

NEWS STORY OF THE YEAR

The occupation of the Malheur refuge

By Sean Hart
Blue Mountain Eagle

The occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge near Burns that began Jan. 2 was by far the largest news event of 2016, with reverberations throughout the year and related stories that have not yet concluded.

After a peaceful event protesting the resentencing of Burns ranchers Dwight and Steven Hammond, some of the protesters took over an unoccupied federal bird refuge facility in Harney County. The Hammonds were convicted of arson for lighting fires that burned onto federal land, served their original sentences of three months and one year, respectively, and were then ordered by another judge to serve the full five-year sentences mandated by the federal laws under which they were charged.

The armed occupiers — including Ammon and Ryan Bundy, who were involved in a 2014 standoff over federal grazing fees in Nevada with their father, Cliven Bundy — demanded the Hammonds' new sentences be overturned.

Even after the Hammonds turned themselves in to serve their new prison sentences, the occupiers remained at the refuge for what would become a 41-day standoff with federal authorities. They demanded not only the Hammonds' release but also the transfer of the refuge land to local control.

Into Grant County

Grant County Sheriff Glenn Palmer met with several of the occupiers, including Ryan Payne and Jon Ritzheimer, at a lunch meeting in John Day, according to other attendees. He said he was not aware they would be there but followed them next door after lunch to continue meeting.

Palmer said he believed a positive outcome would require the government to concede to the occupiers' demands.

"I don't think these guys are going to give up without knowing that they've done something that benefits the people of our country or our region," he told the Eagle.

Days later, Palmer met with the president of 3% of Idaho, Brandon Curtiss, who said his group was provid-



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Anti-occupation protesters hold signs during a town hall meeting at the senior center Jan. 26 in John Day. A group of occupiers was supposed to speak at the meeting, including Ammon and Ryan Bundy, before the FBI captured the brothers on Highway 395 outside of Burns.

ing a "security buffer detail," around the refuge.

Both Palmer and Curtiss told the Eagle they had been friends for more than a year and the meeting was not related to the refuge occupation. They both said they did not believe the occupiers would expand into Grant County.

"They won't come here," Palmer said.

The John Day meeting and the arrests

Canyon City resident Tad Houpt organized a meeting in John Day Jan. 26 and invited Ryan Payne. He said he was unsure if any of the other occupiers would attend, though he invited Palmer to speak as well.

"What I'd like to get across is how much power and authority we have and how we need to make some changes in our government here," Houpt told the Eagle. "... The corruption, that's what this meeting is about — the blatant, unbelievable corruption we have in this county. It's from local government clean up to federal government. Our state government is probably even worse."

At about the time the meeting was set to begin, the attendees learned the two ve-

hicles en route from the refuge to John Day had been stopped by the FBI and Oregon State Police on Highway 395 north of Burns.

Ammon and Ryan Bundy were arrested along with several others, and Robert LaVoy Finicum was shot and killed by Oregon State Police officers after he exited his vehicle at a roadblock and officers said he reached for a weapon. An investigation by the Malheur County district attorney concluded the officers who shot Finicum were justified, but additional shots by FBI agents that did not hit Finicum were under further investigation.

Most of the occupiers left the refuge soon after the leaders were arrested. The last four holdouts surrendered Feb. 11.

Complaints against Sheriff Palmer

At least eight people filed complaints against Grant County Sheriff Glenn Palmer and his involvement with the occupiers with the Oregon police licensing agency, which forwarded them to the Department of Justice, recommending further investigation.

The justice department opened an investigation, which has still not concluded.



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Tad Houpt of Canyon City breaks the news to the audience that the Bundys had been arrested before the start of the public meeting where the brothers were to speak in John Day.

The Oregonian requested public records from Palmer and later sued him to compel their release. During the course of the lawsuit, The Oregonian obtained most of the records it sought but also raised concerns about records being deleted. A judge granted a temporary restraining order preventing Palmer from deleting any emails.

The case was dismissed when the documents were released, but the judge specified The Oregonian could still seek attorney fees. The Oregonian submitted a request for \$78,000 in fees, and a hearing on the matter is scheduled in 2017.

The trial

While several of the defendants, including Ryan Payne, pleaded guilty to conspiring to

prevent federal employees from doing their jobs, most pleaded not guilty and stood trial. Some also faced firearms and theft charges. One group went to trial in 2016, and another group is awaiting trial in 2017.

A jury found the defendants in the first group not guilty on all charges. One of the jurors told The Oregonian the jury acquitted because the federal prosecutors failed to prove the defendants intended to impede the federal employees, which was a necessary component for the conspiracy charge.

While many of the defendants were set free, Ammon and Ryan Bundy remain in custody, awaiting trial on charges related to the 2014 Nevada standoff along with their father, who was arrested after traveling to Oregon during the occupation.

ATTENTION GRANT COUNTY VETERANS:

Did you know a service-connected disabled veteran is entitled to **FREE** use of Oregon State Parks?

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Top Eagle online articles for 2016

Blue Mountain Eagle

The most-viewed article on the Blue Mountain Eagle's website for 2016 was "Documents: OSP moved fatal traffic stop to avoid Grant County sheriff."

The article, which shared information from documents released in the investigation into the Jan. 26 shooting death of Robert "LaVoy" Finicum, received 26,651 views.

Top-viewed articles from 2016 by month were:

- January: "Watch the FBI video of LaVoy Finicum shooting"
- February: "Sheriff's association asked to investigate Palmer's conduct"
- March: "Documents: OSP moved fatal traffic stop to avoid Grant County sheriff"
- April: "Sheriff Palmer intends to sue city of John Day, employees"
- May: "State accuses DeRosier of attempted murder for Thursday shootings"
- June: "Deputy declined assistance, failed to record interview when investigating complaint against his family"
- July: "John Day man dies after falling from cliff"
- August: "Jury: Peterson guilty on three felony charges"
- September: "Missing boy found deceased"
- October: "The Dirty Shame becomes the Ugly Truth"
- November: "Man rescued from badger hole after fleeing from police"

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