

VETERANS COUNCIL OF ST. JOHNS COUNTY
MINUTES OF GENERAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING

JUNE 29, 2023

CALL TO ORDER: Chairman Dudley

WELCOME AND OPENING REMARKS: Chairman Dudley

PLEDGE: Chairman Dudley

INVOCATION: Ray Quinn

INTRODUCTION OF SPEAKERS/GUESTS: Chairman Dudley

There was a large attendance and the new attendees introduced themselves.

MINUTES OF LAST MEETING: Minutes of last meeting conducted May 25, 2023, were presented by Chairman Dudley. Copies of the Minutes and Agenda are available on the sign-in table and were sent to members electronically by the Secretary. The minutes were approved by voice vote with no changes.

TREASURER'S REPORT: Treasurer John Mountcastle provided a detailed report that as of May 24, 2023, there was a balance of **\$159,981.10** and as of date of meeting, the total liquid balance is down to **\$156,374.44**. This includes the Fidelity Money Market of **\$146,778.55**, yielding around 4.7%. Treasurer Mountcastle went over the amounts spent this past month on various actions to assist our Veterans and other funds and how they were acquired. The total available cash at this time is **\$162,374.33**, with an amount of **\$28,869.54** restricted to specific programs as provided in the Treasurer's Report. The Treasurer's Report was approved by voice vote with no changes.

SPEAKERS:

MICHAEL DIONIAN, USS ORLECK, THE JACKSONVILLE NAVAL MUSEUM

Michael Dionian introduced himself to the group, he is a Navy Officer (Ret.) and spoke of the USS Orleck, the Jacksonville historic Navy ship that is open for tours. Mr. Dionian gave the location at the Navy Pier in downtown Jacksonville. He spoke of how the Orleck was towed from Texas to its arrival in Jacksonville in March 2022.

Mr. Dionian spoke of the history of the Orleck and how it was named after Lieutenant Joseph Orleck, who was killed off of Salerno, Italy, during the invasion of Italy in 1943. The Orleck was commissioned in September 1945, right at the end of WWII but not see action in WWII. The USS Orleck served in the Korean War and was awarded 4 Battle Stars during that conflict. The Orleck served in the Vietnam War in the 7th Fleet and spent a lot of time in homeport in Japan and fired over 11,000 rounds in support of troops on the beach and was given a designation as Top Gun Destroyer off of the coast of Vietnam.

The Orleck was decommissioned in 1982 and was transferred to the Turkish Navy and renamed and served in the Turkish Navy until 1998, where she decommissioned after combined serve to both countries for over 53 years. She was one of the longest serving destroyers in history.

The Orleck returned to Port Orange, Texas, where she was initially built in 2000 and she was a museum ship there for 10 years and then was transferred Lake Charles, Louisiana, where she was a ship museum for another 10 years. After she broke away from her moorings during a hurricane and Lake Charles was not interested in having a ship here anymore. Jacksonville was looking for a ship museum and she was transferred to Jacksonville to become a ship museum. Tours were opened to the ship in October 2022, and she was just moved to her home port in Jacksonville in March 2023, and opened for tours. There have been many visitors and tours since the USS Orleck was opened to the public in Jacksonville.

The floor was opened by Mr. Dionian for questions and answers about the USS Orleck.

RICK McALLISTER, "THE LAST PATROL"

Rick McAllister is a Vietnam Veteran and has lived here in St. Augustine since 2001. Mr. McAllister shared the background of The Last Patrol and how it was started. The Last Patrol is a project to take Vietnam Veterans on a 500-mile pilgrimage walk across Northern Spain. It will take 44 days and Mr. McAllister has completed the pilgrimage 3 times before. The fourth time, he will, for the first time, be taking 5 other Vietnam Veterans with him. The Last Patrol this year will begin on September 19th.

The Last Patrol was started by Mr. McAllister after he recuperated from triple bypass open heart surgery from the effects of being exposed to Agent Orange while serving in Vietnam. As part of the physical therapy of coming off that surgery a

friend, knowing that he liked to walk a lot for physical activity, asked him if he had ever heard of the Camino de Santiago in Northern Spain. The friend suggested he watch the movie "The Way." The movie moved him, and he prepared himself to make that first walk of the Camino de Santiago. The journey ends at a major cathedral and inside the cathedral are the bones of the Apostles St. James. He went over all the regions that the walk encompasses in Spain.

The long-term objective is to video the entire journey and produce a professional documentary that can then be shared with other veterans and veteran organizations promoting the idea of a healing pilgrimage. There is a GoFundMe account where donations can be made to help accomplish this mission. Mr. McAllister stated that if anyone had a friend or family member who served in Vietnam and who is no longer with us (KIA or subsequent passing) you can let him know the name and service branch and it will be placed on a scroll to take with them on this pilgrimage.

The floor was opened to questions and answers about The Last Patrol.

COMMITTEE REPORTS:

VETERANS SERVICE OFFICE UPDATE, JOSEPH MCDERMOTT

Mr. McDermott discussed the Veterans Service Office and what is going on with claims filed through that office. Mr. McDermott discussed how the appeals claims process prior to February 2019, are filed and the process in which the veteran goes through with that filed claim. The process included having to go through a Decision Review Officer (DRO) who would look at the claim itself and reverse the denial and grant or continue to deny the claim. Then the claim would go to the Board of Veteran's Appeals (BVA), the law judge. It could take the DRO up to a year to review the appeal, if you didn't win at that level it would go to the BVA which at times could take up to several years before a decision was rendered. In February 2019, the appeals process what changed to the Appeals Modernization Act which gave 3 different lanes to travel for an appeal – a supplemental appeal, higher level review or straight to the Board of Veteran Appeals. Mr. McDermott explained those 3 levels and the length of time for the appeals through this Act. The Legacy Appeals are now being pushed forward to get them completed quicker.

Mr. McDermott also discussed claims and the PAC ACT is still educating about the ACT. There is a lot to the ACT and it's very complicated. It is taking about 4 to 6 months from the time the claim is submitted until there is a response. The Veterans Service Office is trying to educate the Veterans of the time it takes to file these claims.

VETERANS TREATMENT COURT, JOHN LESLIE

Mr. Leslie introduced himself, Mentor Coordinator for the St. Johns and Putnam County Veterans Treatment Court. Although the Treatment Court is actually taking Veterans from 8 other counties throughout the NE Florida area.

The Treatment Court is in the middle of its 7th year and brought in 130 veterans into the program and has graduated 76 participants. Two other graduates will join that number at the next Treatment Court session. All were invited to attend to observe how the Treatment Court operates. There are 33 veterans currently inflow.

The first Alumni Reunion was held at Vail Point Park and will schedule another reunion for next year at a cooler time of year.

OLD/NEW BUSINESS:

Chairman Dudley discussed the Veteran's Day Program Committee and they have met a couple of times for this year's program to be held on November 11th. This year's program will take last year's cancelled (due to hurricane) program and move it forward to this year. The theme of the program is to honor all Veterans that served during the Global War on Terrorism – October 2001 to August 2021. A great program is lined up.

Chairman Dudley also spoke about effort that the Veterans Council is putting forward to one day have a facility here in St. Johns County to house homeless veterans. Several months ago, we applied for a grant through the State of Florida for assistance with that cause and Chairman Dudley received a call from Representative Stephens that the grant was approved in the amount of 3 million dollars. St. Johns County also appropriated a grant for that endeavor in the amount of 2 million dollars – for a total of 5 million dollars in seed money. The site selected for this facility is on SR 16 and we are looking to purchase that particular property. Chairman Dudley will continue to report on this as it progresses.

The MOAA Board made a short presentation and presented the Veterans Council with the profits of their annual convention and presented the Council with a check for \$10,000 to help with our homeless veterans' crisis.

The floor was opened to all who wished to bring anything before the Council.

Next Veterans Council meeting will be held on Thursday, July 27th beginning at 7:00pm.

The meeting adjourned at 8:30 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

William Dudley, Chairman