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Serving Chicopee, Holyoke, South Hadley & Granby

Local veterans kayak entire Conn. River

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For three local vietnam combat veterans, life doesn't have to end when retirement begins.

Equipped with five-days worth of food, a few changes of clothes and camping gear, 57-year-old Ken Bihler of Agawam, 58 year-old Ed Terik of Chicopee and 56-year-old Lenny Desrochers of Granby left out of the Perjovski Boat ramp on James Street in South Hadley last Tuesday morning to begin their final trip to complete their 410 mile kayaking adventure down the entire length of the Connecticut River.

After traveling the final 82.5 miles, the three men, all former employees of the Chicopee Post Office who have been friends for years, arrived in Old Saybrook, Conn., on Friday to end a quest that began on May 23 of last year, in Caanan, Vermont.

Split into three separate trips, it took the men a total of 17 days to kayak the river.

"We decided to split it up into three different trips because it's a lot easier to kayak when you're carrying less supplies," Terik explained. "There is a big difference between four and 10 days worth of food."

According to Terik, the trips were the result of 2.5 years of discussing and planning.

"We've all known each other for quite some time, and we just decided it was something we wanted to do," Terik said.

With a laugh, Bihler added, "As long as you're feeling okay and you got the time and wiles that are looking forward to you being away for a while, then I say go and do it."

According to Terik, one of the greatest



Three long-time friends have completed their three part kayaking journey along the Connecticut River. Above, the three area veterans pose for a picture before leaving out of the Perjovski Boat Ramp on James Street in South Hadley last Tuesday morning.

Chicopee Herald photo by Michelle Kealey

perks of kayaking the river has been the "chance to really relax. It's just so nice floating down the river and not worrying about anything."

"It's real peace for the head," Bihler agreed. "It gets you into such a great peace of mind."

While Bihler said he anticipated the

relaxation that the kayaking would bring, what he didn't expect was the beauty he was able to witness while traveling along the river.

"All my life I've lived by the river and I never knew how beautiful it was," Bihler

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said.

Referring to the sights of wildlife as “absolute treasures,” he said that they have seen everything from eagles to bobcats, to egrets and herons.

He added it was interesting to see such an abundance of egrets and herons, species that he said have been previously threatened with extinction.

“It was great to see all these types of wildlife coming back,” Bihler said.

Seeing these sights, he said, has given him a newfound appreciation for the river.

“It reminds you of how beautiful it is and that you should do your best to take care of it,” Bihler said.

In addition to being able to witness nature’s beauty, the trip had helped to foster an even greater bond between the men.

“A lot of this is about the friendship,” Desrochers said.

“If you’re still friends after all those miles, then you know it’s a real [friendship],” Terik said with a laugh.

Terik and Desrochers, both former marines, have had more than their fair share of experience navigating the water.

But for Bihler, kayaking was something he was completely unfamiliar with.

“I had never even been in a kayak before we decided to do this trip,” he said.

Bihler said that once you learn how to maintain your balance in the kayak, however, the sport is “like riding a bike. Once you

figure out how to do it, you can always do it.”

He added that the golden rule of kayaking is “to always keep your paddle in the water, no matter what happens.”

Having not been previously aware of a kayak’s capabilities, Bihler said, “I was amazed that we could do this, whole river in recreational kayaks.”

According to Bihler, an interest in kayaking is currently on an upswing.

“It’s an industry that’s really starting to boom,” he said.

A veteran of outdoor recreational sports who has climbed the Appalachian trail, Desrochers has been able to share his knowledge of athletic undertakings with Bihler and Terik during the trips.

“I’m kind of the one showing them how to do things,” Desrochers explained.

He said that the one real threat in kayaking along the river is encountering a current strainer, which is exactly what occurred during the second trip.

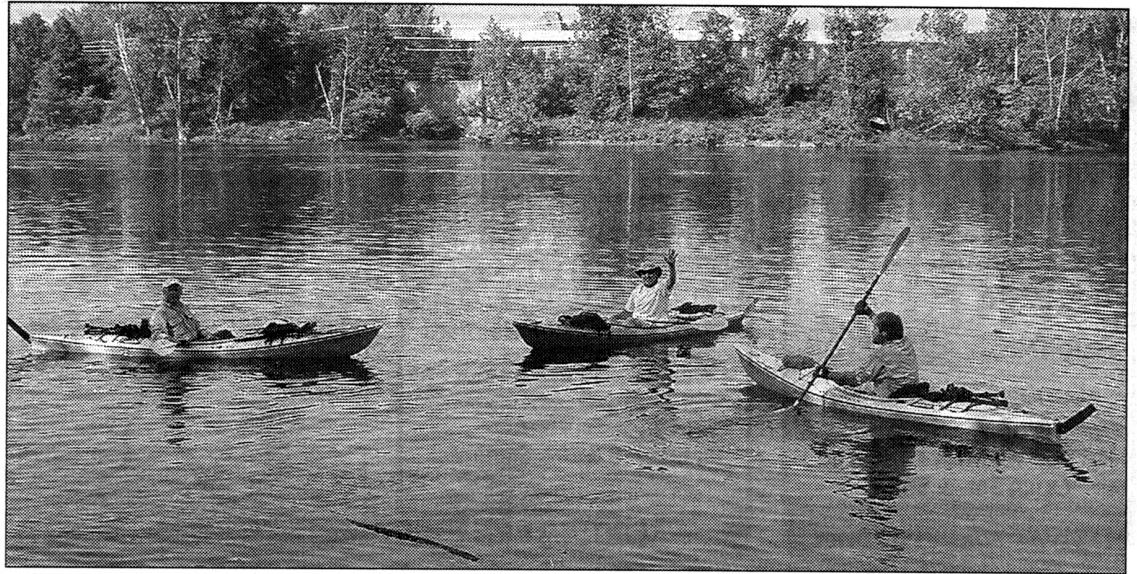
Guiding Bihler and Terik through the current strainer with his expertise, all three men were able to bypass the area harm-free.

According to Bihler, one of the surprises of kayaking was learning that whenever they reach a dam, special wheels, that are on the bottom of the boat, allow for it to be carried up and over the dam.

“Before doing this, I always wondered how you got over the dam,” Bihler said.

Stopping only once to camp for sleep, the men have done as much as 36 miles of paddling in one day.

Bihler explained that they do not have pre-planned camp sites,



Fifty-seven-year-old Ken Bihler of Agawam, 58 year-old Ed Terik of Chicopee and 56-year-old Lenny Desrochers of Granby give a wave good-bye as they leave out of the Perjovski Boat ramp on James Street in South Hadley last Tuesday morning to begin the final portion of their kayak trip of the entire Connecticut River.

Chicopee Herald photo by Michelle Kealey

but just decide to camp “when they get tired.”

If given permission, the men sometimes choose to camp on farmer’s fields or other “primitive areas,” with either no facilities or just an outhouse.

Terik said that in most instances in which they asked permission, farm owner’s didn’t mind them camping in their fields.

“They’re usually really friendly,” Terik said.

While camping on these sites, Terik said that they try their best to pick up all personal belongings and trash so as to leave the locations as they were found.

“We try not to leave a trace,” Bihler said. “The point is to love the river and the places around it.”

He added that the men have

even picked up trash left behind by other campers.

Now that the three have returned, they have with them not only their pride for their accomplishment, but a desire to share their story with other veterans as part of the Vets Helping Vets program.

Desrochers explained that without the proper attitude and a good use of your time, “retirement can be a death sentence.”

He explained that this especially applies to veterans who suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD) from their time in the military.

“If you tell them what you’ve done, and show them something like this, it changes everything,” he said. “They can look at it and think

they they can do it too.”

Bihler, who said that he “felt lost” after retirement, explained that when they first began discussing kayaking the Connecticut River, he didn’t think that they could do it.

“I thought, ‘What are you crazy? People don’t do that at our age,’” he said.

But completing the 400-mile trip has taught Bihler otherwise.

“We were able to do it, and the hope is that by listening to us talk about what we did, [the veterans] will think, ‘Hey I can do this too,’” he said. “We hope that it will let them see that there’s another life waiting for you after retirement.”