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Norene makes final trip to Europe for D-Day commemoration, President Obama calls family to express condolences

By Autumn Morgan

On May 27 Jim Norene of Heppner flew to Normandy, France, for the commemoration of the 65th anniversary of D-Day. Jim, a member of the 101st Airborne Division during World War II, visited the graves of his fallen comrades and died that night in his sleep, before the commemoration ceremony the next day.

Top photo: Jim Norene with his daughter, Tracie Bunch, at the dedication of the World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C. in 2004. Right photo: Jim Norene (right) with his brother Bill. *-Contributed photos*

Jim joined the Army in 1942. He originally planned to be a ski trooper because of all the skiing he had done on Mount Hood. But Jim and a few of his friends decided to switch gears when they learned they could make $50 more per month as paratroopers. So Jim made the switch and went to jump school in Ft. Benning, GA.

Jim and his brother, Bill, were in the Army at the same time. However, Bill was stationed in Arkansas during World War II. "Bill was a little jealous because Jim was involved with the war," said Tracie Bunch, Jim's daughter. During the time Jim was overseas, the two had been writing letters back and forth and were planning to meet in Chicago. Just after receiving the last letter from Bill, Jim found out that Bill had been accidentally shot while training soldiers to use bazookas. He later died in the hospital after contracting pneumonia.

During World War II, Jim was based in England and was shot twice during the time he was with the Army. The first time he was shot was while fighting in Holland and was airlifted back to England where he recuperated before returning to fight in the war. After returning to Holland, during the Battle at Bastogne his unit was surrounded and cut off from supplies and ammunition until General Patton's army was able to break through. It was during this time that he was shot the second time, a bullet shattering bones near his knee and ending his military career.

Since his return from World War II, Jim never said much about his time fighting during the war. But over the last few years he had been meeting with several other veterans and soldiers at barbecues and reunions and had finally begun to open up and share his experiences, at first with his fellow soldiers and then with his family. It was after he had begun to tell his stories to his family that his daughter, Tracie, learned about her uncle, Bill.

The trip to Normandy for the D-Day commemoration was the third trip Jim had made to Europe since he was a soldier fighting during World War II, but his first trip to Normandy. Jim and his wife, Corabelle (Corky) visited Europe for 15 days in 1992 and decided they needed more time to travel and went again in 1993 for a month, visiting England and Holland. Jim was a "devoted husband and father," said Tracie. Jim and Corky were married 55 years before Corky passed away in 2005. Tracie was the only child of Jim and Corky. Tracie and her husband, Mike, have one daughter, Audra Huntington, who lives in Portland with her husband, Sam.

Jim had been diagnosed with non-Hodgkins lymphoma and was receiving blood and platelet transfusions at a cancer center in Washington. Jim had been planning the trip to Normandy for quite a while and it became a joint effort by his doctors and family to make sure he was able to make the trip.

On May 30, after arriving in France, Jim had dinner with a couple from Holland and their one year old daughter. Jim and the couple had been conversing over the internet for the past 7-8 years, with phone calls at Christmas. Tracie says that in some European countries, specifically England and Belgium, people raise their children to specifically recognize, respect and thank American GIs who fought for them during World War II.

President Obama, who was in France for the commemoration, heard about Norene's death and had one of his aides call Tracie on Friday afternoon to ask permission to mention Jim in his speech that day. Tracie was also informed that president would be calling her at a later time. That time happened to be Monday while she was in a class at Heppner High School where she is a special education aide. President Obama expressed his condolences to Tracie and then they spent a few minutes talking about special education funding for school. Tracie thanked the president for the money that he had budgeted for special education programs. She said the president told her it was important to him to help schools with special education programs.

Tracie says that throughout this time the French Embassy has been very helpful. She says that Jim's body is expected to be brought back in 8-10 weeks.

Jim was very proud to have fought with the 101st Airborne Division. He always wore a jacket with 101st Airborne Division emblems and his car had 101st Airborne Division bumper stickers. "He was a silent hero because he has never talked about this stuff," said Tracie. "But he has always been my hero."

Health district hires new administrator

By April Sykes

Morrow County Health District CEO Victor Vander Does has announced that the health district has hired a new administrator, Michael Blauer.

Vander Does, who previously announced his retirement, said that Blauer, who is currently an administrative resident at the Poudre Valley Health System at Fort Collins, CO, is anticipated to be on the job by the end of June. Blauer graduated from Idaho State University at Pocatello, Magna Cum Laude, and received a bachelor's degree in business administration and a BA in Spanish. He earned a master of health services administration degree from the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor.

"I think this is a highly qualified individual and he and his wife are a really nice couple," said Vander Does. "I think they will really fit in this community."

Vander Does says that he expects to stay on the job at least through July 1-2 and perhaps through July 6-7, depending on the overlap.

Vander Does said that the administrator's salary is $105,000 per year.

Vander Does says that he and his wife, Nancy, have definite plans to travel after his retirement. She is currently a board member on the Morrow County School Board.

Deceased newborn found in toilet

On Sunday, June 7, 2009, the body of a newborn infant was discovered in the tank of a portable toilet by a sanitation worker in Hermiston. The toilet had been placed in the Boardman area for use by farm workers, but had been returned to Hermiston for cleaning.

As a result of Umatilla Morrow County Major Crimes Team investigation, Araceli Velasquez Espain, 23, of Hermiston was arrested and lodged in the Umatilla County Jail on charges of aggravated Murder, Murder, Manslaughter I, Abuse of a Corpse II, Criminal Mistreatment I, and Concealing the birth of an infant.

Investigation into this incident remains open. Major Crimes Team members include personnel form the Morrow County Sheriff's Office, Boardman Police Department, Oregon State Police, Umatilla County Sheriff's Office, Pendleton Police Department, Milton Freewater Police Department, Morrow County District Attorney's Office, and Umatilla County District Attorney's Office.

Residents to see increase in city water rates

By David Sykes

Beginning with their July billing, residents of Heppner will see a $2 per month increase in their water bills, the city council voted Monday night.

The two dollar increase, along with a "re-directed" monthly sewer bond payment of $8.90, will be used to make yearly payments of $130,701 necessary to pay off city the water system overhaul completed several years ago. See page SEVEN to read the complete resolution.

ODOT considers toll roads

In other business the council reviewed a letter from the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) which is considering placing tolls on some Oregon roads.

An email invited representatives from the city to attend forums to discuss implementing toll roads in Oregon.

Seven "white papers" about toll roads, listed below have been developed by the state and will be discussed at the forums.

1. Can tolling reduce greenhouse gas emissions?
2. Where, geographically, could tolling work and under what circumstances?
3. Forecasting change – how do we incorporate tolling and pricing into our regional transportation models?
4. What are the economics of transportation system reliability?
5. How does "pricing" urban highway networks affect transportation, people and businesses?
6. How do you determine if tolling a project is a better alternative than other non-tolled options and how would you choose between a number of tolled alternatives?
7. Are truck only toll lanes a viable option for Oregon?

City Manager David DeMayo said Tuesday he did not know if anyone from the city would be attending the forums, all of which are being held in Portland, Eugene, Wilsonville and Salem. A link to the ODOT web site discussing placing toll roads in Oregon can be found on the Heppner web site at www.heppner.net.

Strategic plans to be developed

In other business at Monday's meeting, the council heard from Willow Creek Valley Economic Development Group (WCVEDG) executive director Sheryll Bates who explained an upcoming strategic plan update planned for Heppner.

Bates said WCVEDG has contracted with Greater Eastern Oregon Development Corporation to help complete strategic plans for Heppner, Lexington and Ione. The plans are important, she said, to help cities and other groups focus on the future needs of communities, and to receive funding on those needs. Bates said five to six people from each community will be approached to help put together the strategic plans. "It is important when going after grants," said Mayor Les Paustian.

The city council also heard a report from Morrow County Sheriff's

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HHS principal reports that President Obama calls HHS teacher's aide

By April Sykes

Heppner High School Principal Daye Stone told the Morrow County School Board Tuesday night that Tracie Bunch of Heppner, the daughter of World War II hero Jim Norene, received a call from President Obama at the school Monday to express his condolences to her. Tracie is a special education aide at Heppner High.

Traci's father, who had been ill with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, had traveled to France for the commemoration of the 65th anniversary of D-Day. He was a member of the 101st Airborne Division as a paratrooper on D-Day and fought in Holland and Bastogne during WWII. Norene visited the graves of his fallen comrades and died that night in his sleep, before the commemoration ceremony the next day. President Obama, who was in France for the commemoration mentioned Norene in his speech that day.

According to Stone, Tracie and President Obama visited for a while on the phone. Stone chuckled when he said that Tracie brought up the issue of education funding to the president and spoke with him three-four minutes on the topic. He also noted with chagrin that they had to put the White House secretary on hold while they located Tracie.

Also at the meeting, Morrow County School Superintendent Mark Burrows congratulated Irrigon High School Principal Craig Bensen for his school's softball team's state championship win. Bensen told the Gazette that they scheduled a pep rally and a surprise graduation ceremony on Thursday, June 4, complete with "Pomp and Circumstance" for two senior girls, Kim Campos and Breena Tolar, who were faced with the dilemma of either missing the state tournament or their graduation ceremony. The state tournament was scheduled for Friday, June 5 at 1 p.m. at the Oregon State University softball field in Corvallis. Irrigon's graduation ceremony was planned for the same day at 7 p.m. The girls went on to be a part of the Irrigon Knights

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Celebrate Heppner Schedule can be found on Page EIGHT

At the MCGG GREEN FEED STORE in Heppner:
Celebrate Heppner Sale
ALL Nursery supplies 25% OFF
Father's Day Special
WRANGLER 13 MWZ COWBOY CUT JEANS $19.95. All other men's Wrangler clothing 20% OFF
Morrow County Grain Growers Green Feed & Seed
242 W. Linden Way, Heppner • 676-9422 • 989-8221 (MCGG main office)

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