

For Love And Country

■ Tribal Elder and Vietnam Veteran Steve Rife makes the Trail of Tears walk.

By Ron Karten

When Tribal Elder and Vietnam Veteran Steve Rife lost his wife, Margie, to lung cancer last September, he was already planning to walk the 265-mile Trail of Tears in her memory.

"I had been planning to do this for her, and for cancer awareness, and especially for veterans exposed to Agent Orange (in the Vietnam War)."

Both Rife and his wife were diag-

a.m. on the Saturday morning of June 23rd. He was accompanied by Springfield friend Mike Roberts, who drove the Rife motor home to provide sleeping accommodations. But by the time they hit Eugene, at the rate of about 20 miles a day, Roberts got a job offer.

"I couldn't stop him from taking a job," said Rife, so Rife's brother, Ron, also a Vietnam Vet, took over at the wheel of the motor home, and drove it the rest of the way to

bought me ice cold water, a hair braid for the eagle staff, and a packet of tobacco.

"We were about 10 miles out of Canyonville. They bought me this stuff in Canyonville and drove all the way back. They took the exit behind me and then came back up the road. We said a little prayer and I thanked them, and kept on walking."

When he had walked almost 250 miles, he laughed and said, "I'm having a little problem with my feet. I change socks twice, three times a day."

Channel 6 in Eugene came out and interviewed Rife on Sunday, July 1. "They aired it on TV and misquoted me and I was very upset with them," he said. "They said I wanted the troops to come home. I do want the troops to come home, but after they've won. I don't want it to turn into another Vietnam."

All along, through traffic and four days of the big heat wave, he stayed on or ahead of schedule to walk in at Grand Entry on Saturday, July 7th at noon.

In 2002, Tribal Elder Steve Bobb

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~ Steve Rife,
Tribal Elder, Vietnam Veteran

nosed with cancer the same week. His came from exposure to Agent Orange in the war.

"She had lung cancer and I was diagnosed with lymphoma. We were both seeing the same cancer doctor and we let her do the radiation and chemo, and I laid off for awhile so I could stay healthy and strong to take care of her."

It was not a good year for the family. His sister, Tribal Elder Marcia Bolton, passed over in December, and his aunt, Carol Carpenter, passed over this last March.

He started from Big Table Rock just outside of Medford and 10 miles from Interstate 5 about 9

Grand Ronde.

On the second day of the walk, between Medford and Grants Pass, he passed a rattlesnake, about three feet away. "It was alongside the road in the shade by the guard rail. I stepped out away from him and kept on going. He said goodbye real pleasant with a shake of the tail."

Later on, he was within 15 feet of three nice looking buck deer. "Just on down the road from that, a flock of turkeys were standing out there saying, 'You're a damn fool.' I fit right in with them."

"I had a couple of kids in a car. They passed by me just before Canyonville. In Canyonville, they



Tribal Elder and Vietnam Veteran Steve Rife at this year's Veterans' Pow-wow.

Photo by Toby McClary

and Tribal member Brent Merrill, made the walk. "I think what Steve did was a great thing in honoring his family," said Merrill. "It's not an easy journey, even in the modern day."

"To me, I'm trying to heal because my wife was the love of my life," said Rife. "We didn't have that long together. She was taken from me too soon."

Asked how he was doing at the start of the trip, and again a few weeks later when he was north of Eugene, he replied the same: "One step at a time." ■



Photo by Toby McClary