

WELLS

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the Marine recruiter told them that because they were just 17 and only high school juniors, they needed parental permission to join the Marines.

“They had to return to Union with the appropriate papers for signatures, which their folks reluctantly signed,” Martin said.

The twins shipped out of Union County about two weeks later, on Feb. 27, 1943, but not before catching the attention of at least one local newspaper.

“It ran a picture of them titled ‘Double trouble for the Japanese,’” Martin said.

Once in the Marines the Wells twins were separated for the first time in their lives following boot camp, with Gene receiving training in artillery and Dean being trained as a rifleman.

Dean Wells later participated in amphibious assaults on Tarawa in November of 1943 and Saipan in June of 1944. On April 1, 1945, both Dean and Gene Wells participated in an amphibious landing on Okinawa although in different battalions. Over the course of about six weeks, the brothers each sustained serious wounds and Dean became a war hero after displaying bravery for which he was awarded the Navy Cross.

The Navy Cross is the United States Navy and United States Marine Corps’ second highest military decoration, awarded to sailors and marines who distinguish themselves for extraordinary heroism in combat with an armed enemy force.

Dean Wells received the cross for actions he took while with a Marine rifle platoon on the island of Okinawa on May 15, 1945.

Wells’ platoon was receiving intense fire from an enemy ridge when the attack was momentarily halted, according to a citation for the Navy Cross written by Roy S. Geiger, a lieutenant general in the U.S. Marine Corps.

Wells then led a demolition team forward through a withering barrage and destroyed one of three enemy strongpoints. When the overwhelming fire superiority of the



John Martin, U.S. Marine Corps veteran, participates in a flag raising ceremony at Summerville Cemetery on Memorial Day, Monday, May 30, 2022.

enemy made it impossible for the team to continue, Wells voluntarily and alone crawled forward and across an exposed area and succeeded in destroying another position.

After obtaining additional grenades he again braved a deadly hail of shrapnel and bullets, and although he was seriously wounded, he succeeded in killing everyone at the last center of resistance, according to Geiger, to allow the platoon to secure the ridge.

“His courageous actions and aggressive fighting spirit were in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service,” Geiger wrote.

Dean Wells never said much about his war experiences until later in his life. The family knew about the

Navy Cross but for many years did not know the details, Martin said.

The war hero discussed what he did to earn the Navy Cross in the 2016 book “We All Have a Story to Tell,” which was edited by Robert Wells and includes many stories about the Wells family’s contributions to America’s World War II effort.

Dean Wells’ humility shines through in the book. He notes in the book that the citation he received for the Navy Cross indicates he accomplished a lot after being wounded in Okinawa on May 15, 1945. Wells begged to differ.

“Personally I don’t think I did that much after I got hit,” he wrote in a chapter for the 2016 book. Dean Wells later had

a successful career as an educator in the Portland area. He and his wife had three children. He died in 2018 at the age of 93.

His twin, Gene Wells, who also lived in Portland, died five years earlier.

The ceremony Martin spoke at on May 30 was attended by about 50 people. Those in attendance included members of the Imbler Rural Fire Department, the Patriot Riders and Pastor Frank Humber of the Summerville Baptist Church.

Martin said during his presentation that about 400 veterans are buried at Summerville Cemetery and relatively little is known about many of them.

“But,” he said, “it is important to remember this one detail — they served.”

PREPARING

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different situations such as an active shooter and school lockouts or lockdowns.

“We identify safety areas and work to address those areas,” Hays said.

The police department has an extra patrol in La Grande school zones during the morning drop-off period — the busiest time. Patrols are present not only in case of emergencies, but also to assist with day-to-day issues, such as road crossing. After the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting — the deadliest school shooting in the U.S. to date, when a gunman killed 20 elementary students and six teachers in Newton, Connecticut — Hays also started to patrol in school zones some mornings in an unmarked vehicle.

“We learn from each of these on how to harden our schools so people with criminal intent can’t get to our kids,” he said. “We can do our best to prevent it and I’m going to pour my resources into prevention.”

The importance of being proactive when it comes to safety also can be seen at the collegiate level.

Tim Seydel, the vice president for university advancement at Eastern Oregon University, explained that EOU has worked extensively to develop plans for crises on campus. The university worked with county and city officials to create road maps for incidents, which delineate the roles the university and local law enforcement would take during an emergency. This helps to ensure quick response time and decisive action is taken in a time of crisis, he said.

Building inclusive communities

Another focus for superintendents is building inclusive communities within their schools. According to Wells one of the biggest blessings of a small school is how individualized their approach with each student

can be. “You are not a number, you are an individual, you are listened to and heard,” Union’s superintendent said.

Cove Superintendent Earl Pettit said a sense of belonging is integral to mitigating a lot of issues. When students feel included, when they do not feel left out or pushed out, there are lower rates of bullying, he said.

Providing mental health resources

A pressing concern for schools has been providing students with mental health care. According to Union and Wallowa school officials, districts in the counties have focused on bringing specialists onto their staffs in light of challenges students of all ages face as a result of the pandemic and other stressors.

Jones, of Wallowa, said when children experience trauma in their lives, proactive support is necessary to allow learning to occur.

Similar sentiments were expressed by Hislop, who is making sure Imbler’s teachers are equipped with ways to speak with students and teaching strategies to help them cope.

“You don’t make their feelings go away, but you help them cope with those feelings,” he said.

In addition to having mental health therapists available to students, Wells explained that the Union School District is working with Eastern Oregon University to adopt a social-emotional curriculum for next year.

Students’ mental health is of vital importance to EOU, according to Seydel. Given the challenges of the past few years, the administration recognizes behavioral health is critical now more than ever.

Seydel said Eastern Oregon has two professional counselors on campus, and if a faculty member notices a struggling student, there is a process and team in place to ensure the individual gets help.

While questions linger, schools are taking precautions to keep students safe and emotionally healthy.

“It can happen anywhere and we have to keep that in mind,” Jones said. “When something like the shootings happens it makes us realize the importance of relationships with kids and community and how that has to continue to be a priority for us.”



Hislop



Pettit



Seydel

EXHIBIT

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the story of the Oregon Trail, the settlement of Eastern Oregon, and the history of the Bureau of Land Management while we update the center for the next 30 years,” Wayne Monger, Vale District manager, said in a BLM press release.

In addition to the display, NHOTIC is planning special programs and performances this summer at Geiser-Pollman Park, just west of the museum across Grove Street.

Explore the trail

The exhibit begins with an introduction to the Oregon Trail, including the chance to pack a wagon with supplies for two adults and two children during the journey. A basket is full of magnets marked with items and the corresponding weight, and visitors can choose up to 2,400 pounds.

“Do your math carefully,” the instructions read. “Too much weight and the wagon will be too heavy for your oxen to pull.”

The display continues with “Across the Wide Prairie,”

ABOUT THE RENOVATION
The \$6.5 million renovation of the Bureau of Land Management’s National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center, near Baker City, includes new cement board siding, insulation, roofing, windows and doors, along with a new heating and cooling system. Although the main road to the top of the hill is closed during the renovation, the Oregon Trail Ruts Access on Highway 86 will remain open to the public for hiking and exploring. To learn more about the interpretive center and the Oregon Trail, visit www.oregontrail.blm.gov or call 541-523-1843.



Randy Yawn, left, and Kim Orr ponder their choices for packing a virtual wagon, part of the new Oregon Trail exhibit at the Baker Heritage Museum, Baker City, on Sunday, May 29, 2022.

Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center, which opened May 23, 1992.

Other information in the exhibit details the Baker County Culture and Heritage Passport, which encourages everyone to visit participating locations in Baker County and obtain a special stamp in the provided passports.

Locations are the Baker Heritage Museum, Adler House Museum, Crossroads Carnegie Art Center, Sumpter Valley Railroad, Sumpter Valley Dredge, Sumpter Municipal Museum, Eastern Oregon Museum in Haines, Hun-

tington Historical Museum and Pine Valley Museum in Halfway.

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A basket holds magnets representing potential items to be taken along on the Oregon Trail at a new exhibit at the Baker Heritage Museum, Baker City, on Sunday, May 29, 2022. Visitors to the museum are challenged to choose the best items without exceeding the weight limit for their team of oxen.

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