

WALKING OFF THE WAR

Veterans find peace while
thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail

Text and photographs by Cindy Ross

WHEN LONG-DISTANCE HIKERS REACH PENNSYLVANIA ON the Appalachian Trail, they are usually at a psychologically low point.

Because the elevation map in this area reads like a cruising trail with little or no elevation change, except for an occasional water gap break, the unsuspecting hiker expects to motor through the miles. But the Tuscarora sandstone rocks exposed on the long spiny Blue Mountain will trip up the fittest of hikers. The heat and humidity also soar in July, when most trail end-to-enders come through our fair state, and the denuded oak trees on the ridges, with the leaves eaten by gypsy moth larvae, provide little shade from the oppressive sun.

The halfway point of this 2,100-mile national scenic trail is in central Pennsylvania. One thousand miles is a nice chunk of trail to have on your boots, so quitting at this point can sound pretty darn attractive. This is the time when support and encouragement are most needed to conquer the Pennsylvania hump and continue the long push toward Mount Katahdin at the end of the line in Maine.

MY HUSBAND, TODD, AND I KNOW THIS problem intimately, as we have both walked the entire Appalachian Trail and managed a hostel for years along the route near Hawk Mountain Sanctuary in Eckville as part of the Volunteers in the National Parks Program. We still occasionally bring home hikers and



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host them in a break from the trail, but never have we met a more special group of hikers than the ones that came through this past summer. They are the Warrior Hikers, and we opened up our hearts and our home to them. By the time they left to return to the trail, they had touched us in a way no other hikers have.

HEALTHIER, HAPPIER, HEALED

THE WARRIOR HIKE “WALK OFF THE WAR” Program is a nonprofit program that raises funds for combat veterans. The veterans who hike the Appalachian Trail as part of the program receive support in the way of scholarships and equipment as well as encouragement and support from veterans in trail towns along the way. The Appalachian Trail Conservancy, the umbrella nonprofit that oversees the trail, is the program’s biggest supporter.

The idea for the Warrior Hike Program originated last year when Sean Gobin thru-hiked the entire Appalachian Trail (AT) soon after separating from the Marine Corps. He had recently returned

home from a combat deployment in Afghanistan, and as he followed the white painted blazes that lead from Georgia to Maine on the longest continually marked footpath in the world, it occurred to him that he was actually walking the war out of his system. He was becoming healthier, happier and healed.

Ridding one’s psyche of demons by walking in nature is not a new idea. The very first AT thru-hiker, Earl Shaffer, did just that in 1948 when he walked World War II out of his mind. Shaffer, who had lived in York Springs, Pa., until he passed away in 2002, remains a hero among thru-hikers, especially hiking veterans, and his hike was the catalyst for Gobin to create the Warrior Hike Program.

The program began this year with 14 Warrior Hikers who left Springer Mountain, Ga., in March with their goal of reaching Mount Katahdin at Baxter State Park in Maine, the northern terminus of the trail, six months later.

ONE OF THE JOBS OF GOBIN, WHO serves as Warrior Hike’s director, is to

set up trail town support with VFW’s, American Legions and other veterans groups along the way. This past summer, he scheduled half a dozen gatherings in Pennsylvania alone. He reports that of all the 14 states the Warriors passed through, Pennsylvania was the most welcoming and supportive. Although many more posts and legions in the state would have liked to have hosted the vets by preparing dinners, staging banquets and holding parades and ceremonies, only the veteran groups in Chambersburg, Boiling Springs, Duncannon, Pine Grove, Hamburg and Stroudsburg were large enough, lucky enough and spaced evenly enough apart to enjoy the Warriors’ company. Often checks were presented to the Warrior Hike organization to help ensure that future vets in the coming years will be able to participate in this worthwhile program.

CRADLED IN THE SOOTHING WOODS

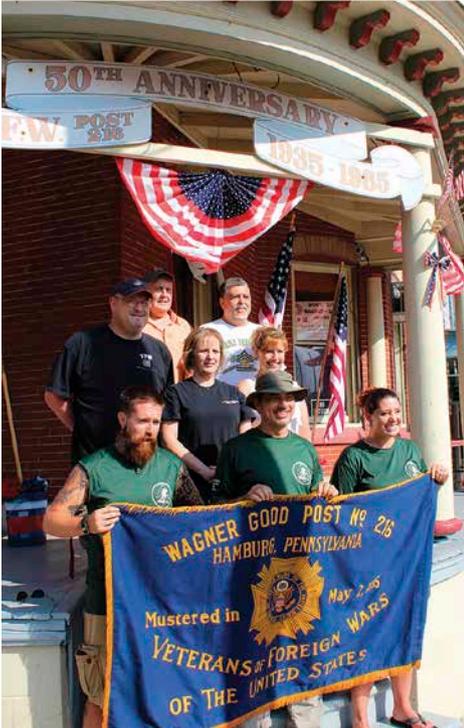
BY JULY, THE WARRIORS WERE EXPECTED to come through our area, and we had volunteered to host them. We decided to include several of our friends who wanted to meet the hiking veterans and who themselves had a history in the military by planning a big potluck supper around the campfire at our house.

As we sat around the fire, eating and sharing stories, we passed around a “talking” stick, allowing everyone in the circle

(left) Carl Steven Clendenning Jr., Adam Bautz, Stephanie Cutts and Rob Carmel take time to pose for a photo at a Appalachian Trail sign.

(facing page, clockwise from top left) Rob Carmel takes in the experience of the journey while on top of Mount Katahdin in Maine. Carl Steven Clendenning Jr. navigates a rocky portion of the trail. Steve and Adam Bautz take turns sharing stories while holding the “talking” stick. The Warrior Hike was possible because of the support of the veterans groups along the trail’s route, including the Wagner Good Post #216 in Hamburg. Tommy Gathman of Lewisburg reaches the 1,000-mile marker on the AT.







Assembled at Cindy Ross's home in Schuylkill County, Warrior Hike participants, friends and family joined a circle to give thanks prior to eating the potluck dinner.

the opportunity to speak. What poured out from the Warriors was unforgettable.

The vets talked of exploding bombs and scraping up human remains with a shovel. They told of collecting dismembered limbs after a suicide bomber drove

his dump truck into the Marine post in the type of act that kills or maims buddies and leaves the survivors on a dozen different meds.

The experiences they had and the horrors these veterans have witnessed put them always on guard, so that they never sit with their backs to an entrance or exit; they feel they must watch doorways and be constantly vigilant. Their experiences jar them awake in the middle of the night to check and recheck windows and doors whenever they hear a sound. Even years later, after they are safely home, the fear and worries continue. They don't sleep well. They have a hard time finding peace, and if they get snippets of it, it doesn't last long.

One Warrior told of being plagued by a recurring nightmare. He is trapped in an abandoned building in Iraq, pinned down, and he always dies. But, sometime around the halfway point on his hike along the trail this summer, the dream stopped. And so did the nightmares of his companions as they all slept in nature's soothing woods.

The fact that the warriors are finally able to sleep is monumental in their healing process. This achievement was worth every minute of work required to orchestrate Warrior Hike and every blister, arduous climb, rainstorm and sore muscle that the Warriors experienced during their walk.

"IT IS SOLVED BY WALKING."

ALTHOUGH ALL OF THE WARRIORS CLAIM TO have witnessed remarkable improvement of their minds in the wilderness, two said that they were surprised when they took a break from the trail and



Wearing a dark blue shirt, Scott Birchman, president of the Blue Mountain Eagle Hiking Club, which maintains a section of the AT, shares a meal with two of the hikers and editor Matt Holliday (in light blue).



saw that their bad dreams and anger, triggered anew by rude behavior from people they encountered, returned. They came to realize that they needed more time in the cocoon of nature and more miles of walking to sort things out.

Each of them used some of their time in the woods to think about what they could do to ensure a peaceful return home. Most hope to further nurture their connection with the natural world, whether it be relocating to a wilder environment or finding a job outdoors.

PENNSYLVANIA HAD ONE WARRIOR SON on board for the hike this summer—30-year-old Marine Tommy Gathman of Lewisburg. Tommy was born and raised here and attended Bucknell University as a business manager major after completing two tours in Iraq. He was a fire team leader and a scout sniper during his deployment. Hiking the entire Appalachian Trail has always been a goal of

his; while growing up, he had hiked and climbed mountains all along the AT with his father, uncles and grandfather.

After completing his thru-hike this year, Tommy planned to return to his present employer, Appalachian Outfitters, in State College. And because the Pacific Crest Trail Association is now supporting the Warrior Hike Program along the 2,600-mile National Scenic Trail that runs through California, Oregon and Washington, he hopes to attempt that long hike in 2014. Afterwards, he says, he might operate a hostel someday for thru-hikers and continue the circle by giving back.

Six of the Warriors arrived at the approach to the summit of Mount Katahdin in September, and I traveled to Maine so that I could join them for their ascent. It was an especially important climb for Tommy because when his grandfather died a few years ago, his father and brothers carried his ashes to the top of Mount

Showing the evidence of satisfaction for completing the journey, Warrior Hike participants celebrate the end of the trail atop Mount Katahdin in Maine: from left, organizer Sean Gobin, Kevin Reed, (above the sign) Sharon Smith, Stephanie Cutts, Pennsylvanian Tommy Gathman, Carl Steven Clendenning Jr. and Rob Carmel.

Katahdin, where they released them. Because Tommy was serving in the military at the time, he was unable to join them.

“So I’m walking ‘home’ to reconnect with his spirit up top there,” he says.

The fact that the Warrior Hikers now know where to go when they need to find peace and solace is monumental. Saint Augustine’s Latin quote, *solvitur ambulando*, could not ring more true for these veterans. *It is solved by walking.*

For more on the Warrior Hike Program, visit warriorhike.com. ↑

Cindy Ross, a long-distance hiker and regular contributor, lives in New Ringgold in Schuylkill County.