

The American Legion at 100 Years **Post 543, St. James, Continuing to Serve America**

By Mike Fegan

Commander, American Legion Post 543

One hundred years ago this week The American Legion was formed in Paris by soldiers of World War One. They created a veteran's organization unlike others before. The new American Legion would be devoted to strengthening the nation –not just serving themselves—through four primary pillars of Americanism, national security, veterans' rehabilitation and children and youth. There are now nearly two million members of the American Legion.

In 2011, eighteen local veterans formed American Legion Post 543. It now has 200 members with an unswerving commitment to programs under the four pillars of the American Legion serving the greater Southport area, Brunswick county, North Carolina and our nation.

Since 1919, the American Legion has been devoted to furthering the basic American principles of justice, freedom and democracy. Post 543's American Legion programs under the Americanism Pillar include Boys and Girls State workshops and the Constitutional Speech Program.

Since its founding, Post 543 has sponsored 40 Brunswick County high school students as delegates to Tarheel Boys and Girls State. These programs help students become familiar with North Carolina government and political process to prepare them for future leadership in communities within our State.

The Constitutional Speech Program allows high school students to compete for scholarships beginning at the local Post level in January and culminates with a national contest in Indianapolis in April. Contestants deliver speeches about the US. Constitution, emphasizing the duties and responsibilities of U.S. Citizens. Since starting the program in Brunswick County in 2014, Post 543 has had ten students compete in its contests.

As they waited to return home following the Armistice of 1918, the veterans of the war reflected on how unprepared America had been for the war. They adopted a strong National Defense as a pillar of the American Legion, with an emphasis of preparing for war even in time of peace. Just 23 years later America entered World War II, and Americans have been in harm's way almost continuously since then, including today.

Post 543 supports the national defense pillar through our sponsorships of programs that assist America's armed forces personnel and their families. These include national organizations like the USO, the Wounded Warrior Project, the Folds of Honor and Special Operations Warrior foundations as well as Operation North State, which is focused on active duty personnel and veterans in North Carolina. Closer to home the Post supports Operation at Ease in St. James, helps Coast Guard personnel based on Oak Island, and pays for the buses that bring Marines here for Thanksgiving.

In early meetings after returning home from the war, the founders of the American Legion became increasingly concerned with the plight of disabled veterans.

At the urging of the American Legion the Veterans Bureau was formed in 1930, which became the current Veterans Administration. In 1944, the American Legion was instrumental in securing the passage of the GI Bill. The work of the American Legion continues today, advocating for better performance by the VA in assisting veterans of all wars.

Post 543 assists local veterans by helping them navigate through the VA and other agencies as they seek benefits they have earned. Post 543 reached out further to all Brunswick County veterans following Hurricane Florence to help them secure aid provided by the American Legion's national assistance programs and to provide direct financial assistance from the Post itself to veterans in need. Direct aid by Post 543 to veterans in need continues throughout the year.

The Partnership to Advance Veteran Education is a unique program started by Post 543. In partnership with other civic organizations, the Post contributes funds to the Brunswick Community College Foundation to employ veterans attending the college so they can meet their incidental needs by working on campus being supervised by those who understand the irregular schedule of classes they must attend.

Concerns for children and youth by the American Legion undoubtedly began on the battlefields during World War I, where shared dangers and hardships created a deep sense of responsibility for children of fallen brothers in arms.

Post 543's local programs for children and youth tend to overlap with Americanism and National Defense as the Post supports local Boy Scouts, The JROTC at SBHS, the Civil Air Patrol, the Brunswick County Schools Robotics team and computers for kids.

Throughout its first 100 years the American Legion has become the largest veteran's organization in America, but more importantly, a significant contributor to the quality of life for all Americans. And for eight years Post 543 has provided American Legion programs to the greater Southport area as its veterans have continued their service to America.

MF/2/27/19