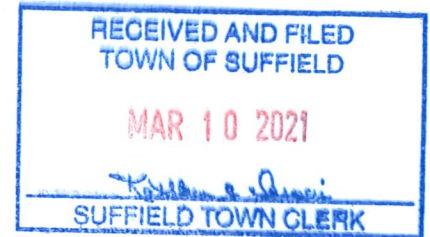


**MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING OF THE
VETERANS APPRECIATION COMMITTEE
FEBRUARY 16, 2021
7:00 P.M.
VIA ZOOM TELECONFERENCE**



Present via Zoom teleconference: First Selectman Melissa M. Mack, Selectman Kathleen Harrington, Executive Assistant Kris Lambert, Deputy Assessor Lisa Trase, Gunnery Sergeant Frederick “Fritz” King, USMC Retired, Lieutenant Colonel William E. Moryto, USMC Retired and Susan Mayne

First Selectman Mack called the meeting to order at 7:00 pm and began with the Pledge of Allegiance.

First Selectman Mack asked that those present observe a moment of silence for all those who gave their lives in service, especially our own Corporal Stephen Richard Bixler, USMC and Dustin Louis Doyon, Electronics Technician Third Class Petty Officer, USN.

Overview of Committee Mission and Background

- First Selectman Mack expressed her thanks to all those on the call who have served our country, for their service and thanked their families for the sacrifice they made to allow these men and women to do so on our behalf.
- The Town has been talking for the last few years about establishing structure around the Town’s Veterans initiatives. It should not be up to the priorities of who is sitting in the First Selectman’s office or the hardworking volunteer base at the VFW to make sure that the Town’s recognitions of our veterans receive the attention and resources they deserve.
- First Selectman Mack recommended a task force structured committee
 - Open to all interested parties who would like to participate
 - Serving in an advisory capacity to the Board of Selectmen
 - Selectman Kathleen Harrington has volunteered to assist the committee
- The mission of the committee will be to organize, support and recommend veterans initiatives on behalf of the Town of Suffield.
- The Board of Selectmen approved the formation of the committee at the end of 2020.

First Selectman Mack thanked all for attending the inaugural meeting of this committee.

Overview of Current Initiatives

Veterans Memorial in Veterans Park

- **Maintenance**
 - Over the last two years, the Town of Suffield has cleaned/washed the monument twice.
 - We have added annual inspection, maintenance and cleaning of the monument to the Public Works proactive maintenance schedule and plan for it in the annual operating budget.
 - Spring 2020: handrails were painted, pavers were reset, broken pavers were replaced, the Town reset edging and refreshed landscaping in Veteran’s Park.
 - In consultation with members of the Suffield Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 9544, the Town decided not to re-finish the plaques.
 - Extra attention was given to addressing “rust” stains on the granite this last spring, removal was successful.

- As we work on the expansion process, we will continue to research best practices for cleaning and maintaining this important town asset.

- **Expansion**

- First Selectman Mack has read all of the files from the First Selectman's Office on the history of the Veterans Memorial and the committees that served since its inception.
- First Selectman Mack is pleased to be discussing the expansion of the Veterans Memorial after its dedication 17 years ago. She provided the following history:
 - The original committee was founded in 1990 under First Selectman Paul Kulas.
 - Second committee was convened on November 17, 1999 by Board of Selectmen when Robert Skinner was First Selectman.
 - The Memorial was dedicated to the Town of Suffield in 2003 under First Selectman Elaine Sarsynski.
 - After installation of the Memorial, in July 2004, First Selectman Sarsynski asked the Board of Selectmen to convene another committee with the scope as follows:
 - 1) *To determine if additional recognition is warranted for veterans who were not listed on the new Veterans Memorial Monument.*
 - 2) *To address special recognition for disabled veterans.*
 - 3) *To consider at what point in the future the Town should address the group of veterans inadvertently omitted from the monument.* This committee decided that those inadvertently omitted would be kept track of and addressed in the future.
- First Selectman Mack has a short list that has come forward during the last five years that she has been in office and she is addressing any other such lists with department heads.
- This will start the process to recommend that the Board of Selectmen appoint another Veterans Memorial Committee to explore next steps for this important monument.
- Next steps are to start with the existing plans we have on file and determine a scope of work; then we would issue a request for proposals to prepare a conceptual design.
- Criteria for inclusion in the next phase will be a very important decision of this committee.
- First Selectman Mack noted that a controversial issue was who was to be included in the original phase, with the committee deciding it would be those who were residents of Suffield at the time of induction into the Service.
- This decision has elicited some complaints over the years.
- First Selectman Mack expressed her interest in knowing what other Towns use as criteria for who is included, which can be used as a point of discussion. This will be an important consideration as we decide how to move forward.
- We have \$15,000 in a capital account and First Selectman Mack has requested \$20,000 more in this upcoming budget to get the conceptual design process started.

Connecting with Suffield's Veterans

- **Municipal Veterans Representative**

- First Selectman Mack would like to explore the Municipal Veterans Representative role and consider the Formation of a Sub-Committee in accordance with Conn. Gen. Stat. Sec. 27-135, to serve as this important resource.
- Lisa Trase, Deputy Assessor, has graciously served as a volunteer in this role and Helen Tetz, the town Assessor, did so before her.

- It makes sense to find another alternative as Lisa's role in the Assessor's Office continues to expand.
- The position can be filled, by statute, with a municipal employee or a committee if established by ordinance.
- A sub-committee of this Veterans Appreciation Committee could also serve in this capacity.
- Lisa Trase provided an overview of the position:
 - i. This position is basically a local point of contact.
 - ii. Requires completion of a 4-hour training session annually which is provided by the Office of Advocacy and Assistance – held in May/June timeframe
 - iii. Training provides important information, contacts and informational material to take back to town for distribution as needed.
 - iv. Room for this position to grow and a large amount of information is available.
 - v. An individual with more of a background with veterans would probably be more suitable to provide this type of assistance.

Mr. Moryto asked if individuals are currently being referred to the local VFW for assistance. Ms. Trase said that the VFW is not included in the training, however, she would be more than happy to refer them. Mr. Moryto offered support from the VFW.

Ms. Trase discussed the Veterans exemptions available in Suffield through the State of Connecticut, which many residents are unaware of. The town is allowed to give exemptions to veterans who served 90 days of service during a period of war or veterans with a disability rating regardless of their time of service, as long as they file a DD 214 (Certificate of Release or Discharge from Active Duty) in the Town Clerk's office. Ms. Trase explained that one of her missions, along with the larger group, is to get more of our town veterans in the system to receive the exemptions that are available and are truly deserved.

Mr. Moryto suggested ways in which to get this information out to the veteran population.

- **Suffield Veterans' Stories**

First Selectman Mack made the following introduction:

"I am honored to introduce Fredrick "Fritz" King Retired Gunnery Sergeant of the United States Marine Corp. and on behalf of the Town of Suffield, I am so grateful for the enormous task he has undertaken to capture the incredible stories of Suffield's servicemen and women. To take on this effort when so many are feeling isolated, makes it an even greater benefit to those in our town."

Gunnery Sergeant King introduced himself and noted that he was the recruiter at the VFW in town along with Lieutenant Colonel Moryto. GySgt. King explained that the idea for his project initially started during First Selectman Mack's speech at the last Veterans Day Celebration when she stated that there were over 600 veterans here in Suffield. Intrigued by this number, he later ran into a woman that same day who thanked him for his service and began a conversation about her own father who had served as a sailor in World War II. He inquired as to whether she had ever discussed his service with him and she answered no. He was saddened by this answer. He went on to explain that *"we know the historical battles and we know the historical figures, but what we don't know, and often times lose, are the stories of the individual soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines who served"* and this is what he is hoping to capture. He wants to capture these stories, which are important not only to military history but to the history of Suffield as well. Reaching out to the town, GySgt. King was able to obtain a list of Korean War veterans from Deputy Assessor Lisa Trase and began his search for the soldier's stories. Thus far he has identified 483 veterans in Suffield from World War II to the current Global War on Terror. He

has sent introductory letters to all of these veterans requesting interviews. Since beginning the project in December 2020 he has conducted 23 in-person interviews with veterans, 16 veterans have answered a questionnaire via email, identified 2 deceased veterans, 10 veterans refused or declined to be interviewed, and 11 veterans letters were returned to sender as "unable to forward." This means a total of 62 persons have been identified out of the 483 individuals who were sent letters. GySgt. King is excited about the project and plans to conduct as many interviews as possible between now and December 31st of this year. Once completed, he hopes to compile all the information he obtained through interviews and put together a book The Voices of Suffield Veterans.

GySgt. King explained that the nice part of this job has been his ability to be put in touch with his fellow veterans as when he moved back to Suffield he felt very alone; believing that people did not understand where he was coming from or what he had been through. This project has opened his eyes to see all those who are in our town who are also veterans and understand regardless of which uniform they wore or in what capacity they served.

GySgt. King mentioned that the VFW hopes to open its doors on St. Patrick's Day and a recruiting table will be set up, not only to get members recruited into the VFW but also to recruit people to get their stories and allow them to meet face to face and confirm that this effort is not a scam. He is hopeful that he will be able to capture some amazing history.

First Selectman Mack thanked GySgt. King for all that he is doing and noted that he will be assisting the town in developing a database to be able to contact Suffield's veterans with information and support. The Suffield Veterans' Stories project will help with this effort.

First Selectman Mack noted that in her review of old files there was a set of Veterans' Memorial Committee minutes from 10/19/04 which mentioned a veterans database being set up at the library, however, she is unsure of whether this was ever set up but plans to look into it.

GySgt. King stated that he had spoken to Lester Smith, Town Historian, and although he did not have any information per se, he suggested that the historical section of the public library would have records and provided GySgt. King with a contact to help in his search. GySgt. King offered his assistance in finding out more about the possible database.

First Selectman Mack would like the Veterans Appreciation Committee to assist with content for the Veterans Resource Page on the Town of Suffield Website to ensure the information is up to date and useful. The link to the webpage is as follows: <https://www.suffieldct.gov/our-town/veterans>.

First Selectman Mack made the following introduction:

"It gives me great pleasure to introduce Lieutenant Colonel William E. Moryto, USMC Retired who has been so instrumental in making sure that our observances in town have been special ceremonies. I want you to mention more about the VFW and your outreach, because as part of this committee, I want to be able to help you with rebuilding the membership at the VFW and help support their infrastructure."

LtCol. Moryto described the problem they currently encountering with membership at the VFW which is the "F" signifying Foreign. We do have numerous veterans in town, but many of them did not serve on foreign soil during war time, which is an eligibility requirement for membership at the VFW. There is an option to start an Auxiliary, which is currently being discussed, that would allow for any veterans and their families to join. Rebuilding the post is another challenge being faced as the older generations are starting to pass on and the newer generations are not as attached as the older generations were. They

plan to try and revive the post in its physical appearance and atmosphere and remove the stigma that may be attached in order to start getting people through the door.

LtCol. Moryto also discussed the need for permanent flag poles at the Veterans Memorial as the current poles are not designed for year-round use. He would also like to see all service flags displayed at the memorial including the POW flags. These changes will provide a much better presentation of our dedication to our veterans.

LtCol. Moryto inquired about a \$3,000 surplus that was reported to have been given to the Board of Finance after the Veterans Memorial was originally dedicated years ago. First Selectman Mack responded that she had recently inquired about this fund and was told that there was a remaining balance of \$490.00. She also noted that maintenance of the memorial is now included in the town's operating budget and will continue to be included moving forward.

LtCol. Moryto also mentioned that he has been made aware of names that are missing from the memorial. First Selectman Mack has also received information over the years pertaining to missing names that should be included. Her hope is that with the new committee being formed, this will be taken care of in the near future. She has been told there is one blank name space left on the existing memorial but does not feel that it is her place to make the decision as to which name should be included. She feels this decision should be left to the committee.

Lt Col. Moryto noted that a "Go Fund Me" page has been set up in order to help with the cost of major repairs to the front entrance of the VFW Hall. The entrance is beginning to fail, is not ADA compliant and has a leak that is entering into the building which all make for a dangerous situation. They will be applying for a Zak Grant to assist in financing this project. He encourages all to support this project and spread the word to friends and acquaintances.

GySgt. King asked for confirmation that there was only one slot remaining on the current monument. First Selectman Mack responded that yes, according to Paul Kulas, that information is correct.

GySgt. King added that there will always be more conflicts further down on the road and a need for more space, which does not appear to have been considered during the monuments building. He inquired as to whether there were plans to expand the existing monument or perhaps add a second monument. First Selectman Mack responded that she plans to support an expansion. Last year \$10,000 was set aside and there will hopefully be an additional \$20,000 set aside this year for a conceptual plan to expand the monument. The goal is to be more forward thinking than in the past, and plan to meet current expansion needs as well as the needs we will have further down the road. It has been 17 years since the first phase and she hopes the momentum can continue towards building a second phase.

- **Observances**

First Selectman Mack wanted to start by acknowledging the gift from the Suffield Women's Club of our new speaker system. We look forward to using it to its fullest potential this coming Memorial Day when social distancing will hopefully be lifted to some extent and allow us to get back to our grand observance! Our goal has always been, and continues to be; to include all interested groups in this beloved community event and this committee will help us do so.

First Selectman Mack invited the First Selectmen's Executive Assistant Kris Lambert to speak to the annual observances we currently hold in town. It is a hope that this committee will be able to assist in these observances and be able to put a sustainable structure in place for future events.

Ms. Lambert provided detail regarding the annual Memorial Day Observance, her role and what the event entails from an organizational standpoint.

- Planning generally begins in January/February
- Selection of Guest Speaker
- Coordination of Military Flyover
- Coordination with National Guard Armory for Marching unit
- Coordination with Board of Education Music and English Departments
- Advertising
- Coordination with VFW
- Coordination with all Suffield Emergency Services
- Coordination of parade and participants
- Coordination of “inclement weather” plan
- Outreach to community organizations interested in participating
- Act as the “touchpoint” for all involved parties

Discussion ensued as to the current parade route and the possibility of changing it in the future, which LtCol. Moryto is strongly in favor of doing. He would also like to see an easier coordination as people enter Memorial Park for the ceremony. It would be ideal if we were able to close off Main Street to thru-traffic during this time to eliminate excessive noise during the ceremony and to make the road accessible for the parade.

LtCol. Moryto also discussed the differences between Memorial Day and Veterans Day and proposed some additional ideas he had on how to improve the events, including options for discussion topics and how to bring names to the forefront. He would like to bring the focus onto the individuals this year and suggested we try to find a family member of a fallen serviceman who would be willing to serve as our Guest Speaker. GySgt King suggested reading from the book of names which would include the name of the veteran and how he or she died. The intent is to remember and this would be a fitting way to do so.

- **Veterans Day**

First Selectman Mack explained that the normal tradition has been for the VFW to plan this event on their own. LtCol. Moryto pointed out to her that this tradition does not make sense as it means the veterans are planning to honor themselves. In recent years the observance has become shorter with less pomp and circumstance and that is unfortunate. Due to the pandemic this year and other factors, it became apparent that this observance was in danger of not happening. The town managed to put something meaningful together quickly, but the First Selectman would like to avoid that from ever happening again. She looks to this committee to provide guidance as to what is appropriate and meaningful for these observances and hopes to implement a sustainable plan for the future.

- **Field of Flags Exhibit**

First Selectman Mack invited Sue Mayne to speak to the group about the Field of Flags Exhibit, which we hope to be an on-going event run by a sub-committee of the Veterans Appreciation Committee. Proceeds of this annual fundraiser could be deposited into the already established Veterans Memorial Special Revenue Fund to be used on annual maintenance and cleaning of the Veterans Memorial or other veterans’ initiatives.

Mrs. Mayne explained that she was one of two people that did the majority of the organization for the Field of Flags Exhibit, which was part of the Town of Suffield’s 350th Anniversary celebration. Her partner was town resident Jean Matejek. Coordination of the event is relatively simple and can be handled easily with two volunteers; however, the bulk of the work involves the set up and take down of the flags. Mrs. Mayne

expressed how grateful she was for the assistance of the Town of Suffield Public Works department who pitched in to help install steel rebar, PVC piping and the flags for this year's exhibit. Without their help, it would not have run so smoothly. Mrs. Mayne provided a high-level overview of what needs to be done in advance of the event, such as advertising, sponsorship information collection, purchasing of supplies, flag layout once the number of flags has been determined and coordinating a large group of volunteers to perform the set up and take down. She noted that she had heard from many people after the exhibit who mentioned they were unaware of the exhibit, despite advertisements in newspaper and social media and as such, she feels interest may be greater in 2021.

Mr. Moryto thanked Mrs. Mayne for her coordination of the event as well as what the 350th Anniversary Committee has done for the VFW. He noted that he has a few ideas on how to build upon the exhibit in the future. One in particular includes obtaining sponsorships for the 31 fallen soldiers and putting 31 flags up during the Memorial Day Ceremony. Mrs. Mayne shared that all the flags and miscellaneous components are being stored at Hill Top Farm and would need to be accessed from that location. She expressed her willingness to assist as needed; however, she will not be responsible for the event moving forward as it will be handed off to a sub-committee of the Veterans Appreciation Committee.

First Selectman Mack noted that the great ideas being discussed this evening will be further vetted by a sub-committee.

Selectman Harrington asked how many of the 350 Flags had been sponsored. Ms. Mayne noted that she did not have the exact number available, however, it was close to all of them. Many sponsorships came in after the Field of Flags had been set up, which required the group to add informational tags to originally unnamed flags.

Discussion and formation of sub-committees

First Selectman Mack noted that each of the topics discussed tonight will lend itself to a separate working sub-committee and more information will be available at upcoming meetings. Solicitation to encourage more participation and additional membership will continue through social media and other outlets.

Consideration of regular meeting schedule

First Selectman Mack envisions the larger group meeting quarterly with sub-committees meeting more frequently to carry out their specific objectives.

Public Comment

None

First Selectman Mack recognized David Shute, Senior Chief USN, who has graciously offered to help work on the Memorial Expansion efforts, as well as others. She is most appreciative of the leadership role that he has taken on.

First Selectman Mack motioned to adjourn at 8:08 p.m. Motion passed unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,
Kristen O. Lambert
Recording Secretary