

McDermitt outpost offers tribute to veterans lost to suicide

By YADIRA LOPEZ
Malheur Enterprise

McDERMITT — Right along the Oregon border with Nevada, near one of the oldest houses in Malheur County, stands a tribute to veterans who have committed suicide.

There, Joe Vaneeten has covered a three-story wooden water tower with animal skulls to represent these deaths. He has over 200 of them.

“I wanted to make a statement about how serious this problem is,” said Vaneeten, a Vietnam War veteran.

Recent statistics from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs say the number of veteran suicides across the country exceeded 6,000 each year from 2008 to 2017. Veterans in 2017, according to the VA’s report, committed suicide at a rate of 17 per day. That’s 1½ times the rate for other adults.

It’s not news to Vaneeten. He lost war friends to suicide. He’s also been on the brink himself.

He said his use of horse and cow skulls is metaphoric. The animals usually died after suffering for some time. Vaneeten buys the skulls from local cowboys and Native Americans, who know about his project and think of him when they



Joe Vaneeten stands at the entry to his rock shop in remote McDermitt.

come across the skulls in the desert.

Vaneeten said he was lucky. His father and brothers were also military.

“I had somebody in my family to talk to about a lot of things, which made me not commit suicide at a lot of different times,” he said.

Vets aged 18-34 are particularly at risk, according to the VA report. From 2005 to 2017, the number of suicides among veterans in that age group increased by 76%.

“Parents don’t want to talk to their kids about what they had done over there,” said Vaneeten. “It’s like ‘You did good, you made it home, now let’s get you a job.’ What we should really be doing is sitting down and talking to them, asking them, ‘What happened to you?’”

Vaneeten has made it his mission to create a safe space for veterans. For years, he operated Base Camp Bravo, a retreat for veterans on the

Oregon coast. Vaneeten said he shut it down because of land use issues.

After selling his ranch in Winnemucca, in 2008 he bought the White Horse Inn — a hotel from the 1800s — in McDermitt. The building needs so much work that for a while last year Vaneeten put it up for sale. But his mission, he said, is too important.

He continues to put work into the hotel, which still needs water and electricity.

The building is not in good shape to host people now, but Vaneeten hopes that grants and donations will help restore it so that vets can stay there in the future.

When he’s not repairing the hotel, Vaneeten operates a rock shop beside it. At the shop he’s got machines for polishing and cutting stones. He envisions teaching veterans how to use the cutting and polishing machines to make art out of stones found in the desert. It’s all a break for the mind, said Vaneeten.

What he wants is to create a safe haven for veterans. He dreams of a place where they can be away from the city for a while and talk to other veterans instead of going home to a lonely place after a support group meeting. It will be a place, he said, to build up their strength.

“There’s a way to talk to soldiers,” said Vaneeten. “There’s a way that they’re used to being talked to and it’s kind of hard core — not too many people know how to do it.”

One of the goals is to help veterans fill out paperwork. Vaneeten said he was lucky to have his wife help him, but he knows all too well how a stack of paperwork can be too daunting to bear, and leave veterans without

needed services.

His frustration with the system is part of what pushes him.

When he ended up in the emergency room a few years back, Vaneeten asked to see a mental health doctor. He didn’t see a doctor for another three and a half months. Even then, it wasn’t a mental health expert like he had sought.

When Vaneeten moved to McDermitt, the population didn’t exceed 100 people. Among them were seven veterans; Vaneeten said they were resistant to file a claim for benefits. So he sat down and listened to their stories and helped them with the paperwork.

That kind of help can make a difference for veterans, he said.

But Vaneeten recognizes he is just one guy, with no funding. His hope is that others will hear about his work and feel encouraged to help veterans, too.

“Find out what a base camp truly is,” Vaneeten urged. “If you have the land and money, build one if you can do it — it doesn’t matter if you can only help out five veterans.”

For now, he’ll carry on his mission in an old hotel by a three-story wooden water tower right along the Oregon border with Nevada.

Forecast for Pendleton Area

TODAY

FRIDAY

SATURDAY

SUNDAY

MONDAY

Mostly cloudy with a shower

Periods of rain in the afternoon

Rain and snow showers

Mostly cloudy with a little snow

A little snow, some ice late

PENDLETON TEMPERATURE FORECAST				
40°	29°	45°	40°	45°
36°	46°	29°	38°	3°
HERMISTON TEMPERATURE FORECAST				
46°	32°	46°	41°	50°
40°	51°	33°	43°	8°

OREGON FORECAST

Shown is today's weather. Temperatures are today's highs and tonight's lows.

ALMANAC

PENDLETON through 3 p.m. yest.

TEMP.	HIGH	LOW
Yesterday	50°	42°
Normals	41°	27°
Records	65° (1933)	-14° (1937)

PRECIPITATION

24 hours ending 3 p.m.	Trace
Month to date	0.15"
Normal month to date	0.46"
Year to date	0.15"
Last year to date	0.11"
Normal year to date	0.46"

HERMISTON through 3 p.m. yest.

TEMP.	HIGH	LOW
Yesterday	50°	45°
Normals	40°	28°
Records	65° (2002)	-20° (1937)

PRECIPITATION

24 hours ending 3 p.m.	0.00"
Month to date	Trace
Normal month to date	0.32"
Year to date	Trace
Last year to date	0.18"
Normal year to date	0.32"

WINDS (in mph)

	Today	Fri.
Boardman	WSW 6-12	SSW 8-16
Pendleton	WSW 7-14	S 8-16

SUN AND MOON

Sunrise today	7:35 a.m.
Sunset tonight	4:30 p.m.
Moonrise today	3:33 p.m.
Moonset today	6:37 a.m.

Full

Last

New

First

Jan 10

Jan 17

Jan 24

Feb 1

Deputy en route to SWAT call in 3-car collision in Bend

By GARRETT ANDREWS
EO Media Group

BEND — A Deschutes County Sheriff’s Office deputy responding to an emergency call on U.S. Highway 97 on Sunday night collided with another driver in a three-car crash that sent the drivers to the hospital.

Deputy Clint Baltzor and the other drivers suffered injuries that were nonlife-threatening.

Baltzor was driving north on Highway 97 Sunday evening, headed to a SWAT call in Terrebonne in his Dodge Durango patrol vehicle with his lights and siren activated.

At about Clausen Drive on the north end of Bend, the driver of a black Nissan

Rogue, Scott Senn, attempted to pull over to the right, but that lane was blocked by another vehicle. He yielded left instead.

Baltzor’s Durango read-ended Senn’s vehicle, which then struck a Honda Odyssey driven by Chad Elliott.

Baltzor, Senn, 55, and Elliott, 26, were taken to St. Charles Bend, treated and released, according to Bend Police Department.

Bend Police are conducting the investigation into the crash, which could lead to a traffic citation for Baltzor or the other drivers.

“No citations have been issued, but it is a possibility,” said Bend Police spokeswoman Lt. Juli-Ann McConkey.

Baltzor recently returned to active duty for the sheriff’s office after more than a month on paid administrative leave for firing his weapon at a man alleged to have stolen a car.

On Dec. 27, Deschutes County District Attorney John Hummel announced he would not charge Baltzor with a crime and that the 12-year veteran of the sheriff’s office had lawfully fired at the alleged car thief, Adam Leland Gilliam, who was hit in the shoulder and neck and suffered a grazing wound to his head.

Gilliam is currently an inmate of Deschutes County jail awaiting trial for 10 criminal counts related to the alleged car theft and police pursuit.

Correction: In the Page A3 story “Umatilla County looking for lawyers” published Wednesday, Jan. 8, misstated salaries for open positions in the Umatilla County District Attorney’s office. Salaries for the open positions at the office range between \$4,890 and \$9,598. The *East Oregonian* works hard to be accurate and sincerely regrets any errors. If you notice a mistake in the paper, please call 541-966-0818.

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NATIONAL WEATHER TODAY

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Postmaster: send address changes to
East Oregonian, 211 S.E. Byers Ave. Pendleton, OR 97801.
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