



walking warrior

Combat veteran Sharon Smith spent six straight months hiking through the Appalachians in a quest to overcome PTSD. Her go-to survival skill? Yoga.

SHARON SMITH WAS starting to panic. The 47-year-old was miles behind fellow hikers while crossing the Appalachian Trail's 100-Mile Wilderness, a rugged stretch of balsam forest in northern Maine. Her cell phone was dead. Her food supply was dwindling. As a veteran U.S. Air Force combat medic, she knew how to push on, yet hiking the dense woods exhausted and

alone terrified her. Her heart racing, she sat on a rock and focused on breathing techniques she had learned in yoga class, imagining that she was breathing in peace and breathing out fear. "It helped me calm down. After a half-hour, I got up, shouldered my pack, and walked on," says Smith. She completed the entire 2,180-mile Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Maine last year as part of Warrior Hike, a non-profit that connects combat vets with the healing powers of nature.

Smith joined the six-month hike to support returning troops, as well as to assist in her own recovery. After serving on the front lines of the first Gulf War in 1991 treating injured Marines and Iraqi POWs, she was diagnosed with PTSD and depression. In more recent years, her flashbacks of bombings and injuries re-emerged as she watched news coverage of the Iraq War. "When you're hiking every day for 8 to 10 hours, you start to process everything buried in the back of your mind piece by piece," Smith says. "Being out in the beauty of nature and the fresh air helped with my depression and gave me a sense of well-being."

Smith credits yoga with helping her finish the entire trail. She took Bikram Yoga twice weekly for three months before the trek to increase flexibility and strength, and during her hike often did poses in her tent in the morning to loosen up. Upon arriving at the northern terminus of the trail, Smith kneeled in front of a trailhead sign and whispered a prayer. "I was grateful for getting there safely, and I was ready to be free of all the demons I'd been carrying with me all those years." **CINDY ROSS**



TRAIL ANGEL

Visit warriorhike.com to follow new troops of Warrior Hikers setting out on the Appalachian, Continental Divide, and Pacific Crest trails this month. Track their journeys, and find festivals and events along their routes.