



Peace Process

Combat Veterans Take to the Appalachian Trail
to Walk Off Their Wars | By Chad Stewart

Retired Army Sergeant Major Rob Carmel, who through-hiked the Appalachian Trail last year with Warrior Hike's Walk Off the War program, peers off into the distance at McAfee's Knob in Virginia. Photo courtesy of Rob Carmel

Tucked away in the vast, emerald wilderness of northern Maine, a pack of combat veterans huddled together before embarking on the final miles of their journey. They laughed and joked, smoked cigars and drew stick figures of themselves in the dirt before heading out to finish their mission.

Six months and 2,180 miles ago, 14 men and women started this pursuit in Springer Mountain, Georgia, with the goal of hiking the length of the Appalachian Trail. About 5 million arduous steps later, six remained. All that stood between the survivors and the completion of their mission was roughly five miles of steep, rugged trail.

It is what they'd been waiting for: One last tortuous climb through mud, rock and fog to reach the summit of Mount Katahdin, Maine's highest point and the northern end of the trail.

More than four hours later, each member summited the 5,268-foot peak, navigating their way through rushing water, a slick rock scramble and a barren plateau, before reaching the mountain's famous sign that marks the summit. Some scaled the peak swiftly, as if the vertical pathway offered no resistance. Others hiked at a slower pace, absorbing the scenery and reminiscing over the past months spent on the trail.

The group didn't always travel together, but the hugs, tears and champagne showers at the top illustrated the bonds formed over the many months together. This was a family.

The veterans—three Marines, a soldier, a sailor and an airman—were members of Warrior Hike, a nonprofit that helps combat veterans transition into civilian life. The organization's Walk Off the War program works with sponsors to provide outdoor gear for the hikers and works with American Legion and VFW posts along the trail to provide support for the participants.

The program, created by former Marine Corps Captain Sean Gobin, is designed with healing in mind. The solitude of nature and an escape from the distractions of everyday life helps the hikers clear their minds.

"Being on the Appalachian Trail and hiking for 12 hours a day for six months without a computer and TV, your brain has nothing else to do but process the experiences that you had," said Gobin. "So your brain is forced to come to terms with what you've dealt with."

Before the advent of modern transportation, armies marched home and navies sailed thousands of miles to reach their homeports. There was time for those troops to reflect on their war experiences with comrades with whom they fought alongside. The long trip home acted as a buffer between military and civilian life; time and camaraderie helped them heal before they returned to society.

These days, a warfighter's trip from the front lines to their front door can be measured in days or hours. For the modern warrior, there is no time to decompress. Gobin returned home from combat three times—twice from Iraq, once from Afghanistan—with each journey lasting less than 72 hours.

"That's a significant psychological switch to flip. When you do it over and over again, that switch begins to short circuit and you have a hard time making that mental adjustment," he said.

Gobin, who spent years waiting for an opportunity to hike the trail, finally had a chance when he left the Marine Corps in



the spring of 2012. He thought the journey would be a way to decompress and ease back into civilian life after 12 years in the Corps.

He planned the trip with his hiking partner, fellow Marine Corps Captain Mark Silvers, while on active duty in Afghanistan. Silvers thought that if they were going to hike 2,185 miles, they should raise money for wounded warriors, so the pair devised a way to raise the funds as they were hiking in the wilderness.

"We spent the next three or four months and came up with a concept of stopping at VFW posts and American Legion posts along the way to expose what we're trying to do and generate donations," said Gobin.

They built a website and planned their hike while stationed overseas and hit the ground running once they returned to the states. "The day after we left active-duty service, we were driving to Georgia to start the hike."

Gobin and Silvers spent months on the trail, raising more than \$50,000 to purchase adapted vehicles for severely wounded troops at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland.

But it was after the hike Gobin realized the impact it could have on other combat vets.

"I finished up at Mount Katahdin and I looked back at all the incredible experiences that I had on the trail and off the trail, at the trail towns, and I realized this was an incredible experience for a veteran coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan that needs a way to recover from the psychological wounds of combat."

Gobin decided to retool the program for 2013, transforming it from a



Above: Retired Marine Corps Staff Sergeant Steve Clendenning kisses the famous sign that marks the summit of Maine's Mount Katahdin and the northern end of the Appalachian Trail. Photo by Cindy Ross

Opposite page top: Former Air Force Staff Sergeant Sharon Smith, right, and Clendenning follow the steep, rocky trail to the top of Mount Katahdin. Photo by Cindy Ross

Bottom: Former Marine Corporal Kevin Reed hugs fellow Warrior Hiker Stephanie Cutts, a Navy veteran, as they reach the end of the Appalachian Trail. USO photo by Chad Stewart



fundraiser to support wounded warriors into a transition program for combat veterans.

He wasn't the first person to witness the healing powers of the Appalachian Trail. Earl Schaffer, the first man to hike the entire length of the trail, did so in 1948 after serving in the Pacific theater during World War II. He sought to "walk the Army out of my system" to deal with the trauma of war and the loss of a close childhood friend who died at Iwo Jima.

At the time, most experts believed that a hike of the entire trail was impossible, but Schaffer proved the doubters wrong. He completed the journey in 123 days and duplicated the feat in 1965 and 1998, at the age of 79. Schaffer, who died in 2002, inspires hundreds, if not thousands, of hikers each spring as they gather in Georgia, ready to carry themselves and their packs north for months.

For the Warrior Hikers who followed Schaffer's bootprints to Maine, the past months had been filled with sore muscles and wounded feet. Some endured hospital visits for appendicitis, kidney stones and norovirus, and all faced down snow, harsh heat waves and were inundated with stretches of soggy weather. From the outset, the hikers expected a tough trek, but daily grind of the trail was more than what some of them expected.

Retired Marine Corps Staff Sergeant Steve Clendenning, who spent 20 years in the infantry, said the hike was more difficult than anything he had done in the Corps.

"I thought this was going to be easy coming into it, but it was very hard," the Purple Heart recipient told a crowd of supporters the day after summiting Katahdin. "It really puts a toll on the body, especially somebody like me coming from the infantry, where your body is just put through the wringer and then you come out here and do this every day. It really hurts."

Gobin, who traveled to Maine to hike with the group during its final day, explained the tangible benefits of completing

the hike.

"At the end of the six months, physically you're in the best shape of your life. You've lost a ton of weight. Mentally, you've processed all the crap that you had to deal with while you were overseas."

Most deployed troops know that a majority of Americans support them and are thankful for their sacrifices, but because they are in a foreign country or war zone, they don't always feel the appreciation they've earned or hear the "Thank you's" they deserve. Often, they are surrounded by a foreign population that isn't always welcoming, or enemies who seek to kill.

"When you're in the military, you know that America supports its veterans, but when you're inside looking out, you don't really see it," said Gobin. "By doing a through-hike and getting to meet all these great people, it becomes readily apparent just how supportive the nation is to its veterans."

On the trail, the number of smiling faces they encountered numbered in the thousands. They made friends with fellow hikers and were supported by everyday Americans along the way.

"The best thing about the trail is the trail community," said retired Army Sergeant Major Rob Carmel, a Maryland native who served 32 years before leaving the service in 2013. "You meet so many great people in the woods."

Many people who lived in the trail towns—mostly small, one-stoplight hamlets along the route—would offer the veterans support in the way of rides into town, a hot meal or a place to rest their sore bodies for the night.

Former Marine Lance Corporal Tom Gathman, who deployed to Iraq twice, once as a fireteam leader and another as a scout sniper, was thankful for the support and cherished the friendships he cultivated during the journey.

"All the people that I met—

The section of the trail known as "The Gateway" (shown above) is the last test hikers face before trekking across a flat plateau that leads them to Katahdin's summit. USO photo by Chad Stewart

Building for the Future

With the success of last year's hike of the Appalachian Trail, former Marine Corps Captain Sean Gobin is expanding the organization's area of operations. In addition to another Appalachian Trail hike this year, Warrior Hike is planning through-hikes of the Pacific Crest Trail and the Continental Divide Trail.

In 2015, he's looking to add a cross-country bicycle trek and a boating trip that will span the entire length of the Mississippi River. Both programs will be designed to allow severely wounded troops to participate.

The organization has seen applications nearly triple this year and Gobin is excited for the trips to start in March and April. To follow the 2014 hikers, or find out if they'll be in a forest near you, go to facebook.com/warriorhike.



Former Marine Corps Captains Sean Gobin, left, and Mark Silvers, right, break just long enough to snap a photo during their 2012 through-hike of the Appalachian Trail. Photo courtesy of Mark Silvers

it just feels like they're the best friends that I've had," he said. "I love the people that I meet out there. And it's really helped me to find ways to love life."

Warrior Hikers were the distinguished guests of many fundraising banquets, and most of the events were attended by local veterans who fought in wars long ago. Usually held at VFW and American Legion posts in trail towns, these celebrations, often aided by good food and a beer or two, were some of the most therapeutic events along the way. More than just celebrations, the occasions offered the hikers opportunities to meet people who had fought similar battles and learn how they transitioned back into civilian life.

"Past generations of veterans could now look at my generation of veterans," Gobin said. "And they could say, 'I was where you were 50 years ago. I understand what you're going through. There's a light at the end of the tunnel and this is how I did it, and you can get there, too.' That was a huge benefit."

The camaraderie between the Warrior Hikers and vets of wars past was eclipsed only by the togetherness felt within the group. For former Air Force Staff Sergeant Sharon Smith, the hike was an opportunity too good to pass up. The Gulf War veteran and former combat flight medic wanted to hike the trail on her own, but hiking with fellow war veterans made the trip more enticing.

"When I found out about Warrior Hike, I thought it would be amazing to be here out here with my brothers and sisters and to have that camaraderie again that I missed, you know, that I haven't had for a long time."

Former Navy Petty Officer 2nd Class Stephanie Cutts, who left

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—Sean Gobin

the service in 2008, was driven by a similar desire. "I wanted to be around vets again," she said.

Cutts, who deployed to the Persian Gulf in 2004, felt that if she surrounded herself with a group of determined, hard-working people, she would have a better chance at completing the epic journey. Thirteen other combat vets certainly fit the bill.

"I wanted to be part of the program because I didn't have the internal drive to finish on my own. I would have quit in the first month, you know, if I had been by myself without this huge support team."

Kevin Reed, a former Marine corporal and a Gulf War veteran, elected to hike the trail with Warrior Hike because he wanted to set an example for his daughter and two sons.

"I came out here to better myself for my children," Reed said. "I ended up embracing a whole new family and I'm so appreciative of every-

thing that they have done for me, everything that's been done for me along the way."

The day after summiting Katahdin and completing her through-hike, Smith was able to put her journey in perspective.

"It's been the most incredible, emotional and personal epiphany during this time for me to be out and hiking on my own. ... When I'm hiking up rocks and hiking up hills and falling down and getting up and saying, 'Damn, I just lived through that.' And I'm going to keep going."

"No matter what happened to me or whatever I lived through—the war or whatever—I can get through this and I can move on, love life and keep hiking." ★

—Chad Stewart is the senior editor of *On★Patrol*.