



**American Legion Post 543
General Membership Meeting Minutes
Wednesday, March 26, 2025**

Meeting Minutes

- 1) The meeting was called to Order at 7:00 PM – Commander.
- 2) The Commander ordered the advancement of the Colors and a hand salute.
- 3) Opening Prayer – Chaplain.
- 4) The Commander welcomed the Guests and asked them to introduce themselves. Former Commander Steve Ratti indicated the Post had two Guests from the Space Force who would be formally introduced later in the meeting and would present information.
- 5) The Commander requested any first-time visit Veterans to stand, state their name and what branch of service they served in. Two Army, one Marine and one Air Force Veteran were visiting for the first time.
- 6) The Commander reminded the Membership that March 29th was the National Vietnam War Veterans Day and the 50th Anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War. The Commander referenced the military display that was organized in the middle of the meeting room and that the display was in recognition of those men and women who were lost during that time and welcomed home all those who served.
- 7) The Pledge of Allegiance was led by the Commander with audience participation.
- 8) The Commander led the Members in reciting the Preamble to the American Legion Constitution.
- 9) The Commander recognized the POWs and those Missing In Action, as well as honored them by referring to the empty chair.
- 10) The Commander reviewed the four pillars and how the Post supports over 70 programs.

- 11) The Commander announced that Post 543 now has a new Athletic Director (Jim Nelson) who would be responsible for all our sports programs and introduced Jim. Jim will be working with Mike Carton in putting together the upcoming baseball team and preparing for the season.
- 12) The Commander declared the monthly meeting convened and took roll call. The Judge Advocate was excused due to travel. The Commander declared a quorum was present.
- 13) The Commander requested the Chaplain brief the Membership regarding any sick call Members:
 - a. The Chaplain requested the Membership to remember Joe Kinser Jr. in their prayers. Joe Jr. was struggling medically.
- 14) The Commander requested any Vietnam Veteran who had not yet received their Vietnam Era Veteran Recognition Pin and certificate to come forward. None were identified.
- 15) The Commander requested Former Commander Steve Ratti introduce the two Space Force personnel. Steve Ratti took the opportunity to congratulate Commander Phillip McGhees on winning the Department of NC Commander of the Year Award.
- 16) Former Commander Steve Ratti introduced TSgt Jorge Lopez & Sgt Daryl Griffin, US Space Force Recruiters who provided a comprehensive overview of the US Space Force, including their mission objectives and how they recruit. They also suggested that the Post 543 Membership could help find young recruits through referring their Grandchildren and their friends to the US Space Force program website. A copy of their presentation slides will be posted on the Post 543 website.
- 17) A motion was made to approve February 26, 2025, General Membership Meeting Minutes. The motion carried, and the voice vote was unanimous. – Commander.
- 18) The Commander called for the Officer and Committee Reports to be presented:
- 19) Finance Officer Report – Mike Carton
 - a. The Finance Officer informed the membership that he would cover three topics in his Finance Report:
 1. The February 2025 Finance Report.
 - a. Post 543 is 71% spent as of 3-26-25.
 - b. Post 543 is on target to meet the budget.
 - c. There are some areas where the Post will be increasing expenditures, with some larger expenses before the end of the year.

- d. The Commander requested a motion to approve the Finance Report, a motion was made and seconded, no discussion was needed and the motion carried with a unanimous voice vote.

2. Post expenditures by pillar.

- a. The Finance Officer reviewed the chart reflecting the Post expenditures that had been spent up to 3-26-25 against the four pillars.

3. The FY25 Budget Mid-Year review.

- a. The Finance Officer reviewed the end of the 2025 Fiscal Year Budget development schedule.
- b. The Finance Officer informed the Post Officers and Committee Leads that they will be receiving a budget email from him next week and that each of the Budget Leads was required to respond.

20) The 2nd Vice Commander, Membership Report – Gary Purcell

- a. Gary indicated that four members had renewed their membership prior to the start of the meeting, getting the Post to 248 paid members. The Post had now achieved 94% of the Department assigned goal of 264 paid members. Need another 16 to meet our Department end of year goal.
- b. Gary requested that three new Members come forward and be recognized. They were each presented with a new Post ball cap and Member card. The Commander welcomed Jim Nelson, John Schlobohm and Harold Sisen to their first Post Meeting as a new Member.
- c. Gary Purcell indicated he had four new American Flags that had been donated and any Member who wanted one was welcome to stop by the Membership table and pick up one of the flags.

21) The Deputy Vice Commander, Active-Duty Support Report – Doug Pratt

- a. Doug reviewed Post 543's support of the upcoming 2025 Camp Lejeune Sexual Awareness Month in conjunction with Commander LTC Perazzola-Ash, beginning on April 1st.
- b. Doug then informed the Post Members that the Post will be supporting a Chalk Art display by Alpha and Bravo companies of the Wounded Warrior Battalion East on April 2, 2025, to help raise awareness of sexual assaults.

c. The Post 543 Active-Duty Committee will be supporting a change of command ceremony for the Wounded Warrior Battalion East on May 9, 2025.

d. The Active-Duty Support Committee also supports the Wounded Warrior Battalion East Organization's Lunch and Learn program which helps Marines, and their families obtain a deeper and better understanding of diagnosis and treatment plans.

e. Doug Pratt then switched hats to his Post 543 Officer Election Committee Chairman and requested the Commander to declare the floor open for FY 26 Officer nominations.

f. Commander Phillip McGhee declared the FY 26 Officer Nomination period to be open effective March 26, 2025.

g. Doug Pratt informed the Membership that the FY 26 Officer Nomination period would close at the April 23rd Post 543 General Membership Meeting.

h. Doug Pratt encouraged any Member who was interested in serving on the ExCom or one of the Post 543 Committees to please contact the list of Election Committee Members.

22) The Service Officer Report – Steve Muir

a. Steve Muir requested Paul Witmer to come to the front of the meeting room. The Commander and Steve Muir recognized Paul Witmer for his outstanding support of Veterans in need in Brunswick County and his 12 years of service within Post 543. The Commander presented a plaque and certificate of appreciation to Paul.

b. Steve Muir informed the Membership that the VEAC event will take place at the National Guard Armory at Wilmington Airport from May 8th to May 10th. He indicated that there were Volunteer sign-up sheets being distributed throughout the meeting room and that if any Member was interested in helping, please sign up. Steve believes that by April 6th, a final decision should be made to go forward with the event.

c. Steve Muir indicated that Paul Witmer had helped a homeless Veteran receive subsidized housing in Shallotte. The Post donated \$700 to fund the deposit and the Veteran is no longer sleeping in his car.

d. Steve indicated the Service Committee had processed nine cases in the past month. Four of the cases were for Post Members. One of the cases resulted in the Veteran signing up for Post Membership.

e. Post Members who live in Palmetto Creek continue to refer cases to the Service Committee which is allowing the Post 543 support structure to continue to expand along Southport-Supply Road (Hwy 211) and impact membership.

f. Steve Muir reviewed the Veteran case from South Carolina whose wife and daughter were having difficulty in getting the Veteran's body cremated, and the remains returned to them. The Post 543 team worked with the coroner and funeral homes involved and resolved the issues. The Post donated \$600 in support of this effort. The family now has the Veteran's ashes.

g. Steve Muir indicated that Post 543 has a strong reputation in the Brunswick County community for the high level of support, not only from a benefits knowledge perspective but also from a Veteran financial support effort.

h. Steve reviewed his visit to DC, along with seven other delegates from the Department of NC, meeting with staff of ten State Representatives out of the fourteen from NC. Steve indicated it was truly an eye-opener experience for him. The new Secretary of the VA gave a presentation to over 1,000 American Legionnaires. The Secretary made some very good points. The VA has over 470,000 employees and a \$350 billion budget. Forty thousand positions have already been cut and six thousand of those cut positions are Veterans.

i. Steve Muir also indicated that the Secretary of the VA recognizes that there is an estimated forty thousand to as high as sixty-five thousand homeless Veterans in the United States currently. The Secretary informed the audience that the average age of the Veteran Administration's facility was forty-five to fifty years old. That includes one hundred seventy medical centers, fifty-eight regional offices and thousands of clinics like the one in Shallotte. The Secretary also indicated no cuts to Veterans benefits or pay. The PACT act and other Veteran benefit programs have added one hundred fifty billion dollars to the VA budget.

j. The Secretary of the VA spoke about Veteran suicides. He indicated that the Veteran suicide rate was as high as it is due to over prescribing medication. He estimated at least twenty-five percent could contribute to this issue. The Secretary said the over prescribing took place because proper phycological treatment was unavailable to the Veterans and prescribing medicine was much easier.

k. Steve Muir closed out his report to the Membership by displaying his father's medals from World War II. He briefed the Membership regarding the process he went through to obtain the medals and offered to assist any Member who was interested in obtaining their medals or their immediate family's medals.

23) Public Relations - Jim McCrisky

- a. Jim McCrisky informed the Membership that he and his committee are working with and learning a new fundraising and communications platform named Give Butter. This new platform will streamline and improve communications inside and outside the Post.
- b. The Public Relations Committee is currently undertaking a Comprehensive Review of the current Post 543 website to update and streamline it.
- c. All Draft General Membership meeting minutes are in the e-newsletters for your convenience - just click and read. Members need to review these published Draft Meeting Minutes to be prepared to approve them at the next meeting.
- d. Post 543 does have a Richard H. Stewart, Jr American Legion Post 543 FACEBOOK page. You should visit it frequently to keep up to speed with what is happening between the General Membership meetings.
- e. If You are **NOT** Getting e-Newsletters via Your e-mail, please contact Jim McCrisky at jwmacii@aol.com or Text at (309) 826-1075.

24) Saint James Military Appreciation Day Update - Steve Ratti

- a. Steve Ratti informed the Membership that these SJMAD events are the vehicle for raising the majority of the Post 543 funds to support the seventy programs reflected in the four pillars.
- b. The SJMAD Committee is incorporating a new model for expanding the event curriculum over the span of one week:
 - Multi day event: June 16 - 22, 2025.
 - Bowling tournament.
 - Tennis tournament.
 - Pickleball tournament.
 - Team scramble tournament, June 21.
 - Flighted, Competitive tournament, June 21.
 - 100 Hole Marathon for Folds of Honor, June 22 (PGA Pros only).
 - Big Tent Dinner/ Dance, Saturday, June 21st. (Mike's Garage Band)

- **NOTE:** The minutes are accurate as of the meeting events. Subsequent to the 26 March General Membership Meeting, it was decided that the Folds of Honor Golf Tournament and the Dinner Gala would both be held on Saturday, 21 June, vice the original plan of 22 June.

c. The SJMAD Committee is looking for Volunteers to help with this expanded curriculum of events. If you are interested in assisting, please see Steve Ratti or Bill Morgan.

d. If any Member has a relationship with any local business, please contact Paula Kallay directly to pick up a SJMAD business letter that the Member can present to those businesses to encourage them to participate in supporting the SJMAD events.

25) The Sergeant-AT-Arms/House & Entertainment Report – Rick Sessa

a. Rick announced that the US Navy Band will be conducting a concert at the Odell Williamson Auditorium at 7:00 PM on March 31st. Tickets are FREE.

b. Rick also announced the UNC Wilmington Military Appreciation Day ballgame at 6:00 PM on April 11th. Food is provided to Post Members. All Post Members are encouraged to participate. Attendance for Post Members is FREE.

c. Rick reviewed the Veteran's Memorial Reef program and invited all Members to attend a special presentation on April 23rd at 6:00 PM at the Homer E. Wright Event Center at Saint James.

d. Rick also reviewed the Veterans Who Are About to Go on Eternal Patrol program and invited all Members to attend a special presentation on April 23rd at 6:30 PM at the Homer E. Wright Event Center at Saint James. The program has been known as "I'm gone, now it's your problem!". The program helps surviving spouses of Veterans plan and prepare for when the Veteran is gone.

e. Rick outlined a future event that will encompass a bus trip to Fort Bragg. This event is in the planning stages and will keep the membership informed.

26) Post Historian Report – Rick Sessa

a. Rick is currently filling the Post Historian position in addition to his other duties due to the loss of the ExCom Member who was managing it previously. The Post is looking to fill this position as part of the ExCom Member recruitment. The Post does have an individual interested in replacing Rick as the Post Historian. Hopefully that will take place prior to the next Membership Meeting.

27) The Veteran Memorial Renovation Committee Report – George Freeman

- a. George Freeman shared the status of Phase II of the improvements to the Veterans Memorial monument area in front of the Saint James Town Hall.
- b. Phase I was completed approximately five years ago and included lifting the monument approximately three feet and engraving the American Legion logo and Post 543 name into the granite.
- c. Following Phase I, funds were raised primarily through memorial brick sales to fund Phase II. Phase II, which is on schedule to be completed mid-April 2025 is aimed to:
 - i. Further enhance monument stature and visibility
 - ii. Improve lighting
 - iii. Provide sitting areas
 - iv. Provide places for the podium and sound equipment during ceremonies

28) The Veteran Memorial Brick Walkway Update – Tom Picinich

- a. Memorial brick sales continue. Tom encouraged any Member who might be interested in a memorial brick for themselves or a loved one to get in touch with him as soon as possible so he can consolidate the next order. Members can contact him at tapicinich@ATMC.net or 201-218-8753. Brick order forms are also available at the Saint James Town Hall. Tom also thanked Jim McCriskin for keeping the brick sales effort visual to the community through the various advertisements in the local publications.

29) Baseball Program Update – Mike Carton

- a. The Post now has a team and coaches. However, the Post is still diligently working to find a place to play the games, as well as practice. The program also needs Volunteers to help out at the games by collecting money at the gate, keeping score in the press box, public address announcer, concession sales, etc. Mike Carton indicated he has a sign up sheet for anyone who is interested in volunteering.

30) Commander's closing comments – Commander

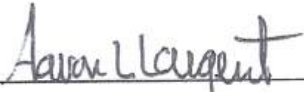
- a. The Commander reviewed the upcoming events list with the Membership. He reminded the Membership that the next General Membership Meeting will take place on April 23rd. The Commander solicited any additional comments from the Membership. There was none.

31) General Membership Meeting Closing Prayer – Chaplain

32) The Commander requested the colors be retired – Commander

33) The Commander's closing remarks (until we meet again) - Commander

34) The General Membership Meeting was adjourned at 8:22 PM. – Commander



Aaron L. Largent
Adjutant



Phillip E. McGhee
Commander

