

RUDD

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the Japanese — islands the United States was preparing to invade. The teams checked for coral reefs and obstacles such as steel triangles the Japanese placed in harbors to sink incoming ships. Rudd often evaded enemy gunfire while swimming in harbors. He said he likely escaped because the Japanese often were firing from 200 yards away and because he made for a small target.

“Often only my head was sticking out (of the water),” said Rudd, who grew up in La Grande.

Still bullets came dangerously close to hitting him, something he could easily see because of how they ricocheted off the

waters he was in.

Rudd was a member of Underwater Demolition Team Three. Today the names of all members of the Navy’s underwater demolition teams, including that of Rudd, are displayed at the National Navy SEALs Museum in Fort Pierce, Florida, said Jack Johnson of Cove. Johnson is a retired Oregon National Guardsman and a good friend of Rudd’s.

Navy SEALs today are equipped with high-tech diving gear including air tanks, which do not emit telltale bubbles. Such equipment is light-years away from what Rudd and the other Navy frogmen had at their disposal during WWII. All they had were face masks, fins and sand shoes — no air tanks or even snorkels.

“Those would have been nice to have,” Rudd said.

In lieu of oxygen sources, frogmen had to work underwater on a single breath. Rudd was able to work three minutes at a time on one breath.

“You can do this if you are in good shape,” he said.

The perils frogmen faced were great but perhaps not as frightening as the Japanese kamikaze planes that passed over the convoys of ships Rudd was with during South Pacific journeys. The planes often appeared to be diving into the ship Rudd was on but always hit other crafts in his convoys instead.

Still, Rudd did not emerge from WWII unscathed. He was on one ship a bomb hit. Three pieces of its shrapnel struck

Rudd on his right side. The shrapnel burned at first, but Rudd never experienced great pain.

“I had three chunks of steel under my skin,” Rudd said.

Doctors did not remove the shrapnel, which broke down over time.

“I had that shrapnel until 1963,” Rudd said.

The Navy frogman escaped serious injury in WWII but saw many people around him on ships die or suffer grave wounds.

“I would see guys who had really taken a beating, who had no arms or legs or had their belly shot up, but I never heard them moaning. They never said a word. I really admired them,” said Rudd, who has lived in Cove with his wife of 57 years, Marilyn for 45 years.

Wally Rudd, 94, was born in Nebraska and later moved to the Ontario area where he attended Ontario High School. His family later moved to La Grande where he enrolled at La Grande High School.

Rudd left LHS in 1943 at age 17 to join the Navy. He returned home four years later but was told by a school staff member he would not be allowed to graduate until he paid for two unreturned library books and a desk he had carved his name in.

La Grande High principal Ron Walk then told the staff member that this was no way to treat a returning serviceman and told Rudd to come back the next day. The following day, Walk awarded Rudd and three other veterans their diplomas.

“If it was not for Ron Walk, I would not have gotten a diploma,” Rudd said.

The sheepskin helped Rudd land a railroad job. His later work included a 12-year stint with the La Grande Fire Department.

Although Rudd today is credited with being part of a program that evolved into the Navy SEALs, he humbly said he would not have wanted to serve as one.

“Their training is twice as tough as the training we received,” Rudd said.

Johnson, who has known Rudd for decades, describes him as a delightful, one-of-a-kind person.

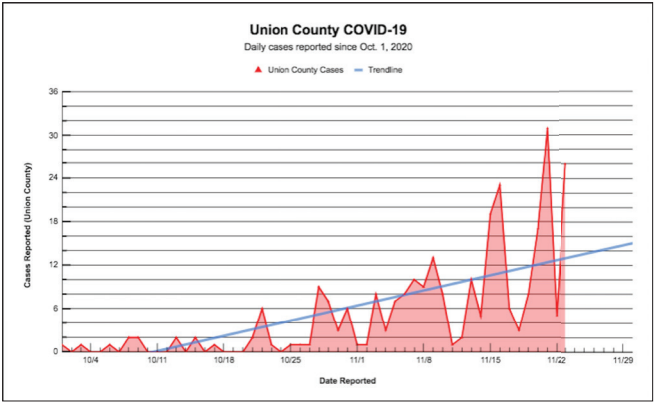
“He’s loves people and is always upbeat. He’s a wonderful guy. You will never meet another Wally,” Johnson said.

COVID-19

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going on break Wednesday for Thanksgiving until Monday, Nov. 30.

Dixon said he learned of the positive test result about 6:30 p.m. Sunday and decided closing school Monday would best protect students while the school worked with health officials to determine if there had been widespread exposure of other students in the district.



This graph illustrates the trend in daily cases reported in Union County by the Center for Human Development and Oregon Health Authority as of Monday, Nov. 23, 2020, since Oct. 1, 2020.

case among his students.

Two staff members who knew they had been exposed to COVID-19 quarantined themselves earlier, he said. One tested negative and the other was advised not to seek testing unless she began experiencing symptoms and remained in quarantine until released to return to work.

North Powder Charter School resumed in-person instruction for all students in kindergarten through 12th grade on Sept. 8.

The North Powder Charter School has about 80 students in grades 9-12 and another 75 in grades 7-8. The K-6 enrollment totals about 125 students, Dixon said.

The high school students also were able to participate in five-on-five football earlier in the year and competed in regulation volleyball matches as well, with limited crowds, Dixon said. Future sports

seasons are on hold until further notice as the year progresses, depending on COVID-19 numbers and Oregon School Activities Association rulings, he said.

Oregon recorded more than 1,000 positive or presumptive cases of COVID-19 for the sixth consecutive day Monday. The state set record highs for new cases four days in a row: 1,225 on Thursday, 1,306 on Friday, 1,509 Saturday and 1,517 Sunday.

The Oregon Health Authority on Monday reported 1,174 news cases, pushing the statewide total to 66,333. Aside from that downtick, the spread of the virus in Oregon has shown no signs of slowing as the Thanksgiving holiday approaches.

“This Thanksgiving, cancel any plans you have to celebrate indoors with large groups of family and friends,” said

Oregon Health Authority Director Patrick Allen.

“The safest, wisest and most caring way to protect the people you love is to keep your Thanksgiving dinner small and limited to no more than one other household beside your own. Keep the holidays a time to remember, not a time to regret.”

As of Monday, in the past six days Oregon reported nearly 12% of its total caseload for the course of the pandemic, with 7,830 cases in that time span.

“Union County residents can help slow down the spread of COVID-19 by keeping physically distant from people outside of their household, limiting social gatherings, and staying home when they are ill or have come into contact with someone that has tested positive for COVID-19, and wearing face coverings,” the CHD stated. “Taking risk reduction measures today is critical to slowing the spread of COVID-19 to keep those in our community that are more vulnerable to serious illness and death safe and to helping maintain hospital capacity so that all Oregonians can continue to have access to quality care.”

— Baker City Herald reporter Chris Collins contributed to this feature.

DINNER

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Neighbors Together online at neighborstogetheroioncounty.org or call 541-963-9126.

Community Connection of Northeast Oregon Inc. also has some Thanksgiving dinners available. Sydney Gleeson, the food services manager for the nonprofit, said the turkey dinners serve four. To put in a request for one of the meals, calls 541-963-7532 option 1.

The La Grande Rotary Club also is not able to hold its annual Thanksgiving meal for seniors, veterans and others.

Tucker Billman, president of the local Rotary Club, explained the organization in the past partnered with McDonald’s, but the freeze means the restaurant has to keep its lobby closed.

La Grande Rotary has been busy, however, during the pandemic. Billman said the club early on during the outbreak worked with local restaurants to provide 400 meals to school children and others, and more recently the organization purchased roughly a ton of food from vendors at the La Grande Farmers Market and provided that to local food banks.

“Some of the vendors there, we bought out their entire inventory,” he said.

The freeze, though, has not put the kibosh on all local holiday traditions. Rotarians also were out Saturday helping to put up Christmas lights at Max Square.

Last year was the first time the Brookshire Catering Company hosted a Thanksgiving dinner in Union at the Eastern Oregon Livestock Show Grounds. The catering company had a history of serving a free community Christmas dinner every year in Joseph, and owner Jeff Brookshire felt he also could give back to the community he grew up in on Thanksgiving. Unfortunately, due to the buffet style serving and limit on groups, Brookshire canceled this year’s Thanksgiving dinner.

“The event had lots of community support,” he said. “Unfortunately, COVID changed the game plan this year. Hopefully we can return next year.”

Brookshire said he will still try to hold a community Christmas dinner in Joseph if possible, but he is not sure when, or if, that will be possible.



Elgin Rural Fire Protection District/Contributed Photo

Elgin firefighters stand at the ready to help Santa deliver bags of treats to Elgin residents as part of Operation Santa on Dec. 24, 2019. The pandemic won’t stop the sugar from flowing this year, but Santa’s helpers will be taking extra precautions.

SANTA

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huge kick out of it. And it kind of warms our hearts just to see the kids waiting to see Santa. It’s awesome to do.”

Operation Santa will begin around dusk on Dec. 24, likely sometime

between 4:45 p.m. and 5 p.m., and Santa will stop at houses that have their porch lights on.

Silvernail stressed Santa won’t be able to come back to houses once he’s passed them, so people need to schedule accordingly.

Donations to help with Operation Santa can be made Tuesday nights at the

Elgin fire station during the district’s regular meetings or sent to the Elgin Rural Fire Protection District at P.O. Box 431, Elgin OR 97827.

“Donations are more than welcome,” Silvernail said. “We’ve had several people donate already, and it’s awesome to see that tradition going.”

Wishing each of you a Wonderful Season of Thanksgiving.

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