

Malheur militants harassed deputies for weeks before standoff, Oregon sheriff tells Knezovich

Nina Culver/SR

The sheriff of Harney County, Oregon, was contending with armed militants for months before they illegally occupied a national wildlife refuge in January.

Sheriff Dave Ward was in Spokane Tuesday at the invitation of the FBI to speak to law enforcement officials about his experiences during the takeover.

After his presentation, Spokane County Sheriff Ozzie Knezovich interviewed Ward for his weekly podcast on [Spokane Talks Online](#).

Knezovich said he's impressed at how the Oregon sheriff – on the job for less than a year – handled the standoff and the attention of the nation.

“He's an individual who really stood his ground,” Knezovich said. “He's won my respect.”

Ward, who has just four deputies on his force, said Ammon Bundy first requested a meeting on Nov. 5. Ward, who knew little about Bundy – son of anti-government protester Cliven Bundy – did some research before he met with Bundy and Ryan Payne.

“It made me a little nervous about why these guys were in my community,” Ward said.

Even then, Bundy and Payne were talking about doing more than protesting the prison sentence of two local ranchers, Dwight L. Hammond Jr. and Steven D. Hammond, who were charged in connection with twice setting fire to government land.

“It was made pretty clear to me that if I went along with their agenda, everything would be all right,” Ward said. “There was a lot of ultimatums and saber rattling.” Bundy and Payne wanted Ward to prevent federal officials from taking the Hammonds into custody.

On Nov. 19, Bundy was back for a second meeting, this time accompanied by 10 other men, most of them armed. There were also armed men outside the building, making the sheriff vastly outnumbered in his own office.

Still, Ward said, he made it clear he wouldn't be playing along because his job includes enforcing the orders of the court. Soon his dispatch center was flooded with so many phone calls complaining about his stance that it was essentially shut down.

“They started, basically, an Internet war against us,” he said.

Soon strangers began arriving in town. Their numbers became noticeable after Thanksgiving. They followed the sheriff, his deputies and their family members, Ward said. They drove slowly

by deputies' homes. People who put up signs or Facebook pages against the Bundys were harassed and at least one person fled town in fear for his safety, Ward said.

Blaine Cooper and Jon Ritzheimer, who would become central figures in the standoff, followed Ward and his family as they went Christmas shopping, Ward said. Others followed them in the grocery store, and Payne once complained to Ward that Ward's mother had threatened him, Ward said.

"I understand she's a scary woman," he said. "She's 74 years old, has a pacemaker and is 5 feet 3 inches tall," he said.

Ward said he didn't like the fact that many people who occupied the refuge falsely claimed to be military veterans. He's a former Army medic who served in combat overseas.

Knezovich criticized the occupiers calling themselves patriots.

"I'm sorry, folks, they're not patriots, they're thugs," Knezovich said. "They are, in fact, the true tyranny."

Their intimidation of deputies and their families crossed the line, Knezovich said.

"True patriots don't do that to other Americans," he said.

During the standoff, Ward said, his primary concern was keeping innocent civilians out of the line of fire, because some of the militants stayed in town and continued to follow members of law enforcement and their families.

"It was a very trying time," Ward said. "I looked over my shoulder during that time more than I did in Afghanistan and Somalia."

The town is slowly getting back to normal, Ward said, but locals still get nervous every time they see a car with out-of-state license plates.

Ward said he is very much in favor of the Second Amendment. He believes the government needs improvement, but said any changes in government or policy need to be made with lawful actions, not by armed rebellion.

"I believe in the Constitution in its entirety, not just the parts that make me feel good," he said.