



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

**SUBJECT:** General Membership Meeting Minutes

**DATE:** Wednesday April 26, 2023.

**LOCATION:** St. James Community Center.

1) Call to Order: Commander Steven Ratti called to order the April 26, 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
  - Kathleen Roth, Public Relations
  - Arthur "Doc" Liberty, Judge Advocate
  - Steve Muir, Service Officer
  - Chuck Francka, Chaplain
  - Bob Davis, Sergeant-at-Arms
- b) Officers Absent:
  - Tammy Taylor, Historian (excused)

4) Sick Call: Chaplain Francka reported that Walter Sral was on Sick Call and that it has been reported that Post member Charles McCauley passed away three months ago.

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

6) Commander Ratti invited any new members or visiting veterans to stand and introduce themselves. None were present. He then introduced and welcomed several special guests, including LtCol Glenn Baker, Commander of the JROTC unit at South Brunswick High School, and the parents of Jackson Scott and Dallas Russ.

- a) Commander Ratti called forward Deputy Vice Commander for Active Duty Doug Pratt, who then introduced Jackson Scott, a senior at South Brunswick High School (SBHS) and winner of the 2023 North Carolina American Legion Cadet of the Year Award. Jackson is a Cadet Sgt. in the SBHS JROTC unit. He was recommended for the award by the unit's commander, LtCol Glenn Baker and nominated by Post 543. Jackson is a founding member of Scout Troop 102 in Boiling Springs Lake and has attained the rank of Eagle Scout. For his Eagle Scout project, Jackson planned and built a food pantry for the Boiling Springs Lake community center and organized a food drive to fill the pantry. Jackson plans on enrolling in a college with an ROTC program and then entering the military or becoming a fire or police first responder. Commander Ratti joined Vice Commander Pratt in congratulating Jackson Scott and in awarding him a \$1,500 scholarship as approved by the Executive Committee at its March meeting. Commander Ratti invited LtCol Baker and Jackson's parents to join them for a picture ceremony and the Post members responded with a round of congratulatory applause.



- b) Commander Ratti then called forward Adjutant Jim Hilty, who in his role as Chairman of the Oratorical Committee introduced Dallas Russ, a senior at the Early College High School and this year's winner of the Post 543 Oratorical Contest on the U.S. Constitution. Dallas, he explained, went on this year to win the District 9 and Division II contests and to take a very respectable fourth place in the State finals. This was the third time Dallas entered the Oratorical competitions. As a freshman she won the Post and District contests and as a sophomore lost out in the Post contest to Andrew Jackson, who eventually advanced all the way to the State finals. Covid kept her away as a junior. All considered, it is a remarkable record of achievement, earning her a total of \$5,500 in contest scholarships. In recognition and appreciation of these

cumulative accomplishments the Executive Committee at its March meeting, on a motion by Deputy Vice Commander Chuck Blackburn approved the award of an additional \$1,000 scholarship for Dallas Russ, bringing her total to \$6,500 in Oratorical scholarship awards. Dallas and her parents came forward for a picture with a large ceremonial check. In an emotional response Dallas thanked the members of the Post for their generosity, for the learning experience of the competitions and for what she had learned about the Constitution.



#### 7) Commander's Report:

- a) Commander Ratti reminded members that nominations for officers' positions for FY 2024 remained open until the end of tonight's meeting for the elections to be held at the May 24, 2023 general membership meeting.
- b) Commander Ratti also opened nominations for delegates to attend the Department Convention June 7-10 in Raleigh, NC. To date, the delegates nominated are Commander Ratti, Steve Muir, and Mike Fegan.
- c) Commander Ratti reminded members that the Memorial Day Ceremony is scheduled for Monday, May 29. It begins at 11:00 AM in front of the Veterans Memorial. Highlights of this year's ceremony include a special guest speaker Admiral Karl Shultz, 26<sup>th</sup> Commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard, from 2018-2022 and we will again be honoring Gold Star families.

#### 8) Officer and Committee Reports.

- a) Membership Report: Al Lebednik reported that according to the Department we have achieved 249 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 April Finance Report and expenditures of 54.56 percent of the FY23 budget to date. A motion to accept the report was approved.

- i) Mike added that Budget leads were expected to submit their FY24 budget reports by April 27 (tomorrow).
- c) Service Officer (Steve Muir).
  - i) The distribution of Poppies at the Southport Spring Festival (Franklin Square) April 7 netted \$1129 for Post. Volunteers distributed over 50 “History of Poppies” Fact Sheets to children. Steve thanked all of the volunteers who participated.
  - ii) Memorial Day event at Lowe’s Hardware, Saturday, May 27<sup>th</sup> 0845 to 1500. We will distribute Poppies again, with support of JROTC and CAP cadets.
  - iii) Steve provided case updates, summaries of six “New” cases and three “On-Going” cases. He noted an increase in hardship and homeless cases Post COVID
  - iv) Steve commented that Senator Grassley had placed a “Hold” on the appointment of VBA Undersecretary Joshua Jacobs.
  - v) VA’s Electronic Health Record Modernization (EHRM) needs improvements the VA and Oracle were told. Six fatal accidents reportedly occurred in which issues with EHRM system played a role.
  - vi) The VEAC will return to Wilmington, October 19-21 and we will, again, need volunteers. Steve will again be involved in the planning.
- d) St. James Military Appreciation Day (SJMAD) Committee (Rod Johnson)
  - i) Rod provided an update on planning for the Concert (June 10) and the Golf Tournament (July 8), explaining how the SJMAD Committee was organized and the progress made in soliciting support of 160 businesses for the tournament. Of particular importance and urgency was the need to fill the positions of Neighborhood Captains to solicit residences. Thirty-five (35) Captains were on board but fifteen (15) critical neighborhoods were uncovered. Rod put up a map in back of the room and identified the areas in a series of slides for the members. Parts of Players, Regency, Founders, The Grove, Seaside, Reserve, Marina, and Members were still uncovered.
- e) House & Entertainment Committee (Rick Sessa).
  - i) Rick commented on planning for the Patriotic Concert (June 10), stating that wrist bands would go on sale well in advance of the event. Catered meals will be available at the pavilion for those who want to buy them at the event. There will also be a raffle.
- f) Elections Committee (Doug Pratt)
  - i) Doug Pratt on behalf of the Elections Committee formally presented a slate of candidates nominated for the Post offices; this slate was approved by the Executive Committee at its April meeting:
    - Commander Phillip McGhee
    - Adjutant
    - Finance Officer Mike Carton
    - Judge Advocate Arthur “Doc” Liberty
    - 1<sup>st</sup> Vice Commander Resource Development Dan Bennett
    - 2<sup>nd</sup> Vice Commander Membership Gary Purcell
    - 2<sup>nd</sup> Vice Commander Active Duty Doug Pratt
    - Deputy Vice Commander Americanism Chuck Blackburn

Chaplain Chuck Francka  
Public Relations Officer Dr. Jim McCriskin  
Service Officer Steve Muir  
Historian Rick Sessa  
Sergeant-at-Arms Bob Davis

ii) At this time Commander Ratti closed nominations and reminded members that elections for officers will occur at the May 24 general membership meeting and the FY24 officers will be installed at the June 28, 2023 meeting.

9) Inputs from Members and Closing Remarks: Commander Ratti thanked the officers for their reports and asked for inputs from the members:

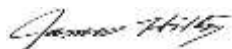
- a) Tom Picinich, reporting for the Veterans Memorial Committee, said renovations to the sidewalks and the installation of new bricks were underway. The work was expected to be completed by May 8, and certainly in time for Memorial Day.
- b) Commander Ratti said the schedule for the Baseball team was now set and that more games will be played this year at South Brunswick High School (SBHS) because the field at NBHS is being renovated.
- c) Leo Mercado is looking for volunteer fore-caddies for the 27 May Folds of Honor Golf Tournament, and Ben Wilson at the Members Club is looking for volunteers to serve on the registration desk to check players into the Tournament. If interested, call them.

**The next general membership meeting is May 24, 2023.**

10) Closing Ceremony. Chaplain Chuck Francka offered a closing prayer.

11) Commander Ratti called for the Honor Guard to retire the colors.

12) Commander Ratti adjourned the monthly meeting at 8:01 PM.



JAMES HILTY  
Adjutant



STEVEN H. RATTI  
Commander