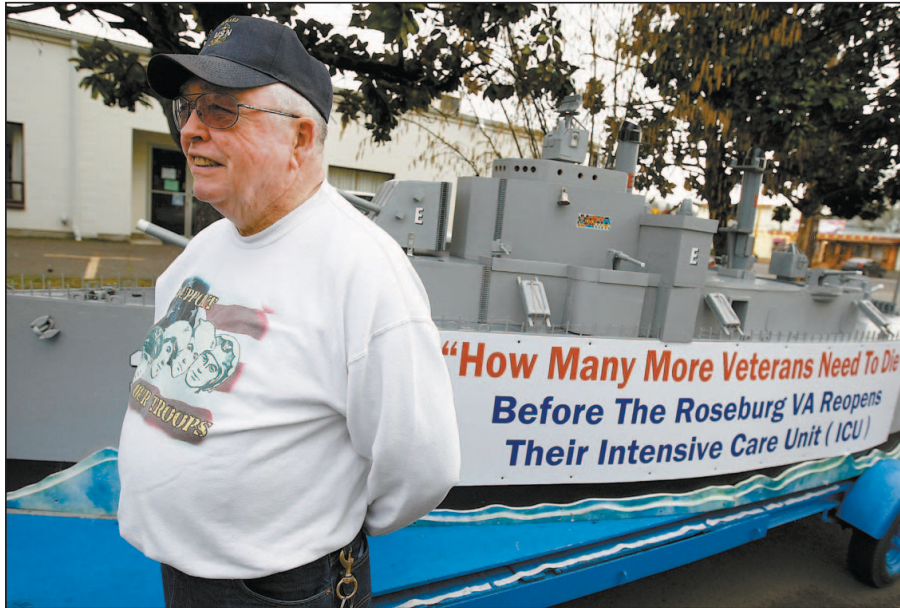


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MICHAEL SULLIVAN/News-Review photos

Bud Bessey, a Vietnam veteran and Douglas County Veterans Forum vice president, stands Friday at Earle B. Stewart American Legion Post 16. The retired Navy chief petty officer tows this replica of a World War II destroyer behind his Ford Crown Victoria everywhere he drives.

Retired sailor moves full steam ahead for veterans

Vietnam veteran volunteers as a veterans service officer 40 hours a week

CARISA CEGAVSKE
The News-Review

Vietnam veteran Bud Bessey tows a replica of a World War II destroyer, the USS Portnell 328, behind his Ford Crown Victoria everywhere he goes.

NEIGHBORS

A regular Monday feature

Recently he attached a large sign to it asking, "How many more veterans need to die before the Roseburg VA reopens their intensive care unit?"

It's a reference to an ongoing battle between some veterans and the Roseburg Veterans Affairs Medical Center, which closed its ICU in 2009. Some veterans, including Bessey, blame that closure for the death of retired Army Sgt. Ray Velez, 61, of Junction City, who died June 25 following a hernia operation at the VA.

Douglas County Veterans Forum President Jim Little said Bessey's demonstration is well received.

"He gets honks and waves everywhere. He's popular," Little said.

Bessey, a retired U.S. Navy chief petty officer, spends 40 hours a week volunteering as a veterans service officer, helping veterans prove they are eligible for VA benefits. He converted



A resident of Myrtle Creek, Bessey says his hobby is meeting and helping veterans.

his carport into a home office and said he is often in it until midnight.

"Everybody has their own torch to carry, and I'm big on veterans," Bessey said. "The veterans in Douglas County are too important to not get everything that they deserve."

Bessey is a former Northwest regional president of the Fleet Reserve Association and started its Roseburg chapter. The association is the third-largest lobbying group for veterans in the country, behind the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

He was elected vice president of the Douglas County Veterans Forum this month after the former vice president, Dodie Blessing, announced plans to move out of the area.

"Bud stepped up and stepped

into the gap," Little said. "He's more than qualified."

Asked what he does when not helping veterans, Bessey says "sleep."

"Veterans are my hobby. Camaraderie is my hobby. I love it," he said.

He said he starts each morning at Ray's Food Place in Myrtle Creek, visiting with a group of fellow Navy veterans who enjoy telling each other their "sea stories."

Bessey joined the Navy in 1960 and served three tours on river boats in Vietnam, ferrying soldiers with the U.S. Army 9th Infantry. He also served as a Navy career counselor stationed at Pearl Harbor and a recruiter in Las Vegas. He said the latter experience helped him with his current business selling Navy memorabilia.

"If you can sell the Navy in the desert during Vietnam, you could sell anything to anybody, and that's why I sell things today," he said.

After leaving the Navy, Bessey spent 12 years doing promotional work and selling merchandise for country music star Buck Owens. He moved to Myrtle Creek in 1992.

During his service, Bessey was exposed to Agent Orange, which he said contributed to heart problems that forced him out of the Navy in 1976 when he was 33.

He has had three open heart surgeries — the first at age 32.

He also has post-traumatic stress disorder, for which he said he takes "nice-guy pills" and attends a support group at the VA.

After moving to Myrtle Creek, he traveled around the country for four years with a traveling replica of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Rather than making him sad, he said he found it soothing.

"I had quite a few friends on the wall, and you kind of make peace with everything," Bessey said.

Bessey said honoring veterans is important year-round.

"We do all this stuff two days a year. You have Memorial Day in May and you have Veterans Day in November and that veteran still has problems in January. He still has problems in August. Every day is Veterans Day because without veterans we'd all be speaking Japanese or German and be celebrating their veterans day," Bessey said.

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