



Erick Peterson/East Oregonian

Locals and well-wishers send off local National Guard soldiers Thursday, Nov. 4, 2021, at the National Guard Armory, Hermiston.

Guard:

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After that, they leave to southwest Asia to support the task force mission of Spartan Shield, protecting against aggression in the region.

Letters were read from officials not in attendance, including from Major General Michael Stencil, National Guard adjunct general.

"You embark on this mission not as individuals but as a unified force," Stencil's letter stated, "demonstrating our resolve to preserve and protect the freedoms that every American is entitled to."

Stencil's letter thanked the soldiers' family and community members, who make their service possible. It stated that families, friends, employers and co-workers are taking care of the lives the soldiers are temporarily leaving behind.

"I know you will represent your state and country with honor. I look forward to welcoming you home when your mission is complete," the letter concluded.

State Rep. Greg Smith, R-Heppner, attended the ceremony and expressed his appreciation to the members of the 116th Cavalry and 145th BSB.

"On behalf of the 60 members of the Oregon House of Representatives, we salute you, we're indebted to you and we appreciate all you do," Smith said.

Col. Geoffrey Vallee added his praise and gratitude to the troops and their communities. Soldiers must be quick to ready for mobilization, he said, but they have served in their nation in many ways, including some who have gone on multiple deploy-



John Hughel/Oregon Military Department Public Affairs

Oregon Army National Guard Soldiers with Bravo Company's 3rd Battalion, 116th Cavalry Regiment render a salute Nov. 4, 2021, during the playing of the National Anthem as they are mobilized for deployment at a ceremony in Hermiston.

ments. And their work, he said, is made possible by people at home.

Vallee noted some of the soldiers had recent major events in their lives, including the births of children and weddings.

Seth Musgrove, battalion commander, spoke of his appreciation for the soldiers and his confidence in them.

"I have no doubt you will achieve success," he said.

As the soldiers met with the public and shook the hands of officers, a few shared their feelings.

"I'm a little nervous, but I have a lot of support with my family. That gives me more confidence," Spc. Aly Espian said.

The 29-year-old Hermiston resident said this is his first deployment. He joined to "fight for our freedoms," he said, to help his mother with her citizenship.

"This was a little unexpected, but I was hoping for it, at least once, to see what it was like," he said.

Cpl. Justin Cox, 26, of Baker City, shared his excitement. This is his deployment, he said, so he was looking forward to learning whatever skills this experience affords, though he added he would miss at least one thing stateside.

"I'm just going to miss fishing," he said.

Pvt. Natalia Peterlohn, 22-year-old La Grande resident, also was among the departing soldiers. She said she first joined the National Guard to serve the country, better herself and save up for school.

She said she was nervous about the experience, and she already was making plans for when she returns. Peterlohn said she intends to return to school to study environmental science.

Mural:

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Travel Oregon CEO Todd Davidson said the George Fletcher mural was exactly what his organization had in mind for the next iteration of his organization's "Only Slightly Exaggerated" campaign. Davidson said the initial stages of the campaign focused heavily on Oregon's natural beauty, but Travel Oregon now wants to shift its focus to people and communities.

"We want these to be a point of community pride," he said.

The completion of the mural means Pendleton is now a stop on Travel Oregon's nine-city Oregon Mural Trail, which stretches from Gold Beach to Ontario. Travel Pendleton coordinator Kristen Dollarhide said the two agencies have been working together on the project for years.

After securing funding from both travel agencies in addition to the Pendleton Foundation Trust, the Wildhorse Foundation and the Pendleton Arts Committee, Dollarhide



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Todd Davidson, CEO of Travel Oregon, speaks to attendees Wednesday, Nov. 3, 2021, at a ribbon cutting for the organization's new "still only slightly exaggerated" mural of George Fletcher in Pendleton.

said they looked for mural sites all over town.

They soon settled on the spot by the Old West Federal Credit Union parking lot, which was desirable due to its close proximity to a busy street. The mural only takes up a small section of the long wall, an

intentional move meant to make it easier for people to take pictures by the art.

If tourists flock to the mural like tourism promoters hope they do, it means Fletcher will be the background of many more social media posts to come.

Food:

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In Grant County, the local food bank has seen a marked decrease in clients throughout the year — roughly 113 families used the Grant County Food Bank in September, down from its January level of 151, according to food bank board member Tom Sutton.

"The numbers are down. My gut feeling tells me — what I hear — is that they got more food stamps than what they normally get," Sutton said, "and they're getting paid unemployment better than what they're making by going to work, so I don't think they need the food bank."

The nonprofit Community Connection of Northeast Oregon Inc. services the Grant County Food Bank, along with food banks in Baker, Union and Wallowa counties. Community Connection's numbers have risen slightly since the previous year.

"When you look at all the modes of service that we do the food boxes and the produce distribution sites and all of that, we've served 15% more people in 2021 compared to the prior fiscal year," said Margaret Davidson, executive director of Community Connection.

Demand wavers during different times over the year, according to Audrey Smith, the food bank manager for Community Connection. Smith noted this typically happens from September through February, depending on the weather.

"The demand for food boxes across our service area has gone down steadily since December of 2020," Smith stated. "However, we have seen a slight increase in the need for food boxes in the month of September, but it's important to know that food is still available for people who need it."

Those wishing to make a donation should note the pantry's and food banks aren't limited to just food donations

— personal care items and household staples also go a long way.

"We could always use paper products — toilet paper, paper towels — household basics," Killion said. "We never have enough. Our shelves are completely empty all the time no matter how much we donate, and that's across the board. I would say that at any food pantry that you go to, people would be so happy to get laundry detergent and personal care products and things like that."

Across the board, the food banks say they're appreciative of the donations that are coming in, and thankful to the communities that are supporting them.

"We are so grateful for all the community support we receive, and anyone who has interest in supporting the pantry; your money isn't going to waste," Killion said. "Your resources are not going into a pile, they're definitely being used."

Anderson:

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Upon his return, he said health district board members told him he would likely be demoted. He was surprised. He received few to no reprimands or complaints during his years of service, Anderson and emergency responders said. Volunteers and community members describe him as a dedicated public servant who made countless sacrifices and saved lives.

Instead, the board fired Anderson in an Oct. 18 meeting without cause, according to news reports. The move shocked local residents and infuriated volunteer emergency responders. Still recovering from COVID-19, Anderson said he plans to sue the board.

"I don't have a lot of options," said Anderson, a veteran of the United States Air Force, who contracted COVID-19 while moving into his new home. He said he still struggles to breathe and speak. And without his job, he's concerned about how he'll pay off his mortgage.

"It really scares me," he said. "I'm 55. I've got a degree, but this has been my career pretty much my whole life. If my strength doesn't come back, I might not be able to be a paramedic."

Marcus Swift, Anderson's attorney, said in a statement that his client alleges he was met with "discrimination and retaliation by the district and its board chair" when he returned home from the hospital. Swift called the board's decision "reckless" and said Anderson claims he was "terminated immediately after he put the district on notice of his protected status as a whistleblower."

Mark Mitchell, chair of the board overseeing the North Gilliam County Health District, declined to say why Anderson was fired.

Responders walkout, member resigns

A health district board member — who said he disagreed with the board's decision and its timing — resigned after the October meeting. In protest, local emergency responders staged a 36-hour walkout.

"We lost all trust in the board at that point," said Tiffany Wilkins, a local business owner and volunteer with the ambulance service. Wilkins said Anderson was essential in helping improve the ambulance service and its emergency responders.

The walkout left a large section of I-84 briefly without nearby ambulance services. From the John Day Dam to the Morrow County line, it's a relatively remote stretch of road known for car crashes amid winter storms. Aside from the local volunteers from Arlington, the nearest ambulance would come from 30 miles away.

"We have a lot of accidents, a lot of nuts out there driving who shouldn't be near a car," said Julius Courtney, the board member who resigned after Anderson was fired. "A lot of wrecks. We're going into the winter. Now is an extremely poor time to have those people upset."

Several sources said they believe Anderson's termination came because he hired an attorney after learning he would be demoted. Wilkins said a board member told her on the night they fired him they did so because "he lawyered up."

Courtney said he could not discuss why Anderson was fired, but Anderson hiring an attorney may have played a role in the dismissal.

"Part of that was discussed in executive session, so I can't answer that," Courtney said, "but I'm sure it had some effect on it. I didn't totally agree that it did have an effect, but I guess it could have."

Mitchell said the board was hoping only to demote Anderson, but the board then had "several indicators that clearly showed that (Anderson) wasn't satisfied with what was taking place." Mitchell denied that Anderson was fired because he hired legal representation.

Discontent grows

The volunteers have since returned to work, but the situation has soured. Disturbed by the board's decision, they have pushed for ambulance service to be moved under the city, the county or a fire district rather than the health district.

The Arlington City Council in a recent meeting said it would allow the ambulance services to operate temporarily under its umbrella. But the health district board moved quickly to prevent that, sources said. Mitchell said the district does not want to separate itself from the ambulance service, adding the situation is a personnel issue the district hopes to solve by hiring new employees.

But some volunteers said they feel unheard and unsupported by the board and Mitchell and are urging the district to relinquish its grip. Some said they are concerned that volunteers have relatively little legal protections and are asking for greater clarity about why Anderson was fired.

"If they can go after Dave, who has always been there for everyone in town, rain or shine," said David Gossett, a pastor and former volunteer who recently left the ambulance service. "If they can go after him when he was in the ICU fighting for his life and fire him while he was still recovering, then why in the world would I ever think that I was anything special to them?"

Mitchell, a former police officer, said the emergency responders have a duty to serve the community without interruption.

"There's no individual that they should place above that responsibility to answer," he said.

Mitchell said the district is supportive of the ambulance service and often will approve the purchases they request. He noted the district has spent \$937,000 on items the ambulance service requested over the past seven years.

"We show tremendous support of them," he said. "Always have. Always will."

'There will be more.'

On Thursday, Nov. 4, Wilkins was about to sit down at the Bee Sweet Bakery & Deli in Arlington when her phone rang. It was the ambulance service. Her face grew serious. She needed to come in.

She rushed to her car, hopped in and drove off. The patient had a heart issue and was in rough shape, she said. The ambulance zipped through town and drove east down the interstate. Eventually, the patient received an emergency flight. It was the second patient with heart problems they'd seen over the past two days.

"If we weren't there, they would have died," Wilkins said. "There will be more. There will be more."



Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group

Art Trice, a driver for the Salvation Army Cascade Division, loads up a van Thursday, Nov. 4, 2021, with food from the Community Connection of Northeast Oregon Inc. food bank in La Grande.