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### Veterans Hiking Appalachian Trail Find Peace In The Woods

By Katy Savage, The Vermont Standard ([thevermontstandard.com](http://thevermontstandard.com))

Nightmares from war still plague Carl Clendenning. He sleeps with one eye open at his home in North Carolina, not able to stop thinking about the friends he lost and the sites he saw in Iraq. But his nightmares have subdued in the past five months as he sleeps in the woods with nothing but trees and the forest.

In March 2013, five warrior hikers left Springer Mountain in Georgia with the goal of walking 2,200 miles of the Appalachian Trail to Mount Katahdin in Maine by September. The memories of war go through their heads over and over again. The more they walk, the more they let the memories go.

They've hiked 1,720 miles so far through pouring rain and 100-degree temperatures, where it was so hot they wrung out their clothes and watched the sweat drip down like water. They have stories of walking miles without anything to drink, when every stream was dry with black mud.

"This has been harder than 20 years of Marine Corps," Clendenning said.

Clendenning's vehicle hit an explosive device in Iraq in 2006. He spent a week in the hospital with a traumatic brain injury and substantial hearing loss.

Every year since the accident has been a challenge. He's struggled with thoughts of suicide and post-traumatic stress disorder. Clendenning still has migraine headaches and dizziness. He still takes a "cocktail of medication" every day.

There is a tattoo on his back for the friend who was shot in the head in Iraq after trying to save another Marine. He watched over 30 of his friends die overseas and he remembers each of them.

But he rests easier in the woods, where everything he owns fits in a 35-pound bag on his back. There is no pressure in the woods, no smells or scenes that remind him of war.

The warrior hikers are passing through Vermont and spent last weekend at Daniel Quinn's house in Woodstock. Across the river in his backyard, hikers with large packs on their back and walking poles in hands make their way down to his house.

Quinn has welcomed more than 5,000 hikers to his home in the past 20 years and has seen more than 200 hikers this year. A novice hiker, Quinn trades hospitality for tales from the trail.



“Most of them have an incredible zest for life, they have incredible stories to tell and each person is on his or her own journey,” Quinn said.

Stephanie Cutts is one of those on her own journey. Cutts was in the Navy for six years and was only able to go home once a year. Things in her family broke while she was gone all the time. She’s walking to let the thoughts go.

“You go over all your mistakes and all your regrets and you learn to let it go,” Cutts said. “You’re surrounded by these people with the same mentality, same goals.”

About 22 veterans commit suicide every day, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs and more than 300,000 veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan suffer post-traumatic stress disorder, but only half seek treatment. The Defense Department has diagnosed at least 233,000 veterans with a traumatic brain injury since 2001.

Out in the wilderness, the warriors fight a different battle than they did in the war. They’re fighting against themselves, their thoughts and demons.

Robert Carmel, 50, of Washington state doesn’t know what civilian life will be like after he’s done hiking. He was a sergeant major for 32 years in the war and has been deployed to Somalia, Kuwait, Afghanistan and Iraq. He officially retired from the military in July.

Carmel doesn’t share his war stories, but they’re always with him when he walks.

“Sometimes the smallest thing can remind you of something that was really hard,” he said, “and you can just let it go while you’re out here.

Carmel’s trail name is Rob because he spent three decades answering to sergeant, specialist, first sergeant and sergeant major. Carmel wasn’t used to hearing his real name.

The wetness, cold and blisters have been worth it to him. He’s learned in his hike that he doesn’t have to be a leader.

“It will make me more of a social person, more of a mellow person, a more environmentally sound person,” Carmel said.

Thomas Gathman was laying on a hammock, relaxing from his morning hike.

Gathman lost two of his friends when they drowned in a river in Iraq. The boat capsized and their gear took them down under the water.

He’s learned that everything works out in the end.

“Whatever you need, the trail provides it for you,” he said. “I’m sure with an opportunistic outlook on life the same will be true when I’m done with the trail as well.”