

# WARRIOR HIKE

## WALKING OFF THE WAR

**Warrior Hike sponsored 14 veterans hiking the Appalachian Trail during 2013, and plans on expanding its program nationwide in 2014. Some 25 VFW Posts along the trail provided comfort through camaraderie to vet-hikers, as well as financial donations.**

BY KATHERINE DAWSON

Regardless of the season, gusty winds tear through the trees that coat the Appalachian slopes. Mourning doves, masked by lush foliage, coo softly into mountain mist. To the hiker, it's simply a background harmony to the sound of his boots against the ground.

WWII veteran Earl Shaffer sought this melody in the mountains after returning from the Pacific Theater. In 1948, he was the first to hike the Appalachian Trail's entire route, starting in Georgia and ending in Maine (see sidebar on page 37).

Shaffer's commitment to the trail inspired future generations of veterans to hike the eastern mountain range to find inner peace.

Today, the non-profit program Warrior Hike helps veterans to do just what Shaffer did decades ago: walk off the war. And VFW Posts have become enthusiastic participants in the process.





## WARRIOR HIKE: THE BEGINNING

The excitement in Warrior Hike founder and executive director Sean Gobin's voice is impossible to ignore.

Inspired by Shaffer's hike, Gobin and fellow Marine Corps veteran Mark Silvers hiked the Appalachian Trail in 2012. But their mission had a twist: they would work with VFW Posts to raise money for adaptive vehicles that would be given to amputee veterans.

"The biggest threat in Afghanistan [and formerly Iraq] is IEDs," said Gobin, who completed two tours in Iraq (2003, 2005) and one in Afghanistan (2011). "So many of our guys are coming back as single, double, triple and quadruple amputees—this was our war."

The team collected contributions by stopping at various Posts along the trail. Each Post offered something unique—some held barbeques with more than 200 attendees. Other times, VFW members served up a steak dinner, or simply

offered the hikers a warm bed to sleep in. Donations from the Posts ranged from a few dollars to several thousand dollars.

"It was everything from us just talking to three members at the bar to huge events with hundreds of people," Silvers said.

After 4½ months of hiking and stopping at nearly 40 VFW Posts, Gobin and Silvers reached their destination at Mt. Katahdin, Maine, on July 31, 2012. Donations totaled \$48,500 for adaptive vehicles—enough to provide three wounded veterans with trucks that fit their needs.

For Gobin and Silvers, helping fellow vets regain some independence was priceless.

But on a personal level, what they gained on the Appalachian Trail couldn't be reflected in the form of a check.

"After hiking the trail, I was in the best shape of my life," said Gobin. "But even more so, I grew to be more comfortable

in social situations, and enjoyed meeting with people throughout the trail and towns. I was able to process and come to terms with my wartime experiences after being in nature for as long as I was."


## NEW DIRECTION

After witnessing the benefits of hiking the trail firsthand, Gobin solely took the reins of Warrior Hike in 2013. His former partner, Silvers, decided to focus on his studies at the University of Virginia.

Gobin opened up the program to veterans of all eras, inviting them to hike the trail with Warrior Hike as their sponsor. But instead of conquering the mountains for adaptive vehicles, they would do so for emotional gain.

"The benefits that I experienced while hiking the trail are something that I wanted other veterans to share as well," Gobin said. "Especially those who are experiencing PTSD symptoms."

Warrior Hike has a limited number of

A photograph of a hiker resting on a rocky mountain peak. The hiker is lying down on a large, flat rock, with their backpack next to them. The background shows a vast landscape with more mountains and trees under a cloudy sky. The text is overlaid on the bottom right of the image.

**"FOR VETERANS,**  
the hike gives you the chance to think about  
your life and the beauty of nature. You're  
able to focus your energy on hiking instead  
of wondering if you're going to get shot at."

—WARRIOR HIKER ROBERT CARMEL

A "warrior hiker" stops to rest on the McAfee Knob,  
located in Roanoke County, Va., on May 24, 2013.

PHOTO COURTESY SEAN GOBIN





PHOTO COURTESY SEAN GOBIN

Warrior Hike founder Sean Gobin and hikers Kevin Reed, Sharon Smith, Stephanie Cutts, Thomas Gathman, Carl Clendenning and Robert Carmel celebrate reaching the summit of Mt. Katahdin in Maine on Sept. 13, 2013.

## VFW DONATIONS

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 totaling nearly \$50,000 purchased three adaptive vehicles in 2012. A similar amount was raised in 2013.

PHOTO COURTESY CINDY ROSS



Post 6000 in Narrows, Va., presents Warrior Hike with a check for \$1,400 on May 30, 2013, which will go toward future Warrior Hike groups.

sponsored spots, so Gobin personally selects participants. In 2013, the program supported 14 veterans.

Each potential hiker must be a veteran who is VFW-eligible. Gobin automatically enrolls each participant into VFW at the start of the hike. Gobin interviews the applicants and takes their stories into consideration. He wants the trail to be a healing journey for those who need it the most. Specifically, he looks for vets who lost friends at war, experienced heavy combat, or had several long deployments.

“On the Department of Defense side, they realized that after 12 years of war, they were dealing with some veterans with serious issues,” Gobin said. “After completing the trail myself, there was an ‘ah-ha’ moment in terms of transition at the end of the hike. It was a transformation from the military to civilian life. It became obvious that this was necessary for combat veterans.”

The 14 selected vets were then issued hiking gear that was donated by outdoor equipment manufacturers and retailers. Through donations contributed during Gobin’s time on the trail and this one, Warrior Hike was able to provide a \$300 monthly stipend to each hiker. Money was used to purchase additional food and first-aid supplies.

The starting ceremony on March 17 at Amicalola Falls near Dawsonville, Ga., was the beginning of a season-long journey. As the veterans made their way north they visited 25 VFW Posts.

“We were glad to have them come again,” said Kim Greene, commander of Post 5202 in Waynesville, N.C.

Greene’s Post hosted the two warriors last year, and opened its doors a second time in 2013. “It’s absolutely a program I would recommend to anyone I knew who could hike the trail,” Greene said. “It seems like a great opportunity to let some of the wartime stress go.”

Post members gave the hikers a ride from the mountain slope to their homes, where they cooked the trail-weary vets a hot dinner. Before the hikers left, several members made personal financial contributions to the program.

In another instance, Post 6000 in Narrows, Va., held a community-wide barbeque and donated \$1,400 to Warrior Hike.

“It’s a great program, and it’s good to

## — War Vet Earl Shaffer Original Thru-Hiker — ➔

**WWII VETERAN EARL SHAFFER** never wanted fame or riches. He lived on a farm in York County in rural Pennsylvania, working various jobs such as a beekeeper and antiques dealer. He lived without electricity until 2000, and never owned a refrigerator. They called him “The Original Crazy One.”

In 1948, he became a trailblazer within the hiking community. Shaffer was the first person to hike the entire Appalachian Mountain Trail, beginning his journey in Georgia and ending it in Maine. He did so over the spring and summer seasons, completing it in four months and four days.

But before he took on the eastern mountain range, Shaffer served with the Army Signal Corps in the Pacific Theater, installing radar and communications facilities. Enlisting in 1941 before Pearl Harbor, he was a forward-area radioman well into 1945.

During Shaffer’s service, his close childhood friend was killed while fighting on Iwo Jima. The two originally planned to hike the Appalachian Trail after WWII. Feeling lost, he took to the trail himself.

“After the war, I couldn’t settle down to do anything, so I started walking,” Shaffer told the *Washington Post* in 1998.

Hiking in combat boots and with his Army rucksack, Shaffer did indeed walk—some 2,160 miles.

He earned the title of the first ‘thru-hiker,’ or someone who has fully covered the trail on foot.

As years passed, Shaffer heard the call to hike the mountains again in 1965—this time traveling south from Maine to Georgia. He completed the trail in 99 days and became the first person to

hike the trail in both directions.

In addition to being an experienced hiker, Shaffer also was an author. The Appalachian Trail Conference published his book about his time on the trail, *Walking with Spring*, in 1982.

The thru-hiker shocked his following in 1998 when he decided to hike the trail for a third time—at 79 years old. It was a tribute to his first hike 50 years earlier.

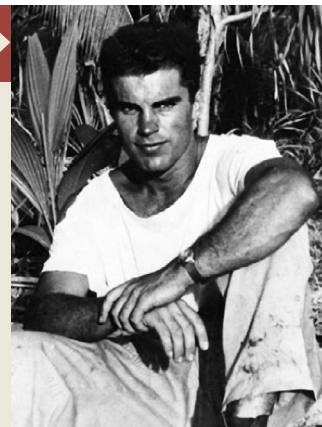
For the first time since his Army service, he saw a doctor who approved his health for this hike. Shaffer was in peak health, which he attributed to his natural lifestyle that never included alcohol or smoking.

And so, starting his hike with the same rucksack he used in 1948, he began his journey in March 1998 at Springer Mountain, Ga.

On Oct. 15, 1998, he reached his destination at Mt. Katahdin, Maine, after 173 days.

“Some people say I’m a legend,” Shaffer told the *Washington Post*, “I don’t know. I just keep going.”

Shaffer died in Lebanon, Pa., of liver cancer on May 5, 2002, at the age of 83. He is a charter member of the Appalachian Trail Hall of Fame.



**Earl Shaffer served in the Pacific during WWII.**

see them interact with the Post members,” said Dan Karnes, commander of Post 1264 in Roanoke, Va.

Karnes’ Post offered them several meals and a place to sleep. One of his fondest memories of Warrior Hike’s visit was simply sitting around and sharing stories.

“VFW will continue to help out where we can,” he said.

According to several of the hikers, VFW Posts were their biggest fans.

“It was incredibly helpful to interact with veterans at VFW Posts in the trail towns, especially the Vietnam-era vets,” Gobin said. “They were a great source of camaraderie and mentorship. They would tell the hikers, ‘I get where you’re coming from,’ and remind them that there’s a light at the end of the tunnel.”

By the time the hikers reached Mt. Katahdin in Maine, on Sept. 13, they had stopped at 25 Posts and raised nearly \$50,000 for next year’s Warrior Hike.

“Our hikers become VFW members because VFW makes sense for us,” Gobin said. “We support combat veterans, and so does VFW. It’s a natural fit.”

### ‘MENTALLY RELAXING, PHYSICALLY CHALLENGING’

“Warrior Hiker” Robert Carmel has served his country since 1983 as a field artilleryman. He’s seen combat in Kuwait (1991), Somalia, Afghanistan and Iraq. His service also includes two tours in Korea. In 2013, he retired from the Army.

“For veterans, the hike gives you the chance to think about your life and the beauty of nature,” Carmel said. “You’re able to focus your energy on hiking instead of wondering if you’re going to get shot at.”

Carmel, who turned 50 while on the trail, was one of only four vets who hiked the entire route from Georgia to Maine.

Two others had to get off for a brief period of time, but hiked the majority of the trail and met the other four in Maine.

According to Gobin, eight others had to part ways with the mountains throughout the six-month journey for various reasons—including sickness and personal issues.

Persian Gulf War veteran Stephanie Cutts and Iraq War veteran Thomas Gathman hiked the 2,186 miles, earning

the coveted title of “thru-hikers.”

Sharon Smith, an Air Force veteran who deployed to Saudi Arabia from October 1990 to May 1991 as a medical technician, also earned that distinction.

Smith, emotional at the memory of finally reaching Mt. Katahdin, described the overwhelming feeling she experienced upon reaching the summit:

“The weight of the world was off of everyone’s shoulders. Seeing Sean’s face when we reached the top—he was so happy, so proud. And all of these guys—tough guys—were jumping around like little boys. In one word, it was epic. It was the journey of a lifetime. An amazing journey that allowed me to think and process a lot of things from when I was in the service. When I reached the top, it brought back my confidence and reminded me I can do anything.”

When Smith started her hike on Springer Mountain in Georgia, she picked up a stone. It represented everything she wanted to get rid of during her hike. The same way she left emotional burdens along the trail, she left that same stone on Mt. Katahdin.

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“I was able to ask myself, ‘how do I want to change my life,’ now recognizing I want adventure again,” she said. “I came off that mountain a different person.”

Smith plans on hiking the Continental Divide Trail in 2015.

But the hikers aren’t the only ones singing the praises of outdoor recreation as a form of therapy for veterans.

Warrior Hike has teamed up with the Psychology Department at Georgia Southern University in Statesboro.

For Warrior Hike 2014, Dr. Shauna Joye and researcher Zachary Dietrich will be studying the effects long-term hiking has on the participants’ emotional states.

They will interview the hikers before, at a half-way point, and after the hike is over. Additionally, Joye and Dietrich will be sending the hikers weekly messages that offer tips on stabilizing their mental health.

“There hasn’t been a whole lot of research done on wilderness therapy and the impact it has on mental health,” Joye said. “But there’s a lot of research to support that the combination of the outdoors and exercise can help [veterans]

transition better.”

Joye and Dietrich will be looking at hikers who walk the trail alone, versus hiking in a group. They will also be documenting the veteran’s emotional state throughout the process. The two are hoping that the study’s results will teach therapists more about the emotional needs of veterans transitioning back into civilian life.

“[Hiking the trail] was like no other experience I’ve had in my life,” Carmel said. “It was mentally relaxing and physically challenging at the same time. The end was bittersweet.”

## **OUTDOOR THERAPY NATIONWIDE**

Starting in 2013, Warrior Hike shifted its focus to promoting outdoor therapy. But Gobin isn’t leaving it at that, as he plans on continuing to expand the program.

Warrior Hike will continue to hike the Appalachian Trail. But in March 2014, Warrior Hikers will also be hiking the Pacific Crest Trail on the West Coast and the Continental Divide Trail that traverses the Rocky Mountains.

The Appalachian Trail Conservancy has been working with Warrior Hike

since 2013. But now the Pacific Crest Trail Association and the Continental Divide Trail Coalition are also on board.

“It’s been tremendous,” said Teresa Martinez, director of the Continental Divide Trail Coalition. “Working with Warrior Hike gives the trail great exposure and provides us an opportunity to connect with our surrounding communities.”

Martinez says that the Coalition has contacted community leaders, including VFW Posts, to prepare them for Warrior Hikers this spring.

“Veterans are such important components in our communities in the Rocky Mountains,” Martinez said. “Hiking on the ‘Backbone of America’—it’s transformative—and the trail exists exactly for that reason. For veterans to heal their souls on the trail—there’s really no greater purpose that the trail could provide.”

Looking beyond 2014, Gobin has some other trails in the works. Currently, he is looking into a biking trail that runs across the country and a kayaking trip down the Mississippi, specifically crafted for severely wounded warriors. ➔