Some people retire to golf courses. Others travel. And then there are those of us who enjoy physical challenges, traversing hiking trails, rivers and mountains. But in my case, it was a Bucket List item from my university days in the early 1970s to hike Hadrian’s Wall, all 73 English miles from the North Sea at Newcastle-on-Tyne to Carlisle on the Irish Sea.

Back in January of 2016, the New York Times had a great article under the column Your Money entitled “Goodbye Clubs. Hello Boots and Kayak” by Abby Ellin. The intended audience was retirees, who wanted a bit more out of life than shuffleboard, pinochle and prunes before crossing over to the Great Beyond. I was hooked! After lengthy discussions, obtaining support from my ‘Better Half’, as well as intensive advance logistics preparations, I headed east in mid-April across the pond to Manchester, England and the beginning of a spectacular journey. Despite blisters, fatigue, bronchitis, and a bout with gout, I had a wonderful two weeks in the UK, with a former Royal Navy officer I had befriended in Norfolk, Virginia on the HMS Invincible in 1989. We have kept in touch ever since.

I arrived at Whitby-by-the-Bay, Northumberland County on a blustery day, with rain, sleet and snow flurries dogging me all the way from Manchester by train, coach and on foot. Northumberland is the coldest part of England, both in summer and winter, and on the same parallel as Hudson Bay and the Aleutian Islands! We stayed two days touring nearby Segedunum Roman Fort and Museum, and the Tynemouth Priory and Castle ruins. Averaging 15 miles a day, we completed the journey across Northumberland and into Cumbria in less than five days. I’ll not do that again! Common sense and old age should have dictated a week minimum.

The original Wall was 10 feet wide, 20 feet high and painted white on the north face, towards Scotland. It consisted of 16 Forts, 80 Roman Mile Castles and 158 Turrets between Mile Castles and took 6 years to build using Legionaries’ from York. The Wall itself was manned by foreign auxiliaries from conquered tribes from as far away as Spain, Iraq and Syria, each with a military specialty such as cavalry, slings, or archery. At Housesteads, the troops were Tungrians from modern Belgium, who set up a temple with magnificent sculptures to Mithras, a god whose men-only cult, beloved of the military, originated in Persia. Great Chesters, further west, was manned by Belgians, then Raetians from the German-Austrian border, then Asturians from north-west Spain. At Magna, there was a troop of Hamians, who set up an altar to their native god, Syria. They had come from one extreme edge of empire to another; eventually they were replaced by Dalmatians, from Croatia. At Arbeia, Iraqi bargemen from the Tigris patrolled the Tyne; at Carlisle, there were Algerians. Most of what was left of the Wall from centuries of farming and farmhouse building was dismantled by the Army following the Battle of Culloden in 1747 against the rebellious Scots to build a military road.

We started at modern-day Wallsend, Tyne and Wear. The fort lay at the eastern end of Hadrian’s Wall near the banks of the River Tyne, forming the eastern most portion of the wall. It was in use as a garrison for approximately 300 years, up to 411 A.D. when Rome evacuated the province of
Britannia. We passed through Newcastle, home to Newcastle Brown Ale, working our way west through the foothills ending up in Heddon-on-the-Wall at the end of the first day.

The views were breathtaking. Northumberland is one of the most diverse of English counties, with a varied coastline of mud flats, salt estuaries, sand dunes and cliffs; agricultural lowlands, mires, lakes, and woods; and the wide and often boggy moorlands, which rise along the border with Scotland into the high summit of The Cheviot. It consists of a lowland east and hilly west, penetrated by valleys and by the River Tyne. The middle section contains moorland and conifer forest, including the vast Kieder Forest. Between the two is grassland used for raising stock. About 71 percent of the agricultural land is either grassland, or rough grazing for cattle and sheep. About a third is uncultivated moorland, substantially unenclosed, treeless upland with semi-natural vegetation. The rhythm of the seasons dictates the lives of the people. Think Heathcliff in Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights*!

*Over the heather the wet wind blows,*  
*I've lice in my tunic and a cold in my nose.*  
*The rain comes pattering out of the sky,*  
*I'm a Wall soldier, I don't know why.*  
*The mist creeps over the hard grey stone,*  
*My girl's in Tungria; I sleep alone.*  
*Aulus goes hanging around her place,*  
*I don't like his manners, I don't like his face.*  
*Piso's a Christian, he worships a fish;*  
*There'd be no kissing if he had his wish.*  
*She gave me a ring, but I diced it away;*  
*I want my girl and I want my pay.*  
*When I'm a veteran with only one eye*  
*I shall do nothing but look at the sky.*

- WH Auden: *Roman Wall Blues*

On Day Two, under blue skies, we then headed west up the River Tyne to the Roman ruins of Vindolaba Fort or Rudchester, to the banks of the North Tyne River, lodging at Humshaugh, Chollerford, Hexam. This is beautiful hill country, dedicated to sheep and cow grazing, towering 350 feet above the river. You could see 20 miles! It was the start on lambing season, and hundreds of lambs were covered in clear plastic jackets to prevent premature death by cold the first week after birth. Along the way we encountered cob and hen swans, flushes of mallards, and ‘parliaments’ of magpies, earning this title as a result of their often appearing in large groups in the Spring, looking stately and cawing at each other.

On the third day, we marched via Procolita Fort, where archaeologists unearthed the Temple of Mithras, a 3rd century construction built to worship the Roman military god. Although desecrated, some walls remain alongside copies of original altars. Then on to Chesters, near the village of Walwick, and the Roman fort of Cilurnum, mentioned in the Notitia Dignitatum, (Register of Dignitaries), circa 400 AD. The fort was built in 123 AD, just after the Emperor Hadrian started the wall. It is considered to be the best preserved Roman cavalry fort along the Wall. Roman excavations were started in the 1840s by John
Clayton, an antiquarian and town clerk of Newcastle, during the 19th century. His dedication proved invaluable to its later preservation. From 1834, he began buying land to preserve the Wall, at a time when it was little understood and being vandalized by quarrying and removal of stones for reuse. He even had some restoration work carried out on parts of the Wall. His enthusiasm helped preserve that central stretch of Hadrian's Wall that includes Chesters, Housesteads and Vindolanda. His archaeological work continued into his early nineties when he uncovered the spectacular sculptures of the temple to Mars Thincsus at Housesteads. We spent the night at the 18th century Centre of Britain Hotel, in Haltwhistle. The port and venison were superb!

The next day we headed to Housesteads (Vercovicium, an auxiliary castrum (fort). Its ruins are located in Bardon Mill, south of Broomlee Lough. From the ridge, you can see Northumberland National Park and Crag Lough, the wall snaking into the distance. The foundations include a hospital, barracks and even flushable toilets. We also reached Vindolanda, south of Hadrian's Wall, which it predates. It guarded the Stanegate, the Roman road from the River Tyne to the Solway Firth. It is noted for the wooden tablets, among the most important finds of military and private correspondence found anywhere in the Roman Empire. We also toured the Roman Army Museum at Magnis (Carvoran). Near dusk, we dropped our rucksacks for the night in Banks, Lanercost, Brampton.

On the final day of the trek, we arrived in Carlisle, home to Woodrow Wilson’s grand-father. This was also the week of Queen Elizabeth’s 90th birthday, as well as the 400th anniversary of the deaths of Shakespeare and Cervantes.

The 2nd week started out with more rain. We took a seaside cottage in the village of Shilbottle a few miles from Alnwick, Northumberland. We toured Lindisfarne Castle and Priory, founded in 635 AD by St Aidan and the location of the 1st Viking raid of the kingdom of Northumberland in 793 AD. I jumped at the chance to toured Bamburgh Castle, a previous Bronze and Iron Age fort. The Keep was constructed by William Rufus, son of William the Bastard and was completely destroyed in 1464 by Earl Warick during the War of the Roses. It was renovated in the 19th century by the industrialist, Lord William George Armstrong, an eminent scientist, inventor, and philanthropist and regarded as the inventor of modern artillery.

The next morning we were off to Cragside, Lord Armstrong’s country house. It lies in the parish of Cartington, near Rothbury and was built into a rocky hillside above a forest garden in collaboration with the architect Richard Norman Shaw, and was the first house in the world to be lit by hydro-electricity. It also houses 130 year old American western hemlock, Douglas pine, and a 140 year old Scots pine, the tallest tree in the UK, one of seven million trees and shrubs planted in the latter half of the 19th century, transforming a bare hillside into a stunning 1,000 acre country estate. This woodland now forms the backbone of the property’s garden with its native and exotic conifers, including dark green yews, and Wellingtonias. Among other notable examples are a 300 year old weeping ash, and a horse chestnut planted by the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw.

I managed to squeeze in a visit to the 11th century Alnwick Castle, the home of the Percy’s in Northumberland County, which guards a road crossing the River Aln. The Percy’s benefited from
England's wars with Scotland and through the military accomplishments of Henry Percy, 1st Baron Percy (d.1314), they enhanced the family's status. In 1309 he purchased Alnwick and it has been owned by the Percy family, the Earls and later Dukes of Northumberland since. Henry Percy, 1st Earl of Northumberland (d.1408), rebelled against King Richard II and helped dethrone him. The earl later rebelled against King Henry IV and after defeating the earl in the Battle of Shrewsbury, the king chased him north to Alnwick. The castle surrendered under the threat of bombardment in 1403 and it was here that his son Sir Henry Percy, known as ‘Hotspur’, was slain at the height of his career. It houses the largest private art collection in the UK, outside of the Queen of England and includes works by Bellini, Canalito, Velasquez, Van Dyke, Reynolds, Lely and Raphael. As the British say, I was “gob smacked” with delight.

While there, I spent the afternoon in Barter’s Used Books, located in an old Victorian train station. I could have spent a week there and not seen everything. As an avid bibliophile, I did manage to find the “Collected Letters of Emma Hamilton”, Lord Horatio Nelson’s paramour.

We also took a day trip to Edinburg by train to visit the Scottish National Gallery, located on The Mound in central Edinburgh, in a neoclassical building designed by William Henry Playfair, and first opened to the public in 1859. Regrettably, my diary notes are not up the caliber of James Boswell’s “Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides” as he traveled with the great Samuel Johnson! I did manage to squeeze in a trip to McNaughtan’s, the oldest second-hand and antiquarian bookshop in Scotland and found a 1918 edition of “Characters from the Histories and Memoirs of the 17th Century” and a 1929 edition of “Englishmen and Manners in the 18th Century”.

On the final leg, we headed south past the town of Washington near Sunderland, in Tyne and Wear, part of historic County Durham, and ancestral home of the Washington’s. William de Hertburne, an ancestor, assumed tenancy of the Wessyngtonlands and soon after, he changed his name to William de Wessyngton (later Washington). In 1540 the Crown sold three manors, including Sulgrave Manor, to Lawrence Washington, a wool merchant. Washington’s descendants retained the manor until 1659, when one of them sold it. In 1656 a descendant, John Washington of Purleigh, Essex, emigrated to Virginia and became the great-grandfather of George Washington. It’s a small world!

In a torrential downpour, we snaked our way through the Yorkshire Dales, an upland area of the Pennines, most of it in the Yorkshire Dales National Park created in 1954. The Dales comprises river valleys and the hills, rising from the Vale of York westwards to the hilltops of the Pennine watershed. In Ribblesdale and Dentdale, the area extends westwards across the watershed, but most of the valleys drain eastwards to the Vale of York, into the Ouse and the Humber rivers. My goal was the thriving metropolis of 176 souls, Grassington, the ancestral village of the Deans. The village Church of St Michaels’s dates to 1150 AD and is still used for Anglican services.

It was a long vacation, but one I will never forget. Its’ good to be home in Northumberland County, said Pogo Possum to Howland Owl!

Eric Dean is retired Navy and lives in Heathsville, on Condit Pond, aka the “Swamp”