



The Old Glory Relay: A BHAG to End All BHAGs

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AthleteBiz Board Member [Bob Fleshner](#) is a fitness and running advocate and trainer. Formerly an executive at United Health Care, he manages the [American Odyssey Relay](#) and, with Team Red, White, and Blue, [The Old Glory Relay](#). Team Red, White, and Blue stresses their [Eagle Ethos](#) in what characterizes their organization and what sets them apart for their care and support of the veteran community.

At the end of the Old Glory Relay 2015, we stood, one hundred plus of us, in total, rapt silence as Chad told his story. Eleven years in the service followed by eight years numbing his pain with alcohol and drugs. Then he told of connecting with Team Red, White and Blue and participating in the Old Glory Relay. And of the folks he met during the Old Glory Relay and otherwise through Team Red, White and Blue, whom he credited with saving his life. BHAG achieved.

For those not conversant in the writings of business consultant, Jim Collins, a BHAG is a Big, Hairy Audacious Goal. Collins believes that BHAGs are a great way to reach for and achieve greatness.



A half a decade ago, Team Red, White and Blue (Team RWB) founder, Mike Erwin, had a number of BHAGs rolling around in his head. One was to build a grassroots organization focused on re-integrating veterans back into civilian society through physical and social activities. With Mike's vision and leadership, Team RWB is now 90,000 members strong and growing exponentially. It has become the leading veterans service organization in the country in terms of programming and engagement for veterans.

Three years ago, Mike and I were brainstorming ways to expand Team RWB and greatly enhance awareness of the issues facing veterans attempting to return to civilian society.

We knew we had to come up with a BHAG to end all BHAGs.

After a few false starts, we agreed upon the concept for the Old Glory Relay. An American flag would be carried from San Francisco to Washington, DC over the course of 60 days starting on 9/11 and ending on Veteran's Day weekend. Along the way it would be carried by thousands of different people through dozens of states, cities and towns. The entire focus would be on the group effort. On the flag. Not like other cross the country adventures, which so often focus on the superhuman effort of one person making the trek.

So, we set the BHAG and we made it happen!



This was year two of the Old Glory Relay and we started in downtown San Francisco. Our first day took us to Silicon Valley by way of a number of major tech corporate offices including Salesforce, Pinterest, Facebook and Google. We ended the first day at Microsoft's Silicon Valley headquarters since they were the 2015 presenting sponsor of the relay. It was 90 degrees that day and would head over 100 the next several days in Sacramento and east on into Nevada. The flag was carried the entire length of Nevada on Route 50, also known as America's Loneliest Highway. And over Monarch Pass and the Continental Divide. Each day teams of anywhere from four to 20 runners would carry the flag. We also added occasional bike legs this year for those who either don't or can't run.

I was fortunate enough to be on the road with Old Glory in early November in West Virginia. We started in Parkersburg and headed east. The first day was mostly on rails to trails paths. Some of the trail heads were not particularly accessible though they appeared to be on the maps the team was using. That resulted in us reaching our final destination of Salem, WV three hours after our expected arrival time. That didn't phase the cub scouts of Salem one bit as they stayed out in force with signs of greeting. Nor did it deter the VFW, which kept our dinner warm. While eating there we met Debbie Parsons who told us that seeing the flag coming into town brought a tear to her eye. She then explained that her son, Jason, had been killed in action eight years ago and this event told her that he hadn't died in vain. As we took turns hugging Debbie and sharing her sorrow, I knew for certain that the Old Glory Relay was resonating in a way that no other event with which I have ever been involved has done.



The following day we received an amazing and uplifting shock when the entire high school and middle school populations of Shinnston, WV were out to greet us! The marching band played America the Beautiful and then the students began to chant "USA, USA" as our runner took off with the flag. A bit later, we entered Morgantown under a beautiful sun bathed sky and retired the colors for the evening.

My final day on the road that week took us through crowded Morgantown and then back into rural countryside. Dirt roads were traversed. True back woods running until we crossed the border of Pennsylvania.

From the Pennsylvania border the flag was carried in close proximity to the Potomac River all the way to Washington, DC. I had the good fortune to carry Old Glory from the Iwo Jima Memorial in Northern VA toward the finish in DC. A large group of us took turns carrying the flag and passing the great monuments to Jefferson, Washington and Lincoln. We then reached the front of the White House and walked the flag to Microsoft's DC headquarters where we retired it once and for all and then heard Chad speak.

While I've tried to describe the event as best as I could in this brief story, words don't begin to express the emotions of the event. The Old Glory Relay will be back in 2016. . . look for us and participate, you won't be sorry!

