

CIGAR BOX BULLETIN

Retired Men's Association of Greenwich, Inc.

www.greenwichrma.org

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"The short memories of American voters is what keeps our politicians in office." -Will Rogers

President **TAD LARRABEE** rang the bell at 10:03. **STEVE MARINO**, brave man that he is, volunteered to lead us in the pledge when the assigned member was a no-show. **JERRY SCHWENDEMAN** conducted the group in *This Land is Your Land* (Woody Guthrie), *Get Me to the Church* (Frederick Loewe and Alan Jay Lerner), and *Leaving on a Jet Plane* (John Denver), aided by **GEORGE UBOGY'S** magical fingers at the piano. Corresponding Secretary **AV RIVEL** made us blush with a tale of a movie-loving duck that snatched popcorn from an elderly lady in the adjoining seat.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

TAD mentioned the returnees: **MAURICE KROHN** from Aruba and **JOHN FEBLES** from Berlin, Estonia and St. Petersburg. I hope that JOHN was not doing any colluding. Mentor of the day was **GEORGE DIPPY**. TAD notified members that there is **no meeting on July 4th and the doors will be locked.**

CHET RISIO sternly reminded members that the scribes who dutifully prepare the CBB every week are not professional stenographers and need legibly written or typed notes from everyone who makes an announcement or otherwise uses the mic to convey information to members. He urged everyone to use 8.5x11 paper and always to put your name and phone number on the page in case follow-up is needed. He noted that **PETER STERN** had quickly complied with a newly designed Volunteer Report form.

COMMITTEE REPORTS

VISITING: The good news is that **WAYNE WRIGHT** did not have any news!

MEMBERSHIP: According to **HORST TEBBE**, active (i.e., dues paying) membership stands at 207. All non-payers are now in the inactive category but can return to our

good graces by anteing up! He reminded everyone that we should always be on the lookout for introducing new member candidates. There were 105 members at the meeting and one candidate, who was introduced for induction by **TONY COCCHI** and **MIKE AMBROSINO**. Geoffrey Burge was born and grew up in Victoria, Australia, and attended Monash University in Melbourne; he received his PhD in Organic Chemistry from Oxford (hurray; finally, a fellow organic chemist). He spent most of his working career in Asia with Beckman Coulter before retiring, but moved to Greenwich when his wife was assigned here. **GEOFFREY** actively competes in Olympic distance and triathlon events as a senior citizen and serves as a crew member for his daughter who has competed in 5 Ironman World Championships. He has already begun to volunteer locally, for the Kids in Crisis fund-raising running events scheduled for June 23 and 24. Welcome, mate, and let's drink a Foster to celebrate.

Those celebrating birthdays this past week were **PAUL BRADY** (84), **BOB CAREY** (86), **RALPH MASTOLONI** (96 –wow), **TONY COCCHI** (77), **ART ROBINSON** (87), and **MIKE AMBROSINO** (81) .

PROGRAM: **GEORGE UBOGY** invited us to stay for a talk by Michael Simberkoff, MD, about the Veterans Administration programs, especially in health care. Details below. **HOLLISTER STURGES** announced that next week we will hear from a well-recognized financial expert who has spoken to us before, namely, Laurence Kantor, who will address “Prospects for the Economy and Markets in Light of Recent Changes in Tax and Trade Policy.”

SPECIAL EVENTS: **MIKE FERRARESE** brought us up to date on one pending event. Details below.

VOLUNTEER HOURS: **JOHN CRAINE** provided the statistics: 327 outside hours by 38 men and 141 RMA hours by 23 men; champ for the week was **HOLLISTER STURGES** with 46 hours. Worth noting also are the 625 hours put in by the Melody Men for their spring program.

FUN AND GAMES

BRIDGE: No one was on hand to offer a report.

TENNIS: Someone dropped the ball –no report.

PICKLEBALL: **TONY COCCHI**, keeper of the whiffle balls, told us that on June 14th at Loughlin Courts there were 10 of us rotating in teams and between courts. Y'all come and try it on Thursday mornings from 9 to 11. Rumor has it that the Town may be redoing the Loughlin courts to provide 6 pickleball courts.

HEARTS: There were 8 players at two tables. **GRANT PERKINS** was too modest to report that he won all three games at Table 1 (“winner to remain unidentified”) but I broke the code. Winners at Table 2 were **TOM HEALY** (twice) and **LEN SAARI**. Two Moon Shots were launched by **TOM HEALY**, **LEN SAARI**, and **JOHN KNIGHT**; “only” one was achieved by **GRANT**. Next week's Captain is **TOM HEALY**.

GOLF: ERF PORTER said that the good weather on June 19th brought out 20 players. Four players shot in the 90s, **DICK BARTHOLOMEW, TOM HEALY, TONY COCCHI** and **JACK WEIR** (who had the low score, 91). **DICK** was closest to the pin on 7 with **JOHN AWDZIEWICZ** closest on 15. **MIKE AMBROSINO** hit the longest drive (“a gorilla clout”) on 17. ERF will be host again on June 25th.

TODAY’S SPEAKER

Dr. Michael Simberkoff, introduced by **GEORGE UBOGY**, has worked within the VA system for almost 50 years, including 19 years as Chief of Staff at the Manhattan VA Hospital. Although now “retired,” he volunteers at the Infectious Disease Clinic of the VA hospital and serves on the Veterans Benefits Administration advisory committee. He gave a broad ranging presentation he entitled “VA: Why is it in the News and Why is the News Usually Bad.” As he convincingly explained by the end of his talk, the performance and reputation of the VA system need no apologies, with objective rankings as high as or higher than non-VA institutions. His brief history of what is now the United States Department of Veterans Affairs included these statistics on the number of combatants in most of our wars: Revolutionary, 1775-1783 – 217,000; 1812 – 286,000; Mexican – 78,700; Civil – 2.7 million Union, 1.5 million Confederate; Spanish American – 306,000; WWI – 4.4 million; WWII – 16 million; Korean – 6 million; Vietnam – 8.7 million, Persian Gulf – 695,000. After WWI, three separate departments were established: Veterans Bureau, Pensions, and National Home for Volunteer Disabled Soldiers, which were all put under a single unit by President Hoover in 1930 and expanded after WWII. It became a Cabinet level Department of Veterans Affairs under President Reagan in 1988.

Today, the VA is the second largest Government Department after the Department of Defense; its budget was 139 billion in 2013 but 199 billion for 2019. It is composed of three units: Veterans Health Administration (VHA), Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), and National Cemetery Administration (NCA). The NCA administers 135 national cemeteries and funds 105 state-run veteran cemeteries. The VBA oversees compensation for service related disabilities, education and training of vets, VA home loans, life insurance and vocational rehabilitation programs. Interestingly, about 40% of all new home loans in the period following WWII were financed by the VA.

The VHA is the largest healthcare system in the US, with 170 centers and 1,063 outpatient sites, serving about 9 million veterans per year. That includes medical, dental and mental health treatment for vets, but also education and training for healthcare providers and research benefiting not only veterans but the US as a whole. All the units fall under 21 regional Veterans Integrated Service Networks, including territories (Philippines, Guam, American Samoa, Virgin Islands). Among its strengths, the VHA enjoys high satisfaction by users, a dedicated workforce, bipartisan Congressional support, strong academic affiliation, a first-rate years old electronic health records system (the first in the nation), good access to primary care and specialists, and excellent mental health services (including coverage of PTSD, addiction, and a nationwide 24 hour suicide prevention hotline). It has a huge database

with records going back many years, which is used for research. The newest venture, begun about 10 years ago, is the “Million Veterans Program,” aimed at gathering individual patient genetic and disease data, that is half-way toward its million-vet goal.

Among the difficulties faced by the VA is rotating leadership (11 Secretaries between 2001 and 2018; politics play a role), impeding the setting of priorities. Other issues are vacancies for senior executives, aging and outdated infrastructure (most buildings are from the WWII era), Federal work rules on incentives and salary caps making it hard to compete for talent, and a forthcoming project to replace the existing electronic health record system to sync it with that of the Department of Defense which will take years and invite the usual IT uncertainty. In spite of isolated problems, some major, that made press headlines over the past few years, the VA continues to generate good news stories on its quality of care. Dr. Simberkoff left us with a couple of strong opinions: do not privatize the VA and for better care, invest more and modernize the facilities.

SPECIAL EVENTS

*Open to all members, guests, candidates and spouses. Checks to be made out to RMA, and must be received within two weeks or the reservation will be cancelled. Contact **MIKE FERRARESE** (myagentmike@yahoo.com / 203-554-0678) or **ABBEY SMOLER** (abbeysmoler@gmail.com / 203-531-0235)*

Sound Water Cruise, August 30th, 2-4pm. Snacks provided; \$35 per person. Self-drive to the dock in Stamford. Status: 21 openings; maximum of 35 allowed.

NEXT WEEK'S SPEAKER

Laurence Kantor: “Prospects for the Economy and Markets in Light of Recent Changes in Tax and Trade Policy.”

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