

REQUEST

Continued from Page 1A

the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The class of 2021 has been impacted more than any other class from COVID-19. Let us give them an in-person graduation experience with all of their classmates. This can be done safely and will send a message to students, as well as all Oregonians where our future is headed,” Maillé said in the letter.

COVID-19 dramatically altered the graduation ceremony last spring for La Grande High School and the other high schools in Northeast Oregon. The pandemic forced the school district to conduct a drive-thru graduation where students in vehicles with their families received their diplomas from school officials and school board members in front of the high school.

La Grande High Principal Brett Baxter said a poll of LHS students indicated 55% would prefer to have a traditional graduation this year. Baxter said a traditional graduation would be a return to a sense of normalcy the students want.

Exposure in North Powder School District

Students in the North Powder School District returned to online learning Thursday, April 15, after more than 30 students were exposed to a confirmed case of COVID-19.

Superintendent Lance Dixon in a press release said the district has been working closely with the Union County Public Health Department and is following the department’s recommendation to take this action.

“We have protocols for this situation, and are taking extra precaution to ensure the safety and health of all our students and staff,” Dixon said. “We encourage our school community to remain calm, follow health guidelines and work together to get through this situation.”

The district will stay in the online learning mode for the week of April 19-22. Students can return to school on Monday, April 26.

Dixon in the press release said the confirmed case was identified earlier this week at the school, and although some cohorts could have remained in school, due to the amount of students and families affected, the district decided this is the best course of action.

The district also canceled athletic events for the next few weeks.

Local case counts

The Oregon Health Authority reported on April 14 the 24th COVID-19 death in Union County: an 88-year-old woman who tested positive Feb. 22 and died April 14. She had underlying conditions, according to OHA, and the state was working to confirm the location of the death.

Union County has 1,409 cases total, with nine new cases reported April 14 and three more April 15. Wallowa County’s total as of April 15 was 156. Five people there have died from COVID-19.

Baker County’s COVID-19 surge continued this week, with 14 new cases April 13, the highest one-day total since late December 2020, and the third-most since the pandemic began.

Nancy Staten, director of the Baker County Health Department, described the situation as “alarming” during an interview April 13. She said a large majority of the county’s cases over the past few weeks — including those the OHA reported April 13 — have been traced to parties and other social gatherings.

“People have COVID fatigue,” Staten said. “People want to gather.”

But if too many residents cease taking precautions — as the recent rise in cases, and their origins, suggest is happening — the effects can be widespread, Staten said.

COVID-19 cases are on the rise statewide as well, with the OHA reporting 816 new cases April 14 and 733 April 15. Oregon’s total number of cases as of April 15 stood at 172,931. The virus as of April 15 has claimed a total of 2,455 lives in Oregon.

The Oregon Health Authority also reported Region 9 — Baker, Malheur, Morrow, Umatilla, Union and Wallowa counties — has less than 50% capacity for intensive care unit beds, with nine out of 17 occupied for the region. But as of April 15, only one of those was a COVID-19 patient, down from two the day before.

Out of the region’s 136 staffed non-ICU beds, 54 remain open.

— EO Media Group members contributed to this article.

CUTLER

Continued from Page 1A

the care team and he got it from a local congressman,” Hutchison said.

While Cutler values his time in the military, he doesn’t consider his service as particularly heroic. Although his unit followed in the steps of much of the island-hopping campaign to drive the Japanese out of territory they’d conquered in the Pacific, he didn’t see any serious action.

“We seemed to be just one step behind everybody,” he said. “We weren’t there when they took the island; we were there after for the mop-up operations. I always said I was lucky.”

He added that most veterans don’t want to discuss the horrors of war and he’s no different. But he was fortunate in not having to witness much.

“I didn’t do much fighting,” he said.

Cutler admits his memory isn’t what it used to be, but he does recall boot camp. The Detroit, Michigan, native took a train to San Diego after enlisting in late 1942 — with his parents’ consent — at age 17. It was at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot he learned some valuable lessons.

“I thought it was all a big game at first until a sergeant came out one day and said, ‘Did you shave this morning?’ I said, ‘No.’ Big mistake,” he said. “I was told to shave and I didn’t do it. I didn’t need to. So he made me get a razor and sat down for a whole hour shaving both sides of my face — a dry shave. My face was so damned sore. I learned the hard way to take orders. ... I remembered that when I was told to do something, to do it.”

He believes the military has lightened up in recent years.

“These guys nowadays never went through what I went through. When we went through boot camp, we went through boot camp,” he said.

While the MCRD was tough, he quickly learned to appreciate it.

“Those first two weeks, I’d have given anything to get out of there. If I wasn’t so scared to, I’d have probably walked out,” Cutler said. “It took about two weeks of training, then I thought it was the greatest place.”

After boot camp and rifle training, he was assigned to the Marine Air Wing.

“I was just lucky,” he said.



Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

U.S. Marine Corps veteran Lee Cutler stands under the national flag and the Marine Corps flag that fly regularly outside his Joseph home Wednesday, April 7, 2021. The 96-year-old World War II and Korean War veteran received new flags for his birthday, April 8.

The first plane he was in was a Curtiss SBC Helldiver, two-seat scout bomber. Considered obsolete before the outbreak of the war, it was kept well away from enemy fighters. The pilot took the front cockpit, with the gunner/radioman in the rear. That’s where Cutler got his first ride.

“The guy just stuck me in there and said, ‘We’re going to see if you can make it or not. Here’s a bag.’ He strapped me in and said ... ‘If you get sick, throw up in this bag.’ So I got in the plane and we got up there and he started to roll the plane, and I was just thrilled to death,” Cutler said. “I enjoyed it. Then he went right, straight down and I started calling out (the altitude.) But looking back, that was all fun.”

After it was determined he could handle flying, he was sent to aerial gunner school and qualified among the top of his class. But radio school in Hawaii tripped him up.

“I flunked, so I didn’t get my wings,” he said. “So I went over as a spare aerial gunner and went to Midway.”

His arrival there months after the crucial June 1942

Allied victory was as one of the replacements sent to the island where much of the Japanese Navy had been destroyed. He handled bombs at the airfield there and machine guns he was familiar with.

After a quick return to Hawaii, he was shipped to the Solomon Islands, the site of another important Allied victory. But again, it was after the island had been retaken from the Japanese. There, he flew again, but spent most of his time disrupting Japanese supplies and equipment.

“We kept their food line and their ammunition line down,” he said. “We’d just go out there and put gasoline on their rice fields and shoot up all their boats.”

Cutler believes his failure to get his wings may have saved his life, since about half of the radiomen/gunners he was aware of didn’t survive the war.

“I just lucked out,” he said. “I was in the right place at the right time.”

Cutler also recalled amusing — or not — incidents from his time in the Pacific. He said fellow Marines wanted

more than their rationed one beer a day.

“They made this ‘torpedo juice’ from berries or I don’t know what,” he said of the fermented and highly intoxicating rotgut.

“A guy said, ‘Here, try a sip.’ I didn’t want to, but eventually I did. The guy got me to take another and another and that’s the last I remember until I woke up after having passed out in the middle of a runway on my way back to my tent. ... I’ll swear to this day that the tent flipped over. Every time I’d get in my bunk, I’d end up falling on the floor.”

After that, he swore off hard liquor. He has a beer now and then, but no hard stuff.

Just before the war ended, he was shipped stateside. It was at a Marine base in California where he married his first wife, Betty. After Cutler was mustered out as a corporal, the couple moved to Ohio where she was from. They had two sons and a daughter and were married for about 40 years before Betty died of cancer in the 1980s.

The family had moved to the Portland area in the early 1950s, where Cutler got a job with the Army National Guard, first as a civilian and later enlisted in the Guard. He worked with the Army Corps of Engineers and was a technical sergeant in charge of building airfields and equipment procurement.

When his National Guard unit was mobilized for the Korean War, at first Cutler wanted to go. But he didn’t want to be separated from his family.

“They said, ‘They can’t go with you ... they’re going to Japan. ... We’ll just get them there and they’ll live on the base. You’ll get to go over there once in a while.’ So I decided I didn’t want to go,” Cutler said.

He met his current wife, Kate, in Sandy, where she used to swim in a pool he cleaned.

“It was the bathing suit that caught his eye,” she said.

In retrospect, Cutler highly values his time in the service and thinks the experience would be valuable to all young people.

“I think it was fantastic. I would go through the Marine Corps again. They taught us to follow orders and help one another,” he said. “Every young man — who can — should serve his four years — to learn something, to learn to be a man.”

POOLS

Continued from Page 1A

grandmother who wanted to know if the pool would be open for her grandchildren (this summer),” Jungling said.

Fewer people will be allowed in the outdoor pool because of state social distancing rules. For example, the capacity for recreational swims will be 30 people. Swimmers at recreation sessions will be limited to between 60 and 90 minutes, to allow for more people to use the pool, Jungling said.

Another COVID-19 rule requires masks to be worn at the Elgin pool facility at all times except when swimmers are in the water.

The pool will be open Monday through Saturday to the public, and will be available for special events on Sundays. Jungling said one of the biggest issues he is facing is hiring lifeguards, which are proving hard to find. He encouraged anyone interested in working as a lifeguard to contact him.

Veterans’ Memorial Pool, like the Elgin pool, will be open Monday through Saturday this summer as it is the rest of the year. Social distancing standards will remain in place. These include limits on the number of people who can be in the pool at one time for activities, such as recreational swims.

Limits also apply for lap swim sessions, during which

only one swimmer is allowed per lane. Lap swimmers are limited to one hour when there are people waiting to work out in the eight-lane pool, said Breeanna Hughes, the head lifeguard at the indoor pool in La Grande’s Pioneer Park.

Restrictions also apply to the pool center’s two dressing rooms. Each has four stations, all of which are at least 6 feet apart. Only one person can normally be at each station, but two are allowed if the swimmers are family members.

People at Veterans’ Memorial Pool also must wear masks at all times except when they are swimming.

The same mask rules apply at the Sam-O-Swim Center

where similar social distancing standards are in place. Paula Moe, aquatics director for the Baker County YMCA, said swimmers are not complaining though.

“They have been wonderful,” Moe said. “They just want to be in the water.”

She said the more than four months the Sam-O-Swim Center was closed in 2020 in the spring and summer was a terrible time.

“It was awful. It was hard on people who wanted to exercise, needed therapy or had nowhere to go,” Moe said.

The pandemic also led to the closure of Cove’s outdoor warm springs pool. The Observer was not able to confirm the status of the pool by deadline Friday.



We want your voice to be a part of the conversations shaping Oregon's future.

Share your opinion. Earn money.
Join the OVBC Panel.
panel.oregonvbc.org

