

Old Green Berets Backpacking the Camino in Spain

by Jim Sladack, Lt. Colonel, US Army (Ret.)



Camino Frances: 492 Miles from St Jean Pied de Port, France to Santiago, Spain

The Camino de Santiago Compostela

It was my birthday. Next year, I turned 65. I knew that time and the cumulative effect of injuries had taken their toll. But hey, I was an old Green Beret! There must be at least one grand adventure left-- something that would be mentally and physically challenging, yet still within my ability. I remembered an article I had read about the Camino de Santiago.

The Camino was a Christian pilgrimage dating back to the 9th century when, according to legend, the bones of the Apostle Saint James were discovered in what is now Santiago, Spain. Subsequently, the Spanish kings used the existence of the tomb to rally Christians to war against the Moslems, who occupied the Southern half of Spain. Thus began the Reconquista or "re-conquest" which continued until 1492 when Grenada fell and the last group of Moors was driven from the Iberian Peninsula.

There were six major routes leading to Santiago. The most popular, the Camino Frances, required hiking 492 miles over the top of Spain carrying

a backpack. It attracted thousands of hikers because it offered inexpensive hostels about every twelve miles available only to pilgrims called peregrinos. The practical effect was that a hiker need not carry a tent, food, sleeping bag, much water, or excessive changes of clothes, which significantly lightened the backpack load.

Imagine walking from San Diego to San Francisco or Chicago to Pittsburgh or Tampa to Atlanta without being mugged or challenged by the local police. The Camino Santiago may be the only road where one can backpack on a combination of trails and highways, through fields and major cities, for 500 miles unmolested, so long as you are perceived as being a peregrino.

John Adams Walked the Camino Backwards

During the Revolutionary War, John Adams had landed on the Galician coast and walked the Camino route in reverse to reach Paris, seeking French aid against the British. Adams wrote in his journals in December 1779, that he "...always regretted that we could not find time to make a

Pilgrimage to Saint Iago de Compostela.”

Who to Invite?

I wanted to invite some old friends. I decided to cull possible candidates by restricting it to:

- US Military Veterans: I didn't want to walk 500 miles in the company of anyone whining about bad weather or blisters. Veterans understand teamwork and good humor when conditions become difficult.
- Over 60 Years of Age: I thought the common denominator of having lived the same decades, knowing the same songs, recalling the same world events, and having many of the same family experiences would lend cohesion.
- Christian Background: At its core, the Camino remains a Christian pilgrimage.
- Men: My wife, God bless her, did not want any women on the team!

The Camino Amigos—All US Army Veterans I invited five. Two friends from grade school reluctantly declined. One, an Army Vietnam vet, suffered from bulging discs in his back. Another, a former Marine, had an ailing mother in her 90s who depended on him.

My friend Bobby and I had gone through the Infantry Officer Course and Airborne School at Fort Benning in 1971, and were then placed on orders to Fort Bragg. Later, Bobby spent eight years with the 20th SFGA Florida NG and five years assigned to Special Operations Command Europe while in the reserves. He eventually retired as an LTC. He received my email invitation just three days after being diagnosed with cancer! He faced two months of proton radiation and chemotherapy. Bobby was a practicing Catholic and cancer made him consider his own mortality. His civilian friends felt sorry for him, which only made him feel gloomier.

I talked to him by phone. “Listen! If you're gonna die, than what better place to die than along the Camino de Santiago? Come on, old buddy, suck it up and make the pilgrimage!”

His three adult daughters jumped on the idea as life affirming. They promised to join him for the

last 100 kilometers. “You can do this. You're our dad,” they encouraged him. Bobby recognized this would be his last opportunity to have his girls with him for an extended period, as jobs, marriage and life in general had placed them all on different trajectories. “I'm going if it kills me!” he said.

Concurrently, I wrote Chet. We had grown up in the same blue collar neighborhood in Pittsburgh and graduated from North Catholic High School. Chet had been drafted and spent a year at Camp Baxter, Da Nang in 1972. He was in a reflective mood because a neighbor his age had gone into the hospital the week before for a “routine” operation and died. It hammered home for Chet the wisdom of not putting off things for another day that may never come. His biggest concern? He was a dispassionate engineer and an atheist and did not want to be around a “bunch of superstitious religious people trying to convert him.” I told him his current religious beliefs did not matter. I just wanted folks who would be polite when we inevitably met religious pilgrims and who would appreciate the Christian iconography we would encounter. This was rural Spain, after all, and there would be ancient churches awash with medieval Christian art. “OK. I'm on board,” he answered.

Sam proved the easiest to recruit. He accepted the same day he received the email. He ran a restaurant in Rome, Georgia and at age 64 had just gotten engaged to be married for the first time. “Don't know how I'm going to juggle this, but I'm coming!”

Sam and I had served with the 7th RRFS at Ramasun Station near Udorn, Thailand in 1973-1974. The Army Security Agency (ASA) operated a large electronic listening base there. It collected radio transmissions 24-7 from North Vietnam and Red China for intelligence analysis, in support of the US military effort in Vietnam. Under the advice of an uncle, a retired Army CSM, Sam had enlisted specifically for the ASA. He was a stellar athlete and ran the base gym and sports programs.

One night, we barely survived an attack from

a mob of drunk, armed Thai mercenaries and Thai jockeys. Surprisingly, Thai jockeys are tough, aggressive men. The Thais were enraged because an airman, from the nearby Royal Thai/USAF base, had beaten up one of their friends over a Thai woman an hour before. Although we had nothing to do with the earlier quarrel, we were acceptable substitutes simply because we were Americans. It was monsoon season. The street lights were dark. We fought hand-to-hand against multiple opponents, running through knee deep water toward the main part of town and safety. Sam was medevaced to Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines as the only patient on a C-141 because of head fractures from being clubbed. The summer of 2014 marked the 40th anniversary of that fight. I told Sam, "I'll buy you all the Spanish beer you can drink!"

Sam was the grandson of an old school, Baptist preacher and had become cool toward organized religion from too many fiery sermons and long church services as a boy. His fiancée was religious and approved of the idea of a pilgrimage. She endorsed his finally doing something "spiritual."

Final Roll Call:

Two Catholics, one lapsed Baptist and an atheist, all senior citizens and all veterans including two old Green Berets. The Camino Amigos, as we dubbed ourselves, agreed to meet in Madrid Airport in September 2014. I was pleased. I had not seen any of these guys in 20 years. They had never even met each other! "You're crazy," my wife told me. "And your Army buddies are all crazy too!"

Schedule Change from Labor Day to the 4th of July

I proposed starting the Camino the first week of September. The weather would be cooler, reducing the chance of heat injuries. Also, the hostels would be less crowded without the boy scouts, college students and families who spend a week on the Camino as a summer vacation activity.

I knew we would pass through Pamplona. As a joke, I emailed everyone saying we should move our departure date up two months to "Run with the Bulls!"

"Works for me," Sam replied. "That's one of my bucket list items."

"This has backfired," I thought. I sent an email to everyone. "Shame on me! It was a poor joke. It would be madness to run with the bulls."

Chester stunned me with his reply, "Don't be a candy ass, Jim. Let's Run with the Bulls!"

"Candy ass?!!" I responded. "Let's vote. If you and Sam really want to run, so will I."

Bobby opposed the idea as reckless but accepted the 3:1 vote. For the next six months, he emailed YouTube videos of people being gored, tossed in the air, and trampled by angry bulls.

Saint Jean Pied de Port, France

We lived in different parts of the country and would be departing from California, Florida, Georgia and Pennsylvania. Cellphones and email made it easy to coordinate. We departed the USA on July 1 and linked up in the international airport in Madrid the following morning. "I hope you boys, get along," I said playfully. "Because if you don't, this is going to be a long six weeks!" The guys liked each other at once.

From the International Terminal, we caught a shuttle train to the main railroad station. We boarded a fast train disembarking at Pamplona. Then we caught a taxi to Saint Jean, on the French side of the Pyrenees, where we stayed overnight. That gave us time to in-process at the Pilgrim's Office. It was well-staffed because many pilgrims originate their Camino there. If a pilgrim did not already have a Pilgrim's Passport, the office issued one for a token donation. In order to receive the Compostela, a certificate of completion, when he reached Santiago, a pilgrim needed to present a Pilgrim's Passport filled



At the Pilgrim's Office in Saint Jean, France, for In-Processing

with hostel stamps authenticating that he had covered the route.

We wanted to cross over the Pyrenees, thinking it adventurous because the armies of Charlemagne and Napoleon had entered Spain by that route. That proved very much harder than anticipated. The long uphill climb in the summer heat drained us. Even downhill, stretches of the trail were dried creek beds, filled with softball sized rocks. It rained later in the day. Fatigue and jet lag from flying from the USA two days earlier, with little sleep, compounded matters. Bedding down in the Church albergue (i.e., a hostel) at Roncesvalles that night, we were exhausted. Fortunately, the albergue was well-run and clean. It resembled a military barracks with showers and washing machines. Pilgrim's price: \$11 each.

Lesson learned:

Skip the Pyrenees and start in Roncesvalles, which has its own official Pilgrim's Office. This was the Camino de Santiago, not Ranger School. "Everyone walks their own Camino," we would hear, over and over again. The trick was to adjust your route, pace and daily distance to what made sense for you.

It rained the next two days. Although we wore breathable rain jackets or ponchos, it did not matter. If not from rain, sweat soaked one's shirt and pants. Dri-fit T-shirts and trousers did, however, dry more quickly than the cotton and polyester fatigues and BDUs we once wore in the Army.

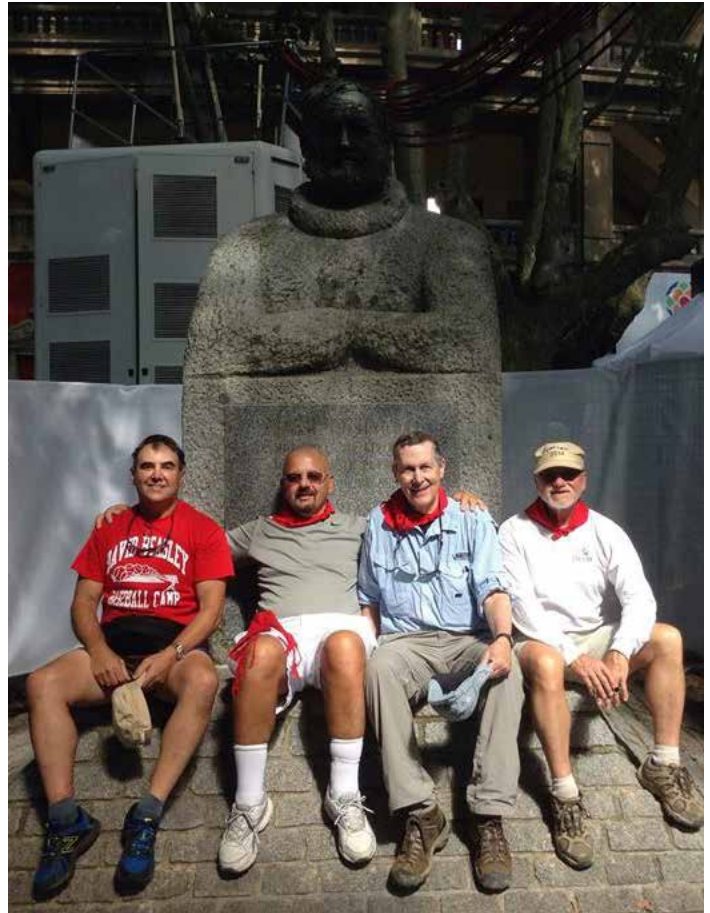
Pamplona and Running with the Bulls

I had bought a copy of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* published in 1922. He only wrote a few pages on the daily movement of the bulls from a corral to the Pamplona bull ring. His story captured the imagination of the public and propelled the Feast of San Fermin and its bull running to international attention. The feast lasts eight days, from the first Sunday to the second Sunday in July each year. Pamplona's population of 200,000 swells during the event, especially on weekends. All the locals, from little children to the elderly, wear white shirts and trousers or dresses with a red bandana around the neck and a red slash tied around the waist. Depending on the number of bullfights scheduled that day, six to eight bulls were released every morning during the eight days of the festival.

Hotels sold out and room prices tripled on weekends. The room rates dropped 50% by midweek as vacancies arose. We booked a suite that slept four for Tuesday and Wednesday. That weekend, we walked about 25 miles past Pamplona to log off two Camino stages and then caught a bus back early Tuesday morning for the bull running.

We wore white jerseys, trousers or shorts which we brought from the states. For \$7 at a street stand, we bought packets containing a red bandanna and red waist scarf. We were easily the oldest men to assemble in front of the town hall staging area. Young Spanish women officiously walked through the crowd with clipboards. First, they challenged Sam asking his age and ending with the question, "Do you understand that you may get killed?" I wasn't surprised when Sam laughed and answered "Yes" to the possibility. I was surprised to learn that he was only 50-years-old! The woman smiled. Ten minutes later, Chet was challenged. He too was now 50-years-old! How had they lost 15 years? They were both annoyed that I wasn't examined by the pretty inquisitors. "It's because I'm better looking than you!" I told them.

Just by speaking English, other Americans and Brits gravitated toward us. Most were athletic



Sam, Jim, Bobby and Chet in Hemingway Plaza. Mission: to reconnoiter the escape route.

young men. They were all nervous and offering each other terrible advice like, "It's every man for himself!" We apparently projected confidence because we were repeatedly asked, "How many times have you run before?" Only to see shocked looks when we said, "This is our first time."

We positioned ourselves just past "Dead Man's Corner"—maybe $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way into the 903 yard course. Sam and Chet began slow jogging when the warning rocket sounded. If they did not get gored, they hoped to follow the bulls into the bull ring before the police closed the gate. The bulls cover the half mile course, running a 3:58 minute-mile pace, which includes running uphill when they first bolt from their corral. If a runner can avoid getting gored for 14 seconds, the animals will have whizzed safely past.

A practice not generally known is that the manager of the bull ring sells tickets to the locals



In the staging area, 30 minutes before the bulls were released.

who fill the small arena. Like pagan Romans, the spectators cheer as bulls wearing blunt “caps” on their horn tips are released to run around the ring tossing the brave souls in the arena below. There is much more contact among the bulls and runners in the bull ring than in the street. Sam and Chet scrambled from bulls for a half hour, arguing with each other as to whose bright idea it had been to enter the bull ring!

I could not run fast because of an ankle injury. From my experience with boxing and the martial arts, I knew that when a heavyweight opponent closes quickly, the correct defensive technique is to step away at a 45 degree angle. Never back up or move along the same “railroad track” or you’ll probably get clocked. I figured bulls were essentially incredibly huge, heavyweight fighters!

The crowd surged forward like a living wave—it was electric. The immediate danger was

from muscular, pumped up young men running backwards or with their heads turned toward where the bulls were coming. Four feet away from me, five guys lay sprawled on the ground after the first one tripped. They needed saving. I stepped next to the rearmost guy and forearmed sprinting young men away from the fallen, until they could jump to their feet and run off. Not one thank-you. Terrified people lack manners.

One skinny young man leaned into me and yelled, “What do we do?” He was a 20-year-old college student from Long Island and genuinely frightened.

“We’re fine,” I said calmly. “Just count the bulls.”

When I reached “eight,” I told him, “We got this. That was the last bull for today’s run!” It was like counting shots from a shooter’s Model 1911.

Several hours later at a bus stop, the same young man came up to me! I was easy to spot—a bald-headed guy still dressed in white with a red bandana. He grabbed my hand and shook it vigorously, exclaiming how I had saved him by body checking crazies and counting the bulls aloud! Sam, Bob and Chet rolled their eyes and laughed. My “tall tale” had just been fact checked as true!!!

Takeaway: for us, the bull running was a lot of fun. We would recommend it to any old Green Berets hiking the Camino in July.

Burgos Cathedral

In Burgos, we marveled at the Gothic Cathedral with its breathtaking arches. We paid our respects to El Cid, whose tomb is inside the cathedral, and who was a legendary Christian commander in the fight with the Moors.

The Ability of Homo Sapiens to Walk Distance

We also visited the Museum of Human Evolution in Burgos. Its display cases illustrated how first Neanderthals, then modern humans, trekked step-by-step from Africa to Europe. Spain was where the last Neanderthals perished 40,000 years ago. The museum had a thought provoking collection of primitive tools, edged stone weapons and bones from the Neanderthals. It also had incisive observations on modern humans. Although the human brain evolved dramatically in the past 50,000 years, the rest of our bodies are anatomically unchanged in the last 200,000 years. Whatever robust physical feats a “caveman” could perform, a modern human has the same physical capacity to perform as well.

Our species is designed for walking long distance. One thing that struck all of us as we walked the Camino was just how very far the average person could walk day after day after day. Before Spain, we thought we would do well to average 12 miles per day, which was the daily marching baseline for the old Roman legions. Modern life discourages walking. We realized that this was because of the time involved in

walking, not the distance or physical ability of people to walk. Initially, we managed 15 mile treks daily. By mid-Camino, barring heavy rain, we established for ourselves that even longer hikes were feasible, walking several 20-milers. Back home, unaccustomed to dedicating an entire day for just walking, we would have thought this impossible.



Chet and Sam before a Stylized Painting of El Cid in Burgos Cathedral

Pilgrims We Met Along The Way

We had wondered if other pilgrims would be cool because we were ex-military. Since 9-11, many Europeans regard American foreign policy as overly muscular. We experienced some people, expecting us to defend US policies. High private gun ownership in the USA, and the fact that three of us owned firearms, also sparked questions. We teased one another playfully, which pleased the other pilgrims. I joked that I was a U.S. Marshal and that my companions were my prisoners--walking the Camino as penance for their terrible crimes! In the end, we inevitably won folks over.



Camino Amigos on the Hill of Forgiveness

Pilgrims, of all ages, would walk with us for hours sharing their reasons for their Camino. Many were at inflection points in their lives. Should they switch careers to follow a dream, while they were still young enough? There was a British physical therapist wrestling with leaving a higher paying job in London, for a similar but much lower paying position in Manchester, to return to his family and friends. Others were commemorating a personal tragedy, like an Irish teacher honoring a sister who had died in childbirth but whose twin boys survived.

Some were reticent like an American attorney and an American college professor, both women, both intelligent and charming. Each was searching for something important and elusive that they could not quite articulate. A young French woman, an engineer, was conflicted about trying out as a helicopter pilot in the French Army. She had not met anyone who supported a military career--- until she met us! We encountered four 20-year-old Danish students, bubbling with youth and enthusiasm. They were intrigued to talk to us about the Vietnam War and Cold War, as though those had occurred in a different millennium. Their compassion for the “four old American soldiers”

was both amusing and touching. We would leapfrog the same people, seeing them some days and not others. It was natural to gather for beers or a Pilgrim’s dinner at night.

We also got along well with the hostel operators, who were generally middle aged. At one café, where we stopped for breakfast, we discovered the owner was a retired Spanish Army paratrooper who had participated in field problems with Army Special Forces at Fort Bragg and the British SAS in Scotland. He was genuinely pleased to meet pilgrims who were military veterans.

Leon: the Cathedral and the Holy Grail

After 300 miles, we entered Leon. There was a commercial aspect to the Camino. Businesses along the Camino rely on pilgrims for a major portion of their annual income and are pilgrim friendly. By now, we had the drill down for sleeping in the inexpensive hostels, although at times we did pay \$25 each and stay at small hostels with two beds in a semi-private room. We learned to skip breakfast at the hostel in order to start in the cool of the morning. There were always small cafes or food trucks selling

coffee, soft drinks, pastries and ham and cheese sandwiches. At night, there were restaurants near the albergue offering a Pilgrim's Supper. For around \$10, one had a choice of a meat dish or omelet, a salad, a bottle of table wine and an ice cream dessert. There was always plenty of fresh baked bread.

Leon also boasted a magnificent Gothic Cathedral. Both the Burgos and Leon cathedrals were constructed on a larger than human scale that forced a visitor's head heavenwards. The art was medieval and heavily religious, with scene after scene from the Bible. There were side chapels for the pious. Bored municipal employees sold entry tickets and offered hand-held devices with recordings in English explaining the art and history of the cathedrals.

The Basilica of Saint Isadora stood only a five minute walk from Leon Cathedral. It was filled with objects from dead kings. Of special note, it boasted a bejeweled 11th century chalice seated in a plain 1st century vessel. Historians studying the museum's artifacts declared in 2014 that

there was "conclusive evidence" and "no doubt" that the older base was the Holy Grail-- the chalice used by Jesus at the Last Supper! The announcement was covered by several American TV networks. (e.g., <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pqpGSrZ1OtY>)



Potable water was plentiful both at hostels and public fountains in villages.



A Pause on the Endless Road to Santiago



In the cafe of a retired Spanish Army Paratrooper. Service Mementos on Rear Wall.

This was the stuff of the Arthurian legends. In the old sagas, only a knight whose heart was pure and brave could find it. It was up to the individual to accept its authenticity or not.

The Cathedral at Santiago; Finisterra

My daughter telephoned when we were 100 miles from Santiago. "Mom had a stroke and is in the ICU. Come home." I departed abruptly but did not feel cheated. I had covered almost 400 miles in the company of old Army buddies and seen the Holy Grail.

Bobby's three adult daughters joined him for the final leg from Sarria to Santiago. They walked to celebrate their dad's survival from cancer. Everyone walks their own Camino. There was as good a reason as anyone's.

The group marched into Santiago a week later. The plaza was crowded with smiling pilgrims waiting to attend Mass at the cathedral. That



Sam, Bobby and Chet in the Plaza of the Cathedral in Leon



Sam and Chet at Finisterra— the End of the World

ritual acts as a final punctuation mark to the Camino, for both the religious and non-religious. In the cathedral, an enormous incense-burning censor was swung half the length of the cathedral by robed priests pulling ropes. Beneath the floor of the Cathedral, legend claims that the bones of Saint James, one of the original twelve Apostles of Jesus, lay.

Bobby and his daughters departed two days later for Madrid and flights home. Sam and Chet, 15 pounds lighter and well-conditioned, walked an additional 55 miles to Finisterra, which sits on the Atlantic coast. This leg is not an official part of the Camino, but many pilgrims do add it to their trip. The terrain is rugged and beautiful and far less crowded, than the stretch leading into

Santiago from Sarria.

Viewing the expanse of the Atlantic Ocean, from the desolate coast, the Romans named the area Finisterra or the End of the World. Beyond there be dragons! Spiritually, it separated the light from the dark; the living from the dead. From here, the spirits of the good were believed to depart to heaven and those of the wicked to hell.

A light rain was falling when Sam and Chet reached the Atlantic Ocean. They had covered 550 miles, since leaving St. Jean in France six weeks earlier. Impulsively, they walked into the cold water and congratulated one another. They felt justified.

**Camino Statistics, 1 Jan 2014 through 30 Sept 2014
(About 250,000 pilgrims per year)**

<u>Gender</u>	<u>Number of Pilgrims</u>	<u>Per Cent</u>
Males	112,100	(54%)
Female	95,907	(46%)

Transportation

Foot	183,350	(88%)
Bicycle	23,191	(11%)
Horseback	1,372	(.66%)
Wheelchair	94	(0.05%)

Reason for Pilgrimage

Spiritual	103,766	(50%)
Religious	89,651	(43%)
Sport, tourism, culture	14,590	(7%)

Age of Pilgrims

Under 30	60,743	(29%)
30 to 60	114,943	(55%)
Over 60	32,321	(16%)

See <http://www.johnniewalker-santiago.blogspot.com/> for complete statistics on the Camino.

References:

Guidebooks (all available from Amazon)

1. A Village to Village Guide to Hiking the Camino de Santiago by Anna Dintamin and David Landis. vilagetovillagepress.com Superior graphics and layout. Our favorite.
2. Michelin Guide to Camino de Santiago. A thin booklet with topographical maps and the clearest charts showing elevations, hostel locations and distances between villages.
3. A Pilgrim's Guide to the Camino de Santiago by John Brierley. This remains the most popular US guidebook. It has a narrative style and is more religious in tone.

Facebook Group: American Pilgrims on the Camino. This friendly website answers every possible question from how to access Spanish medical clinics, to buying discount airline tickets. Also, APOC will issue an official Pilgrim's Passport before you depart the USA, allowing you the option of beginning anywhere you like along the Camino.

Movie *The Way*, starring Martin Sheen. Available as a DVD. A father recovers the body of his son, who has died on the Camino. The father completes the journey, scattering his boy's ashes along the road. The film shows the actual hostels, terrain, and places of interest. Moreover, it will confuse your wife that you want to watch a movie about a relationship without a single gunfight or car chase! It provides an excellent overview, if you are unsure about hiking the Camino.