



Courtesy Photo

Technical Sgt. Matt Bracken, 714th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, is marking the occasion of his 30th birthday by hiking the entire length of the Appalachian Trail.

# A TEST OF WILL

Reserve crew chief abandons civilization for life on the trail

By Mr. Shawn J. Jones

They call him Chainsaw. He is a KC-10 crew chief with the 714th Maintenance Squadron, but his grizzly brown whiskers suggest he's living the life of a mountain man, not an Airman.

Those whiskers aren't lying.

Tech. Sgt. Matthew Bracken is a reservist in good standing, but he hasn't shaved or put on his Air Force uniform since he started hiking the Appalachian Trail in early February.

He aims to thru-hike the trail, meaning he will cover its entire length—from Springer Mountain, Ga., to Katahdin, Maine—in one continuous trek.

As of early June, Sergeant Bracken had made it southern Maine and he

expects to finish the trail's 2,181 miles later this month—just in time to take his Air Force fitness test during the July drill assembly.

It is tradition for thru-hikers to earn a trail name. Fellow hikers bestowed the name Chainsaw on Sergeant Bracken after they heard his relentless snoring while he slept in a shelter along the trail.

## A CHECK MARK ON THE BUCKET LIST

In late December, Sergeant Bracken returned to his status as a traditional reservist after completing two years of active-duty service. With his 30th birthday approaching in April, he wanted to do something adventurous to mark the

milestone. He said he considered rock climbing in South America or Thailand, but quickly settled on the Appalachian Trail. He was intrigued by the challenge of walking its entire length. Nearly 2,000 hikers attempt to thru-hike the trail each year, but 3 out of 4 never complete their journey.

"The trail has been on the bucket list for a while now, and I didn't know when I was going to get this much time off again," he said.

While some thru-hikers escape to the wilderness engage in deep thinking and find themselves, Sergeant Bracken was primarily motivated by the physical and mental challenges of hiking the trail.

“I’m not soul searching,” he said. “I know who I am.”

Once he became determined to thru-hike the trail, Sergeant Bracken came up with a plan to ensure his military affairs were in order. First, he completed all of the recurring training requirements that would come due before July. He then rescheduled several upcoming weekend drill assemblies so that he could accomplish them prior to leaving. Due to scheduling policies, he could not reschedule all of his drills, so his supervision agreed to excuse them due to the relatively unique nature of his request.

### A COLD, HARD TRAIL

His plan was to start in the South, where the winters are milder and hike northward through the spring and early summer. Sergeant Bracken took a plane to Georgia and made his way to the trail’s southernmost point at Springer Mountain of Feb. 3.

While his plan was sensible, it didn’t work out too well as Georgia experienced one of its coldest winters on record. Much of the trail goes up, down and around the Appalachian Mountains, and the cold conditions meant Sergeant Bracken was forced to scale the mountains in knee-deep snow.

“Naturally, it slowed me down a great deal, but you just have to stay focused

and realize there’s nothing you can do about it,” he said.

Sergeant Bracken also said that sleeping in temperatures that dropped as low as ten degrees was part of the challenge of the trail. He said it was so cold that he could only sleep for about an hour at a time before the cold would wake him up.

“I would have a crust of frozen condensation on the outside of my sleeping bag,” he said. “It was absolutely miserable, but I chose this, and nobody made me do it.”

While the February temperatures made the nights miserable, he admits that finding good places to sleep on the trail is no problem. He carries an ultra-light tent in his pack, but he hasn’t had to use it yet. There are more than 250 shelters along the trail. The shelters have three walls, a roof and several bunks. They aren’t warm or comfortable, but they keep hikers dry and off of the ground. As long as Sergeant Bracken takes care to plan his daily mileage, he can reach shelters at stopping points that keeps him close to his 22 miles-per-day pace.

### DANGEROUS ENCOUNTERS

It wasn’t just the snow or the cold that showed Sergeant Bracken how dangerous the trail can be.

Early in his trip, Sergeant Bracken crossed paths with a black bear. These

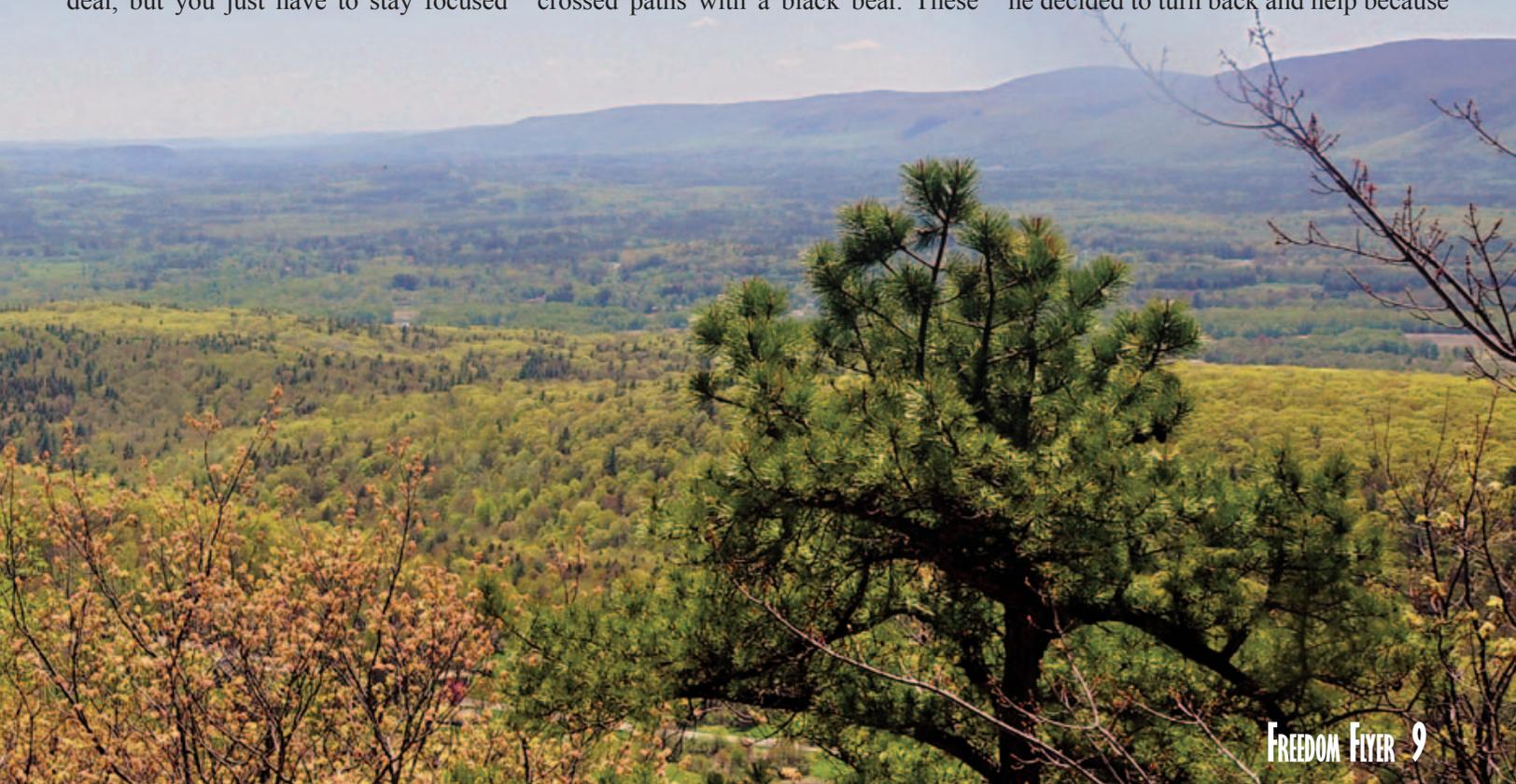
types of bears are not typically hostile toward people, so he decided to take a photo. Sergeant Bracken said that after taking the picture, the bear did not run off as expected. Instead, it took on an aggressive posture toward him and stared him down. He said he felt the hair rise on the back of his neck as his fight-or-flight instincts kicked in. Sergeant Bracken said he glanced down to check the footing for his escape, but by the time he looked back up, the bear had finally turned away from the trail.

That wasn’t Sergeant Bracken’s only stare down with a large mammal. Just after crossing the border into Vermont, a he came across a moose 15 yards up the trail. The moose blocked his path, and like the bear, it locked onto Sergeant Bracken with a threatening gaze.

“Eventually after about 5 minutes or so, he let me pass,” he said. “My heart was pounding.”

While Sergeant Bracken has escaped from his dangerous encounters unscathed, he knows firsthand that many hikers aren’t so fortunate.

On his third day of hiking, he came across some hikers huddled around a fallen member of their group. Sergeant Bracken, who was feeling fatigued and dehydrated, initially decided to keep his pace without interfering. After hiking past the group and heading up the trail, he decided to turn back and help because



Sergeant Bracken rests at a shelter along the Appalachian Trail while swapping stories with a veteran day hiker in Massachusetts May 12. There are 250 shelters along the trail, which runs 2,181 miles from Georgia to Maine.



the fallen hiker was unconscious and the other hikers weren't doing much to help. Sergeant Bracken tried to revive the man by performing cardiopulmonary respiration. He tried and tried until he became too exhausted to continue.

It was too late, and Sergeant Bracken later learned that the man had died of a heart attack.

"I'll never forget the date," he said. "It was February 5th, right at the southern side of Blood Mountain in Georgia."

#### PHYSICAL AND MENTAL ENDURANCE

Spending months hiking the Appalachian Trail is sure to produce many noteworthy sites and encounters, but what defines a thru-hike is the monotony of daily life on the trail.

Initially, Sergeant Bracken averaged 7 to 8 miles of per day, but he quickly built up to a 22 mile average. While 22 miles is certainly a hefty total, the mileage doesn't take into account the various changes in elevation that occur on the trail. The total elevation gain of hiking the entire trail is equivalent to climbing Mt. Everest 16 times.

Though he acknowledges his good-fitting boots for keeping him blister-free,

he said that most morning he has stiffness and swelling in his knees.

The trail can be physically taxing, he said, but the real challenge is mental.

"I'm not having fun," he said. "My mind and body are really worn out now."

He admits that it's sometimes difficult to find the motivation to continue, and there were points where he entertained the idea of quitting before putting the negative thoughts out of his head and resetting his determination.

The hardest time to remain enthusiastic is when the weather is bad, he said.

"Just recently, I had ten days of straight rain, which means waking up to wet boots and socks every day," he said. "That's mentally crushing."

#### HELP ALONG THE WAY

No matter how many challenges Mother Nature throws at him, Sergeant Bracken said there are two things that keep him going – pride and spite. He won't quit because he doesn't want to give in to the pain, and he admits that since he told so many friends and family about the trek, he doesn't want to disappoint them.

Sergeant Bracken said there have been

many things that pick up his spirits.

He has met many interesting people on the trail. Some of them are thru-hikers like himself. Others are on less ambitious hikes. He has met his share of odd people, but most have been good people. Many day hikers are quick to offer him a type of food or drink that he normally couldn't hike with. If he is particularly lucky, he'll stumble upon what is known as 'trail magic', which are stashes of refreshments placed along the trail for thru-hikers. Sergeant Bracken said that he has also had plenty of free rides into and around various towns when he heads off the trail to rest and resupply.

He doesn't take any assistance for granted.

"It's nice to know there are still good people in the world," he said.

#### CONTACT WITH CIVILIZATION

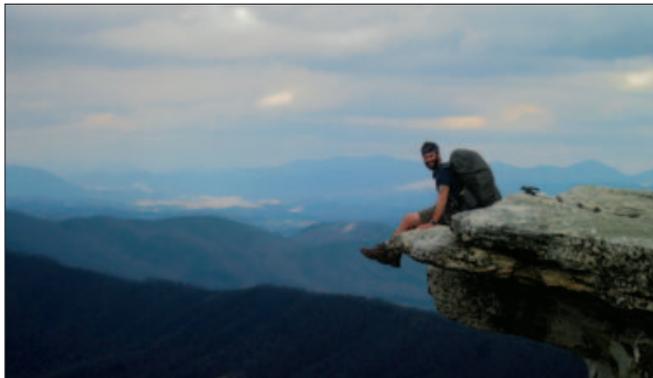
While Sergeant Bracken has spent much of the past 5 months living in the woods, he hasn't been totally cut off from the real world. His cell phone allows him to stay in touch with friends and family and keeps him



Photo by Mr. Shawn J. Jones



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Courtesy Photo

Sergeant Bracken purifies water that he collected from a stream in Massachusetts May 12. Properly managing hydration is important for Sergeant Bracken, who hikes an average of 22 miles per day.

Sergeant Bracken takes in the view from McAfee's Knob near Roanoke, Va. He said many of the scenic views along the trail are awe-inspiring and help make up for the mental and physical challenge of hiking the length of the trail.

informed on significant world news. One notable text message he received read, "Osama Dead," alerting him to the death of Osama Bin Laden.

Heading into towns near the trail also give him a brief dose of civilization. Approximately once a week, he stays in a hotel room in a town near the trail so that he can rest, recuperate, get a real shower and eat some real food. At one stopover, he was even able to catch the Super Bowl. At another, he visited friends and family near the parts of the trail that run through Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

But no matter how much time he spends in civilization, the trail still dominates his life.

"Even the days I take off to recuperate still involve me walking around a town to get food and repair and replenish any equipment I have."

He must make time for detailed planning of the upcoming days to properly account for daily mileage and the spacing between camp shelters, water sources and resupply points.

"I can't escape the trail for just one day," he said. "It honestly feels like I work ten to twelve hours a day every day."

Sergeant Bracken's opinions about the rigors of thru-hiking the trail are not uncommon.

"Thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail is demanding, grueling and difficult," said Laurie Potteiger, the information services manager for the Appalachian Trail Conservancy. "Despite the difficulties and challenges, thru-hikers invariably consider their six months on the Trail among of the best in their life."

Ms. Potteiger said that hikers who immerse themselves in the trail are exposed to many aspects of Mother Nature that aren't a part of most people's daily lives.

"Thru-hikers see sights of incredible beauty, an incredible variety of

plants and animals, and experience the thrill of walking through storms, climbing every steep mountain on the horizon, and fording rivers. They walk above the clouds, below the vast canopy of the forest. They walk above tree line and sleep underneath the stars, and experience first-hand the generosity of people in small-town America," she said.

### ALMOST FINISHED

Sergeant Bracken's hard work should soon pay off as he is scheduled to complete the trail in late June. After completing the challenge, he said he will be ready for a vacation.

"I don't know where to, but honestly, I could care less," he said. "As long as it doesn't involve hiking."

Sergeant Bracken said he will never take this experience for granted.

"I have learned a little more about myself, and how much pain or adversity I can overcome," he said. "I will say though, after a long steep climb up a mountain where you have an amazing view and you take off the weight of your pack, it is very awe inspiring and probably the closest to enlightenment I'll get to." ♦