

I'm Proof That ...

# It Is Solved By Walking

## Navy Veteran Stephanie Cutts Completes the Appalachian Trail and Rediscovered Her Healthy Self

By Cindy Ross

Out of the thousands of hikers who leave Springer Mountain, Georgia, every year hoping to successfully hike the entire 2,185-mile of the national scenic Appalachian Trail (AT), only a few hundred make it. Your odds aren't good. And, if you would have heard that a 255 pound, 5-foot, 7-inch-tall female was in that group in 2013, Navy veteran Stephanie Cutts would not have been the one you would have put your money on.

Stephanie was part of a new wilderness therapy program for returning U.S. veterans called Warrior Hike ([warriorhike.com](http://warriorhike.com)), designed to help veterans deal with post-traumatic stress disorder and transition from their military service by thru-hiking America's three national scenic trails. The fourteen veterans who participated in 2013 received the equipment and supplies required to complete a thru-hike. Besides the healing rhythm of walking through the natural world, part of their healing involved connecting to communities in the trail towns and veterans along the way at VFW and American Legion Posts that host them.

The climbs in Georgia's southern Appalachians are hellacious—steep ups and steep downs and way too many in a day when you're just starting out on your six-month journey. It's a lot to handle for a hiker adjusting to carrying a loaded backpack—let alone the hundred additional pounds that Stephanie hauled along! That's like strapping 20 five-pound bags of flour or 50 one-liter bottles of liquid onto your frame, on top of your tent, sleeping bag, food, clothing, and essentials—virtually everything you need to travel and survive in the wilderness for days at a time.

As a professional long distance hiker with over 10,000 miles on my boot, I was planning on hosting the Warrior Hikers at my home in

Pennsylvania when they passed by on the trail in July. But I was worried about Stephanie. I picked up the phone and dialed the program director, Marine Corps Captain Sean Gobin, and expressed my concern for her.

"Sean, that trail is so hard down in Georgia. How is she going to haul one hundred extra pounds and keep up? How is she going to make it?"

"They [her hiking buddies] won't let her quit," Sean explained. "In the military, your comrades have your back. They will support her."

What I didn't know then was what incredibly tough stuff Stephanie is made out of and how deeply passionate she was about succeeding at this monumental journey.

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 trips 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 halfway point of this 2,185-mile national scenic trail 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 to weary hikers. It is a time when support and encouragement are most needed to get over the Pennsylvania hump and continue the long push toward Mount Katahdin in Maine.

My husband and I knew this problem intimately, as we have both completed the entire AT and ran a hostel along the route for years under



the Volunteers in the National Parks Program. When I first got wind that the Warrior Hike program would happen along the AT last summer, I wanted to hear and write their story. I wanted to feed them, too, as long distance hikers have voracious appetites. It would be easy, because I have a large group of supportive friends who have huge hearts and love to cook. I asked Sean to put me on the schedule when the Warriors came through Pennsylvania. We had a big potluck dinner around the campfire and passed around my rain stick as a Native American Talking Stick, a tool used in many Native American traditions when a council is called. It allows each member to present his or her sacred point of view. It is passed

from person to person and only the person holding the stick is allowed to talk.

As the stick made its rounds, each Warrior shared one story from their time in the military and one story from the Appalachian Trail. When Stephanie held it, all ears were on her and not an eye was dry.

## THE TALKING STICK

Stephanie stood up to share her story, wearing a pink sundress that she carried for in-town special occasions. She'd even applied makeup for the event here at my home. Her colorful sleeve tattoos appeared as if they were part of her dress.

"I joined the Navy when I was 17. I was a welder, a plumber, and a firefighter as part of Damage Control. I responded to and trained responders to react to any type of fire or toxic gas emergency. My ship, which was based out of Pearl Harbor, was deployed twice in the Persian Gulf.

"I was a rising star in the military," Stephanie continued, "but then I learned through a Red Cross message that my father had died." Stephanie was the only member of her family who could not attend the funeral, because her ship had just left on deployment and was too far away for her to catch a flight home from Hawaii.

"His death affected my career," she said. "I still did my job the best that I could but it didn't matter because I kept failing physical readiness weight standards."



She struggled to stay in shape but lost motivation. The pounds kept adding up. Eventually, because she had failed so many tests, she was released from her eight-year contract two years early. And she kept gaining weight. "I stopped trying," Stephanie said. "I couldn't get off the couch."

Out of the service, Stephanie felt lost, like she didn't belong and had been out of touch with her non-military friends and relatives for too long. "My nieces and nephews don't know me," she said. "I needed to spend more time with my family."

In addition to feeling lonely and adrift, Stephanie had other reasons for joining the Warrior Hike.

"My mother was diagnosed with cancer in her right kidney when I was seventeen," she said, "and, right then, I stopped believing in God." She could not understand how someone who believed so strongly in God could go through such suffering. "I'm hiking the trail to find God again, for God to find me."

But Stephanie's also hiking to get back her health, her life. "I'm going to find the motivation to put away the rest of my grief and anger."

Stephanie paused, with the Talking Stick in her hand, to wipe the tears streaming down her cheeks, but then she smiled broadly.

"When I went down to Georgia to meet the Warrior Hikers and begin the trail, I was so scared that I was going to be in the worst shape of everyone and be the biggest," she confessed, "but everyone had a gut—no one was in shape! 'Damn right, we're gonna stick together,' I said to myself. I was way excited to see those big pot bellies!"

Stephanie had aimed to "dump a bunch of weight" before she left Springer Mountain on foot and tried to prepare herself by reading about the trail. She tried motivating herself with inspirational quotes and a chart that tracked her weight. She says she attempted to exercise but didn't get much fitter. Still, Stephanie says, she wasn't worried about her weight.

"I know my limitations," she said. "When it comes to hiking, I go my own pace. I continually reminded myself to not go someone else's speed."

However, she did find that hiking as a heavier person was difficult. Stephanie explained: "It was hard to find clothing that fit and didn't cause chafing. There are no plus sizes in name-brand hiking wear, and I was a size 22–24 when I started my hike. I busted the crotch out of my pants, bandaged my terribly chafed sores with bandages and white surgical tape, even trying duct tape, which was a terrible mistake. Finally, I found bright blue pants with orange stripes at the dollar store."

Even though she was still waddling because of the scabs on her inner thighs, Stephanie felt better in her new pants. Still, her feet and ankles were swollen for much of the entire hike, so she elevated them every chance she got to sit down.

The day we passed around the Talking Stick, Stephanie stood before us, near the AT's halfway point, with 1,000 miles in her legs and thirty fewer pounds on her body than when she started. She was hugely hopeful.

## MOUNT KATAHDIN

Three months after the Warrior Hikers visited my home, they planned to reach Mount Katahdin in Maine. I wanted to be there for the climb and join in the trails' end celebration. Out of the fourteen Warriors who left Springer Mountain six months earlier, only four made it all the way. One of them was Stephanie.

When she reached the two boulders marking the start of her ascent up Mount Katahdin, Stephanie shimmied through and looked at me, elated. "Two thousand miles ago and sixty pounds heavier, I could not have done this!"

She told me on the climb to the finish, "I was never worried that I couldn't do it. The AT was exactly what I needed—a goal, something to believe in. I couldn't quit. I was committed to the program, and when I give my word to someone, I keep it—no matter what it takes."

### About the Warrior Hike's "Walk Off The War" Program

The first person to hike the entire length of the AT was a World War II veteran, and Warrior Hike—in recognition of the physical, mental, and spiritual benefits of long-distance hiking and in partnership with the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, the Continental Divide Trail Coalition, and the Pacific Crest Trail Association—created the "Walk Off The War" Program to support combat veterans transitioning from their military service by thru-hiking America's three national scenic trails. [warriorhike.com](http://warriorhike.com)



Sometimes, Stephanie says, hiking wasn't very fun. "I was hurting a lot. I know I am not a fast hiker but I can do my two miles per hour."

As the miles ticked by, Stephanie noticed a positive difference in herself and the other hikers. "Once I got on track and had nowhere else to move but forward, I knew I would get there."

There was misty fog on the summit when Stephanie arrived. From a distance, the Warrior Hikers' figures looked ghostly, diffused. The large wooden sign stating, "Springer Mountain, Georgia—2,180 miles" emerged into view. Champagne bottles began to pop; cameras clicked.

The Warriors went up to the sign, one by one, as if it was a consecrated altar. Some embraced its rough wooden side and planted a kiss on the words, "Mount Katahdin." Others collapsed at its base, draped an arm affectionately over its bulk, and murmured a prayer. Stephanie just cried and hugged the sign with reckless abandonment and a powerful release of emotion.

She told me, "I finally silenced the voice in my head that told me I couldn't do something [like this], that I wasn't good enough. Those negative voices plagued me since childhood and I worked on silencing them throughout my entire hike. I often thought about all the mistakes I made and learned to let go of them as the miles passed by."

She said covering that distance gave her time to deal with emotions she wouldn't allow herself to fully resolve. "I was able to work through all my issues and leave them on Mount Katahdin,"

Stephanie said. "The trail changed me back to who I used to be."

Saint Augustine's Latin quote, "Solivtur Ambulando," (It is solved by walking) could not be truer.

## OFF THE SUMMIT

Today, Stephanie is a motorcycle mechanic and plans to open her own repair shop in the future. She has returned to school to learn small business management. She's also a wellness coach at her gym in Orange City, Florida, where she supports and encourages women to work hard and never quit.

"You cannot stay on the summit forever. You have to come down again. ... So why bother in the first place?" Stephanie asks, continuing with author of *Mount Analogue*, Rene Daumal's words. "Just this: What is above knows what is below, but what is below does not know what is above. One climbs, one sees. One descends, one no longer sees but one has seen. There is an art of conducting oneself in the lower regions by the memory of what one saw higher up. When one can no longer see, one can at least still know."



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