



**American Legion Post 543
General Membership Meeting Minutes
Wednesday, November 20, 2024**

Meeting Minutes

- 1) The meeting was called to Order at 7:00 PM – Commander.
- 2) The meeting was opened with the advancement of the colors – Post Honor Guard.
- 3) Opening Prayer – Chaplain.
- 4) The Commander welcomed all the guests and recognized Dr. Gene Smith, President of the Brunswick Community College, Rosey Greer Shoudy who is the local Representative for the Marine's Toys For Tots program, Anna Keener who is a nursing student and recipient of the Colin Furr Scholarship award, Joseph Qualls who is a Post 543 P.A.V.E. Scholarship award recipient and a student studying Horticulture at BCC, as well as Dylan Phillips who is the Editor for the Brunswick Beacon and recipient of the Post 543 Excellence in Media award.
- 5) The Commander requested all first-time attending Veterans to stand, introduce themselves and report which service they served in. There were two first-time Veteran attendees.
- 6) The Commander informed the Membership that there were Korean War 50th Anniversary pins available and that he would like to recognize any Korean War Veteran by awarding a Commemorative pin to them. No qualifying Veterans were in attendance.

- 7) The Commander requested any Vietnam War Era Veterans that had not received their Commemorative pin to please come up front and be issued the pin. There was one Veteran present who had not received their Commemorative pin and service certificate. He was issued a pin and a certificate by the Commander.
- 8) The Commander requested the Chaplain brief the Membership regarding any sick call Members:
 - a. John Holmes is in Novant hospital. The Chaplain will try to determine John's room number and encourage Members to visit him. Please keep him in your prayers.
 - b. Bill Wells, who was the Post's Charter Chaplain, passed away. Please keep his family in your thoughts and prayers.
- 9) The Commander invited Rosey Greer Shoudy to speak to the Membership regarding the Toys for Tots program and what the upcoming seasonal needs will be. She also provided a comprehensive overview of what had been accomplished from the 2023 season.
 - a. The program collected over \$8,000 for purchase of bikes/scooters and helmets.
 - b. The program distributed over 42,000 toys to over 10,000 children.
 - c. The program is currently short, about \$3,600 for the 2024 season.
 - d. The program had added some additional fund-raising efforts.
 - e. Rosey suggested Members should purchase a Christmas Amaryllis from the Toys for Tots program which is one of their current fundraising efforts.
 - f. The program needs the Post's help again this season. There are major needs for collection box distribution, counting/sorting/boxing toys and organizing volunteer schedules/training/waivers. A major need is help for the Walmart Days.
 - g. Rosey briefed the Membership on the Toys for Tots literacy program.
 - h. Bike distribution will be held on December 16th and 17th.
 - i. Toy distribution will be held on December 20th & 21st. Over 1,000 families have already signed up for toys and there is a month to go.
 - j. Rosey left flyers & her card on a table at the rear of the meeting room that outlined how Members can volunteer or donate toys or donate funds to the Toys for Tot program.

- k. Rosey provided examples of the type of toys needed for the various ages and genders of the children in need from Brunswick County.
- 10) The Commander invited Chuck Blackburn (Deputy Vice Commander – Americanism) to the podium to introduce Dr. Gene Smith, President of the Brunswick Community College and recognize the Post 543 Scholarship recipients.
- a. Dr. Smith provided an overview of his role at Brunswick Community College and the various programs. He made a special effort to thank the Post 543 Membership for their military service and expressed his appreciation for what the Post does for the local community. He indicated that the college has 2,083 students for the 2024 school year. He invited those Members who have not visited the campus to come for a tour.
 - b. Chuck Blackburn mentioned that Post 543 does support scholarships for the Trades curriculum at BCC. The Post supported three students of the BCC Trades Program through the Post 543 scholarship program in 2024.
 - c. Chuck Blackburn invited Anna Keener to come to the front of the meeting to receive \$1,500 from Post 543, as well as \$1,000 from the Department of NC associated with the Colin Furr Scholarship which covers her Brunswick Community College 2nd year Nursing School tuition for 2025. The Commander, Chuck Blackburn and Dr. Gene Smith presented the check to Anna Keener and pictures were taken. Anna Keener informed the Membership that she was born and raised in Brunswick County and expressed her appreciation for the support of Post 543. She also indicated that she looked forward to giving back to Brunswick County as a nurse.
 - d. Chuck Blackburn invited Joseph Squalls to come forward and to be recognized as the recipient of a P.A.V.E. \$1,000 scholarship to Brunswick Community College. Joseph is an Army Veteran who is enrolled in the BCC Horticulture Program. He thanked the Post for their support and indicated he would consider joining Post 543. The Commander, Chuck Blackburn and Dr. Gene Smith presented the check to Joseph Squalls and pictures were taken. Joseph briefed the Membership regarding how difficult it was to find a job when he first got out of the Army and how thankful he is for the opportunity to receive an education in a field that will employ him, once he graduates.

- e. The Commander awarded Dr. Smith a Post 543 military challenge coin in appreciation for his continued support of Veterans.
- 11) The Commander requested Jim McCriskin (Post 543 Public Relations Officer) to come to the podium to introduce Dylan Phillips who is the Editor for The Brunswick Beacon publication. Jim McCriskin provided a brief overview of the Brunswick Beacon and introduction of Dylan Phillips. Dylan was invited to come forward to receive the Post 543 Media Excellence Award. Mr. Phillips expressed his appreciation for the award and thanked Jim McCriskin for the excellent supply of Veteran and Post 543 information to the publication. A special recognition plaque was awarded to The Brunswick Beacon Editor.
- 12) The Commander announced that the guests may want to depart prior to the regular Post 543 General Membership Meeting officially convening. The guests departed the meeting room at 7:50 PM.
- 13) The Commander conducted a Roll Call, and all Officers were present.
- 14) A Quorum was declared, and the Commander officially opened the meeting at 7:58 PM. – Commander.
- 15) Remembering the American Legion Four Pillars (There are 70 Post programs that support these four pillars) – Commander. The Commander expressed his appreciation for those Members who continue to support the 70 programs associated with the four pillars.
- 16) POW/MIA Recognition – Commander.
- 17) The Commander requested all Members to stand, uncover and join in the Pledge of Allegiance – Members & Guests.
- 18) Preamble to American Legion Constitution – Commander and Members.

- 19) A motion was made to approve October 23, 2024, General Membership Meeting Minutes. The motion carried, and the vote was unanimous. – Commander.

20) The Finance Officer Report – Mike Carton

- a. The Finance Officer informed the membership that he would cover three topics in his Finance Report:
 1. The November 2024 Finance Report.
 2. Post expenditures by pillar.
 3. The FY25 Budget Mid-Year review.
- b. A motion was made to approve the November 2024 Financial Report, and the motion was seconded. The Commander requested any comments or discussion from the Membership – there was none. A vote was taken, and the November 2024 Financial Report was approved unanimously.
- c. The Finance Officer reported that the current budget was 41.5% spent and on target with the projections. Spending is where we are supposed to be. The money is going to support the kids and the Veterans within Brunswick County.
- d. The Finance Officer presented a slide showing expenditures according to the four pillars that the Commander had referred to earlier. The slide reflected what had been budgeted and what had been spent to date on each of the four pillars. The Finance Officer explained each of the levels spent on each of the budgeted amounts. He also informed the membership that in June, the spend rate would start to ramp up.
- e. Mike reviewed the Mid-Year Budget Review process with the Budget & Finance Committee and ExCom will review the proposed changes. Then in January 2025, ExCom will provide approval, and the revised budget will be presented to the Membership for approval at the January General Membership Meeting. The revised budget will then be implemented in January 2025.

- f. The Commander informed the Members that the Post had issued a \$5,000 check recently to American Legion Post 29 in Lanier, NC for support of the folks and Legionnaires in Northwest North Carolina. Their town was devastated by the recent storm.
- g. A motion was made to approve the Finance Officer's Report, and the motion was seconded. The Commander requested any comments or discussion from the Membership – there was none. A vote was taken, and the Finance Officer's Report was approved unanimously.

21) 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 us to 196 paid members. The Post had now achieved 74% of the Department assigned goal of 264 paid members. At 74% of target membership, out of the 19 Posts in our district, we are in the top three.
- b. The Post has 68 members to go to meet the goal. We have 87 former members who have not renewed so the Membership Committee is working diligently to contact those 87 former members – but we still need new member recruitment to continue to keep pace with those members who pass away on an annual basis. Gary encouraged all Members to recruit new Members for the Post.
- c. Gary reminded the Membership that the next Post meeting in January will be the Member's Recognition Meeting for membership milestones and dinner. Recognition pins for continuous membership in the American Legion will be awarded at the dinner.
- d. Gary introduced a Veteran who transferred his membership from New York to our Post and is a retired Marine Veteran. He visited a month ago and then made a request to transfer membership. The Members welcomed James Sullo to the Post. Gary presented Jim with a new Post 543 ballcap.

- e. Gary reviewed the various ways to renew your membership:
 - i. Several ways to renew your membership:
 - Cash or check at monthly General Membership meetings.
 - Mail (or drop off) check to Vice Commander-Membership
 - Pay online via credit card for 1 or 3 years.
 - One year at **Mylegion.org** (\$45)
 - Three years at **Legion.org/renew** (\$135) - three years-no increase.
- f. Steve Ratti asked a question about renewing online and whether or not the Post would still receive their portion of the membership. Gary indicated that the Post would and that renewing online was simple and timely.

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

- a. Doug introduced Steve Claiborne who coordinates the Active-Duty Support efforts at Camp LeJeune. Steve gave a quick overview of the Post's efforts with the USO to provide Thanksgiving fixings for the Camp LeJeune Marine families. This will take place on November 22nd and is called a Turkey Roll. The program is for the lower enlisted Marines at Camp LeJeune.
- b. Active-Duty Support has planned to support the Thanksgiving Dinner event for Camp LeJeune which usually includes 110 US Marines from the Engineering School. The program includes local families signing up to host a couple of these young Marines in their homes for Thanksgiving dinner. The Marine Corps this year indicated that they wanted to add another bus to the program which brings the total Marines for the Thanksgiving Dinner event to 165. The Post is very pleased to work with the Marine Leadership at Camp LeJeune to accommodate this increase. Participating local families from the past have indicated they enjoy this event as much as, if not more than the Marines. Hosting families and Post Members need to be at the SJCC no later than 09:30 hours to welcome and secure their Marine guests. To volunteer, Members need to contact Rick Quashne at 910-233-6418 or Steve Claiborne at 910-269-5554.
- c. Doug Pratt briefed the Membership on the Oak Island Christmas By The Sea Parade. The Parade will take place on December 7th and the meeting point is the Truist Bank parking lot. Meet there at 12:00 hours. You will then be transported to the staging area where you will help decorate the trailer with flags and bunting.

- d. The Adjutant emphasized that we need Veterans to be passengers on the trailer. There was a lack of participation in the Veteran's Day Parade in Wilmington. This parade is local, so we need a good showing to demonstrate our thanks to the community for their support. Paul Witmer reminded the Membership they were needed to help throw candy and dog biscuits to parade revelers along the parade route.
- e. Doug Pratt reminded the Membership that the Post 543 Santa will be delivering gifts to the Oak Island Coast Guard station on December 20th. If any of the other Members want to be involved this year, please contact Bob Davis at 440-371-3922 or at email 323bobdavis@gmail.com.
- f. Doug Pratt indicated that it's that time of the year again where the Election Committee will be soliciting Members to serve in the various Officer positions on the ExCom for the Post. Doug displayed the newly formed Election Committee's names and contact information, as well as encouraged anyone interested in serving to contact any of the Committee members directly. Doug reviewed the ExCom Officer positions and who currently holds the positions. He also indicated that any of the ExCom Members would be willing to discuss the responsibilities and roles of the positions they are currently in. He also showed the current organizational chart.
- g. Doug announced that the Post's annual Army/Navy game celebration would be held at the Bella Cucina restaurant on December 14th, beginning at 14:30 hours. Pre-game festivities will be conducted with lots of pizza and beverages. Come join other Post Members as we celebrate this long-term rivalry and camaraderie.

23) The Sergeant-At-Arms/Entertainment Committee Report – Rick Sessa

- a. Rick Sessa thanked all those who attended the Patriotic Concert in the Park on Saturday, September 21st. The funds received from the concert were \$4,700. A special shout out to Jim McCriskin for his efforts to get the word out and for Mike's Garage Band for their support.
- b. Rick informed the Members that the Entertainment Committee is working hard to plan some new and exciting activities for the Post membership.

c. The same evening after the Army/Navy football game, the Brunswick Community College Nurses Training Jimmy Buffett Tribute Show will take place. Remember that a portion of the ticket cost goes to funding BCCNTE. Again, that's Saturday, December 14th at 19:00 at the Odell Williamson Auditorium on the BCC Campus.

d. Gary Purcell already informed the Post Members of the Post 543 Annual Members Recognition, Remembrance & Charter Dinner – January 22, 2025 at the Saint James Community Center, beginning at 18:00 hours. Rick reminded the Members that the dinner/meeting would start one hour earlier than our normal start time of 19:00 hours due to the dinner and awards ceremony. Please mark your calendars with this adjusted start time.

e. A tentative Valentine's Day Dinner Theater Trip is under consideration by the Entertainment Committee:

- February timeframe
- Currently working on details
- May rent a bus so everyone can travel together
- Currently looking at perhaps a murder mystery event

f. A Fort Liberty Day Trip is also currently under consideration by the Entertainment Committee.

- March timeframe
- The Post Commander will host the trip
- Looking at renting a bus
- Spend the day touring Fort Liberty

g. If you are interested in any of these trips or would like to assist the Committee in the planning stages, please contact Rick Sessa at 973-714-5253 or email popsess@gmail.com. Rick reminded the Membership that these events were to help provide camaraderie and fellowship opportunities to all and encouraged everyone to participate.

24) The Service Officer Report - Steve Muir

- a. Steve Muir mentioned that he had placed a dozen fact sheets on a table at the back of the room. The fact sheet covers VA's 10 step process for the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Care Givers. He encouraged anyone interested, stop by the table and take a fact sheet.
- b. Steve shared that there are currently 775,000 Veterans in North Carolina and that 129,000 who are active-duty personnel. Only 25% of them are receiving VA benefits.
- c. Steve Muir indicated that the WWII Veteran project is still ongoing. The Post got him a new assist chair which he is very happy with. The Veteran was also presented with a Memorial Quilt by the Shallotte Quilters. Steve hopes to get John to one of our General Membership Meetings to speak as a guest speaker.
- d. The Korean Veteran (Gene), who was in the hospital, is now in a rehabilitation center and should be returned to Terra Bellum Nursing Home shortly. The Oak Island Veteran's Committee of the Elks Lodge has approved a \$1,000.00 for the Korean Veteran located at the Terra Bellum nursing home. These funds will allow the Veteran to continue to receive care at the nursing home, once he returns.
- e. Steve Muir informed the Membership that he and his committee have been working on seven new cases since the last Membership Meeting, which are mainly claim related. He is also assisting a female Veteran on Oak Island and will be providing she and her family with a Thanksgiving dinner.
- f. The takeaway from the fall conference at Raleigh was the briefing of eight different Post Commanders who outlined the level of damage that occurred because of the tropical storm that devastated Northwest North Carolina. It was heart wrenching to hear about the damage, but heartwarming to hear about how the Posts nationwide came together to provide support and recovery resources. Steve related that a Post in Michigan was able to raise over a million dollars and sent down over 300 trucks with giant rolls of hay to feed the livestock in the devastated area. It may take over a year before the recovery is complete. Steve indicated that there was major concern by many of the Post Commanders in the affected areas that there was no emergency response communication system between the American Legion Posts and the District or Department Commanders. They are currently putting together a system that will help mobilize the Posts under emergency scenarios.

g. Steve announced “breaking news” that the Congress’s House of Representatives passed the Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veteran’s Health Care and Benefits Act (H.R. 8371). The act covers many additional benefits. It has been sent to the Senate, but its future is unclear. This bill addresses various programs, benefits, and services provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), including those related to health care, educational assistance, home loans, homelessness, and disability and memorial affairs.

Among other elements, the bill

- modifies the administration of the Veterans Community Care Program, including by providing protections for care agreements between veterans and clinicians.
- increases the expenditure cap for non-institutional care alternatives to nursing home care.
- provides certain support to family caregivers under the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers.
- modifies the administration of certain educational assistance programs and benefits, including by removing the expiration of a surviving spouse’s entitlement under the Marine Gunnery Sergeant John David Fry Scholarship.
- expands the Native American Direct Loan program by allowing Native American veterans to refinance other existing mortgage loans on the same property if certain conditions are met.
- requires the VA to provide a burial and funeral allowance for certain veterans who die prior to October 1, 2026, in a home or other setting at which the veteran was receiving VA hospice care (if such care was directly preceded by VA hospital or nursing home care).
- temporarily increases the maximum rate of per diem payments provided by the VA to entities that furnish services and transitional housing to homeless veterans.
- authorizes a program to modernize the electronic health record and other relevant health information technology systems of the VA; and
- addresses various oversight and reporting matters.

- h. Steve also asked how many Post Members use the Supply, NC VA Clinic. He then asked how many use the Wilmington, NC VA Clinic. Both come under the Fayetteville VA Medical Center and there will be a VA Town Hall Meeting at the Supply VA clinic on November 21st from 15:00 hours to 16:00 hours. Executive leaders will be there from the Fayetteville Center and other local VA representatives. They will present updates on what they are doing in Brunswick County and conduct a question-and-answer period. The notification of the Town Hall was sent to all Members in a Commander's Communication earlier in the week.
- i. Steve indicated that several of the Post 543 Members attended the Brunswick County Veteran's Coalition meeting on November 13th, which was a very informative meeting. One of the speakers was from MOA (Military Officer's Association) who spoke on "How to prepare and plan for final patrol". The Post 543 ExCom discussed this and has recommended that the guest speaker be invited to share her presentation with our Membership. Steve solicited input from the Membership who were in attendance regarding whether to have a separate session for this type of presentation before our regularly scheduled General Membership Meeting and invite the spouses. It was unanimous that we should schedule it. Steve will work with the Commander and the Adjutant to get the presentation scheduled.
- j. Steve advised the Membership that they should check their VA Health card expiration date because they do expire. They can be renewed at the VA Clinic in Wilmington at the airport. They only renew cards twice per week (Monday & Wednesday) because the person must come down from Fayetteville.

25) The Post Historian Report - Stephen Burns

- a. Stephen updated the Membership regarding the efforts to evaluate launching a Sons of American Legion squadron. He and Rick Sessa have been doing research and will present their findings to the ExCom at the January ExCom meeting.
- b. Stephen also indicated he has been working with Jim Hilty on the Oratorical contest planning stages and looks forward to the contest taking place in January. He and Jim will visit the Early High School program on November 21st. They are working with two students currently who will be participating in the upcoming contest.

- c. Stephen is working with the Korean Veteran (Gene) regarding his possible participation in the upcoming Cape Fear Region Veteran's Honor Flight that is scheduled in April 2025. There are some concerns regarding the Veteran's health and those issues are being addressed prior to registering him for the flight.
- d. Stephen indicated that the display case in the Town Hall is currently scheduled to transition to the US Air Force memorabilia in January. If any Members have memorabilia they would like displayed, please contact Stephen directly to coordinate.
- e. The Commander also reminded the Membership that the Honor Flight website was <https://www.honorflightcfa.org> and that anyone interested in going on the flight should register as soon as possible because the flight fills up quickly. He also reminded the Membership that we will have a Coordinator from the Honor Flight program to do a brief presentation at the January General Membership Meeting.

26) The Commander reviewed the upcoming events list with the Membership. He reminded the Membership that there will NOT be a Membership Meeting in December. The Commander asked Jim Hilty to provide a brief overview of the Oratorical Contest program. Jim informed the Membership of the dates of the three different contest sessions. He also requested anyone who might be interested in volunteering to support any of these sessions, please see him or Stephen. He had a sign-up sheet on one of the tables at the rear of the room.

27) The Commander solicited any additional input or comments:

- a. Tom Picinich mentioned that memorial brick sales were still underway and that an uptick in sales recently has been very good. He reminded Members of the process for ordering bricks in memory of their loved ones who served in the military. The Commander thanked Tom for all his hard work in getting the bricks ordered and installed. Tom indicated a brick location catalog would be available online at the Post website shortly.

b. The Commander reminded the Membership that the next General Membership Meeting will also be a Member Recognition Dinner and will take place January 22nd at the Saint James Community Center at 6:00 PM.

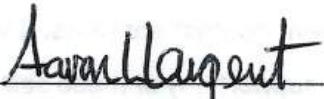
c. Rick Sessa asked if any of the Members would be willing to bake cookies for the State Port Pilot cookie contest. The Post gets a one-half page advertisement in return for participating in the cookie contest. If you are interested in participating, please see Rick after the meeting or email him at popsess@gmail.com.

28) General Membership Meeting Closing Prayer – Chaplain

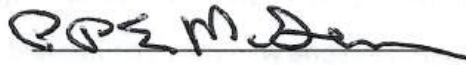
29) The Post 543 Color Guard retired the colors. – Commander

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

31) The General Membership Meeting was adjourned at 8:30 PM. – Commander



Aaron L. Largent
Adjutant



Phillip E. McGhee
Commander