

Belles:

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transport ship that was part of a convoy moving Allied troops off the coast of northern Africa.

According to an account by the Naval History and Heritage Command, Germans attacked the convoy on Nov. 25, 1943, and again the next day, using new Hs-293 radio-controlled, rocket boosted glide bombs. Forty one of them missed their mark, thwarted by smoke, radio jamming and extensive anti-aircraft fire. But one was a direct hit.

“The bomb hit Rohna’s port side, penetrated deep into the ship on delayed-fuse, and blew holes in the starboard side, quickly causing the ship to list to starboard,” the account states.

Most lifeboats were destroyed or trapped under debris. Others made it into the water but were quickly swamped by troops and sunk. As neighboring ships attempted to rescue soldiers hanging on to debris on rough seas in the dark, some were sucked under ships or were unable to survive the exposure for the hours it took to be rescued.



Jack Ballo/Contributed Photo

The sinking of the HMS Rohna, pictured here, is the subject of the “Rohna: Classified” documentary. A Hermiston man, Kermit Belles, was one of the more than 1,000 American troops who lost their lives on the ship on Nov. 26, 1943.

Altogether, by the U.S. government’s count, 1,050 U.S. soldiers and more than 100 Allied troops from other countries were killed in the sinking or died from their wounds afterward. The exact number of survivors is unknown, but thought to be somewhere between 900 and 1,000.

Not wanting the Germans

to know that their new radio-guided missile technology had worked, the Army classified the entire event indefinitely, ordering survivors and rescuers to stay quiet under threat of court martial. Gold Star families such as the Belles were simply told their loved one was missing in action.

According to the Rohna

Survivors Memorial Association, a few survivors began to start sharing the story of the Rohna with their local newspapers in the early 1990s. It gained wider public attention in 1993, when CBS commentator Charles Osgood shared the story on his nationally syndicated radio program, “The Osgood File.”

People who heard the

broadcast began to wonder if that was what happened to their relative, and slowly an unofficial database of survivors and victims began to take shape. In October 2000, Congress passed a resolution publicly acknowledging the sinking of the HMS Rohna. The resolution stated that the men who died on the Rohna had been “largely forgotten by the Nation” and acknowledged that “many families still do not know the circumstances of the deaths of loved ones who died as a result of the attack.”

Sutton said after he found out, it was strange to realize his uncle had been killed by Nazis and not Japanese soldiers as he had grown up believing.

He is trying to keep Kermit Belles memory alive, and recently submitted information about Belles to filmmaker Jack Ballo, who has teamed up with historian Michael Walsh to create the documentary “Rohna: Classified.”

In the documentary’s trailer, one woman says she never knew her husband was a survivor until he started crying one day while watching a scene in a tv show where a ship was sinking. “He told me the whole

story, and told me that I could not repeat it,” she said.

Sutton said Kermit was one of 10 children in the Belles family, four of whom fought in World War II. Ken was a paratrooper who jumped into Normandy and was awarded a Purple Heart. Tony served in the Army in the Philippines. And Bob was in the Navy Seabees.

Sutton, a Marine Corps veteran, said after seeing his daughter deployed to the Middle East, he said he can’t imagine what his grandparents went through.

“Imagine having four of your sons in World War II, not knowing if they’ll come back, and getting that telegram,” he said.

The Belles family had moved from Washington to a home on Diagonal Road in Hermiston in 1941, but Kermit’s registration card says he enlisted at age 18 in Timentwa, Washington. Sutton said it is unclear why Kermit enlisted there instead of in Hermiston, and none of Kermit’s siblings are alive to ask.

He wants people to know what parts of Kermit Belles’ story he does know, however.

“It’s nice to remember these guys,” he said. “They paid a big price.”

Services:

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room today was overwhelming,” said county Commissioner John Shafer.

Mental health at Yellowhawk

The meeting began with comments from Wyden, who said he recently received calls from officials across rural Oregon about a “dire shortage” of mental health services the pandemic has exacerbated.

Mental health representatives from Yellowhawk Tribal Health Center on the Umatilla Indian Reservation quickly chimed in on how the pandemic has impacted students countywide. Clinton Kittrell, a counselor with Yellowhawk, said the health center has seen an increase in anxiety disorders as a result of the pandemic, and students’ grades have suffered.

“We really struggled with, ‘What are we going to do to help them?’” Kittrell said. “It’s been a challenge.

Cindy Cecil, a mental health manager at Yellowhawk, said the health center sees high turnover rates as a result of burnout.

“We preface self-care as best we can,” Cecil said. “That’s hard when you have such a high population and only a few clinicians to serve that population.”

Representatives from the Athena-Weston School District and the Umatilla School District spoke about the challenges their students have faced.

Cameron Sipe, a counselor in the Athena-Weston School District, said of the 29 children receiving counseling at the school, only four receive additional counseling. She emphasized the need for telemedicine and the like.

“When you have students in a high-poverty area and no local mental health care you have a perfect storm of problems,” said Ann Vescio, middle school principal for the Athena-Weston School District.

CAHOOTS

The discussion then delved into mental health and policing.

As chair of the Senate Finance Committee, Wyden has been pushing Congress to pass the CAHOOTS Act — Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets — a bill modeled off a Eugene program where a two-person team of medics and mental health professionals respond to calls regarding mental illness, addiction and people experiencing homelessness. The legislation would fund partnerships between law enforcement and mental health professionals to form joint 24/7 crisis response teams.

One billion dollars in seed money for a CAHOOTS-like program reimbursed through Medicaid was included in the American Rescue Plan. And now that local officials have voiced interest in the CAHOOTS model, Wyden is seeking to promote such programs in rural areas, such as Umatilla County.

“I believe that can be done in rural areas just like it can in urban areas,” he said. “I’m not saying the CAHOOTS model needs to have a cookie cutter and you plant it every-

where. There are clearly differences. But I do feel that the core values associated with the new communication that comes about with mental people talking to law enforcement people is a keeper anywhere in the country.”

Some county law enforcement have recently voiced interest in such a program, saying officers are spending more and more time on calls they are not specifically trained to handle.

“I think we’re all fairly familiar that police are not the solution to mental health crises, but we need a seat at the table obviously because we also are going to be dealing with it too,” Pendleton Police Chief Chuck Byram said.

Wyden said he plans to take the input from the county officials to form “planning grants” and awards for county mobile crisis teams. He added he has received support and interest from Republican senators who think the CAHOOTS model is a “terrific idea.”

“What we’re going to show on CAHOOTS is that this is an area that brings Democrats and Republicans together,” he said. “And I have seen that so far. I have not seen an ounce of partisanship so far.”

New care provider

The meeting came just days after the county awarded a contract to Community Counseling Solutions to be its new mental health and addiction services provider over the county’s previous mental health provider, Lifeways.

Byram said in the meeting too often Lifeways was unable to provide help after his officers made an arrest, describing it as a “challenge and a frustration.”

Officials in the meeting said the closure of county mental health facilities only increased burdens on law enforcement as well as other county entities.

Pendleton Mayor John Turner emphasized the need to renovate the county jail so people suffering from a mental health or addiction crisis have somewhere to recover, an effort that officials have been pushing for in the Legislature for years.

“When somebody’s under arrest and they’re not a vicious killer or anything, we put people with mental health issues in the general jail population because we don’t have any place else to put them,” Turner said.

In addition, the closure of Aspen Springs as a psychiatric hospital in Hermiston has left a gap in services, officials said. The acute care facility was open for just seven months before it closed due to staffing challenges made worse by the pandemic.

“It has left the region again with this great big black hole and nothing on the horizon,” said Kimberly Lindsay, executive director for CCS. She requested assistance from officials in the meeting “to find another opportunity or resource for acute care.”

In closing, Karen Wheeler, chief executive officer of Greater Oregon Behavioral Health Inc., spoke about the need for housing services and having mental health workers in the community helping people experiencing homelessness.

“It’s impossible,” Wheeler said, “for people to recover thinking about the roof over their head that they don’t have.”

Tribes:

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ceded some 6.4-million acres to the United States government with the promise of a 520,000-acre homeland in Eastern Oregon.

A subsequent government survey reduced the reservation by almost half, to 265,000 acres.

The Slater Act of 1885, specific to Oregon, and the General Allotment Act of 1887, reduced the reservation to 172,000 acres.

In addition to making the reservation smaller, these two acts also led to the land, which had previously been used communally, being split up into individual allotments.

The U.S. government gave CTUIR males 160 acres, women 80 acres and children 40 acres. The rest was considered “excess” and sold to the white immigrants coming west, creating a checkerboard of Indian and non-Indian ownership across the reservation.

Indian-owned land has been divided into two types: fee and trust.

The United States government holds tribal lands in trust for the use of a tribe. The U.S. holds the legal title, and the tribe holds the beneficial interest. This is the largest category of Indian land. Tribal trust land is held communally by the tribe and is managed by the tribal government.

Fee land is reservation land no longer in trust or subject to restriction. Sometimes a tribe, or individual tribal members, has land in fee. The term refers to the “fee patent” document issued to the individual Indian landowner.

The allotment system further diminished the amount of Indian-owned land when allottees sold their parcels, which were often too small to earn a living from and too large to maintain.

In 1920, Poker Jim, a headman for the Walla Walla Tribe, in a statement published in the East Oregonian, explained why the Walla Wallas were sending a delegate — his son — to Washington, D.C., to speak with Cato Sells, the commissioner of Indian Affairs from 1913-1921, about the allotment deal.

“We do not want these allotments and do not want patents (government grant) here,” proclaimed Poker Jim. “The game and fish is pretty nearly all gone from this country now and if you let the Indians get patents and sell off their lands pretty soon there will be no more home for the Indians here.”

Poker Jim’s statement appealed to Sells to help educate young men who, as soon as they got their allotment, would “sell their land and then they do not have any land and do not have any money because the money is soon spent and drawn, and the Indians are left without any home or any land to live on. Pretty soon, if you let them go on this way, the old Indians will be dead, and the young Indians will be beggars, because they

will waste their land and money if they get patents.”

Despite Poker Jim’s request, non-Indians were allowed to purchase lands across the reservation.

Umatilla innovation

A strategy meeting in 1989 included representatives from the CTUIR, the Bureau of Indian Affairs and land experts, including Cris Stainbrook, who is now president of the Indian Land Tenure Foundation headquartered in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Dave Tovey (Bill Tovey’s brother), a CTUIR planner at the time, wrote a 50-year plan that envisioned the tribes directly owning or managing 40% of the reservation land by the year 2040. That’s a little over 100,000 acres of the land within the original 265,000-acre treaty boundaries — about six times more acreage than the CTUIR owned in 1990.

Stainbrook was working at the time with First Nations Development Institute, a nonprofit organization that assists Native American communities in economic development, when he met with CTUIR leaders. He’s watched the tribes grow over the last three decades.

“I was always impressed with Umatilla,” says Stainbrook. “Over the years I’ve been watching the progress. When the Tovey boys showed up things started to move.” Dave is now the director of Nixyaawii Community Financial Services; Bill is the director of the CTUIR Department of Economic and Community Development; and Al manages Wildhorse Casino.

“Over the years I’d put them in the top five tribes in the country for aggressively regaining lands as well as using the land for tribal economic development.”

Getting fair market value

In the mid-’90s the CTUIR created its land acquisition program. It initially purchased land using money from mitigation funding to tribes for the loss of land, including wildlife habitat, caused by dams on the Columbia River, and the Bonneville Power Administration for salmon recovery. A percent of gaming revenues from Wildhorse Resort & Casino as well as bank financing and contract sales has also been dedicated for land purchases.

Of the tribes’ 43,393 acres of fee property purchases, 21,688 acres were paid for with mitigation funding and 21,705 acres using tribal money.

Bob Burns, an accredited rural appraiser, has been working for more than 50 years as a farm and ranch appraiser. He’s worked with the CTUIR staff in the Land Acquisition Program for several years.

“They know what they’re doing and if they don’t they ask direct questions of the right people,” says Burns.

Burns noted the tribes try to purchase land at fair market value but often face a higher asking price.

“A lot of people take a run at them with a price that’s way too high. They think because the

tribe has a casino they can ask a premium,” Burns says. But staff in the Land Acquisition Program “talk to people one on one and it usually comes down to the price of the appraisal; the real fair market value is what the tribes do.”

Funding the buy-back

The Land Buy-Back Program was created as a result of the settlement in Cobell v. Salazar. In the late 1990s, Elouise Cobell, a Blackfeet Indian from Montana, sued the Bureau of Indian Affairs for 100 years of inadequate accounting of compensation owed Indians for leases.

The trial lasted a dozen years and Cobell died before she could see the creation of the Land Buy-Back Program, which is funded by a settlement of \$3.4 billion.

A total of \$1.5 billion is being distributed to current tribal member landowners based on the value of the property and income that could have been produced over the last century.

Funded by the other \$1.9 billion in the settlement, the Buy-Back Program set aside funding for tribes throughout Indian Country to reduce fractionation — that is, land that through inheritance is often owned by hundreds of Indians, many from different reservations.

The Umatilla tribes received about \$20 million in two allocations as their share of the \$1.9 billion but expect to get more, according to Bill Tovey. This has helped the tribes purchase almost 13,000 highly fractionated acres of land within the reservation.

To address fractionation, in 2008 the Umatilla tribes updated their inheritance code, which now requires that when a landowner dies their land can only be passed to CTUIR members. Each year the tribes spend around \$700,000 on land in the program that has no CTUIR heirs. Purchasing that property is no easy task. In some cases, hundreds of owners — many from other Northwest reservations — share in small parcels.

Tovey knew of one parcel of slightly more than a third of an acre owned by more than 20 Indians.

In those instances, the CTUIR has issued checks for pennies, especially if the parcel is range-land, which is valued lower than productive farmland.

Of the 33,953 acres of trust land purchases, the tribes have bought 15,788 acres from willing sellers, 5,495 acres through probate and 12,670 acres with the Land Buy-Back Program.

Tovey said the CTUIR is well on its way to realizing the land acquisition vision set out by his brother in 1990.

“The CTUIR has been very aggressive with land acquisition,” Tovey said. “The staff has grown from one in 1990 to 10 people who work on acquisitions, probates, fee to trust, land management and data collection. Gaming revenues and mitigation funds have helped push the ball further with the Land Buy-Back Program giving the tribes big bursts of funding to secure lands.”