

## WHITEWATER WARRIORS: TEAM RIVER RUNNER, ASHEVILLE

BY JULIET V. MATTHEWS



*BJ Phillips guides local veterans down the Nantahala River.  
Photo by Jim Glaze*

**B**ELIEVE THERE IS a special camaraderie that exists among paddlers. When I am with my friends or even a stranger and we are kayaking alone in a gorge, deep in the woods on a cold winter day, I don't think about work or the unfolded laundry. I simply enjoy the moment and focus on my environment and those around me. In 2011 I began driving from Birmingham, Alabama to parts of western North Carolina and northeastern Georgia almost every chance I got in order to kayak. Good fortune brought me the opportunity to kayak as a volunteer with members of the Asheville chapter of Team River Runner, or TRR. I had never heard of this organization, so I searched the Internet to learn what they were about ("To create an environment of healthy adventure for healing active duty and veteran service members through adaptive kayaking."). The more I discovered about this great organization, the more impressed I was. Everything I discovered

about the boaters with whom I would soon be kayaking down the river forever changed my perspective on whitewater and on life.

My first-hand experience with TRR began on Memorial Day weekend, 2012. The river destination was the Tuckaseegee River in Dillsboro, North Carolina. I was invited to participate as a volunteer sweep (safety boater) that day. As I waited in the parking lot at the put-in, a nice, super-sized, white van arrived from the Charles V. George V.A. Center. Loaded inside were some enthusiastic paddlers, a bunch of boats, and gear. I was excited to see people of varying ages, races, and backgrounds so eager to be on the river.

The boaters were active duty service members, veterans, or their family members. They were all at the river that day, some of them possibly on their first whitewater descent, thanks to TRR. I would

later learn that TRR was not only offering an opportunity for challenges via kayaking, stand up paddle boarding, whitewater boating, and other paddlesports, but was providing the opportunity for service members and vets to find health and healing. These folks were getting the benefits of having a social network and support system and were part of a progressive step-by-step program to learn whitewater skills. They were embarking on many exciting adventures and were on a journey to accomplish things that may have seemed impossible before.

Everyone had a smile that day as we enjoyed the warmth of sunshine in forgiving Class II rapids. I paddled that day with Victor Gaines, and Horace McDonald. I would return to this river later, as well as Section 9 of the French Broad, to share many laughs with Victor's daughter, Angela Richmond. We also shared some

moments of excitement as we navigated down rapids. I was forced to step up my river skills a notch when Horace's nephew, Tristan, a new kayaker and a bright child, encouraged me to try new things on the river and practice my roll.

Kayaking with these folks was a blast. Soon I wanted to know more about some of their stories and why each person chose to travel down the river. I already knew from my research on TRR's website that it existed for the purpose of creating "an environment of healthy adventure for healing active duty and veteran service members through paddle sports." I also discovered that the organization gave the family members of veterans the opportunity to participate in paddle sports as well. Some of the veterans may have been recovering from post-traumatic stress disorder or were living with a physical or other mental disability. Their being on the river was not only a time for learning, but also a time to socialize and let Mother Nature recharge their brains. This made me realize that one of the many reasons I kept returning to the river was that it fueled my soul, cleared my mind, conditioned my body, introduced me to friends, and helped me overcome my fears.

I wanted to learn more about the veterans I met on the river with TRR, and I decided the best way to get the willing to share their stories was over dinner at the local pizzeria. Horace and Cliff Counsell, TRR Asheville's highly organized and thorough Trip Coordinator and kayaker, took charge of getting veterans to join us for pizza and conversation. On a cold winter night, 10 people showed up, and over several hot pies their stories unfolded.

Victor, 58, got involved with TRR after meeting with Beverly Bradigan, the lead recreation therapist at the Asheville Veterans' Medical Center. Beverly thought

Victor would be interested in a new activity in the community for veterans, and Juliet Jacobsen Kastorff and Becca Day of Endless River Adventures were starting a chapter called Team River Runner Asheville. Victor told me that he already loved water sports, so he gave it a try. While he had canoed in the past, he had not whitewater kayaked. His first training session was at Warren Wilson College in the swimming pool. All of the equipment was provided by TRR, which Victor thought was great. Today he owns his own gear and has been boating with TRR for five years. He says that TRR has made a significant difference in his life, as kayaking has helped him relieve stress, and it helps him mentally, physically, and spiritually.

Victor also gets to spend time with his family on river trips with TRR. His daughter and her husband Mark are a regular part of the group; Mark has even purchased his own kayak. Angela tells me that she really enjoys seeing how the inexperienced vets react during their first boating experience. She says that TRR made her realize that anything is possible, and the TRR experience

has been nothing but positive for her dad. When I asked for Victor's wisdom about why other vets would benefit from TRR, he said, "The benefits are freedom on the water with a sense of independence, yet being a part of the group, and knowing that when someone is in trouble on the water you or your buddies will be there to help them. Pretty much like we were there for each other in the military."

Like a good comrade, Victor invited Horace McDonald to join TRR. Horace would quickly play an integral role in getting the vets to and from the river, as well as down it, as the trip driver, boat loader, and sometimes lead paddler/guide on different rivers. Horace can drive a Sprinter van through the switchbacks to the lower Green River like a pro. He told me that when he first saw the flyer about TRR, he really wasn't interested, but then he met Victor who made kayaking sound fun. So he tried it and had a good time! Horace has led boaters down several scenic and challenging rivers in the Southeast and tested his skills on the Salmon River in Idaho while boating during the TRR National trip in 2013. He told me



*A TRR veteran kayaking down the Nantahala River.*

**Photo by Jim Glaze**

# NEWS & NOTES



*Victor Gaines, Leslie Segal, and Horace McDonald on a TRR trip.*  
**Photo by Will Leverette**

that kayaking has had a positive effect on his life and has caused him to get out and meet people. For Horace, steering away from isolation and toward being closer with his family is the benefit of being on the river. He feels that being a part of TRR has presented him with a chance to work on his leadership skills, a physical challenge, and a mechanism to improve his mental and physical health.

Veteran and kayaker Mike Dow shared with me his first experience boating with Horace and TRR on the Upper Green River. They reached a rapid called Pinball,

which is a Class III+ double drop. Horace had paddled ahead of Mike, and suddenly Horace disappeared below the horizon line. Mike saw Horace's paddle blade fly wildly in the air and thought, "This can't be good." Still, he paddled into Pinball rapid, charged on, and made it through. Mike said that when he moved to Asheville in 2013 he hadn't been in a boat for over 12 years. He saw a flyer about TRR, contacted the V.A., and on a beautiful day ventured down the Tuckaseegee River with Team River Runner. Later that day the weather turned into a massive thunderstorm, but Mike said all he could think while being on

the water with a storm looming overhead was, "What other sport can you do and it feels so good?" He says that kayaking has given him life-changing experiences and opened up the possibility that he can do wonders.

Other TRR boaters like Ephram Byerly, David Whitlow, and Mike Hyer all share the common experience that boating is not only challenging but a fun social experience. When John Coligado was having trouble adjusting to life after the military, a V.A. psychologist at the Columbia, South Carolina V.A. Center recommended he try TRR. Since then, he has developed many lasting relationships with other TRR members and gained a renewed sense of self. John said to me, "I would've never thought to pursue kayaking prior to TRR and now I'm a fan of kayaking and TRR. In particular my experiences with Asheville TRR have helped me readjust to life after the military." His favorite event is the Southeast Regional at the Nantahala, and the best part of TRR for him is getting to kayak and raft with his son Joe. John said to me, "TRR is the most veteran-oriented organization I've ever participated in outside the military. They care about their members and help veterans adjust to life after the military."

A couple of hours later only a few slices of pizza were left. There were smiles and laughter around the table from talk of our river adventures. I had kayaked with some of these guys and gals at one time or another and watched them push past many of the same fears I have had on the water. I was no longer some random

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**Opposite page top:** Veterans and volunteers from multiple chapters of TRR attend the Southeastern Region Rendezvous on the Nantahala River (NC).

**Photo by John Coligado**

**Opposite page bottom:** TRR veterans navigate Lesser Wesser Falls on the Nantahala River.

**Photo by Jim Glaze**

safety boater from Alabama volunteering on a TRR trip, but now a local Asheville transplant, and the people of TRR were my boating Comrades. I was starting to see that the rivers and creeks were not only the life of our planet, but healing waters for our veterans and so many others. I no longer saw members of TRR as having a disability, but as brave, strong, bright, and

courageous people who keep on giving. As Will Leverette, TRR's head of paddling instruction said to me one evening while sitting on his back deck, "They are our Whitewater Warriors."

*For more information about Team River Runner see: <http://www.teamriverrunner.org/> or visit them on Facebook.*



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