

WARRIORS

WALKING OFF THE WAR

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY CINDY ROSS



Kevin Reed
United States
Marine Corps
Infantry Mortarman



Tommy Gathman
United States
Marine Corps
Infantry Rifleman



Sharon Smith
United States
Air Force
Medic



Steve Clendenning
United States
Marine Corps
Light Armored
Vehicle Crewman



Rob Carmel
United States Army
Field Artillery



Sean Gobin
United States
Marine Corps
Armor Officer



Stephanie Cutts
United States Navy
Hull Maintenance
Technician

Veterans with the Warrior Hike program converge with other celebratory A.T. hikers on Katahdin



AROUND THE CAMPFIRE,

the veterans talked of the kind of nightmares that jar them awake in the middle of the night; and of how they check and recheck windows and doors when they hear a sound. They talked of exploding bombs and the memory of a suicide bomber who drove his dump truck into the Marine post. They talked about how their best buddies were killed and, how, afterwards, they got put on a dozen different meds. The kind of stuff that makes them forever vigilant; always watching doorways and never sitting with their back to a restaurant entrance. Even years later, after they are home, it continues. They don't ever sleep well, they have a hard time finding peace, and if they get snippets of it, it doesn't last. It is all so exhausting. Until, they find themselves walking the Appalachian Trail.

Last year, United States Marine Corps Captain, Sean Gobin thru-hiked the entire 2,000-plus-mile Appalachian National Scenic Trail after returning home from active duty in Afghanistan. What occurred to him while following the white-painted blazes that lead from Georgia to Maine, was that he was walking the war out of his system — becoming healthier, happier, and healed. This idea of ridding one's psyche of demons by walking in nature is not new. The first A.T. thru-hiker, Earl Shaffer, did just that in 1948 when he walked World War II out of his system. In that vein, Gobin spearheaded the Warrior Hike "Walk Off The War" program, which supports veterans transitioning from their military service by thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail. Veterans who are selected to participate in

the "Walk Off The War" program receive the equipment and supplies required to complete a thru-hike, Trail town support with veteran and hiking organizations located along the A.T., and assistance with job placement opportunities upon completion of the hike.

In March 2013, thirteen Warrior hikers left Springer Mountain, Georgia, with their eyes set on reaching Katahdin at Baxter State Park, Maine six months later. When they came through Pennsylvania, my husband, Todd Gladfelter, and I hosted them. When a long-distance hiker reaches Pennsylvania on the Appalachian Trail, they are usually at a psychological low point. The Tuscarora Sandstone rocks exposed on the long, spiny Blue Mountain can trip up the fittest of hikers. The elevation map reads like a cruising trail with little or no elevation change, except for an occasional water-gap break. So they expect to motor through the miles. The heat and humidity also soar in July, when most end-to-enders come through our fair state, and the denuded oak trees on the ridges, eaten by gypsy moth larvae, provide little shade from the oppressive sun. The half-way point of the A.T. is in central Pennsylvania. One thousand miles is a nice chunk of Trail to have on your boots, so quitting can become pretty darn attractive. It is a time when support and encouragement are much needed to get over the "Pennsylvania hump" and continue the long push towards Katahdin.

Todd and I knew this problem intimately, as we both completed the entire Appalachian Trail and ran a hostel for years along the route near Hawk Mountain Sanctuary in Eckville under the Volunteers in the National Parks Program. We now only



occasionally bring home hikers and host them, but for the Warrior hikers, we opened up our hearts and our home. I enlisted the help of my friends who wanted to meet them and also had a history themselves in the military. We had a big potluck dinner around the campfire and utilized my Rain Stick to pass around and use as a Native American talking stick and share stories. What poured out from the Warriors was unforgettable.

Veteran Steve Clendenning told of a being plagued by a recurring nightmare: he is trapped in an abandoned building in Iraq, pinned down — and always dies. Steve's vehicle was hit by an improvised explosive device (IED) during his service in the United States Marine Corps. He spent a week in the hospital with a traumatic brain injury and substantial hearing loss. Every year since the attack has been a challenge as he struggled with thoughts of suicide and post-traumatic stress disorder. But the dream has finally stopped, he reported as he sat by the fire at our backyard get-together. So have his companions' nightmares, as they sleep cradled in Mother Nature's soothing woods.

Since 2001, more than 2.5 million veterans have returned home from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but many of them have never transitioned from their experiences. This is evident by the recent report from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, which stated that more than 20 percent of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. And even more startling, every day, 22 veterans commit suicide.

That the Warriors are finally able to sleep is monumental in their healing process. This achievement was worth every minute of work needed for Sean to orchestrate the Warrior Hike and every blister, arduous climb, rainstorm, and sore muscle that the Warriors have experienced. When speaking with Sean, he shared with me that the Warrior hikers had some of the typical long-distance hiking challenges — the sore knees, deep snow

Clockwise from right: Following their climb, the Warriors lead the parade at the Trails' End Festival in Millinocket, Maine; Sharon Smith nears the end of her thru-hike; Steve Clendenning (left) and Adam Bautz, U.S. Marine Corps — who had to leave the Trail in Pennsylvania due to family matters — discuss some of the traumas of being a war vet during a relaxing stay at the author's home in Pennsylvania; Rob, Steve, Stephanie, and Adam on the Trail in Pennsylvania.

in the southern mountains, intense heat waves, and long, wet, rainy stretches to deal with.

For retired Sargent Major Rob Carmel, one of the hardest things for him on this hike was not being in charge, but taking a back seat, watching his comrades engage in perhaps questionable behavior and not stepping in, just letting them go to find their own way, "hike their own hike." This group of diverse ages and backgrounds had been brought together and stayed together, for the most part, throughout the entire 2,000-plus miles. This is not always the norm for thru-hikers. Because the Trail exposes all your character flaws and highlights, all your true colors come through. It enabled them to watch each other go through the rough lows and spectacular high points. They watched the transformation of their hiking comrades occur before their eyes.

Stephanie Cutts, the Navy mechanic, who lugged herself up Springer Mountain and is now 60 pounds lighter from the entire hike, explains, "the Trail has changed me back to who I used to be." Another Warrior reports that he did not realize that he had issues (anger and such) until he began the A.T. It has been a





journey of self-discovery for him, one of personal awareness and insight. This is the first step to healing — understanding and admitting that you have issues that need to be dealt with. That is one of the gifts of spending a long time on the Trail — you might not solve all your personal problems but you do come to learn who you are and attain a level of acceptance.

It has been a struggle for Sean to see his vision of the Warrior Hike through. The road blocks in getting the program off the ground were many. He began by building a website, then sent out applications seeking combat vets, set up sponsors, organized gear, arranged for the vets' transports, all while he was at the University of Virginia working on his MBA. Sean said Warrior Hike has multiple purposes. A big one was to set up events coordinated with the VFWs and American Legions along the Trail towns. This helped create visibility and educated the general public on the Appalachian Trail and the Warrior Hikers themselves. This exposure resulted in broadening local community support for the Trail and the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) and reaching people who may have known little to nothing about the A.T. and what it is like to actually hike it. It informed folks of the therapeutic outcome of an extended hike on the Appalachian Trail, for combat vets and for the everyday lay person. The ATC is proud to be an integral partner to this program. "The ATC helped promote the Walk Off The War hike, and we love the fact that the A.T. experience was so meaningful to all of the Warriors who participated," says the ATC's executive director Ron Tipton. "This is a great example of the value of the Trail to our country."

People came from everywhere to offer their support. In Vermont, help from "Trail angels" was off the charts. Sean said they could count on one hand, how many times the Warrior hikers were offered full-hearted hospitality, so generous and giving were the Vermonters. Often, checks were presented to the organization to ensure that future vets in the upcoming years will be able to participate in this very worthwhile program.

Another wonderful outcome was all the beautiful camaraderie and connection the Warrior hikers made with the older vets who they met at various events. They were in their shoes 40 years ago and there was positive talk of "a light being at the end of the tunnel." Sean wanted the Warrior hikers to socialize, forcing them to communicate and interact at the events, helping them to learn how to be with regular people again. The rule was — you didn't have to hike as a group, but you needed to attend the events as a group. This schedule forced them to stick together and, as a result, come to care about each other.

Sean sent group e-mails to all the Warrior hikers and personally talked to many of them on a daily basis. Throughout the entire Georgia-to-Maine journey, he was there for them. He was able to remain removed and offer guidance. In the Marine Corps, Sean served as a Company Commander. His job was to make sure that his people completed their mission. But this isn't the military and the Warrior hikers were here to heal, so treading lightly and leading with a bright, illuminating light was necessary.

Today, all the Warriors have seen remarkable improvement in the wilderness of their minds. Two of the Warrior hikers, who



From top: Sean and Rob carry the Warrior Hike banner to the peak of Katahdin; Emotional Warriors take a moment to enjoy their amazing accomplishment.



took a break from the Trail half way through, reported that they were surprised when the bad dreams and their anger, triggered anew by rude behavior, returned. They realized they needed more time in the maternal cocoon of nature, more miles walking to sort things out. Hopefully, the second 1,000 miles did just that.

The Warriors reached Katahdin this past September. Four out of the thirteen who began reached the summit having remained on the Trail for the entire six months. They are: Rob Carmel, U.S. Army, Stephanie Cutts, U.S. Navy, Thomas Gathman, U.S. Marine Corps, and Sharon Smith, U.S. Air Force. Two others, U.S. Marine Corps veterans Steve Clendenning and Kevin Reed rejoined the Warrior hikers for the final climb of Katahdin, as well as the 100-mile wilderness, after briefly leaving the Trail to contend with injuries and family issues. Following their climb, the group attended the Trails' End Festival and a barbeque hosted in their honor at Millinocket, Maine's American Legion Post 80. The 2,000-miler Warriors are thinking about what to do to create more peace when they return home to further nurture their connection with the natural world, be it relocating to a wilder environment, finding a job outdoors, or some other action. Sean has also connected Warrior Hike with Orion International — a successful military job career placement organization, which will help the Warrior hikers find and succeed at their next step.

This first year for the program has been a testing ground. Sean shares that next year's program will be even better after a poll is taken and feedback gathered. Ron Tipton believes the ATC will

continue to support the program in the coming year and it will also, hopefully, be endorsed by the federal government. The Pacific Crest Trail Association is on board to sponsor an end-to-end hike on that 2,600-mile national scenic trail and three of this year's A.T. Warrior hikers hope to be on that team. The Continental Divide Trail Coalition is also hoping to sponsor Warrior Hike.

Tom Gathman, who lost friends during his deployment in Iraq, said, "As we hiked from Georgia to Maine, we came to terms with some of the things that we have seen, experienced, or may have had to do. And we got plenty of time to think about those things." Steve Clendenning feels the same way, "With everything I was dealing with, PTS, I thought hiking the Trail would help me. It is so peaceful and calming in nature. Out here, I sleep like a newborn baby. I might hurt all day long from hiking up a mountain, but when I get to a lookout and can see forever and reflect on what God has created, and the people in my life that I have lost, and I have lost more than thirty friends...I really needed this hike. I'm going to live my life for those that couldn't."

There is more hiking and more healing ahead for these combat vets and, hopefully, for many others like them. The fact that the Warrior hikers now know where to go when they need to find peace is monumental. Saint Augustine's Latin quote, "Solivtur Ambulando" — it is solved by walking — could not be more true. ⚡

For more information about the Warrior Hike program visit: warriorhike.com

Clockwise from above: Sean Gobin and Rob Carmel en route to Katahdin; The Warriors attended events coordinated with the VFWs and American Legions in Trail towns along the way; Steve and Adam enjoy some refreshing recreation near the author's house in Pennsylvania.

