



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

SUBJECT: General Membership Meeting Minutes

DATE: Wednesday June 28, 2023.

LOCATION: St. James Community Center.

1) Call to Order: Commander Steven Ratti called to order the June 28, 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
 - Chuck Blackburn, Deputy Vice Commander Americanism & Youth
 - Doug Pratt, Deputy Vice Commander Active Duty Support
 - Chuck Francka, Chaplain
 - Bob Davis, Sergeant-at-Arms
 - Kathleen Roth, Public Relations
 - Arthur "Doc" Liberty, Judge Advocate
 - Steve Muir, Service Officer
 - Al Lebednik, Vice Commander Membership
 - Mike Carton, Finance Officer
- b) Officers Absent:
 - Tammy Taylor, Historian

4) Sick Call: Chaplain Francka reported that Walter Sral, a long-time member of the Honor Guard passed away, and a celebration of life is scheduled for August 5 at 1:00PM at Palmetto Creek. Thomas Miller (knee surgery), Johnnie Holmes (dialysis), and Michael Morrison (cancer treatment) are also in need of our prayers. Finally, word has been received the NC Department Commander Tom Ehlers has suffered a stroke.

5) Approval of Minutes: The draft minutes of the May 24, 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. One prospective new member, David Arntsen an Air Force veteran stood and introduced himself. He was warmly welcomed by the members. Commander Ratti introduced a special guest, Mrs. Sandy McGhee, wife of Phillip McGhee our in-coming Commander.

7) Commander's Report. Commander Ratti briefly reported some of the news from the recent Department convention held at Raleigh, noting that Dale Smith was reelected as Commander of Division II and commenting that the Post received awards for the JROTC Cadet of the Year (previously awarded) and an award for Community Service (not yet ready to be presented).

- a) Commander Ratti said he took the greatest pride in announcing that Post 543 was selected as the 2023 recipient of the award as NC Department Honor Guard of the Year. He then called up the Honor Guard to come forward to receive the plaque and to have a group picture taken. The Honor Guard is the face of the Post, the group most often seen by the public and the formal representation of the membership to the community at large. This much-deserved and long overdue award recognizes the many years of service in formal ceremonies, flag raisings, literally scores of veterans' funerals, and patriotic celebrations in St. James, Southport, and across Brunswick County.
- b) Commander Ratti continued his report, explaining that nominations for the open adjutant position for FY 2024 were about to close. Under Article IV (Section 7) of the Post By-Laws the Commander had previously called for a special election to be held on July 26 to fill the open adjutant's position, which will become vacant on June 28. The Commander announced that, during the period June 28 to July 26, when the adjutant's office is vacant, he has appointed a committee to undertake the duties of the office. The Commander then asked three times for nominations for the office of adjutant for the special election. Hearing none, nominations were closed. At the May meeting Bill Agnostak was nominated and he accepted the nomination. The election and installation will take place at the July 26 general membership meeting.
- c) Jim Hilty, acting in his role as Chair of the Oratorical Committee asked for a moment to recognize those who had gone out of their way to serve the Post volunteering to assist in conducting three Oratorical Contests this past year, each consuming a large part of a weekend day. In addition to the Post contest, Post 543 also hosted the District 9 contest and the Division II contest, primarily because the Post has gained a reputation for managing these contests so well. Assisted by Mike Fegan who set a high standard in organizing the conduct of the contests when he was chair of the Oratorical Committee, Hilty thanked the volunteers for their service and distributed small tokens of appreciation to the following: Mike Carton, Doug Pratt, Kirk Davis, Rick Sessa, Chuck Blackburn, Chuck Francka, Dennis Feltz, Kathleen Roth, Dan Bennett, Bruce Blomgren, Mike Fegan and Steve Ratti.

8) Officer and Committee Reports.

- a) Membership Report: Al Lebednik thanked everyone for their support throughout the last two years and introduced Gary Purcell who will be taking over as Membership Chairman. Al said that Membership cards are now available and you can now pay your dues (\$45) for the new year effective date July 1, 2023.
- b) Finance Report: Finance Officer Mike Carton presented a slide showing the End of Fiscal Year 2023 Finance Report and final expenditures of 82.05 percent of the FY23 budget as of 6/28/23. After a short discussion noting that the officers had shown restraint in keeping within the budget, a motion to accept the report was approved without dissent.
 - i) Mike then presented the proposed FY 2024 Budget, a balanced budget that was previously reviewed and approved by the Budget Committee and the Executive Committee. A motion to accept the FY 2024 budget as submitted was approved without dissent.
- c) Fourth of July Parade: Doug Pratt provided explicit directions for those who intended to participate in the Southport Fourth of July Parade, indicating they should either report to Sentry Storage at 09:00AM to help assemble the Trailer or report to the Walmart parking lot at 08:45, prepared, in either case prepared to step off at 11:00AM and secure sometime after 2:30PM.
- d) ExComm Telephone Survey of Membership: Doug Pratt reported that the Executive Committee would already have called or soon will be calling the membership and following up on discussions seeking to get information on members' interests in getting more involved in programs and perhaps taking leadership positions. A follow-up report will be made at the July meeting.
- e) St. James Military Appreciation Day: PR Officer-Elect, Jim McCrisky showed three slides regarding preparations for the SJMAD Golf Tournament and updating the membership on fund raising for the SJMAD. He commented that sales on the SJMAD golf shirts have gone quite well and that the first shipment is nearly sold out. He reminded members that Troon donates 100% of the sales from the shirts to the Post. Sign-ups for the golf tournament have gone well and all of the 176 spots are now taken.

Rod Johnson commented on the neighborhood solicitations, stating that contributions appeared to be running ahead of last year. He thanked everyone for their efforts and reminded them that we still needed volunteers the day of the tournament.

Mark Lieberman, who is coordinating volunteers for the golf tournament, commented that he needed assistance the morning of July 8 at 0600 with placing flags on golf carts and other preparations for the tournament. Please see Mark if you are willing and available.
- f) Service Officer Report. (Steve Muir)
 - i) Steve reported on the distribution of Poppy's conducted on Memorial Day at Lowe's hardware, where 30 "History of the Poppy" fact sheets were distributed to children and a total of \$2760 was netted in contributions. Steve thanked the volunteers who contributed their time and noted the participation of the CAP

Cadets whose presence made a significant difference. Combined with the donations that came in during Spring Fest, the Poppy distributions this year have netted a total of \$3889 to go toward Veterans services.

ii) Steve commented on the huge impact that the PACT Act has made since its passage a year ago, as over \$1 billion in retroactive payments have been distributed. In North Carolina over 12,000 decisions have been issued and \$6 million in retroactive payments.

iii) The Veterans Experience Action Center (VEAC) will be held October 19-23 in Wilmington. A call will be issued again for volunteers later in the summer.

g) Deputy Vice Commander Americanism: (Chuck Blackburn)

i) Chuck presented a proposed "Scholarship and Awards Policy 011-1" setting a time limit of four years for retaining scholarships and awards in Post 543 restricted accounts, with certain exceptions and extenuations. The proposed policy was previously reviewed and approved by the Executive Committee. After a brief discussion in which clarifying questions from the floor were satisfactorily answered, a motion to approve the policy was approved without dissent.

ii) Chuck then turned to a slide with two photographs, one showing all of the members of the 2023 American Legion Tar Heel Boy State and another showing the four representatives from St. James Post 543. Chuck Blackburn proudly pointed out that all four Post 543 Boys State representatives have earned the rank of Eagle Scout.

h) House & Entertainment Committee: (Rick Sessa).

i) Rick began by thanking Bob Davis and Mark Lieberman for their steadfast contributions to the House and Entertainment Committee during the last year. He noted their excellent contributions to the Patriotic Concert held on June 8 at Woodlands Pavilion. The proceeds from this year's version exceeded last year's.

ii) Rick turned next to the events of the Southport Fourth of July Festival. He reviewed the major events in which Post 543 members would be participating, such as the Franklin Square Arts & Crafts on July 2 (Baseball Team); Salute to Veterans on July 2 (Honor Guard color presentation); Flag Retirement Ceremony on July 3 (key note address by Aaron Largent); Festival Parade on July 4 (Honor Guard and Legionnaires parade).

i) Athletics Officer: Leo Mercado presented a progress report on the Brunswick Post 543 American Legion Senior Baseball Team regular season. To date, five of fourteen regular season games have been cancelled or postponed because of weather. The team has faced a number of challenges in maintaining a full roster. They have yet to win a game, but the coaches remain optimistic and believe they have a great group of young men. The season wraps up next week and an appreciation picnic is scheduled for July 9.

j) Inputs from Members: Commander Ratti thanked the officers for their reports and asked for inputs from the members: Tom Picinich, reporting for the Veterans Memorial Committee, said renovations to the sidewalks and the installation of new pavers was now complete. He said he was taking orders for new memorial bricks so they would be available by Veterans Day.

9) Commander Ratti's Closing Remarks. Commander Ratti thanked the many members of the Post who had contributed countless hours volunteering for the more than seventy programs that comprise the operations of Post 543 over the last two years while he has been commander. Some members have given exceptional service, gone the extra mile to be on call at unusual hours, work a little harder and a little longer, make additional telephone calls, attend extra meetings to represent the Post, or perhaps stand long hours at parades or at funerals. These extraordinary efforts deserve special attention and the applause of the Post members.

- a) Commander Ratti then commended the following individuals, citing their specific achievements and naming particular contributions each had made to the success of the organization over the course of the last two years, and awarding them Meritorious Service Awards: Bill Morgan, Arthur "Doc" Liberty, Rick Sessa, Kathy Roth, Al Lebednik, Bob Davis, Leo Mercado, Doug Pratt, Chuck Francka, Steve Muir, Chuck Blackburn, and Rod Johnson.
- b) Commander Ratti called up Finance Officer Mike Carton and Adjutant Jim Hilty and announced that they had been selected as co-winners of the Post Legionnaire of the Year Award for their outstanding service in their respective positions.
- c) In his concluding remarks Commander Ratti thanked the Post membership for "supporting Veterans, Youth and Americanism in our Community." He expressed his thanks to the membership for the privilege of serving as their commander for two years. He reiterated his faith in the financial strength of the organization, the resilience of the membership, and the positive outlook of the core of the membership going forward.

10) Thank you, Commander Ratti. Adjutant Hilty then stood and said he had a presentation to make on behalf of the Executive Committee and the entire membership. Hilty noted that it was now time to thank Commander Ratti for his service. He said, in part, "In his two years as commander Steve Ratti has wielded a remarkably steady hand and displayed an amazing skill for avoiding the rocks and shoals in all their various incarnations. However, what strikes me most about his leadership is how he stands by the troops and supports his fellow Legionnaires.... How he quietly took up the pen and succeeded in gaining awards for his colleagues. How persistent he was in helping secure awards and in making sure everyone was fairly treated." For these and many other reasons, Steve Ratti was presented with the Commander's Award. The inscription on the plaque read in part: "Presented to Steven H. Ratti in recognition of Loyalty, Devoted Service and Leadership in upholding the principles of the American Legion for God and Country. We gratefully reward your term as Commander, 2021-2023." The members of the Post gave Commander Ratti a standing ovation and final salute.



11) Installation of Post 543 Officers for FY 2024. (Mike Fegan, District 9 Commander and Jim Torr, District Vice Commander). Commander Fegan then came to the podium and directed the Sergeant-at-Arms to bring forward the duly elected officers. Once they were assembled, Vice Commander Jim Torr administered the oath of office to the following officers:

Commander: Phillip McGhee
Finance Officer: Mike Carton
Judge Advocate: Arthur "Doc" Liberty
1st Vice Commander Resource Development: Dan Bennett
2nd Vice Commander Membership: Gary Purcell
2nd Vice Commander Active Duty: Doug Pratt
Deputy Vice Commander Americanism & Youth: Chuck Blackburn
Chaplain: Chuck Francka
Public Relations Officer: Dr. Jim McCriskin
Service Officer: Steve Muir
Historian: Rick Sessa
Sergeant-at-Arms: Bob Davis



Commander Fegan welcomed the officers, encouraged them to maintain the highest standards of the office, and reminded them of the trust and responsibility embedded in the offices they now held and the challenges that lay before them. Commander Ratti congratulated the officers of FY2024 and turned over the proceedings to our new Commander, Phillip McGhee.

12) Introducing Commander Phillip McGhee. Commander McGhee received the gavel from Commander Ratti, thanked him for his service, and acknowledged a warm welcome from the members of Post 543. He thanked District Commanders Fegan and


Torr for their kind words of encouragement and congratulated the newly installed officers. He then moved directly to the closing ceremony.




The next general membership meeting is July 26, 2023.

- 13) Closing Ceremony. Chaplain Chuck Francka offered a closing prayer.
- 14) Commander McGhee called for the Honor Guard to retire the colors.
- 15) Commander McGhee adjourned the monthly meeting at 8:25 PM.


JAMES HILTY
Adjutant


STEVEN H. RATTI
Commander


PHILLIP E. MCGHEE
Commander