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WWII buffs restore old vehicles, preserve memories

BY DIANNE HARDISTY, Contributing writing

dhardisty@bak.rr.com | Wednesday, Apr 27 2011 04:14 PM

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Images



Casey Christie / The Californian

Rancher Marc McCaslin loves to restore old cars, including military vehicles. He's rounding up his collection of old military vehicles to be displayed as part of a Wounded Heroes fundraiser restoration work. He's been collecting and restoring cars since he was 13. This is a Browning 50 caliber machine gun attached to one of many vehicles he has and is in the process of restoring many.



Casey Christie / The Californian

Marc McCaslin wears this T-shirt with "We Bleed OD Green," on the back.



Casey Christie / The Californian

Rancher and collector Marc McCaslin stands next to a 1943 WWII vintage, Weasel medical and supply transport, "Weasel," on his property in Bakersfield. This is part of his military vehicle collection and some will be on display as part of the Wounded Heroes fundraiser, Sunday.

What do you get when you combine a history buff, treasure hunter and shade-tree mechanic? You get a member of the Olive Drab Drivers, a loose-knit local organization dedicated to restoring military vehicles used in combat going back to World War II.

Members of the organization and their restored vehicles will be at Cal State Bakersfield from noon to 4 p.m. Sunday, during a barbecue for the Wounded Heroes Fund, a local organization that assists returning combat veterans. The group also will display their vintage vehicles during the Minter Field Air Museum's fly-in on Saturday, May 14, at the Shafter Airport.

"The vehicles we restore are our nation's 'iron veterans,'" explained Jeffrey "Al" Goines, a Bakersfield private investigator and a member of the Olive Drab Drivers.

"Everyone seems to have their own personal reason for getting involved in this. But restoring these vehicles maintains the connection with the heroes who drove them during World War II, Korea and Vietnam, and those who are grateful for their sacrifices today," said Goines, whose father and stepfather were his military heroes.

Goines has restored a 1953 M38a1 Willys Jeep used during the Korea and Vietnam wars. The military eventually sold the surplus Jeep to a local school district and it was resold to a family for towing behind a motorhome before ending up with a local rancher. Goines spotted the vehicle with a "for sale" sign along Union Avenue. Years of sweat equity and cold cash have gone into restoring the vehicle's military roots. Goines now drives it in parades and places it on display. He has the hulk of another old Willys Jeep awaiting restoration in his garage.

For westside rancher and Olive Drab Drivers member Marc McCaslin, it was the stories his grandfather told that inspired him to begin collecting and restoring World War II memorabilia. At first it was just helmets and small items but then his passion expanded to buying and restoring military vehicles and aircraft. Some of the vehicles are stored at Minter Field, and several others are stashed away in buildings around his horse ranch, west of Bakersfield.

"My mother's father, Lt. Col. B.C. Smith, would tell war stories about the Pacific Islands. I didn't care if he told the same story over and over again. I loved to hear them," explained McCaslin.

As a youngster, the now 33-year-old almond, alfalfa and wheat farmer became fascinated by World War II history. A graduate of Shafter High School, McCaslin harnessed his trade school training and family farm technical experience to further his collecting and restoring obsession.

His vehicles are featured in parades and displayed at patriotic events, McCaslin's way of honoring generations of veterans. In a hangar at Minter Field, McCaslin is restoring a Vultee BT-13 Valiant, a World War II trainer used extensively at Minter Field in Shafter and Gardner Field in Taft to prepare thousands of young cadets for combat in Europe and the Pacific.

"It's neat to see people's reaction to these vehicles," said McCaslin, likening the restoration process to a "treasure hunt."

"First you hunt and find the vehicle. Then you have to find parts that may be 65 or 70 years old," he said. "But when you are done, you will have veterans lining the sides of roads saluting you and the vehicle with tears running down their face."

Goines choked up when he recalled an exchange he had with a veteran in a local restaurant.

"I was sitting at a table talking about my dad having served with the 5th Air Force," recalled Goines, explaining that an elderly man was sitting at another table some distance away. The man got up, walked over to Goines and asked if he had been talking about the 8th Air Force. Goines responded that he had been talking about the Pacific Theater's 5th Air Force, which inspired the man to launch into stories about his own service with the 8th in Europe.

After the man returned to his table, a young woman he had been seated with came over to Goines. She explained that the man had Alzheimer's disease and had not been able to talk in months.

"Memories about the war are so powerful and meaningful to these veterans," said Goines, who added that restoring "iron veterans" preserves memories for those who lived them and provides a historical record for future generations.



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