

Veterans: ‘Wherever the body of a comrade lies, the ground is hallowed’

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“He made a vow to never let a day go by without thanking someone who packed his parachute emotionally, who packed his parachute spiritually, who packed his parachute financially,” Hackett said.

He said many people go through the day never thinking about the people who “packed their parachute” in some way to help protect the life they are leading.

“Today I say, thank you to the families of those men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice, that we might live in liberty, in the land of the free and home of the brave,” Hackett said.

Pendleton VFW keeps remembrance intimate

In Pendleton, for the second year in a row, the Veterans of Foreign Wars Let ‘er Buck Post 922 held a smaller, more intimate Memorial Day ceremony in the wake of COVID-19.



Members of the Otzenberger family honor Willard (Bill) Otzenberger before a Memorial Day service Monday, May 31, 2021, at the Hermiston Cemetery. Otzenberger served as a gunner on a B-24 Marauder in the 409th Bomb Group during World War II.

Kathy Aney/East Oregonian

The VFW hopes it is the last of its kind.

About 40 people gathered at Pendleton’s Olney Cemetery for the ceremony, which also was livestreamed on Facebook for those who couldn’t make it in person.

Like last year, the proceedings were expedited. While previous ceremonies may have featured a keynote speaker and live music, the 2021 event was consolidated down to a couple of prayers, a VFW speech and some

other ceremonial honorings, including the laying of flowers at a headstone that read, “In honor of all deceased veterans.”

Clifford Smith, the incoming commander of VFW Post 922, spoke about the sacri-

fices veterans made to keep the country free and the need to continue remembering them and their service.

“Wherever the body of a comrade lies, the ground is hallowed,” he said.

Respect, tradition and honor

Kevin Hedgepeth, retired Coast Guard, attended the ceremony in Hermiston. He said he found the entire observance moving.

“I’m still a little teary-eyed,” he said.

As a veteran of the smallest branch of the military, he was pleased to find three flags at the cemetery for Coast Guard veterans.

“When I was active duty, there were more cops in New York City than Coasties in the entire world,” he said.

Hedgepeth grew up on the Oregon coast, though, and said he chose the Coast Guard because he had a great respect for them after watching the rescues, protection and other benefits they

provided to commercial fishermen. Even in times of peace, he said, the Coast Guard saves lives and protects livelihoods.

He said he hopes people remember that Memorial Day is much more than a three-day weekend.

“It’s an opportunity to remember those who put themselves in harm’s way so we can continue to enjoy life,” he said.

Judith Burger, the outgoing commander of the Pendleton VFW, performed “Taps” before the ceremony ended. As the event wrapped up, Smith told the audience he hoped the VFW could revive its usual ceremony for 2022, “once COVID is over.”

The past two years’ ceremonies may have looked very different, with small crowds huddled near the cemetery mausoleum. But Smith said it was important to keep the tradition going, even during the pandemic years.

“We want to honor our fallen,” he said.

Wildfires: ‘Fire seasons are getting longer, forests are getting drier’

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urged Christiansen to include that money in the agency’s budget request for the fiscal year that starts Oct. 1, 2021.

“This is an amazing opportunity,” Merkley said.

Backlog of projects

Two collaboratives are underway in the Blue Mountains, one in the southern part of the range, the other in the northern section, on the Wallowa-Whitman and Umatilla national forests.

Last year, the U.S. Department of Agriculture allocated \$2.7 for the latter collaborative during the fiscal year that started Oct. 1, 2020.

Forest Service officials have said the \$2.7 million will help the two national forests start chipping away at a backlog of projects that are ready as soon as money is available.

Although the details of the work vary depending on the area of the Blue Mountains involved, the general concept is to cut some of the trees, primarily smaller-diameter ones, that are growing in higher densities than was historically the case in the northern Blues, Steve Hawkins, deputy fire staff officer for the Wallowa-Whitman, said in a 2020 interview.

Those smaller trees, most notably grand and white firs, have encroached over the past century or so in places that ponderosa pines and tamaracks used to dominate, in part due to the exclusion of fire, which historically killed most of the firs when they were relatively small.

Ponderosa pines and tamaracks, which generally grow in widely spaced stands rather than in thickets, are much more resistant to wildfires than the grand and white firs that have become much more prevalent over the past several decades.

Although Merkley promotes the additional \$40 million for collaborative projects, his ultimate goal is even more ambitious.

He said he believes the federal government needs to spend at least \$1 billion more each year on forest restoration work nationwide.

‘We have to do more’

In Oregon alone, Merkley said, forest improvement work, including thinning and logging, that has already gone through the environmental review process could treat 2 million acres at an estimated cost of \$388 million, were the money available.

One way to increase the chances of bolstering budgets, Merkley said, is by ensuring the federal government does not return to the practice

known as “fire borrowing.”

That term refers to the federal government transferring money from Forest Service and other agency budgets to cover firefighting costs, leaving less money for projects to reduce the size of wildfires and thus the cost to fight them.

Fire borrowing was necessary in several years over the past decade as millions of acres burned annually across the West.

Merkley said although Congress ended fire borrowing in 2018, the changes made then will expire at the end of the fiscal year — Sept. 30, 2021 — unless it’s reauthorized.

“We cannot go back to the fire borrowing of the past,” Merkley said.

On May 28, Merkley lauded Biden’s budget request for 2022 that includes \$2.45 billion to ensure fire borrowing doesn’t resume.

The president’s budget request also includes the \$80 million for collaborative forest projects that Merkley promotes.

During the May 27 press conference, Merkley recalled driving the length of Western Oregon in September 2020 following the fires that burned more than 1 million acres, destroyed towns, such as Detroit, east of Salem, and killed 11 people.

“It was unforgettable to me,” Merkley said of the experience of driving for hours and never escaping the cloying smoke that persisted in much of Oregon for more than a week. “I’ve never seen anything like this.”

Merkley also talked about the 2020 fires during Wednesday’s appropriations hearing before his committee.

“Whether they have lost a loved one, business or home to a wildfire, had to pack their most valuable belongings and anxiously awaited go orders, or were trapped inside by a thick blanket of hazardous smoke, nearly every family in the West has been impacted by wildfires in one way or another,” he said. “It’s impossible to thrive if your community is being ravaged by these blazes. That’s why any plan to boost America’s infrastructure, create jobs and protect lives and our economy must include responsible forest management strategies that can help us stay ahead of wildfire risks.”

Merkley said the threat of severe fire seasons is likely to increase due to climate change.

“Fire seasons are getting longer, forests are getting drier,” he said. “We have to do more on the forest management end.”

PHS:

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the Pendleton Round-Up Grounds. Hundreds of families, friends, neighbors, teachers, coaches and mentors packed in the stadium grandstands, stomping their feet, blowing air horns, ringing cowbells, whistling and cheering for the graduates.

For many in the crowd, the day was emotional, as any graduation is. But this year, they said, was especially challenging for students, and seeing their loved ones persevere brought pride and joy.

“I’m surprised at the emotions,” said Lois Newcomb, whose granddaughter, Reice Obrist, was one of the graduating seniors. “I didn’t expect to feel so emotional. For my granddaughter, I’m so proud of her.”

The ceremony began with introductions from Pendleton High School Principal Melissa Sandven. The students emerged into the stadium to the sounds of “Pomp and Circumstance,” walking between yellow flowers on their way to their seats in front of the massive crowd.

Three students spoke at the ceremony — Bailey Baxter, Katelyn Kelm and Cortney Herrera. Each addressed the adversity students faced in the unprecedented year while reflecting over the memories they shared, from learning chants at football games to dancing at school dances to competing in elementary school track meets and taking outdoor school classes.

“This last year has been a rollercoaster,” Baxter said. “Not only for my fellow students, but for parents and teachers throughout our



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Pendleton High School graduates on Saturday, May 29, 2021, enter the Pendleton Round-Up Arena for commencement. More than 170 Pendleton High seniors and their families celebrated the event.



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Pendleton High School Senior Class President Katelyn Kelm speaks Saturday, May 29, 2021, at the Pendleton Round-Up Grounds as more than 170 of her fellow graduates and their families gather for commencement.

nation as well. My fellow graduates, despite all the struggles and hardships — hardships that haven’t been suffered in generations — we have made it to the end of our Pendleton High School journey.”

Kelm, the senior class president for 2021, directly addressed the pandemic while praising her fellow graduates.

“We are one of the first classes to graduate during a

global pandemic,” she said, “which is proof that we can overcome adversity.”

She added: “Class of 2021, though the times may be unpredictable and unprecedented, we have the courage and resilience to power through anything.”

Herrera, the all-student-body president at the high school, began her speech reflecting on the memories the class shared.

“Memories that we have

made together are now there for us to look back on and laugh at,” she said. “The last year and a half, the memories we were able to make were limited, but that does not mean that we didn’t get anything out of the past four years.”

Sandven recognized many students’ achievements, including honors awards, scholarships and students who planned to enter the armed forces.

Among them was Steven Asher, who plans to go into the United States Air Force at the end of this year, according to his aunt, Rachel Walker.

“It’s nice to know they have their whole lives in front of them still,” she said. “He’s been wanting to go into the military for years now.”

In all, the class of 2021 earned nearly \$268,000 in scholarships from the Pendleton community, and more than \$1.7 million in scholarships overall.

One student, Robert Wilfred Windy Boy, was the only student in Oregon this year to receive the bilitery seal from the state for attaining high proficiency in English and the Nez Perce language. He was recognized with thunderous applause.

Cassie Abbott felt emotional watching her son, Nicholas Tucker, receiving his diploma on May 29. Tucker struggled to maintain a consistent routine when the pandemic hit, she said, and online classes were difficult. Several families at the graduation said their loved ones had similar struggles.

Only days ago they learned Tucker’s grades were strong enough to graduate, a moment she said felt amazing.

“He put in so much hard work,” she said.

Bills:

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prevented it from advancing to the governor’s desk.

To preserve Oregon’s farmland and open spaces, the state created two sets of boundaries in the 1970s: city limits, which encompass the areas where cities offer services like utilities and public safety, and the urban growth boundary, a slightly larger set of lines that mark where cities can install urban development.

The state only allows cities to expand their urban growth boundary if they meet certain density levels, but Pendleton city officials have long argued that the city’s steep surfaces and rocky soil make it much harder to develop than it looks on a map.

The bill once again had the support of 1000 Friends of Oregon, the state’s top pro-urban growth boundary group, and nearly univer-

sal support from legislators from both parties. Besides state Sen. Dallas Heard, a Roseburg Republican who has continually voted against bills that are unrelated to reopening the state during the COVID-19 pandemic, the only other no vote came from state Rep. Paul Evans, D-Monmouth.

“The addition of ‘more land’ is not a solution, it is a temporary remedy,” Evans wrote in a letter urging the Legislature to take on a broader conversation about land use policy. “It is how we best optimize the land available that is the real issue before us.”

The bill adds Pendleton to a pilot program already being utilized by Bend and Redmond, and will stay in effect until 2028. In an interview, City Manager Robb Corbett said the city will begin a deliberative process of identifying land near Pendleton where property owners and developers might be interested in developing affordable housing,

one of the city’s top needs.

Lawmakers shrink airport’s public records requirements

Another Pendleton priority — Senate Bill 315 — also passed through both chambers of the Legislature with little opposition from lawmakers.

The bill creates an exemption in Oregon’s public records law so the city can block disclosure of any public record associated with the Pendleton Unmanned Aerial Systems Range, “including but not limited to pricing, intellectual property and customer records,” as long as the city can cite some sort of competitive disadvantage will be created from it.

City officials argued they needed to make the drone testing range more opaque because its customers often operate in secrecy and require a similar level of discretion from the city. They added Pendleton’s range was the only facil-

ity under the operation of a public government rather than a private business or tribal entity, meaning it was the only facility in the state that had to comply with public records laws.

The Society of Professional Journalists said its opposition to the bill, arguing the bill was overly broad in what records it wanted to keep from the public eye.

But legislators were undeterred, passing the bill with no amendments. Corbett said the nature of UAS ranges is so new, it will take time to determine whether the bill is too broad in trying to protect Pendleton’s commercial interests and the issue could be revisited later.

Along with Heard, the only other legislator to vote against the bill was Brad Witt, D-Clatskanie, who didn’t provide a statement explaining his vote.

Both bills will now move to desk of Gov. Kate Brown, who will have to sign them to make them law.