things easy starting out. It rained for the first three days of the hike and then he injured his Achilles while in Georgia.

Still, Haun persevered, motivating himself to keep pushing and resting himself at the appropriate intervals. The hike itself is pretty straightforward. All of the hikers can move at their own pace. Some hikers go back and forth between hiking with a small group and hiking alone. Some hikers will even go the entire trail alone. The only requirement is that all hikers meet up

at certain checkpoints once a week at certain points along the trail.

Haun says that it's been around 'half and half' for him as far as hiking alone or with a group. The toughest part of the trail for Haun was hiking through the Smokies.

"It was bitter cold and tough," said Haun. "It was snowy at times and the winds were sometimes between 50 and 70 miles per hour."

All of the hikers carry the needed essentials with them. Luxuries are very few. The items include tents, bottles of water and cooking materials. They also take a water purification system and of course, plenty of food. All of the items they take are solely for function and purpose.

The hikers also take a special notebook, which helps them be aware of various water sources throughout the trail. The book also notes which water sources should be avoided.

Haun said that the hike helps him more each day. All of the hikers will complete the six-month journey on September 12. Haun said that he hopes to be a 'calmer person' by the time he completes the hike.

"I want to simplify my life more, you know?" said Haun.

Haun said that he and the comrades he hikes with have been steadily building chemistry, yet everyone sort of hikes at their own pace. Each of them are dealing with different things.

At 25 years of age, Haun is the youngest member participating in the hike.

For any other veterans that might be considering the hike, Haun said 'do it'.

"I would highly recommend it," said Haun. "It's really feels like I'm being a part of something bigger... it's helped me to lose weight and get in shape. It's a lot different going from just sitting on your rear to having a house on your back."

Haun said that he isn't sure if he will return to the military or join the civilian sector following the completion of the hike. It's one of the things he says the hike will help him decide.

One thing is certain however: Haun, like hundreds of soldiers before him, is using the beauty and serenity of the Appalachians to readjust to life back home in America. The peaceful sounds of birds chirping and winding mountain streams offer a peaceful reconciliation compared to the sights and sounds of war.

"It's just been great so far," said Haun after taking a refreshing sip of Gatorade. "To any veterans that are thinking of doing something like this, I would highly encourage them to do it."

