

VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA
Chapter 641

Minutes of the Membership Meeting – 2 March 2024

The meeting was held at the Montgomery College Cultural Arts Center and on Zoom, commencing at 0932 hours and attended by 19 members and 2 associate members. President Bill Bennett assumed the chairmanship of the meeting.

Members present included Bill Bennett, Jim Smith, Roland Kauffman, Steve Campanella, Bill Highland, Bill Gray, Dave Gudes, Rodney Eng, Dan Maher, Carl Hirsch Art Wong, Imants Celtnieks, Don Stanton, Henry Baez, Richard Epstein, Kenny Titcomb, Howard Rosenthal, Michael Higgs, and Amos Mathews, plus associate members Huong Le and Thao Phung (with Thanh and Dat).

A motion to accept the minutes from 3 February was presented. The minutes were approved, after noting under County Report that Ross Cohen is the Deputy Secretary of the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs; the Secretary is Anthony Woods. Also, in the list of members present, Dan Maher was listed twice.

Membership Report: Roland reported that we have a total of 149 members, along with 16 associate members. The 149 members include 146 life members and 3 incarcerated members.

Treasurer's Report: We do not have a Treasurer. Former Treasurer Bill Highland discussed our outgoing expenses.

Ukrainian Relief: Art Wong is working with our contact in Gaithersburg to determine what is needed.

3DE Deliveries: Our 3DE Committee includes Rodney Eng, Dave Gudes, Bill Highland, Bill Gray, and Howard Rosenthal. Rodney said we have not had any requests lately from the DC VAMC for supplies of clothing and other items. They have not yet spent our \$400 check from last month.

Wall Washing: Bill Gray said the schedule is not yet set, though James Pierce of the Park Service indicated we will get two dates. Our veteran friends in Harrisburg and West Virginia want to join us. Bill reiterated that members of our chapter are needed to address and advise other groups on Saturday mornings. Rodney brought up problems we have had with the equipment. A heated discussion followed.

Incarcerated Veterans: Roland said there were no prison visits last month.

Rockville Parade: Roland asked if there was interest in marching in the Rockville Memorial Day Parade. We won first prize in 2022 within the military category; the 2023 parade was cancelled due to weather. Today, only three people voted to participate, so we will not.

County Report: Bill Gray attended the Montgomery County Commission on Veterans Affairs meeting, via Zoom, on February 20. Michael S. Heimall, Director of the DC VA Medical Center, gave an update on the PACT Act and on initiatives at the Medical Center.

The PACT Act is perhaps the largest health care and benefit expansion in VA history. The full name of the law is The Sergeant First Class (SFC) Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act. The PACT Act was signed into law by President Biden in August 2022. The PACT Act expands and extends eligibility for VA health care for veterans with toxic exposures and veterans of the Vietnam, Gulf War, and post-9/11 eras; adds more than 20 presumptive

conditions for burn pits, Agent Orange, and other toxic exposures; adds more presumptive-exposure locations for Agent Orange and radiation; requires VA to provide a toxic exposure screening to every veteran enrolled in VA health care; and helps the VA improve research, staff education, and treatment related to toxic exposures.

VA has a new proposal that would give expanded presumptive benefits to veterans who served in locations where Agent Orange was tested, used, or stored outside Vietnam, including locations in Canada, India, and military locations in 12 U.S. states, including Montana. As part of the Federal Register process, veterans, advocates, and the general public have 60 days to comment on the proposal.

Updates on initiatives and services at the DC VA Medical Center, from 2023 to present:

- Providing care to 800 new veterans a month. Veterans are entering the system for a number of reasons including the expanded eligibility, staffing challenges at Walter Reed and Fort Belvoir, and veterans over age 65 relying on TRICARE.
- Still need assistance with providing outreach to the community. 128,000 veterans are enrolled in VA healthcare, but only 78,000 veterans use the VA healthcare system.
- In 2024, the VA will be planning future capital infrastructure needs, developing a master plan and determining how to use the current space at the DC VA Medical Center that will inform the design for a new Medical Center. A master plan should be delivered in May.

Charitable Giving: Bill Highland mentioned that the mail has delivered several requests for contributions to local charities. President Bill said it's the time of year when we give to our usual organizations.

Motion: Authorize spending \$1,000 on four charities, split as such:

- \$250 to Shepard's Table
- \$250 to America's VetDogs
- \$250 to NAMI (National Alliance for Mental Illness)
- \$250 to Quilts of Valor.

Motion Approved

Vet Center: Bill Gray asked that we buy coffee supplies for the Vet Center.

Motion: Authorize spending \$49.95 for the Vet Center

Motion Approved

Maryland License Plates: Dan Mayer said the Governor has changed the requirement for a Maryland Disabled Plate from 100% disabled to 50% disabled.

Chapter Elections April 6: Bill Gray and the Nominating Committee submitted a slate of nominees for all chapter offices. Elections will be held at our membership meeting on April 6. Any member in good standing, with a second (also in good standing), may nominate any additional candidates for any of the positions. The Nominating Committee includes Bill Gray, Michael Higgs, and Dave Gudes (replacing Amos Mathews). Their nominations are:

President: Bill Bennett

1st Vice President: Roland Kauffman

2nd Vice President: Stephen Campanella

Treasurer:

Secretary: Jim Smith

Director-at-Large: Dave Gudes

State Council Representatives (two-year term):

Bill Bennett, Guy Hayslett, Roland Kauffman, Don Stanton

Kensington Book Festival: Richard Epstein is organizing veteran writers to read (and sell books) at the 17th annual Kensington Day of the Book Festival on Sunday, April 21. Information is available at <https://www.dayofthebook.com/>

Thursdays at Noon: A group of chapter members, along with other veterans, get together every Thursday at Noon. If the weather is good, they meet in the pavilion at East Norbeck Park. If the weather is bad, they meet at Mission BBQ in Rockville. Contact Charlie Shyab for information, fossilflea@verizon.net. All are welcome.

Breakfast: Many thanks go to Huong and Thao for today's wonderful breakfast sandwiches.

Meeting Close: At 1032 hours a motion was made to adjourn, and President Bill adjourned the meeting.

Upcoming Chapter Events:

- Membership Meeting preceded by Board of Directors Meeting, Saturday, April 6, at 0930. Meet at the Montgomery College Cultural Arts Center.
- Membership Meeting, Saturday, May 4, at 0930. Meet at the Montgomery College Cultural Arts Center.
- Membership Meeting, Saturday, June 1, at 0930. Meet at the Montgomery College Cultural Arts Center.