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Tough trek

Veteran Stephanie Cutts of Winters carried this backpack the length of the Warrior Hike along the Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Maine.

Photo by Margaret Burns



Cutts completes 2,187 mile Appalachian Trail veterans hike

By MARGARET BURNS
Staff writer

In 1948, World War II combat veteran Earl Shaffer told a friend he was going to “walk off the war” to work out the sights, sounds and losses of the war. Four months later he became the first person to hike the entire length of the Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Maine.

In 2012, Sean Gobin and Mark Silvers, United States Marine Corps armor officers of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, repeated that journey. In 2013, Gobin founded Warrior Hike, to offer the same experience to veterans transitioning from military service to civilian life.

Stephanie Cutts, who enlisted in the U.S. Navy at age 17, heard about the program from the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, thought it would be “a blast,” applied, and was accepted along with 13 other veterans. On March 17, she was in a cabin at Amicalola Falls State Park, Georgia, sorting through a huge bag of gear donated by sponsors.

“There was so much stuff donated, all we had to bring was underwear and a toothbrush,” says Cutts. Thru-hiking the Appalachian train is no small feat. The total length is 2,187 miles from Georgia to Mt. Katahdin in Maine.

“The terrain is tough,” says Cutts. “If there is a choice to go through a valley or over a mountain, the trail goes up one side of the mountain and down the other. We started doing just eight miles a day until we got to Virginia. Then we did 16 miles a day until New Hampshire. After that, we slowed to about 12 miles a day until reaching the top of Mt. Katahdin.

“That last section of the trail is something else! There is a 100-mile stretch called The Wilderness. A sign at the beginning says, ‘There are no places to obtain supplies or get help until Abol Bridge 100 miles north. Do not attempt this section unless you have a minimum of 10 days supplies and are fully equipped. This is the longest wilderness section of the entire Appalachian Trail and its difficulty should not be underestimated.’”

Gobin set up a schedule that put the Warrior Hikers in contact with VFW posts all along the route. The VFW people provide a good meal and baths. They also raise money for the Warrior Hikes charity, which provides adaptive vehicles to veterans who have lost limbs.

“The groups along our route raised \$50,000, enough for three or four vehicles,” says Cutts. “We got to talk to veterans of earlier conflicts. They are not used to talking about their experiences, some of the stories are heart-breaking. I met a man who fought on Iwo Jima.”=

“On my mother’s side of the family, I have relatives who, cumulatively, represent over 100 years of military service. I knew when I finished high school in Esparto that I wanted to get out of town but didn’t know what I wanted to do. It was college or the service.

“I’m glad I enlisted. I’ve seen more of the world than I ever thought I would. I’ve met more people. The service teaches you to be proud of yourself, how to present yourself, a good work ethic and to always look out for other people.”

Cutts’ mother and stepfather are Linda and David Hightower of Winters.

“This is a physically grueling experience,” says Cutts. “In one day in Georgia, we experienced snow, sleet, hail and rain. There are no days off. If your clothes are wet when you wake up, you put on wet clothes. The heat waves in Pennsylvania were awful. Thank heavens for Trail Angels, people who leave supplies at the trailhead. Someone left a ton of cold water for us.

“It is emotionally a roller-coaster also. Six months alone on the trail with yourself is a lot of time to process all you’ve been through. You run out of things to think about. You learn to push yourself mentally. I played Rocky movies over and over in my head.

“Out of the 14 people in my group of Warrior Hikers this year, only four of us finished. That’s about average for the Appalachian Trail overall. When I signed in at Mt. Katahdin, I was #383, and they estimate that about 3,000 people start to walk the trail each year.

“I fantasized about Olive Garden – pasta, pizza, bread. I lived on granola, ramen and tuna packets. We were using 5,000 calories a day, so we ate and ate and lost weight.

“The most special memento I have is the coin that Sean Gobin had made for us. In the military when special dignitaries come, the troops get coins commemorating their visit. Gobin gave us our own coins on Friday, September 13, a rainy and foggy day when we reached the summit of Mt. Katahdin. That means a lot to me.”

The feeling must be mutual. Sean Gobin wrote in an email, “My Stephie is tough as nails and I love her like a sister.”