



Walking off the war

By **Mark Larabee**, PCT Communicator Managing Editor

Shawn White had just begun his third tour with the U.S. Army in the Middle East when he was nearly killed.

He'd done two year-plus tours in Iraq in 2007 and 2009 as an engineer with a unit that cleared roads of bombs and booby traps – Improvised Explosive Devices or IEDs in military parlance.

So he'd already seen his share of danger, death and more before heading to Afghanistan in 2012. He was not there long. During a firefight, a nearby ammunition cache caught fire and Shawn and a comrade were seriously injured. Within 30 days of hitting the ground, he left the country on a hospital flight with burns on 10 percent of his back and arms.

Healing those physical injuries would take months and several surgeries in the burn ward at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas. But the mental wounds from those long months in the war zone nearly always take longer to shake. Shawn knew something wasn't right inside.

"It was a rough road," he said. "The first deployment was physically demanding – 14 months. When I came home, things were a little different."

He started running with a bad crowd, hanging out in bars late at night, drinking too much. "I knew this was not going to work for me," he said.

Stationed at Fort Lewis, near Tacoma, Wash., Shawn was drawn to the mountains and the trails. He thrived on the experiences those places provided. He loved the fact that he had to be self-reliant.

"It was an enlightening, self-acknowledgement moment," he said. "I loved the lifestyle I'd chosen in the backcountry."

He'd heard about a program where soldiers could walk off the war, and he soon found the Warrior Hike online.

U.S. Marine Corps veteran **Sean Gobin** started the program. As he was preparing to leave the Marines in March 2012 after several tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, a buddy tried to talk him into climbing Mount Kilimanjaro. But Sean always had wanted to hike the Appalachian Trail.

"I literally drove from the back gate of Fort LeJune to the trail and started hiking," he said.

Having seen how war affected his friends, he decided to raise money on his hike to benefit veterans, stopping in trail towns and engaging with veterans groups and other service organizations. He raised \$50,000.

"At the end of the hike, as crazy as it was, I did look back, and there was something to be had, hiking eight hours a day to process all that had happened in combat" he said. "Bing! Inside your own head was really therapeutic."

Knowing firsthand the physical, emotional and spiritual benefits long-distance hiking could have, Sean started the “Walk off the War” program. It’s designed to support combat veterans transitioning from their military service by engaging them in a thru-hike on one of America’s National Scenic Trails.

Having other veterans to hike with is a way to deal with the shared experience of combat, Sean said.

“They understand PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and the issues of transitioning back into society,” he said. “You go from evil to seeing incredible people who like to help. It reframes your thinking.”

In 2013, Sean worked in partnership with the **Appalachian Trail Conservancy** to organize a hike for veterans, repeating the process this year on the Pacific Crest and Continental Divide trails.

Ken Schwartz, a PCTA Hike the Hill volunteer and two-time PCT section hiker, worked with Sean for months to organize the PCT hike, arranging stops at **American Legion** and **Veterans of Foreign Wars** posts along the way.

Ken said trail town veterans will greet the hikers. Having so much in common is a plus, and the trail community’s welcoming nature will add to the supportive feeling.

“I’m mainly doing this for the PCT,” Ken said. “I want to do some good for the people and the trail.

Angela Powell is among five who began the PCT on April 13. They plan to finish in early September. The Kansas native who now lives in Phoenix was in the **U.S. Navy** for 9½ years before leaving in 2011 to go back to school.

She spent much of her military career in “damage control” as a shipboard firefighter and expert on biological and nuclear defense methods, serving tours in Guam, Maine, San Diego and Iraq.

In Iraq, she was not on a ship. Instead, she was reassigned to work with an Army military police unit at a prison on a forward operating base near Basra, in the southern part of the country.

“To spend 14 hours a day with a fence between you and the bad guys – you are playing mind chess with these guys,” she said. “It was a very awkward experience. You get the worst of it, being female. You are not respected.”

“I’m not supporting anything,” she said. “Even though I’m getting this education, I’m not fully engaging. And it’s even harder when you know your brothers and sisters are out there fighting and you’re not wearing the uniform.”

Previous page: The mounted color guard from the Veterans of Foreign Wars post in Campo escorted the hikers for the first five miles.

Below: Warrior Hikers make their way across the high desert toward Warner Springs – with Kevin Black, Tom Bielecki and Shawn White. Courtesy of Warrior Hike Facebook page.



2014 PCT hikers

Thomas Bielecki

Hometown: Grand Rapids, Mich.
Resides: Alto, Mich.
Service: U.S. Army
MOS: Infantryman
Deployments: Afghanistan

Kevin Black

Hometown: Clarksburg, W.Va.
Resides: Fallbrook, Calif.
Service: U.S. Marine Corps
MOS: Legal Services Specialist
Deployments: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait

Angela Powell

Hometown: South Haven, Kan.
Resides: Prescott, Ariz.
Service: U.S. Navy
MOS: Damage Controlman
Deployments: Southeast Asia, Iraq, Persian Gulf

Joshua Shields

Hometown: Mundelein, Ill.
Resides: Saint Amant, La.
Service: U.S. Air Force
MOS: Airborne Cryptologic Language Analyst
Deployments: Iraq

Shawn White

Hometown: Virginia Beach, Va.
Resides: Olympia, Wash.
Service: U.S. Army
MOS: Combat Engineer
Deployments: Iraq, Afghanistan



She believes the PCT hike will be a way for her to clear her head. She is considering reenlisting as an officer once she gets her nursing degree.

"I think it will be super helpful to be around people with similar experiences who understand what I'm going through," she said. "I may not know these guys yet, but being veterans, we're family members."

Shawn White also tried to explain the incredibly strong "unspeakable bonds" that only military people share and understand. Married with a 9-month-

old son, he's promised his wife a new beginning once he comes home from the PCT.

"With the injury and by transition being so fresh, this long walk is really going to solidify the healing," he said. "The emptiness will be gone. You spend 28 months in combat and you serve a purpose day in and day out. You lose a piece of yourself once you come stateside."

"You look for something to fill that void," he said. "This program gives you five to six months to really reflect. In the backcountry, you're in charge of you." 🌿

The 2014 PCT Warrior Hikers, l-r:
Shawn White, Kevin Black, Angela Powell,
Thomas Bielecki and Joshua Shields

