

## The Soft Fall

Caveat: Apologies in advance as this is a lengthy essay. I “thought” my last step on the trail would be the end of my adventure. It was...physically. Yet, over the past 3 months, I’ve felt there was something missing. Like I haven’t had any sort of closure. Until, that is, I started writing this essay. Now...I can rest in peace with my Thousand Miler Finish.

Bottom line: 13 Nov 22, I completed the trail on my 109<sup>th</sup> hike. It took me 13 months to segment hike a total of 1117.2 miles. I dedicated each hike to a fallen service member that claimed Wisconsin as their home of record at the time they paid the ultimate price. My last steps on the trail brought me to the foot of the Tuscania Memorial along the Baraboo Segment. My Great Uncle is memorialized there. I’ll take you through a look back on what brought me to this point, but first...I had an accidental epiphany 22 Feb 23 that spurred my thoughts on what I should write about in my essay. ☺

22 Feb 23:

As I sit in solitude on a chilly, quiet winter morning...chin resting on forearms...I stare out a window and find myself mesmerized by fragile, tiny scurrying snowflakes. They’re seemingly jockeying amongst themselves along wind’s unpredictable gusts. Falling slow...then falling fast. Never knowing where they might be cast...or just how long their journey will last. Flitted and flicked, this way and that, by nature’s unforgiving acts. There’s no way to control the freefall below. However, they know, there’s two ways to go. Peaceful vs Terrifying. Although nudged off course from time to time, they steel themselves in their endeavor to find a soft, peaceful landing in a field of dreams after a long journey through time and space. Conversely, they fear landing hard upon bustling, noisy passage ways in which brutal, merciless, killing machines toss them to and fro...forcing them into dark places. Alone and cut off. Their fleeting existence...extinguished for all time. Languidly, I lift my chin from my forearms as I begin to draw parallels between what I see before me...and my once daunting transition in 2021. A transition I call...The Soft Fall. A soft fall...thanks to the IAT.

In 2021, I was living in Maryland and working at Joint Base Andrews; an Air Force & Navy shared military installation. Although I retired after 22 years of active military service in Sep 2009, I remained on duty with the US Air Force as a DoD civil servant in the same office...with the same comrades and colleagues...for the following 12 years. I sold my home the previous year and moved into a tiny apartment in preparation for my transition to my next chapter; retirement from federal service. Most people find retirement to be one of the most exciting things to look forward to. It terrified me. Mostly because this decision was coupled with other major life events; a 985-mile move back to my home state of Wisconsin and leaving friends, family, and colleagues behind. I had been living within a military safety net for a very long time. I was mostly dreading leaving behind a trusted, dear friend. One who is quite literally the only person in my entire world that knows what it’s like to battle the deepest darkest visions and fears hiding in the corners of a combat mind. I was also going to lose my identity. I wouldn’t be Ms M- or Major anymore. Rather Connie’s sister or Maggie’s daughter. I had MUCH weighing on my mind over the course of 10 months in that tiny apartment. With COVID mitigation

practices still in full swing...there was no carefree venturing about. I no longer had a lawn to take care of. Couldn't do putt-zie things around my home to keep my mind and hands busy. Much of my belongings were already packed and moved to a storage unit. All the ingredients to a perfect storm were beginning to percolate under the surface. No open concept floorplan or sun shining in through bright windows. Walls were closing in. Silence was deafening. Early nightfall of winter was encroaching. The suppressed, evil darkness of combat visions lying in wait within my brain had clawed their way to the surface. Again. I knew I had to do something, anything, to keep from going back to a time and place in which I had allowed life to get the best of me. A time when too many major life events (deployment to a combat zone, divorce, a move, a new base, a new job, a new house, a new daycare) converged and overwhelmed me. I landed solid in a place that I never, ever expected to find myself...Ward 5, Walter Reed Army Medical Facility, heavily sedated, and on suicide watch. I don't ever want to go back to that place. So, I opened my "toolbox".

My toolbox is something I carry with me, yet never open. Unless, that is, I feel threatened. I instinctively know when to open it and access the tools at my disposal. 2021 was the first time since 2013 that I knew I needed to access those tools. I'm not talking about hammers, screwdrivers, wrenches, or saws. I'm talking about unseen tools I use to tinker on unseen scars. They are more powerful than anything mechanical you can ever find on any shelf in any store. These are tools that help me stave off the inevitable: pesky, manipulative demons that come in the form of depression, anxiety, isolation, and fear. These amazing tools are: positive thinking, exercise, socialization, fresh air, facing fears, setting goals, making plans for the future, and offering transparency to others.

With the tool of positive thought in hand, I started to envision things that made me happy. I reminisced about things I'd done and places I'd been throughout the past 30+ years. My mind ALWAYS goes back to my favorite assignment - Germany. While there from 2005-2008, I took my two daughters out volksmarching nearly every weekend during the warmer months. Volksmarching is defined as "a form of non-competitive fitness walking (pretty much...hiking)." Our treks took us to many villages throughout the South & West areas of Germany. I also went volksmarching in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Poland with friends. It was great fun and so addicting...I didn't want it to end. When the time came for me to move to another assignment, I searched for volksmarching clubs in the states. Well, I didn't find a club where my next assignment was, but I did find one in Madison, WI! I figured I would keep this in mind if I ever moved back to my home state after retirement. These happy thoughts about volksmarching spurred me into action. I logged on to my computer and tried to find the Madison club again (13 years later). Wasn't long before I became irritated and eventually disappointed. No matter how hard I searched, using every different kind of criteria I could think of, I couldn't find the Madison Volksmarching Club. All that came up during my many searches was this thing called, the "Ice Age Trail" (IAT). "THAT'S NOT WHAT I'M LOOKING FOR!!!", I screamed inside my head. I did note, however, a recurring thing that kept coming up was something called a "Mammoth Challenge". The timeframe during which I was searching was October 2020. This just so happened to coincide with the IAT Alliance's inaugural Mammoth Challenge - celebrating the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the trail becoming 1 of only 11 National Scenic

Trails. Anyways...I gave up my searches for the next few weeks. However, the IAT didn't totally leave my brain. About a month later, I started reviewing posts on the Ice Age Trail facebook pages. I saw everyone posting all these great commentaries and photos of their adventures along the trail. Then I started to see people posting photos of their certificates and patches from the challenge. All I could think was...holy cow! I really want to do that, but I don't think I could ever hike 40 miles in one month!! (fast forward to Oct 2021...I hiked 110 mi. lol).

Between November 2020 and June 2021, I obsessively read facebook posts, took notes, and collected hiking gear. I was totally consumed and distracted with everything IAT. I fell in love with Yolanda Deloach's commentaries, photos, and how she affectionately refers to her truck as Fiona. Hoping one day...maybe I would get a chance to meet her and/or hike with her. I followed Emily Ford's historic winter thru hike. Never a day went by that I didn't open facebook and anxiously scroll the pages to find updates about her adventures with Diggins.

I became an IAT member before I even left Maryland! Ordered the atlas, guidebook, and wall map, too! By the time I left Maryland in July 2021 and got to Wisconsin...I was set!! I was incredibly eager to start my IAT adventure. So much so that I insisted my two daughters join me as I took my first few steps on the trail at Devil's Lake. (One daughter helped me with the drive to WI, the other surprised me by coming in from NV to greet me.) Well, let me tell ya...it wasn't pretty! lol. It was about 95\* that day. High humidity. I hadn't had anything to eat. And, the only exercise I had under my belt was 5-6 mile walks per day along flat neighborhood streets and sidewalks. We started up the East Bluff from the North Shore Parking area. Holy Hannah...I thought I was gonna keel over! I was seein' spots...I was gaspin' for air...my thighs were burnin'...and I seriously thought I was going to toss my cookies. Needless to say, I didn't make it to the top. It was AWFUL!! Here I'd been so excited to start hiking the trail for the previous 10 months...and I quit within (probably) ¼ mile. I was really embarrassed in front of my daughters. I honestly believe that all three of us were thinking the same thing, "yeah, okay...you still gonna hike this whole trail?" Two months later, I would (for real) go on my first hike. And, guess what day it was!? 18 Sep 21... the 74<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the US Air Force! The hike was led by Sue Nelson-Greenway. Karyn Niin Kitigade also joined the hike. Both these ladies kicked my a\$\$ on a 13-mile hike from Gibraltar down through Lodi Marsh. Just as these two ladies helped me through my very first hike...they accompanied me on my very last hike. Great friends now...and always will be.

Three weeks after my first hike with Sue and Karyn, I executed hike #7. It was my first solo hike. An itty, bitty 1.8-mile route through the Lodi Marsh Segment. It became my favorite segment that day and remained so for the rest of my 1117.2-mile journey. It wasn't my favorite because the trail was pretty. It wasn't my favorite because it was an easy trail. And, it wasn't my favorite because I was conquering my first solo hike. It was my favorite because on that day, along that trail...I discovered that a door didn't have to completely close in order for another to open. The moment of discovery went down like this... Within 5 min of starting the trek through the woods and across the marsh I suddenly stopped dead in my tracks. Almost as if I had hit a brick wall. Peace. Quiet. No wind. No cars. No people. No hustle or bustle. Only birds. Birds of many feathers flitting, chirping, singing. Light rain tick, tick, ticking upon Fall's leaves hanging ever so

precariously above. I was frozen in silence, eyes closed, listening. With my face tilted upward toward the sky ... I stood motionless. Listening. Then it happened. A single thought unexpectedly hit me so hard my eyes flew open! I fell slightly off balance and wobbled a bit. As a rush of air filled my lungs so fast I actually heard a deep, throaty gasp. "I made it." That was my thought. "I really made it! I came out on the other side of 34 years. 9 moves across the country and around the globe. 3 deployments. Countless temporary duty assignments. I'm really here (pat...pat...pat)?" So many visions ran through my mind at that moment. Almost as if a movie on fast forward. Close calls, life altering situations, fatal tragedies, hellos...goodbyes. Whispering in the wind I voiced, "But, I wouldn't change a single day. It all made me who I am. I can still carry it with me as I start this new adventure. After all, I've already started to do just that with my dedications to fallen Wisconsin service members." After a few minutes, I continued on down the trail. As a smile spread wide across my face, I began to draw parallels between the military way of life...and hiking. These parallels would stick with me clear through the finish. Some just make me chuckle:

Military	Hiking
Battle Buddies	Hikin' Buddies
Sand Fleas	Snow Fleas (yes, there is such a thing)
Ruck Sack	Back Pack
Convoy Planning	Leap Frog Planning
Call Signs	Trail Names
On-Time = 15 min early	On-Time = 15 min late
Chow Hall	Kwik Trip
Mission	Hike
Certificates & Patches	Certificates & Patches

It's no stretch to say...the trail saved me. Before I even stepped foot in Wisconsin! Reading about it, planning hikes, and ordering gear kept my mind busy. After I actually started hiking, I would eventually use every single tool in my toolbox. Thus...my sanity remained in tact.

- Positive thinking
- Got TONS of exercise
- Got out into the fresh air
- I made SO many new friends (Sue, Karyn, Jen Lynn, Barb, Jean, Mary J, Jenn, Bruce, Kathy P, Mary S, Paul S, Beth, Carol & Fergie, NolaRae, Delores, Billie, Vicky V, Vicki C, Priscilla...to name a FEW!)
- Reconnected with classmates, old neighbors
- Faced my fears (bears no longer scare me)
- Set Goals (planned to finish the trail in 5 years...crushed it in 13 months. lol)
- Went from passively joining a hike to planning hikes fairly quick
- I was never afraid to be transparent about my own shortfalls & struggles if a fellow hiker seemed to be struggling with an issue. It's always good to know that you're not the only one facing problems. Strength is found in numbers.

I learned many things along my journey.

- Stinkhorns exist and definitely live up to their name
- 75-80 year old women ROCK!! And, kick my a\$\$ at the same time.
- Cows are cute
- Fall is definitely my favorite season
- Don't forget to "look back" every once and awhile
- Pine forests are my favorite
- There's a lot of free stuff out there on those CRs!
- Puffballs can get HUGE!
- I can stand upright inside of a tree
- I reaped WAY MORE than I sowed

HUGE thank you to my family, pet/house sitters, new friends, old friends, trail angels, chapter coordinators, trail maintenance and mobile skills crews, and land owners. Huge thank you as well to all who work and/or volunteer with the Ice Age Trail Alliance. Y'all are working so hard to acquire land rights, develop new routes, and coordinate challenges and events. Without all of you...I would be in a messy state right now. I have zero doubt about that. I realized a dream I didn't even know I had...until it was all over. I couldn't have done it without you.

Sincerely and Ever Grateful

Annette Martiny

"TRLBUG"