

Vietnam veteran Ron Esselstyn gets Purple Heart 51 years later

Helicopter blade slammed into soldier's head

By Kathy Aney
East Oregonian

Decades after a helicopter blade struck Ron Esselstyn's head, he finally received his Purple Heart.

The Pendleton soldier almost died 51 years ago in Vietnam at age 22 after an Army helicopter carrying him and other soldiers landed in a rice paddy and Esselstyn hopped out. When a Viet Cong sniper popped up from the weeds, the soldier jumped off balance into the chopper's moving tail rotor. The blade hit with such force that it mashed part of Esselstyn's fiberglass helmet into his brain.

His parents got a telegram calling their son's prognosis "guarded." When he awoke, speech eluded him. His doctors suspected he would never walk again.

The Pendleton man, once called "The Cat" by basketball teammates, surprised everyone by not only walking, but eventually running more than 100 marathons. He finished college and started a career as a tax appraiser at the Umatilla County Assessor's Office.

Esselstyn didn't receive his Purple Heart. The veteran believed he wasn't eligible because he was technically an "advisor," not a combat troop. Possibly he was passed over because of a misunderstanding of Army regulation, which bars soldiers from receiving Purple



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian

Ron Esselstyn has tears come to his eyes as Oregon Department of Veterans Affairs Operations Director Ed Van Dyke pins a Purple Heart on his chest Thursday afternoon at the Jonathan M. Wainwright Memorial VA Medical Center. The awards ceremony comes 51 years after a helicopter blade hit him in the head during conflict in Vietnam.

Hearts for vehicular accidents that weren't caused by enemy action.

Last year, Oregon Department of Veterans Affairs Operations Director Ed Van Dyke began researching Esselstyn's service record and found that he was eligible for the Purple Heart and seven other medals, ribbons and badges.

On Aug. 25 at the Jonathan M. Wainwright Memorial VA Medical Center in Walla Walla, the 73-year-old veteran finally got his medals in front of a crowd of about 75 gathered in the Outpatient Center Atrium.

Esselstyn sat in his wheelchair, wearing a black ball cap emblazoned with

the image of a helicopter and the date of the incident, Aug. 27, 1965.

His hat covered the flat, runway-shaped surface left behind after reconstructive surgery to fix the place where the rotor sheared off part of his skull.

He listened as Van Dyke said he first learned of Esselstyn's story from an East Oregonian article a year ago.

"As I read the article chronicling Ron's amazing story, I knew I had to do whatever I could do to insure he received the honors and recognitions he deserved," Van Dyke said.

Van Dyke collected a thick file on Ron from the

Army archives and sent the evidence to the Secretary of the Army last March. Van Dyke's request was forwarded on to the Army Awards and Decorations Branch which determined Esselstyn should receive not only the Purple Heart, but a Good Conduct Medal, National Defense Service Medal, Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal, Vietnam Service Medal (with two stars), Republic of Vietnam Campaign Ribbon, Expert Badge and Marksman Badge.

"These are tokens he should have received many, many years ago," Van Dyke said.

He walked over to Es-

selstyn and pinned the Purple Heart onto the veteran's shirt. Esselstyn teared up.

"I was shocked," he said later. "I didn't expect all this."

Ron's wife, Sue, stood nearby, looking emotional. She more than anyone sees the dark moments caused by that long-ago injury. About a decade ago, her husband lost his sense of balance and developed drop foot.

He tumbled off his back porch and hit his head on a patio. He tripped in the driveway, breaking his hip. He had to give up running.

He struggles with post-traumatic stress, diabetes and concentration. He exhibits signs of bipolar disorder. She doesn't know which conditions are the direct result of the head injury and which aren't.

Today, however, she felt only joy as she watched Ron receive long-overdue recognition.

"He's overwhelmed with so much love and so many people," she said.

After the official ceremony, a parade of people came forward and addressed Esselstyn. The speakers included childhood friends, a junior high basketball coach, Sen. Bill Hansell (who worked with Esselstyn at the Umatilla County Courthouse) and a VA medical team that Sue Esselstyn has dubbed "Team Hope" for their caring. One of the nurses on the team, Lonna Lobe, addressed Ron.

"You take care of some patients that forever touch you," she said. "You and Sue will always be in my heart."

Veteran's Benefit Expo set for Sept. 8

Wallowa County Chieftain

The Oregon Department of Veterans Affairs' second annual Veteran Benefit Expo will be held Sept. 8 at the Veterans Memorial Coliseum in Portland, bringing together close to 100 federal, state and local providers of programs and services that benefit veterans and their families.

The free event, open to the public from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., is the largest veteran benefit expo of its kind in the state of Oregon and is being hosted in Portland for the first time.

"The 2016 Veterans Benefit Expo is a one stop shop event for veterans and their families to learn about the full range of their earned benefits," said Cameron Smith, director of the Oregon Department of Veterans Affairs. "This is an opportunity to connect with over 85 service providers under one roof. We are excited to host in Portland this year and continue to take this approach to communities across Oregon going forward."

For more information, visit www.expo.oregondva.com, or call 503-373-2389.

Local VFW to host lineage ceremony

Wallowa County Chieftain

Eagle Cap VFW Post 4370 is hosting a lineage dinner and ceremony for Wayne Lathrop and Betsy Lathrop on Tuesday, Sept. 6.

The ceremony begins at 11 a.m. at the VFW Post, 800 N. River St. in Enterprise, with luncheon to follow.

If you wish to attend, please RSVP by calling Jim Hicks Jr. at 541-263-0059 by Sunday, Sept. 4

Feeling Stretched as a Caregiver?

Powerful Tools for Caregivers is an educational series designed to provide you with the tools to take care of yourself.

This program helps family caregivers reduce stress, improve self-confidence, communicate feelings better, balance their lives, increase their ability to make tough decisions and locate helpful resources.

Classes consist of six sessions held once a week. Two experienced Class Leaders conduct the series (many are experienced caregivers themselves, who have successfully applied the techniques they teach). Interactive lessons, discussions and brainstorming will help you take the "tools" you choose and put them into action for your life.

You will receive a book, The Caregiver Helpbook, developed specifically for the class. Classes will be **FREE**, thanks to support from Community Connection of Northeast Oregon, Inc.

Classes will be held at Community Connection 702 NW 1st St. Enterprise, from 9:30 am - 11:00 am. Session are held every Thursday and begin on September 15th, 2016. For more information or to register, contact Connie or Kris at 541.426.3840. Class size is limited and per-registration is required.

BMCC releases honor roll for summer term

Blue Mountain Community College in Pendleton recognizes the following full-time students who earned summer term honor roll honors:

President's List (4.0 GPA)

- Alyssa Pratt of Union County
- Dean's List (3.40 to 3.84 GPA)
- Jenifer Cameron of Wallowa County

Celebrate the Song!

Two stages of live original music, non-stop, all day!
Songwriting Contest • Songwriting Workshop

Plus great food, drink, art vendors, fun for the whole family!



Saturday, September 3, 2016

Labor Day Weekend W.C. Fairgrounds, Enterprise, OR
Tickets \$15 advance/\$18 at gate 12+under FREE

Lewi Longmire & the Left Coast Roasters Sum People
Kory Quinn Ashleigh Flynn & the Porch Climbers
Will West & Groovy Wallpaper Misé
Laney Lou & the Bird Dogs Tracy Spring

www.juniperjam.com

Erica Bailey earns bachelor's degree

Erica Bailey of Joseph has completed her bachelor of science degree in health administration and leadership from Pacific University in Forest Grove, Ore. She graduated summa cum laude and also earned an award for academic

excellence. Erica is the daughter of Dr. Troy and Janice Bailey owners of Wallowa Valley Eye Care in Enterprise. She will begin work on a doctorate of optometry this month and anticipates completing that degree in 2020.

DEATH NOTICES

Mary Ann McLaughlin

Mary Ann McLaughlin of Enterprise died at her home Aug. 28, 2016 at age 55. A celebration of her life will be held at 1 p.m. Friday, Sept. 2 at the old Enterprise Christian Church, 207 E. Main St., with interment to follow at the Enterprise Cemetery. Bollman Funeral Home is entrusted with arrangements.

Submit Obituaries

Send obituaries by email, obits@wallowa.com; fax, 541-426-3921; or mail, PO Box 338, Enterprise, OR 97828.

Weather Forecast

Courtesy of Weather Underground. www.wunderground.com

	High	Low	Conditions
Sept. 1	77	45	Clear
Sept. 2	66	40	Partly cloudy
Sept. 3	66	41	Clear
Sept. 4	68	41	Clear
Sept. 5	71	40	Partly cloudy
Sept. 6	68	42	Clear


Phases of the moon

Sept. 1	Sept. 9	Sept. 16	Sept. 23
New Moon	1st Quarter	Full Moon	Last Quarter

WALLOWA COUNTY SUNRISE AND SUNSET AUG. 31-SEPT.1

(from the U.S. Naval Observatory)

WED	THUR	FRI	SAT	SUN	MON	TUES
Aug. 31	Sept. 1	Sept. 2	Sept. 3	Sept. 4	Sept. 5	Sept. 6
Rise: 6:10	Rise: 6:11	Rise: 6:12	Rise: 6:14	Rise: 6:15	Rise: 6:16	Rise: 6:17
Set: 7:27	Set: 7:25	Set: 7:24	Set: 7:22	Set: 7:20	Set: 7:18	Set: 7:16



WALLOWA COUNTY CHIEFTAIN

EARLY DEADLINE

For September 7th Edition

Ad, Classified & Legal Deadline:
Thursday, September 1st at Noon

To Submit Your Ad:
Stop by the office at 209 NW First St., in Enterprise
Call (541) 426-4567 • Email jpowell@wallowa.com
Place your ad online at wallowa.com

Office will be closed September 5th