The annual elk hunt down in the Big Hole Valley of SW Montana near the small town of Wisdom is an eagerly awaited ritual for me. However, I am discovering that each consecutively year’s hunt--although still much anticipated--is hard on the old body! There’s nothing that even comes close to make every muscle in your body sore and ache, as elk hunting; that is if you kill an elk and have to pack it out! It is punishment that you look forward to willingly!

It has been a tradition for quite a few years now to spend opening few days of big game season in the Big Hole Valley hunting elk with a family member, close friends, and/or one of our Currahees, primarily Sal Morales (D Co. 68/69). I began hunting the Big Hole area back in 1984.

I was especially eager for this year’s rendezvous, because I had missed the 2012 hunt due to the flu. This year’s hunt, however, would be somewhat melancholy, for we--Sal, Doc Volkmann and me--would be without our dear friend, Burl Summers, who had taken ill during the hunt last year and died a couple weeks later. This year’s hunt would include another change later on. I received word from Sal several months prior to this year’s opening day of big game season that he would probably not be able to make it after all, due to family issues and finding someone to make the trip with him. He would keep his options open, however.

Doc Peter Volkmann, a licensed clinical professional counselor for veterans (and other) in my area, and a close friend had joined our annual elk hunting team in 2012. Doc operates Kootenai Counseling & Consulting located in both Libby and Troy, Montana. He and I had put in as a party for a cow elk and antelope tag in the Big Hole. We were both successful in drawing the tags.
Doc Volkmann with his Vietnamese wife---Just kidding, will explain later on.

Doc and I met off and on during the summer to put the final touches to our planned hunt. We had decided to take separate vehicles, in case one of us had to leave early, or have business to take care of before retuning home to Libby after the hunt. We had stayed in contact with our good friend, Carl Miles in Wisdom, whose home we would be staying at. Carl is one of those “good ole southern boys” and I do mean that in the most profound term! You will never meet a more gentleman-like individual these days.

Sal and I first got to know Carl in 2011, when he and Burl set up Burl’s 5th-wheel camper in Carl’s trailer park. They stayed there again in 2012. Carl owns and operates (among other enterprises, the Big Hole River RV Park in Wisdom. He is also the inventor/owner of Heel Guard, Inc., specializing in motorcycle parts for special riders. It is amazing what all he has invented in this field. He is the one in the orange hat. Carl is wearing the orange hat in the below picture. Check out his website:www.heelguard.com.
Why the Big Hole?

In case you haven’t read any of my previous Big Hole Hunts write-ups, a quick background review is in order.

Why Wisdom, Montana? Donna and I had moved to Wisdom back in the early 1980s during my career with the U.S. Forest Service. I had accepted the first district wildlife biologist position which the Beaverhead National Forest had established.

The Big Hole Valley is located in SW Montana up against the Continental Divide separating Montana and Idaho. The elevation in the Valley bottom is around 6,050 feet and from there it goes up to some 12,000 elevation along the Divide. It is a beautiful, but cold location in the winter time. During my approx. two years at Wisdom, I experience 56 below zero. Summers are cool. Donna hated it; I loved it—lots of blue ribbon stream fishing and abundant wildlife, especially elk! We lived on the home ranch belonging to Fred Rutledge family, who had purchased the Spokane Ranch just outside of Wisdom and we lucked up and was able to rent their old home. We had the entire large two-story home with all the out buildings to ourselves.

It is worth noting that the Big Hole Valley is inhabited by large cattle ranches and I do mean “large”. A typical ranch in the valley, i.e. Rutledge, Hirschy, Huntley, Peterson, etc. graze up to 80,000 – 100,000 cattle and horses. They are very wealthy families and the real “cowboys” of
the west. They are some of the friendliest individuals you will ever meet too. Their grandparents were the pioneers who settled here. I believe one of the ranchers told Sal and Burl that they had recently shipped 30,000 yearlings to market. The valley is known as the Valley of the 10,000 haystacks.

In early 2001, another friend and fellow Currahee 3-506th, Paul Clement (2/A Co. 1967/68) contacted me and ask if I would show some friends of his there in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan some good areas in Montana to hunt. I was thrilled to do it and told Paul to have them contact me. Later that summer, Paul’s friends, Tony Andary, an attorney in Sault Ste Marie contacted me. Tony was thrilled to learn I would take the time to show him and two of his hunting friends there in Michigan—Tim McCasey and Gary Spencer—some areas to hunt elk and deer. Over the following months as big game season approached, Tony and I corresponded often. I invited him and his friends to come out and hunt in the Big Hole with me; and also around the Kootenai National Forest, where I would show them around. It turned out that we had a wonderful hunt down in the Big Hole and back up in the Libby area (see 2001 Hunt write-up).

In 2003, Len Liebler, one of my former platoon leaders, 3rd Platoon, Alpha Company came out and accompanied me on my annual Big Hole elk hunt and then spent a few days back in Libby with us. It was such an honor to have him come to Montana and spend a week with Donna and me; and to do some companion hunting. I didn’t kill my elk that year down in the Big Hole. Rather, on a day showing him some of my favored hunting areas around Libby, we were on our way back home in the middle of the afternoon and came across a small herd of elk near Libby, where I shot the bull below.
In 2010, Sal and his close friend, Ron Cortez in California came to Montana to hunt elk and deer, both in the Big Hole Valley and up in the Libby areas where I live. I wrote up that hunt too and will post it for our members.
The three of us again put in applications for a 2011 hunt in the Big Hole and were successful again. However, Sal’s friend Ron and his two sons—who were also successful in their drawings for the 2011 season hunt decided to hunt another area in SW Montana. It was during that summer; Sal convinces our good friend and former Delta Co. Currahee, Burl Summers, who lives in Idaho Falls, Idaho to join us in the 2011 elk hunt at Wisdom—the rest of the story can be found in that after action report.

The Trip Back to the Big Hole

For Doc and me to travel from Libby and Troy, MT down to Wisdom was just short of 350 Miles and would take about 6.5 hours not counting stops for breakfast in Thompson Falls and refueling in Missoula. Our itinerary went as follows. I left Libby an hour before daylight on Friday, October 25, which by the way was my 70th birthday; and drove to Troy, where I rendezvoused with Doc just south of town. We then continued south to Thompson Falls (116 miles from Libby). We stopped in Thompson Falls to stretch our legs and eat a hearty breakfast of pancakes, eggs, sausages, hash browns and coffee at Minnie’s Montana Cafe.
After filling up on breakfast, we headed for Missoula (102 miles, 2 hours drive), where we refueled. It was unbelievable foggy between Thompson Falls and Missoula. From Missoula south to the Big Hole Valley was blue sky and perfect fall weather.
The trip through the Bitterroot Valley south of Missoula is very scenic.
The Montana-Idaho border is eighty-three miles south of Missoula near the Junction of Highways 93 and 43—Chief Joseph Pass. Highway 43 takes you into the Big Hole Valley and Wisdom (twenty-six miles).

Soon after turning off Highway 93 onto High 43, the scenery quickly changes from heavy timber to sparsely scattered natural meadows adjacent to streams and timbered areas. A few miles farther and without much notice, you drop suddenly into the Big Hole Valley itself.
A few miles farther near the banks of the Big Hole River is the small town of Wisdom. The town’s name originated with the Lewis and Clark expedition back in 1805. Wisdom was named for the river (now the Big Hole River) that flows through the valley. In 1805 Lewis and Clark, at the confluence of the tributaries of the Jefferson River near the present site of Twin Bridges (W/NW), decided to name the three streams for the three “cardinal virtues” of the President and benefactor, Thomas Jefferson. But their names--Philosophy, Philanthropy, and Wisdom--proved to be too much for later settlers, who changed the names to the Beaverhead, Ruby and Big Hole. But the town that sprung up kept the name Wisdom.
Some Recorded History

The population of Wisdom (town) in 2010 was 98 and it hasn’t changed much since. However, around the turn of the century, population peaked with perhaps 1,000 residents in and around the valley. Wisdom once supported several bars and hotels, a pharmacy, car dealership, churches, hotels, a bank and many small businesses. Cheese and butter were shipped out of the valley to the miners in Butte and Gibbonsville. Cattle were trailed to the railroad in Divide and Armstead for shipping. Timber in the surrounding hills was milled and used to construct fences and homes. Wisdom was located on the Yellowstone Road, an early attempt at tourism from Glacier to Yellowstone National Parks. Gravel roads served the community until the 1960’s. As manpower and horse power were replaced with larger and larger motorized equipment, small ranches became unprofitable and were consolidated into larger ranches. The gold played out as federal timber became in short supply and as larger communities offered better shopping and more jobs, Wisdom began to shrink.

Main Street Wisdom, Montana (circa 2010)

It is kind of sad to see changes taking place in Wisdom. The Antler Saloon is pictured on the upper right. The local restaurant (now called “The Crossing Bar & Grill”), but up until just recently was known for decades as “Fetty’s” is pictured in upper left. The general mercantile store—mainly fishing & hunting gear and clothing is the green building middle left is now called “Hook & Horns Trading Post. Originally the establishment was called Conover’s Trading Post. The owners had external mounted speakers from which music was played all day long.

Now for the Rest of the Story….

Doc and I arrived in Wisdom around 3:30 p.m. We headed straight to Carl Miles’ house to drop off our gear and then take a quick drive a short way out of town to glass for elk in the area where we planned to hunt opening day. We also wanted to attend the hunter’s ‘potluck’ at the Antlers bar, which the local businessmen put on each year for hunters coming to the Big Hole to hunt. The potluck starts at 4:30 p.m., so we needed to get back to town by then, if we expected to eats some of the tastiest “vittles” anyplace!
Doc and I drove out to the area, park the vehicle and set up the spotting scope. We were glassing the far side of the drainage where the willow stringers paralleled the natural meadows. Before I had fully setup my scope and started glassing, Doc said, “I see some”! As I focused in, I could see elk already in the clearing and lots more inside the willows moving out into the meadow. We counted 59 elk, including a number of nice large bulls—5 and 6-pointers--before we closed up shop and headed back to town. Things looked bright for opening day! Now, it was time to head back to town and go to the Antlers for the hunter’s potluck.
This year’s hunter’s potluck was even better than last year’s feat. It was free and all you could eat! Not only was the food outstanding, so was the socializing with the locals and hunters from other areas of Montana, as well as, from other states. I often wear my 101st Airborne cap wherever I go and often times it will attract veterans, who will generate conversations, and our present at the Antlers this time was no exception. One hunter sitting at the bar reached out to shake my hand as I passed by and said, “I see you served in the 101st? Thank you for your service.” I thanked him and inquired if he too had served, which he had. In a joking manner, his reply was, “Yea, wherever you, ‘Screaming Eagles’ operated, you pissed the enemy off and we had to operate in the areas afterwards and caught hell”.

Now, the real story about Doc and "his Vietnamese wife! Actually, we staged this pose for our hunting partner, Sal back in California. The very nice lady in this picture is Sandra and is a waitress at the Antler Saloon where the “hunter’s potluck” is served each year. She is a friend and familiar face for those of us who return annually to Wisdom and patron the Antler Saloon for excellent pizza and refreshments, especially the hunter’s potluck. She has been a waitress at the establishment for a number of years. Sal and Burl entertained us all in 2011 with their kidding around and seeing how much teasing they could do in good fun. Let me tell you, however, she could hold her own and dish out anything they could.

Now, that the real story about Doc and his “would be” Vietnamese wife has been cleared up, we’ll continue our pursuit of the mighty “Wapiti”!

Opening Day (October 26)

Our plans were once again to hunt Fred Hirschy’s ranchlands. I became acquainted with the Hirschy family back in 1984 when I worked as a wildlife biologist on the Wisdom Ranger District. My primarily contact over the previous years had been with Fred’s dad, Jack Hirschy.
Jack, sadly passed away in the summer of 2012 at the age of 94. (See my other Big Hole elk hunting write-ups about the Hirschy family) I had written Fred and Lynn earlier in the year asking for their permission to again hunt their ranchland and received written permission.

Fred and Lynn Hirschy’s Ranch where we usually hunt elk.

Elk Habitat
Even though elk are plentiful throughout the Big Hole Valley on private ranchlands, as well as on U.S. Forest Service lands, I prefer to hunt a particular location that happens to be on Hirschy’s ranch. The above picture depicts both U.S. Forest Service and ranchland. Federal lands lies above the valley floor, while private lands occupy mainly the valley floor. Clear, clean, cold water can be found everywhere.

Back in the late 1990, the majority of ranchers in the Big Hole had an agreement with the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MFW&P) to allow hunters access to their property, provided they signed in and posted the permit in their vehicle (on dashboard). When the wolf population in the Big Hole became a problem with killing livestock and elk and the federal agencies (U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and MFW&P) took little to no action to reduce the packs, the ranchers dropped out of the agreement. Hunters now must ask each rancher for permission to hunt their land and some refuses to allow hunters on.

The picture above represents the typical elk habitat found on most ranchlands within the Big Hole. The rich diversity of small stands of conifers, numerous willow stringers, natural meadows and their ecotones make this some of the most productive elk habitat in the U.S. Hunters can often find livestock grazing in the same general areas where they hunt. You don’t want to shoot any rancher’s livestock!

**Hello! Will you ever get down to the details of the hunt, you ask!**

The alarms went off at 4:00 a.m. opening morning. Carl had the coffee on and smell of eggs and sausages filling the kitchen by the time Doc and I had all our hunting gear on and started our pickups to warm them up—the temperature was around 12-degrees! Carl had our plates on the table filled to their brim with not only eggs, sausages, but southern style cooked grits, toast and even thick pieces of ham. Donna had sent along some huckleberry and strawberry-rhubarb jam…and what a breakfast to start the day off with!...More about this interesting trooper later on.
By the time Doc and I reached our hunting area, the eastern sky was just beginning to show the first glow of coming of daylight, yet our hunting area was still too dark to make out any physical features. Doc and I had already discussed the day’s plans and strategy the evening before. I would park my pickup at the lower portion of the drainage, while Doc would drive farther up the drainage a mile or so and start moving down into the willows to take up position before the sun came up. I informed him that there would be other hunters in the general area come daylight, who also had permission to hunt the area; and who without a doubt had observed the herd of elk that we had spotted the previous afternoon and would be in hot pursuit of them. If you look back to the photo that labeled “Prime elk habitat” (Photo PEH), it was in the left side (middle section) showing open meadow on far side against the willows that we had spotted the elk herd yesterday afternoon.
After Doc left my location, I pulled off the main gravel road onto a dirt maintenance road just below the ridge and waited for daylight to arrive before heading down into the willows; my objective being the far side of the drainage (approximately a mile) away. I expected the elk to still be in the general area where we had seen them the afternoon before. It is normal for the herd to continue grazing throughout the night and more than likely some of the animals would move toward my location, while others would move toward Doc’s. When the first shots are fired, the elk will try to bunch up and then there’s no telling which direction they will run. If there isn’t a lot of shooting, the elk will remain in the drainage; however, if a lot of shooting occurs and hunters are visible, the elk will leave the drainage for the forested areas back in Doc’s location. I wanted Doc to be in position in case the later scenario occurred.

When it became light enough for me to see where I was walking, I left my pickup and headed down into the drainage bottom. I knew I would have several willow stringers and a couple small streams (3-5 ft. wide, 6-12 inches deep) to cross before reaching half way across the drainage bottom; and I wanted to be at the far side before the sun rose above the horizon, or the shooting started.

I had made it halfway to my destination and just walked out of the willows to cross an open area, when I spotted a large group of elk approximately 350-yards in from of me. They were moving in two to three abreast along the very edge of the far willow stringer and headed down drainage. I quickly dropped on one knee, raised my scope to get a better look. There were approximately a hundred head strung-out a hundred yards or better and unaware of me. There is always an old cow that leads the herd; and this particular one would walk a short distance, stop, look ahead and then continue moving, repeating this action several more times. I quickly spotted several large bulls (5 and 6-pointers) near the head of the group. My licenses allowed me to take a cow and a bull here in the Big Hole and so could Doc. We had put in as a party for the cow license and both drew it.

It was legal shooting time by this time, so I picked out a nice 6-point bull and waited for him to step clear of the others. During all this time, my glasses kept fogging up, due the cold temperature and my hike from the pickup. When the bull stopped broadsided to me, I fired. I was pretty sure that my shot was good. The group of elk suddenly turned and began running back up the drainage. My shot had been the first shot thus far fired in the drainage. After the elk turned and ran approximately 50-yards, I watched one of the large bulls drop out of the herd and slowly moved into the willows, indicating to me that he was wounded. I took notice where e bull entered the willows and continued to watch the herd move farther up the drainage. Within minutes, all hell broke loose with hunters shooting at animals in the herd. I was surprise to hear so much shooting and afterwards seeing as many hunters--4-6 visible to me, wearing orange walking out of the willows up the drainage. Part of the herd, probably 50 or so bunched up and ran right out into the middle of the meadow, which drew fire from those hunters. The rest of the herd broke into smaller groups of 10-20 each and continued to run farther up the drainage toward Doc’s location.

As I was still in my down position watching the herd in the open mill around, suddenly this cow appeared from nowhere directly in front of me no more than 30-yards! She had walked out of the nearby willows, stopped and was watching the other elk in the open. So, what did I do? I raised my rifle and dropped the cow where she stood. The odds of me filling both my tags opening morning, before the sun cleared the horizon would be unbelievable! I was always taught “never count your eggs until they were in your basket”! I had the cow, but I didn’t know yet if I had my bull. I stood up, walked over to my cow, made sure she was dead and then headed over to the where I watched the bull step into the willows to look for him or a blood trail.

I made my way to the other side, keeping what little cover I could between me and the willow stringer the bull had gone into, not wanting to spook him in case he was only wounded. I slowly made my way up through the willows until I reached the spot where I had last seen him.
After approximately 15-minutes searching for animal or blood trail, I found neither! As I searched, I looked back across in the direction where my cow lay and spotted two hunters walking in that direction. I had not yet placed my cow tag on the animal and quickly headed back to do so. After about 10-minutes later, two hunters walked up and congratulated me on getting the cow. They then told me that they had seen me shoot earlier at one of the bulls in the herd and walk over to look for him. I commented that I thought I had hit him good and that he was most likely down, but I didn’t find the animal or a blood trail. I let them know that I had both a cow tag, as well as my bull tag. They told me they would head over to look for him or blood trail and then they left. About an hour later, they came back to my position and told me that they could not find any sign of the bull.

After field dressing my cow elk and quartering it, I walked back to my pickup, drove down to another location where I consider it would be easier to pack the animal out (approx. a mile). I grabbed my snow sled--one of those plastic sleds you buy to pull your kids over the snow on—and headed back to the elk. I had also brought to the Big Hole my game cart. I decided the snow sledge would work much better for me.

I have news for those of you who haven’t packed out a 700 pound adult cow elk (live weight) a mile or more on your back, and/or portions pulled over dry ground in a sled the day after you turned 70-years old…and out of shape! It “ain’t” easy! It took me from soon after daylight to 2:30 in the afternoon to deliver four quarters and back-strap to my pickup. I backpacked the first two quarters and used the sled on the two hind quarters. I have never been so tired in all my life!

After loading all the meat, I could hardly lift my feet to get into my truck! Oh, by the way, when I reached my truck with the first load of meat the first time, I found these three notes on my windshield. I thought to myself. Doc! Please tell me that you have your elk packed out to your vehicle by the time I get mine loaded and drive up to your location!
Well, I dragged myself up and into the seat of my pickup. Found enough strength to turn the ignition key on and started the engine. No way on this earth could I muster enough strength to go back over (nearly a mile) to look for my bull elk…I hope he made it!

I drove out of the area and up the drainage where I knew Doc’s pickup would be parked. Doc too had brought his game cart to the Big Hole with him. When I arrived at Doc’s truck, my enthusiasm bottomed out! Doc was no where to be seen, no elk quarters in the back of his pickup! Now, Doc is in his early 40s, built like a football player, always on some 40-mile hiking trips somewhere in the U.S. on vacation time; and no elk quarters packed out! Why, he capable of packing a quarter of elk on his back, one under each arm and the fourth held between his two hands!

Unable to muster up enough energy open my truck door, I set up my spotting scope and right off located Doc about a mile out and just inside some willows at the far side of the drainage, bent over dressing his elk. STILL DRESSING HIS ELK! There should be at least two elk quarters in the back of his truck by now! I was so tired that I could barely open my truck door to place a note on Doc’s windshield. The note read. “Doc, I need to go into town and soak in a tub of hot water for an hour or so to ease my back muscles”—and it was the truth! “I will be back out to help you in an hour or so.” After posting my note, I headed back into Wisdom to Carl’s house, ran me a tub of hot water, crawled….no, fell in…and laid there semi-conscience! What a difference that soaking did for me. I felt like a new man after the soaking. I took me 17 ibuprofens—actually just one—got dressed and headed back out to Doc’s location.

I had little doubt by the time I got back to Doc’s truck, there he would be with a big shit-eating grin on his face and four big elk quarters laying in the back of his truck. WRONG! No sign of Doc! Again, I set up my spotting scope and sure enough, there was Doc bent over his elk dressing it out! STILL DRESSING HIS ELK! Lord, tell me I’m still in the bath tub dreaming! No, it was real and Doc was still dressing out his elk. I did notice Doc’s game cart this time leaned up beside his truck.
I grabbed my snow and headed to his location. Actually, it felt good to start walking and loosing up my muscles. It is worth mentioning that by now it was getting late in the afternoon with the sun just above the horizon! No problem, I thought. Doc would have his backpack with flashlight with him. When I got within 50-yards of him, Doc yelled out his greetings. It was a fine moment to share both our successes this day. I told Doc that I was little surprised that he hadn’t packed out at least a couple elk quarters by now. After he explained the events that had taken placed during the day, I had a different perspective. Here is what he told me.

Insert of Doc’s cow elk inside willows

After leaving me before daylight, he had driven to his designated location, parked his vehicle, donned his backpack, slung his rifle over his shoulder and head down across the drainage to take up his position on the far side of the drainage. Soon after daylight arrived, he heard all the shooting down the drainage in my direction. A short time later he spotted the elk running in and along side the willows coming in his direction. Unknowing to him, 4-6 young hunters had moved into his general area and began shooting at any animal they could see—in the willows, in groups, or by themselves. Doc picked out a mature cow as it ran nearby and shot it. Doc told me that he saw several wounded elk that the young hunters had indiscriminately wounded and left lay. He later observed the same young hunters drive their vehicle down into the drainage to recover some elk, which was not permitted. This disgusted Doc, especially since one of the hunters tried to claim his elk, even though another seriously wounded and unclaimed elk laid some 75-yards from his cow. The actions of those hunters disgusted him, so he took down their license plate numbers in case he could fine a local game warden.

He informed me why he had not progressed further in getting his cow dressed out, quartered and packed out by the time I arrived. Soon after killing his cow and tagging it, he walked out (a mile or so) to find me and let me know that he had gotten his cow; and to get his game cart. Several hours had elapsed by the time he returned to his down elk. It took another couple hours to gut-out his animal and separate enough meat for his first trip out on his game cart. Well, his game cart was almost useless over the rutted terrain, even though fairly level. After a hundred or more head of livestock and elk had “chewed up” the ground with deep ruts from their hooves’ during the time the ground was wet and soft earlier in the year; it was nearly impossible to push or pull the game cart across the rutted terrain. This attempt had taken another couple hours. After leaving his game cart back at his truck, he returned to his elk and began moving part of the elk out closer to the edge of the meadow.
Doc also told me that Heidi Hirschy, one of the Hirschy ranch owners had learned about the indiscriminate shooting into the herd of elk earlier that morning and came out to tell all remaining hunters to leave their property. Doc spoke with Heidi, who was very upset and informed her of what he had observed from the group of young hunters from Flathead County in the far northern part of the state.

After some more small talk, Doc and I went to work removing the remaining quarters and back straps (tenderloins), placing them in game bags and loading the meat into our snow sleds. By the time we accomplished this, it was getting dark! Doc says, “I have my flashlight with me in my backpack.” Well, yea, but the batteries are dead! SAY WHAT! A mile from our vehicles and it is getting darker than inside an underground missile silo with no lights! We put our brilliant minds together….no wait, our tired minds together, loaded a quarter on Doc’s back--I purposely left my backpack in the truck!--loaded three quarters into our snow sleds. After considering our situation, we decided to load the three quarters into one slide—mine. I would carry Doc’s empty sled and he would carry one quarter on his backpack. We found a 6-foot pole to tie to the pull rope on the loaded sled and we each grabbed hold and headed for our vehicles. It got so dark (no moon) on our way out that we would often have to wait for a vehicle (most likely another hunter) coming or going on the main gravel road in order for us to get our bearings! We would pull for a distance of probably 50-75 feet, stop, catch our breath and start pulling again! We finally reached our vehicles at 8:30 p.m. dark! Now, this is how good memories are created. Life is good.

We found enough energy between the two of us to load the meat and sleds and we headed for town, knowing Carl was probably getting ready to send out a search party for us.

After we arrived at Carl’s house and cleaned-up, the three of us headed for the local restaurant for a few cold beers and dinner. We were some tired and hungrier than a Montana grizzly bear coming out of hibernation in the spring...with cubs! Regular check on weather conditions was a primary objective during our stay in the Big Hole and the forecast was wasn’t good—incoming snow and freezing conditions. Were we looking at another 2010 scenario?
Day Two (October 27)

With the approaching storm expecting to hit sometime during day two of our hunt, I informed Doc that I was going to forgo hunting antelope and head out of the valley before driving conditions became hazardous getting over Chief Joseph Pass. Doc wanted to return to his elk carcass to collect as much meat that he could, before he headed home. I agreed to drive back out with him to his take-off location and then head out home. I wanted to do some last minute glassing to see if I could spot any elk remaining in the drainage.
On our way in, we were stopped by the lady employed by the Hirschy family to oversee the issuing of permits to hunters who hunt the Hirsch ranchlands. She let us know that the Hirsch lands were now closed to hunting for the rest of the season and the only ones allowed to go onto their land were those hunters still recovering their down animals from the previous day, which included Doc. She also informed us that the Hirschy’s ranch hands would be traveling on horseback to dispatch and recover any found wounded or dead animals. What had began as a perfect hunt had been spoiled for the rest by a few greedy and spoiled individuals.

Ironically, the article appearing on the right appeared in our local Kalispell Daily Inter Lake the day after I arrived home to Libby. We are pretty sure this was one of the young hunters that Doc mentioned. Folks often refer to the Big Hole as “in the Dillon area”. Dillon is south of the Big Hole.
After leaving Doc, I headed out of the Big Hole Valley for home. I would have to stop at the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Fish check station near Sula to have them check my elk and record some important information, which will provide hunters and the state agency with harvest statistics. The stations are normally operated by a state warden along with young college students majoring in wildlife management from college around the U.S.

**Another Memorable Hunt In The Bag**

A few days after our Big Hole Hunt, Doc and I got back together for a mule deer hunt in the Ten Lakes Area here in NW Montana outside Tobacco Valley. I have taken some large mule deer bucks in the area over the years wanted to show the area to Doc; and it was an opportunity for me to visit some old favored hunting sites.
Well, don’t believe everything you hear from the weatherman! Soon after arriving in the Ten Lakes Area (high elevation), the rain was in the form of snow and coming down fast! Unable to use our spotting scope or binoculars, we “got out of Dodge”! We headed back out of the high country for the lower elevations and spent the rest of the day looking a white-tailed deer.
My 2013 hunting season turned out to be another memorable hunt. I realize more than ever now that there will come that time when I won’t be able to make that annual trip to the Big Hole to hunt the magnificent wapiti. As most of us hunters know, it isn’t the harvesting of the animal, but the camaraderie that is lasting. I thank Doc and Carl for helping make this year’s hunt another treasured memories.

Jerry in Montana
Doc loading his quartered elk
Jerry’s cow elk