



Richard H. Stewart, Jr.
American Legion Post 543
St. James, NC 28461

SUBJECT: General Membership Meeting Minutes

DATE: Wednesday March 22, 2023.

LOCATION: St. James Community Center.

- 1) Call to Order: Commander Steven Ratti called to order the March 22, 2023, General Membership Meeting of the Richard H. Stewart, Jr., St. James, NC Post 543 at 7:00pm.
- 2) Presentation of Colors: The colors were then presented, saluted and put in place by the Post 543 Honor Guard, followed by:
 - a) The opening prayer by Chaplain Chuck Francka.
 - b) The Commander led the members in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.
 - c) The POW/MIA recognition was recited by Commander Ratti.
 - d) The Preamble to the American Legion Constitution was projected and Commander Ratti led the members in reciting it aloud.
- 3) Roll Call of Officers and Committee Chairs: (Ratti).
 - a) Officers Present:
 - Steven Ratti, Commander
 - Jim Hilty, Adjutant
 - Rick Sessa, Vice Commander Resource Development
 - Al Lebednik, Vice Commander Membership
 - Mike Carton, Finance Officer
 - Chuck Blackburn, Deputy Vice Commander Americanism & Youth
 - Doug Pratt, Deputy Vice Commander Active Duty Support
 - Chuck Francka, Chaplain
 - Bob Davis, Sergeant-at-Arms
 - b) Officers Absent:
 - Tammy Taylor, Historian (excused)
 - Kathleen Roth, Public Relations (excused)
 - Arthur "Doc" Liberty, Judge Advocate (excused)
 - Steve Muir, Service Officer (excused)
- 4) Commander Ratti introduced and welcomed one special guest, Barbara Blackburn, wife of Deputy Vice Commander Chuck Blackburn. He asked for any new members of Veterans visiting for the first time to rise and introduce themselves. One gentleman said he was interested in joining but did not fully identify himself or complete an application.

5) Sick Call: Chaplain Francka reported that Chuck Bris-Bois, Woody Johnson, Jim Rosadino, Ken Bastedenbeck, and Walter Sral were on Sick Call.

6) Approval of Minutes: The draft minutes of the February 22, 2023 General Membership Meeting was approved as posted on the Post website.

7) Commander's Report:

a. Commander Ratti formally opened the floor for nominations for officers' positions for FY 2024, the elections to be held at the May 24, 2023 general membership meeting.

b. Commander Ratti reporting for the Veterans Memorial Committee, reported that the Executive Committee, at its March 20 meeting approved a request for an expenditure not to exceed \$12,500 for sidewalk renovation and preparation for installation of pavers and, later, memorial bricks, to include demolition of existing sidewalk and addition of two new sections to add space for 1300 memorial bricks and a potential for \$130,000 in sales of memorial bricks. Tom Picinich, a member of the Memorial Committee spoke from the floor emphasizing that this was a "once in our lifetimes" kind of a request.

In addition, the Executive Committee reviewed and approved in concept a preliminary design proposal submitted by Carolina Creations to expand the Veterans Memorial site by extending a circular apron of pavers in front of the Memorial, with a water feature in the center and a knee-wall partially surrounding the apron, which will allow for presentations to be held in front of the Memorial without bifurcating the audience. Commander Ratti presented three schematic drawings showing a preliminary design, without delineating specific construction materials, design details, or estimated costs. (See image below)

During discussion and in response to questions, Commander Ratti indicated that the Veterans Memorial Committee's proposed design upgrade would include permanent fixtures and mounts for flags in front of the Memorial. Also, it was the intention of the Committee to embed inlays or tablets depicting major conflicts within the stone knee-walls. Details such as the design of the figure(s) in the water fountain would by necessity be left to later as would the texture and the exact nature of the pavers in the Memorial apron.



Commander Ratti reported that the funding and completion of the project ultimately rests with the Town of St. James. One major issue, of course, is funding the full cost of the project itself, which the Post cannot bear. Several suggestions were offered from the floor regarding how the Post might proceed strategically in finding appropriate funding and sponsorship for the Memorial upgrade. Calling the question, Commander Ratti asked for and received unanimous approval for a motion for authorization to proceed forward with the planning phase for the upgrade of the St. James Veterans Memorial.

- c. The Governor's Volunteer Service Award, Commander Ratti explained, honors exemplary service and volunteerism across the State of North Carolina. The award is given to those who make a significant contribution to their community through volunteer service. Each County in the State nominates ten individuals for the award. This year, we are honored that Chuck Blackburn is included among the winners of the award for Brunswick County.

His nomination letter read in part: "Chuck, as Deputy Vice Commander for Americanism and Youth coordinates and oversees the Post 543 programs for Tar Heel Boys/Girls State, North Carolina Student Trooper Program, the Richie Hat Trick Scholarship Program, the Colon Furr and Post Nursing Scholarship programs, STEM program in Robotics, Trade & Alternative Scholarship program, Boy/Girls Scout Troops, and the High Oratorical contest on the U.S. Constitution. This involves an estimated four to five hundred hours a year of volunteer hours of contact work with high school and community college (SBHS, BCECHS and BCC) counselors, scout leaders, and guidance counselors in the planning of and executing of programs and many more hours with high school students, scouts, and community college students in interviewing, presenting and scheduling of programs. Chuck works with Scout leaders and with prospective Eagle Scouts in the selection of Eagle Scout projects, some of which Post 543 has under-written in the past.

"For nearly a decade Chuck Blackburn has taken the lead at Post 543 in directing programs that now provide over \$20,000 annually in scholarships to college students. Chuck has recently been instrumental in developing an innovative program in Trade or Alternative Training scholarships and financial aid for students at South Brunswick High School wishing to enroll in community college programs such as plumbing, welding, carpentry, computer technology, or electrician training.

"Chuck and his wife, Barbara are regular supporters of Matthews Ministry. Chuck developed the Post 543 support for Matthews Ministry after learning about the number of school children needing winter wear. He organizes their neighborhood functions and en lieu of gifts, makes donations to Samaras Village. Chuck is a Committee Chair and a Neighborhood Captain for SJMAD and he solicits several vendors for MAD. He is active in recruiting new Post members."

For all these reasons and more, Chuck Blackburn is deserving of the Governor's Volunteer Service Award of 2023 to be presented in a formal ceremony at the Odell Williamson Auditorium in early April. Congratulations, Chuck!



Congratulations to

Chuck Blackburn



8) Officer and Committee Reports.

- a) Membership Report: Al Lebednik reported that according to the Department we have achieved 248 members or 96 percent of our goal of 259 members. He reminded members that dues were now \$45, and urged those few who had not renewed to do it now.
- b) Finance Report: Finance Officer Mike Carton presented a slide showing the March Finance Report and expenditures of 51 percent of the FY23 budget to date. A motion to accept the report was approved.
 - i) Next, Mike presented a slide summarizing and reporting on FY 2022 Financial Audit completed in September and posted on the website. The report indicated that, overall, Post 543's financial record keeping, accounting practices, and process are exemplary. Compliance with established guidelines is generally very good. Record keeping for the St. James Military Appreciation Fund (JMAF) is outstanding. The Commander complimented the Audit team and Finance Officer.
 - ii) The Finance Officer then reported on an administrative action taken by the Executive Committee at its meeting on March 20, 2023 to update Policy 03 Travel Reimbursement, specifically to change the daily maximum reimbursable food allowance from \$50 to \$60 to align our policy with GSA standards. The updated Policy 03 has been posted on the website.
- c) Athletics Officer (Leo Mercado). A second report on the 2023 Baseball Season.
 - i) Leo presented three slides summarizing and further updating the status of the 2023 American Legion Baseball season for team Brunswick 543. Tryouts will be held April 1st and 8th at North Brunswick High School (NBHS). The season will run from May through July. At present, 12 teams in two divisions are registered. The schedule may include 10 to 15 games. Home games will be at both North Brunswick High School and at South Brunswick High School fields.
 - ii) The team needs sponsors. Leo is making an effort not to double-tap those sponsors who are already committed to SJMAD.
 - iii) The team also needs volunteers to work at the games in the press box, in concessions, and at the gate. The team is looking for a first base coach and an assistant coach. See Leo, if you are interested.
 - iv) The Post website will be updated with players, schedule, volunteers, and sponsors. The team (Athletics Officer) has an email account: NCPost543Athletics@gmail.com. Post members can follow the team on the Game Changer app.

- d) Service Officer (Paul Witmer for Steve Muir).
 - i) Paul asked for volunteers to distribute Poppies at the Spring Festival (Franklin Square) in Southport, April 7-8 and at Lowe's Hardware on Saturday, May 27. Paul provided sign-up sheets for those interested. He said that JROTC and CAP cadets have agreed to assist.
 - ii) Paul also briefly updated the membership on some of the Veterans cases that the Veterans Service Team is currently handling, including two virtually homeless Veterans, one a female that the Team is working with the County VSO to stabilize. And he briefly alluded to a few cases where Post members or their friends or significant others have received substantial upgrades in their VA benefits due to increased VA attention paid to their cases through the VEAC.

- e) House & Entertainment Committee (Rick Sessa and Bob Davis).
 - i) Rick Sessa thanked everyone who attended and supported the "Eagles" tribute band performance on March 7 at Brunswick Community College and reported that the Post recovered a small amount of revenue from the event.
 - ii) Rick urged Post members to attend two upcoming Military Appreciation events being sponsored by the UNCW Office of Military Affairs: (1) a UNCW Softball Double Header, (March 25) and (2) a UNCW Baseball game (April 1). Contact militaryaffairs@uncw.edu for Free tickets.
 - iii) The Lower Cape Fear LifeCare is sponsoring a "Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans" event on March 29 aboard the Battleship North Carolina. Free admission to Vietnam Veterans and discounted admission to their guests. Contact Laura Long at 910-620-5062 or Laura.Long@LifeCare.org.

- f) Elections Committee (Doug Pratt)
 - i) Doug reminded members that Commander Ratti had opened nominations for all officers' positions at the beginning of the meeting. He asked if there were any nominations from the floor. There being none, he reminded members that nominations would remain open until the end of the April 26, 2023 monthly meeting. Nominations may also be submitted to the Elections Committee members, which are Doug Pratt, Jim Hilty, Kathy Roth, Chuck Francka, Al Lebednik, and Rick Sessa.
 - iii) Election Timeline: April 26 (Nominations close); May 15 (Elections Committee presents recommendations to Executive Committee); May 24 (Annual election of officers); June 28 (Elected officers are installed).
 - iv) All Executive offices are up for election: Commander, Adjutant, Judge Advocate, 1st Vice Commander Resource Development, 2nd Vice Commander Membership, Finance Officer, Deputy Vice Commander Active Duty Support, Deputy Vice Commander Americanism/Youth, Sergeant-at-Arms, Service Officer, Chaplain, Public Relations Officer, and Historian.
 - iv) Doug reported that persons interested in one of the officer's positions would be welcome to attend the Executive Committee meetings and to "shadow" the officer for a meeting or two to see what was involved with carrying out the duties of the position. Doug also included a place on the website where officer positions and responsibilities are listed:
<https://www.ncpost543.org/executive-committee.html>.

- 9) "Reflections on the Vietnam War" (Commander Ratti)



With “National Vietnam War Veterans Day,” March 29 approaching, Commander Ratti thought it appropriate to take a few moments to reflect on the meaning of the War and its impact on veterans, including many of the Veterans present in the room. He centered his remarks on why there is a Vietnam War Veterans Day and why 29 March is a good choice for when to hold the commemoration. He illustrated his talk with a number of photographs of the Vietnam Memorial, Arlington National Cemetery, and Vietnam War Veterans.

He began his talk by summarizing the long, complex history of U.S. involvement in the war under six different presidents and its incalculable toll in human casualties, measurable, in part, by the 58,297 names on the Wall. Vietnam Veterans, Commander Ratti said, fought a long, brutal war and, over time, an increasingly unpopular war that ended in strategic and political defeat. When they returned home, they were met by an often-ungrateful nation. They never received a proper “Welcome Home.”

The Paris Peace Treaty signed on 27 January 1973 by all combatants stated plainly that the US would conduct “a total withdrawal from South Vietnam of troops, military advisers, and military personnel” within sixty days. This was done by 29 March 1973. Thus, March 29 was selected as National Vietnam War Veterans Day, as Commander Ratti explained:

March 29 is a good choice for Vietnam War Veterans Day. It focuses attention on the homecoming, the distinct experience that defines the Vietnam War generation of veterans. It gives us a chance to say “Welcome Home” to a group of veterans who never got the reception they deserved when they returned to the United States.


Commander Ratti concluded his remarks by asking all Veterans who served in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, or the waters in and around Vietnam during the period of conflict to stand and be recognized (pictured below). He said, “In the event no one had yet properly done so, let me do it now. Welcome home. Thank you for your service. I salute you!”

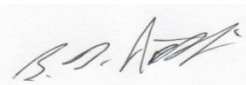


- 10) Inputs from Members: Commander Ratti thanked the officers for their reports and asked for inputs from the members:
- a) Tom Picinich, reporting for the Veterans Memorial Committee, said he had received orders for new bricks. He expected that both the new memorial brick installations and the sidewalk renovations would be completed by Memorial Day.
 - b) Commander Ratti said the Post was looking for a volunteer to coordinate other Post volunteers working with West Brunswick High School students in their Robotics program. Please see Chuck Blackburn or Steve Muir, if interested.

The next general membership meeting is April 26, 2023.

- 11) Closing Ceremony. Chaplain Chuck Francka offered a closing prayer.
- 12) Commander Ratti called for the Honor Guard to retire the colors.
- 13) Commander Ratti adjourned the monthly meeting at 8:05 PM.


JAMES HILTY
Adjutant


STEVEN H. RATTI
Commander