

The Broken Toy Resistance

Hunting an Apex Predator in Southern Florida's Vast Wilderness

I have tried to live my life by that old adage, “never be the smartest guy in the room”. The idea being if I surrounded myself with people who were far more interesting than I was, I would learn and improve. This mantra has led me to some interesting and strange places throughout my military and law enforcement careers. It is how I now find myself surrounded by Green Berets, riding in an unassuming rental van through the Florida Everglades, for the purpose of hunting the Burmese Python. I wonder, “what the hell am I doing here?” It would not be the last time.

Florida's Everglades National Park consists of approximately 1.5 million acres of land, which amounts to the largest tropical wilderness in the United States. It was the first National Park created to protect an ecosystem, instead of geographic features, and hosts (or rather, did

host) a significant number of threatened/protected species. For reasons that vary based on whom you're asking (hurricanes, wayward pet owners) this fragile wilderness is inhabited by an invasive apex predator, the Burmese Python. These snakes thrive in a tropical environment like the Everglades and kill prey by constriction. They grow based on age and food source, of which the Everglades is plentiful. The state record snake in Florida was 18-19 feet long and weighed hundreds of pounds. They are known to eat mammals, birds, and even alligators. Some estimates place the loss of native species due to these animals at 95%.

Hunting these predators is done through various means, all of which amount to: find snake, grab same. Pythons are captured by hand and once turned over, are humanely euthanized by Florida Fish and Wildlife. So, yes, python hunters wrestle these snakes by hand in order to capture them alive.

This entire endeavor is sanctioned by the State of Florida to preserve natural habitats. A licensed python hunter can earn \$50 for every snake up to four feet and \$25 for each additional foot. Competitions are held with prizes in the thousands of dollars for the hunter who manages to catch the most pythons in a given period of time.

A few months prior to this journey, a legendary retired Corporal and mentor of mine, reached out and asked if I'd be

interested in taking part in a trip to the Everglades. During this trip, he'd be filming a documentary to showcase the Walking with Warriors foundation (<https://walkingwithwarriorsministry.org>) which specializes in getting Veterans and first responders outdoors for the stated purpose of equipping "Warriors to thrive before, during, and after life's challenges". The documentary, I learned, would focus on capturing the stories of the 9/11 generation of armed professionals and their shared experience on a four-day python hunt. Furthermore, the group that was signed on included several of the fabled US Army's Green Berets, Infantry Officers, cops, and a 9/11 survivor firefighter. Sign. Me. UP!

I'm no stranger to adventure and random woodland excursions, but this was going to be different. I'd be launched into a massive wilderness, filled with all manner of nasty ways to die, 40 miles from the nearest cell reception. My wonderful wife put it rather comically when asked about this prospect, "with the group that's going, you're safer there than you are at work." So I hitched up my big boy pants, took stock of my equipment, begrudgingly embraced being in front of a camera, and committed.

The Cast

Every great adventure tale needs three things: a mystical location (check!), a secretive and deadly foe (check!), and a ragtag group of rogues to stare down a seemingly insurmountable task (check, check, check!). Let me begin by introducing these hooligans and heroes:

Michael - The leader of our hunting party and organizer of Walking with Warriors. I first met Michael during my initial interview for this documentary, during which time his intelligence and humility struck me immediately. A man only fools underestimate, Michael has the ability to inspire individuals to great deeds. The sort of ability that can only be honed by decades spent studying the art of unconventional combat and the beliefs of men. To this point, I discovered that he planned some of the missions my team carried out on our second deployment. He is the epitome of the warrior poet.

Zach - A fearless, yet calm addition. Zach quickly took on the role of second in command to Michael. His eidetic memory, rational thinking, and hunting experience made him invaluable. In his spare time, Zach forges custom knives which include uniform pieces from fallen service-members.

Chuck - A great source of strength for the group. Chuck's experience as both a special forces medic and ER doctor added to our sense of invincibility, however misguided that sense may have been. A man of renewed faith.

Truitt - A towering, bayou accented, comedian, whom I spent the majority of the trip convincing to apply to my own agency. Truitt quotes case law and laughs in equal measure, adding levity to the most frustrating of circumstance. A man who cares more for the crime fight and helping others than his own well-being. I liked him immediately.

Jeremiah - A young Army Officer whose wisdom belies his youth. Quick to assist, laser focused, and a man who's comedic impressions only added to the levity of the experience. The type of officer I wish I had during my own enlistment, he will accomplish great things.

Anaiah - A self-made, thoughtful, philosophical, US Navy Veteran and psychologist. A man whose depth Jeremiah described as, "like talking to the ocean". I spent hours conversing with him on law enforcement, fatherhood, and religion. A man who values hard work and discipline as routes to self-improvement.

Jimmy - What can be said about a survivor of New York Fire's valiant efforts to rescue innocents from the World Trade Center on 9/11? A man who has seen the greatest evil this world can offer and still responds, "send me" some 23 years later. A beacon of hope for all warriors who stand at the precipice between light and self-consuming darkness. A man who deserves more than most to retire on a beach

somewhere, but wants nothing more than to help his fellow citizens and train the next generation of New York's Bravest.

Tom - A mentor and retired SWAT Corporal. If I spend my entire life trying to be half the husband, father, instructor, and all around good person that Tom is; I would fall short but be all the better for the attempt. An exemplar for how men should behave and one of our photographers/film makers.

Josh and Ian - A heavily bearded US Marine father and his eldest teenage son, together made up the rest of our film/production crew. Josh's stoic nature allowed for him to film and photograph our expedition while intentionally maintaining near invisibility. Ian's love and respect for his father ever apparent simply by his willingness to head out into the unknown with nothing more than a USMC Ka-bar on his hip.

Martin - Yours truly.

Day One

Tom picked me up around 0700 on the first day. My gear was laid out by the door in preparation and after the exchange of coffee and pleasantries, we were off. As has been the recent custom, due to Tom's kindness and my living circumstance, we loaded up in his truck. I found myself riding toward our rally point feeling as I did in my early twenties prior to leaving on deployment; that strange mix of clarity and calm that overtakes your mind. It's the acknowledgment that the time for fear is done, the wheels are in motion, and you have a task to accomplish. I've always found that state of mind oddly comforting, as I suspect many others did as well.

The launching location was a semi-empty parking lot near downtown Tampa, FL. Tom and I arrived first and he began to set up camera equipment. Just as Tom was turning down my twelfth well-meaning, but ultimately futile offer of assistance, the rest of our team began to arrive. This was my first introduction to all but two of them. I was immediately struck by the idea that everyone looked the same. Sure there were multiple races and ethnicities, builds and ages, but the look in every man's eye was the same. The way they carried themselves was the same. Hell, even the choice in footwear amounted to one school of thought: "I can walk for miles in these and they can get wet". We looked like a flash mob advertisement for bearded outdoor fitness and fixed blade knives. It was probably the safest parking lot in the city that morning. Introductions were made and the conversation quickly turned to gear, which then turned into a knife

sharpening lesson using the front passenger window of Zach's truck.

Michael arrived, gear was transferred, and we began the long drive South. Again, I was reminded of the military. Multiple people from vastly different backgrounds all brought together for a single purpose. It's a beautiful thing and of course the point of this entire adventure. Fast forward to the opening paragraph of this article. I now found myself in a white rental van with Green Berets Michael, Zach, Chuck, and fellow Navy Vet Anaiah. The conversation fluctuated between philosophy, religion, the state of the world, war stories, and crude jokes. I felt right at home.

A few hours in, Michael announced that we were making a stop to stretch our legs. Upon arrival, I found myself at the Ochopee Skunk Ape Research Facility and greeted with a massive statue of the beast. For those who aren't up to speed on the current state of skunk ape affairs, think Bigfoot but living in the Southeast.

This facility amounted to a gift shop, rumor mill, and staging point for tours of the Everglades. As gimmicky and tongue-in-cheek as the place was, it served as a stark reminder that civilization ends at the pavement down here. Once we entered Everglades National Park, we would be on our own.

If you ever find yourself on a roadtrip down this far South, I highly recommend stopping.

After a quick group picture in front of the statue, we hit the road again. Daylight was burning and we still had the final member of our team to pick up.

During this stretch of our drive, flanked on either side by hammock and swamp, I couldn't help but *feel* the emptiness of the place. It was like laying eyes on an abandoned house. Visually, the sight of it sparks expectations of solitude within us, but it's the stillness of the place that makes it feel empty, makes it feel...wrong. As evidence of this, I was keenly aware of the stark lack of roadkill. Though this stretch of road leading South through the Everglades is two lanes, it is traveled constantly. In my mind there should have been absolute carnage on the pavement's shoulders, given the abundance of life within this ecosystem. Instead, it was just empty.

These thoughts rattled through my head as we drove. After an unknown length of time that was better measured by distance than by the passage of minutes, we pulled off again. This time to enter a parking lot of packed sand with markings that read "Coopertown Airboat Tours". A broad, smiling, clean-shaven man approached. As we waited to purchase tickets and sign liability waivers, he introduced himself as "Jimmy". The New York accent and overt

friendliness were unmistakable, this was the final member of our band. I liked him immediately.

Just as no trip to the Everglades would be complete without an airboat tour, no airboat tour in the middle of nowhere would be complete without an arguably insane staff. Seriously. These folks rebuild converted car engines, mount them to fiberglass boats equipped with large fans, then use them to dodge any number of random things down here that will kill you. While the boat was prepped, we were treated to a lecture on indigenous animals within the Everglades by an individual wrapped in an albino python. This dude dripped with what the thespians call, “stage presence”. Complete with homemade tattoos, stories about “going away for a while” and allegedly selling horses to guys in Mexico that sounded suspiciously like cartel members. My cop spider sense went haywire immediately, but hey, the man put on a great show!

We donned hearing protection and boarded our airboat. As fun as living my childhood Gator McKlusky fantasies were, that same feeling of emptiness broke through again. During this hour or so long tour, we spotted just two birds and two alligators. But Martin, you may say, all the animals were probably just spooked by the sound of impending airboat and your childish squeals of glee. Maybe. But add it to the lack of roadkill and I’m not so sure. My mind could have been playing tricks on me, but maybe this is the true influence of a non-native apex predator.

Our tour concluded and we again mounted up in our vehicles. With Jimmy now in the van with us, the conversation continued. More war stories (literal and figurative) were shared. By this time the sun was long gone. We made one final stop at the edge of civilization, and cell service, to grab snacks and call wives.

We entered the Southern section of the Florida Everglades National Park. A few minutes into crossing that boundary a long, black, cylindrical, thing emerged from the darkness. The headlights illuminated the thing stretched across the oncoming side of the road. SNAKE! The convoy spun around, but it was gone. This sighting would fuel me for the remainder of the trip.

From this entrance to our staging area of Flamingo Campground is approximately 40 miles. That's 40 miles of darkness with literal jungle creeping at the edges of the blacktop. In this gloom, with my level of excitement, everything looked like a python. This far out, only two radio stations out of Key West could be received. So we spent the remainder of the drive blasting 80s/90s pop music and straining our eyes into the night.

The Flamingo Campground is located at the appropriately named "1 Flamingo Lodge Highway". It's host to permanent

living structures, pull-behind hookups, and (at this time of year) the entire mosquito population of the Southeastern United States. Walking with Warriors supplies all of the meals and tents for these trips, as well as a lot of the gear. I opted to bring one of my own tents and upon arrival we made camp. Again I was reminded of my time in the military. Once everyone's individual setup was complete, each individual assisted the others.

After a quick meal, it was time for our first hunt! Pythons in this area come out after dark and lay across paved sections of road to absorb residual heat from the day. It was around 2300 hours when we loaded up again, this time accompanied by a local python hunter. I found myself seated in the bed of a pickup truck with Anaiah, Tom, and Ian, clutching a magnet-based spotlight and gazing out into inky blackness. Anaiah, who has been on these hunts before, knew exactly what to do and I was happy to follow his lead.

As we cruised slowly down that 40 mile stretch of highway with our lights trained on the edges of the road, I began to doze. The wind and mosquitos sapped my desire for conversation despite being in such good company. I was beginning to give up when Ian yelled "SNAKE!" Anaiah was immediately out of the pickup bed and I found myself right on his heels. We crossed to the passenger side where the rest of our party joined us. There was indeed a snake, coiled defensively on the edge where swamp meets pavement. In the gloom and ambient light it appeared to give off a black

sheen. The pointed, almost triangular shape of the head, as well as it's coiled position, gave the experienced folks pause. This was no Python, it was a cottonmouth. The Florida cottonmouth, or Water Moccasin, is a pit viper native to Florida and definitely not something to mess with. We slowly backed away and allowed him to continue whatever business venomous snakes have this time of night.

We loaded back up in the truck and continued the drive. This same sequence of events played out repeatedly over the next four or five hours, all with the same cottonmouth result, except for a single instance where a large black slithering object was identified as the tail of an alligator slipping back into the waterline. I guess everything down here really can kill you. We arrived back at camp and I crawled into my tent accompanied by the most persistent mosquitos I've ever met. I killed as many as possible and laid down with snakes on my mind. We'd received word that last night the professional python hunter we were meeting with in the morning had encountered a python so large, he and his partner alone couldn't hold it. They estimated it to be 10-12 feet. Thoughts of that monster slithered through my head until I fell asleep.

Day Two

I awoke the same way I have many times before; laying on the oddly comfortable ground, the soft light of morning forcing its way through plastic tent walls, and the haunting cry of distant coyotes in my ears. I lay there for a moment soaking in the experience, thinking about time spent in Southern California and that same sound bouncing off of canyon walls. But I'm no longer in my early twenties, there's no looming deployment schedule, and if I lay here for too long someone else in our group may have to pull my weight. I couldn't allow that. So I got dressed and emerged to assist with camp tasks. Michael's wife Bren, who also serves as the President/CEO of Walking with Warriors and had traveled down separately, was already hard at work cooking a massive breakfast for our grateful group. Michael laid out a map of today's hunt area across Jeremiah's broad shoulders. The plan was to meet up with well-known python hunter and TV personality, Tom Rahill. At which point we'd load up in small boats and paddle to the Aerojet Dade Rocket Facility, an abandoned 1960s rocket manufacturing facility, and hopefully find our quarry.

Our group now well fed, caffeinated, and uplifted, piled back into the vehicles. We drove to a nondescript wildlife management complex that I couldn't find again to save my life. This took the form of several warehouse-style buildings with overgrown sheds to one side. The main structures had the look of something left in the Florida humidity too long and the sheds appeared to be on the verge of being retaken by the swamp. I learned that licensed python hunters were

granted these sheds for equipment storage and it was here that we met Tom Rahill.

Mr. Rahill has been featured prominently within the media, YouTube, and even on “Dirty Jobs with Mike Rowe”. He looks every bit the man you’d expect has spent the last thirty years walking this massive wilderness would, to include the bravado. His safety brief turned into white noise once I got the gist. Ten minutes summed up into, “Everything down here that grows, flies, crawls, or walks can kill you. Also, don’t drown.” Got it! After Zach gifted Mr. Rahill with a custom knife, we began to remove several small boats that were cached behind the row of sheds. These boats were in rough shape, several appeared to have catastrophic cracks patched with insulating foam. “What the hell am I doing?” I ask myself again. But fellowship and adventure call men to do great and stupid things, so we made note of the cracking locations and loaded up Mr. Rahill’s truck.

We then traveled to an entry/portage point along a waterway that would lead us to the Aerojet Dade Rocket Facility. Michael removed a box of MREs as we readied the boats. “You can’t look in the box as you grab, but trading is allowed.” Rules established, we all snagged our meal for the day. This waterway consisted of a dirt road leading to a shallow entrance pool, maybe three feet deep. This pool then fed into a larger channel with a 20 foot drop off. My boat for the day, a small OD green skiff, began to leak immediately. Luckily, Mr. Rahill had a fix! A generous

application of Flex Tape and a Bic heat treatment later, our catastrophic crack became significantly more manageable. Jimmy found half of a plastic gas station cup to use as a bailing bucket and we were off! The team was distributed amongst three boats of varying size but all in similar state of disrepair. Jeremiah, Ian, and Jimmy shared my boat. We quickly figured out that three would maneuver the boat and one would constantly bail water. We could make this work!

Spirits high, MREs and bailing instruments in hand, we launched! Our skiff entered the main channel and crossed the drop off without issues. However, our compatriots were not so lucky. Let it be known that three large men and their respective gear do not fit well into a tiny, leaking boat. Appearing almost in slow motion I watched as Tom's boat, containing Chuck, Anaiah, and around \$20k worth of camera equipment, crossed the channel drop off. Their small boat, obviously overburdened with far too much awesomeness, rocked repeatedly and PLOP..into the drink they all went. Three heads popped back up after a moment, Tom clutching a camera worth more than my first three cars combined. If any of them appeared pissed, they didn't show it. The three collected what gear they could, righted the boat, and hauled it back to the entry pool to reconvene. Now we had an adventure! The only casualty? Tom's camera. RIP.

After redistribution of personnel and equipment, we again set off. Tom in the boat alone this time, Chuck moved to another boat, and Anaiah set to travel by land with Mr.

Rahill. We entered the channel again, some of us wetter than others, and crossed under a bridge so low that we ducked as we passed. At this point, Michael further expounded his view on the battle cry “Tharseo”. Basically this term, from the Greek root tharsos, means “courage”. Michael explained that first responders and Veterans have nothing to fear because the path has already been laid out by those who have traveled before us. To take heart, push forward, and trust that God has a plan for those who serve. I was reminded of the Tacitus quote inscribed upon the National Law Enforcement Memorial, “In valor there is hope”. The point? Your experience is shared by those who came before you. The fact that bravery and self-sacrifice exist is reason enough to take heart and keep moving forward. You are not alone.

We continued to travel along this canal, swapping stories and alternating tasks, while discussing the finer points of maneuvering an unruly and leaking skiff. This canal system was dug during the space race days to transport heavy rocket engines to the testing facility. The design of our boat leads to a slow and leisurely pace. I quickly lose sight of the rest of our party. The water is clear and I can see almost to a bottom of tangled trees and algae. Growing up camping and fishing in Florida, kids are taught about alligators. I try not to think about the bull gators I know are staring up at us. These things are as long as mid-sized trucks and can weigh in excess of 1,100 pounds. However, wayward dogs and small children playing at water’s edge aside, they tend to leave you alone this time of year.

This canal section ends and we're forced to portage to the next section of water. To my uninitiated readers, this means carrying a boat between two bodies of water. This task was made significantly easier through Jeremiah's ingenuity. Configuring shoulder straps out of cordage, he set the four of us up for efficiency. We continued this series of events traversing the canal system, to include one overgrown section where I sat on the bow and helped to steer by grabbing branches to pull the boat along. This route took us 3.15 miles to a rocky outcropping which was separated from the Aerojet Dade Rocket Facility by a small pond. We unloaded and sent some of our team back to grab the others. While attempting to move one of the boats across this outcropping and into the pond, we flip another one. This time it's Zach and Truitt who get wet. Again, true to form, if any frustration is felt it is not shown publicly. The rest of us ford the pond, trying not to slip on slick rocks, until we reach a raised wooden platform at the beginning of the facility.

Socks and shoes were removed to allow feet to dry and snacks were shared. As we waited for the stragglers of our group myself, Zach, Chuck, and Truitt set off on foot toward the rocket facility. The Aerojet Dade Rocket Facility was once a testing site for rocket engines and rocket fuel. It was ultimately abandoned when NASA selected a competitor's machine. Since that time, multiple attempts have been made to repurpose the site but all were unsuccessful. Today it remains a loose collection of buildings, silos, and pavement that is slowly being retaken by nature. The site of several deaths after its abandonment, the property has been fenced

off and ladders to higher points of each building have been removed. This hasn't stopped graffiti artists, firearm enthusiasts, and drug addicts from trespassing and the evidence of their presence can be found everywhere. This place looks every bit like a post-apocalyptic way station from a Stephen King novel.

We poked around for a while but no snakes were to be found and we rejoined our group. A plan was discussed to scout a hammock mound island area where pythons were known to nest. These mounds are created when the roots and decaying bodies of trees pile high enough that a small island is formed. Due to the solitude and easy water access, pythons often nest on these mounds. Special permission is needed to visit these areas, but luckily we had the required boxes checked.

Piling into the boats once again and after yet another warning about yet another thing down here that will harm you (poisonwood trees), we set off! We joined several members of our team that had already cleared a landing area on this particular mound, which appeared to be made entirely of poisonwood. I covered my exposed skin as best I could and we set off for the interior of this island. Hunting methods in this area involved taking sticks or poles and jamming them as deep as possible into the roots upon which you stand. The objective? To piss off whatever may be nesting below your feet enough that it slithers out to pick a fight. We worked this mound in such a manner until the sun

began to set, but were only able to find a recently abandoned python nest complete with hatched eggs.

Tired, sore, disappointed, and quite possibly suffering from poisonwood rashes, we began the long paddle back to our entry point and ultimately to camp. Unbeknownst to us, Bren had been hard at work prepping a feast. I'm sure there's a lesson here about campfires, warm food, and a tribe to which you belong improving your outlook and forcing the advancement of humanity; but at the time I was just simply content.

The group, now with full bellies, gathered around the campfire. The conversation, masterfully guided by Michael, turned to suicide and misconceptions on PTSD. It is not my place to share the experiences of my fellows beyond my own involvement, so I will not go into depth on these topics. Suffice it to say, every Veteran and first responder goes through something. It is the nature of our profession. We do not want someone to coddle us, we want a task. We want a mission and we want to be of use. When we no longer feel purpose, we lose ourselves. If you are experiencing this as you read these words, you are not alone. Find a program like Walking with Warriors and dive in head first. You have value, your experiences have value, and you are needed. Tharseo.

As Michael led our conversation, a theme began to emerge. Namely, suffering as a way of bettering oneself and that being a necessity of the human condition. Iron sharpens iron. Feeling at peace, I crawled into my tent to sleep. The presence of the mosquitoes did not bother me after that.

Day Three

Day three began much the same as day two. Breakfast was served, plots were hatched, and stories were shared. The forecast called for heavy rain, so we packed appropriately. The day's plans called for a hike through an area near a large lake, interviews for the documentary, and a surprise. Chuck, inspired by the previous day's events and his own renewed faith, requested he be baptized within this wilderness at the exact location the boats capsized. Michael, among his other exceedingly impressive qualifications, also happens to be a minister. I've seen all manner of interesting things in my life, but I had never witnessed a baptism. Particularly not a Green Beret, alligator infested swamp, torrential downpour, baptism. With any luck, our group would get to witness a beautiful sight, support a brother in arms, AND capture a snake!

I donned an old woodland camouflage gore-tex rain jacket, issued to me some fifteen years prior, and resigned myself to an interesting day. Our hike itself was uneventful, however I found myself engaged in perhaps the most profound

conversation of my trip on the return drive. While other members of our group dozed, I was fortunate enough to speak with Michael one-on-one.

The backdrop of this conversation was much the same as my initial trip down, in the same white unmarked rental van, traveling through the backroads of the Everglades. To add to the ambiance, rain pattered off of the windshield, roof, and body of the van as we drove toward the baptism location. Michael expressed his views on Post Traumatic Stress, stating that much has been learned through research, but the public is stuck in old ideas regarding it. That just because a person has a military or first responder background, the assumption is that they have PTSD. Michael believes it is a mistake to look at this as a “disorder” and that most individuals have used their service “like rocket fuel to help them thrive in life”. Michael described that other conditions commonly experienced by these groups, Traumatic Brain Injury and Moral Injury for example, were often mistakenly classified as PTSD. This mistaken classification sparks pity, a victimization mindset, removes ownership of the Veteran/first responder’s choices, and doesn’t acknowledge the likelihood of emerging stronger after critical incidents (Post-Traumatic Growth). Rather, Michael believes in taking ownership of your experiences and remembering that you had the privilege to serve. In Michael’s own words he described his experiences, “I just wanted to do epic things with epic dudes”. Michael went on to say that he made the choices to experience those events and that he refuses to be

seen as a used up piece of government machinery. "I reject the idea that I'm a broken toy," he told me. Michael knows it is well understood the human body gets stronger from hard workouts and you are not a "broken toy" when reaching muscle failure while setting a personal record but that he, "rejects the well-intentioned assumption that Vets and cops are broken toys because they did hard stuff - they answered the call to do hard stuff, loved doing hard stuff, and we can help each other get stronger by overcoming the really hard stuff." I don't believe I've ever heard PTS and self-determination summed up as beautifully as that.

We arrived at yesterday's boat launching site and after acting as a guide for the passage of the vehicles through high water, we all piled out into the rain. As the only non-Christian in the group, I volunteered for overwatch in case any alligators let curiosity get the better of them. However, I found curiosity got the better of me instead and I positioned myself where I could see the rite and also watch out for predators. Out of respect for my brothers, as well as my inability to fully describe the sacred nature of this event, I will not describe it here. That being said if any armed professionals are looking for a renewal of faith, you'd be hard pressed to find a better suited setting than this one. The power of the moment was lost on no one, including a young mother and her two children who stopped on the side of the road just to be a part of it. Fate is a funny thing.

Wet, cold, and utterly awed, I headed back to the van with my comrades. A solemn jubilation had captured the group and its presence was almost palpable. The sun was setting as we arrived back at the campsite where Bren again had dinner waiting. This time, steak was on the menu! A fitting feast for our final night together. Our group gathered around the campfire again to discuss our triumphs and our trials, as we waited for a few hours to pass so we could head out on another roadside hunt.

Loading into our vehicles again, this final hunt went much the same as the first night's. Several cotton mouths, a gator or two, but no pythons. My disappointment was tempered by the realization that the adventure would be over tomorrow. Upon return to camp I crawled into my tent for the last time, the enormity of this experience enfolding me like a blanket. Darkness closed in, exhaustion took over, and I slept.

Day Four

Truth be told, Day Four was a blur of packing and securing gear. I had known going into this that I wanted to write about the experience and had received permission to do so. I struggled with the idea of how to formulate an ending with no snake in hand. Our quarry had eluded us, how does one reconcile an ending with no end? Conversations turned to

next steps and I found myself back in Tom's truck heading North to a gas station for our final interviews and goodbyes.

As we pulled into an available pump, I saw the group huddling around one of the other vehicles. I was immediately struck by a sadness I haven't felt in almost fifteen years. The mission was done. It was time to say goodbye. Farewells mean more to warriors and they always will. Veterans and first responders are by design confronted with the delicacy of life. As such, they know how serious parting can be. Each time may very well be the last time. Due to these circumstances it is a consequence of the warrior condition to say goodbye, but I find that it never becomes easier.

We all went our separate ways then to return to work and families, with me at least changed for the better. Snake or no snake, I had a great time!

I cannot recommend highly enough the work Michael and Bren do for our community. For any of you looking to be involved in a trip like this, find more information at [**https://walkingwithwarriorsministry.org**](https://walkingwithwarriorsministry.org). Keep an eye out for "The Campfire" which will be released at multiple film competitions soon. I hope to see you on our next trip to the Everglades!