

The history of this veterans' recognition program began with an idea from a local Vietnam veteran activist and a dance instructor. Ted Sampley and Mary Beth Dawson wanted a way to pay tribute to the many veterans that have given so much in the continued fight for world peace and freedom. The first Salute "show" was performed in November 2000 at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC to a multitude of veterans and visitors to our nation's capital. Positive comments after the show prompted Mr. Sampley and Mrs. Dawson to bring the performance back to their hometown of Kinston, North Carolina.

In 2001, a committee of Kinston businesses and individuals headed by the Pride of Kinston began planning the veteran celebration. Former US Air Force Sergeant Adrian Cronauer, the deejay better known for "Gooooood Morning, Vietnam" was the emcee during the Tribute Show and kept things lively. Members from the elite group of Tuskegee Airmen were in attendance during the festivities. One of Kinston's most distinguished sons, Eugene 'Red' McDaniel, was the special speaker at the Memorial Service where all of Lenoir County's Killed in Action were remembered. Items from the North Carolina boxcar of the French Gratitude Train were on display at the Community Council for the Arts.

Purple Heart recipients were recognized during the entire event for their bravery and courage under fire the following year. Artifacts from Michael Blassie's tomb, more commonly known as the 'Tomb of the Unknown Soldier' were on display at the Community Council for the Arts. The Culture Heritage Museum offered a glimpse of black military history during its open house. A ladies' fashion show consisting of Civil War fashions was held at the footings of the planned CSS Neuse replica. WNCT-TV news anchorman Allan Hoffman, while serving as emcee at the Tribute Show, was honored for his service to this country.

The following year (2003), the theme centered on the citizen soldiers who served in the reserves and National Guard. At that time, over 4000 reserve men had been called. The Salute! committee felt that special recognition should be given to those who stand ready at a moment's notice. The first veterans' parade since the 40's, led by Rolling Thunder, invited veterans from all eras to march downtown in the 'March of Honor' and be honored by the Boy Scouts of America. The Tuchahoe Braves, a re-enactor group, joined other re-enactors in demonstrating life and soldiering during the wars that have affected America.

Salute! chose to honor our local World War II veterans in 2004 since the nation was honoring the 16 million involved in the war by the dedication of the World War II Memorial in Washington, DC. Members of the National Sojourners, in 1776 replica uniforms, presented a spectacular flag history show addressing how Americans respect our country's flag. The Boy Scouts of America, Caswell District, shared some activities they do that help our local community. Numerous entertainers including the 'Other Blues Brothers' provided entertainment during the busy day.

A new year brought about the formal registration of Salute! A Tribute to America's Veterans as a 501 (C) (3) tax-exempt organization. Salute! also assumed the responsibility for the Walk of Honor. Although the theme for 2005 focused on the Korean War, the celebration honored all veterans. A collection of small-scale model planes used during the Korean War was on display for a week at the Community Council for the Arts. A traveling replica (The Small Wall) of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington allowed visitors the opportunity to get a perspective on veteran's roles in US history. Honored guest was Brig. Gen. Mildred Bailey, a native Kinstonian who was the second female to be promoted to general. Also, in November, the construction of the Lenoir County Vietnam KIA Memorial was dedicated to honor the twenty-three soldiers killed in action during the most unpopular and misunderstood use of our military citizens.

During the spring of 2006, the addition of 911 Emergency Services Memorial began as an expansion of the Walk of Honor. It would be dedicated to those emergency services personnel who were killed during that terrorist attack in our country. It would also honor those individuals who have served or are serving in any organized emergency service, such as law enforcement, fire departments, rescue and emergency services personnel. It was completed and dedicated on September 11, 2006. Two months later, Salute! would "Welcome Home" the Vietnam veterans with the honor they never received when they returned from the jungle. Returning one by one, to this country at different times throughout the war period, made homecomings and ticker parades quite difficult. Entering this country during civil change and liberal unrest was a cultural shock to the returning veterans. A collective photographic display, 'A Thousand Words: Photographs by Vietnam Veterans' was available for viewing for two weeks at the Community Council for the Arts. Local veteran and POW Eugene McDaniel returned as the honored guest.

Salute! continued to lead the citizens of Lenoir County in the celebration- Forces of Freedom in 2007. We no longer can live our lives secure and without fear. The enemy is right here in our cozy little towns, in our heartland and in our major cities. The Community Council for the Arts created a visual art exhibition with a joint exhibit by artists Ken Badoian and Donald Webber. The Walk of Honor dedicated over 50 new bricks to the walk along the picturesque Neuse River honoring the men and women who have served our country. The Tar River Community Band presented local veterans and the community a free concert showcasing a company of North Carolina entertainers honoring all US war veterans.

The United States and other nations have made a serious effort to rid the world of those who would cause our people to live in dread and fear. That is why Salute! chose the theme—Honoring Our Heroes in the Middle East—for the year 2008. With the war raging in Iraq and Afghanistan, unrest in Pakistan and Iran, and a multitude of threats against Israel, many of our American soldiers have chosen to put themselves into harm's way in the name of preserving freedom. All who have served in Desert Storm, Enduring Freedom, Iraqi Freedom and the other minor conflicts all deserve our unending support and gratitude. The newest idea for the year festivities included a stew fest cookoff and the Pink Hill-Billies entertainment on Saturday afternoon.

Col. Adele E Hodges, the first female commander of Camp Lejeune, served as the key speaker at the 2009 veterans celebration where she stressed the importance of "Thank A Vet" theme. People should not forget that their basic liberties have not always been around and that they should not be taken for granted. Those liberties came at a cost. Every family or neighborhood has some tie to the military, so it was only fitting that the theme resonated the idea to thank those who gave up their normal lives for mundane activities.

Women serving in our armed forces have played many vital roles that have extended some 400 years into the past. Although female combat roles are still controversial, women are now given more prominent roles in contemporary armed forces. Over 40,000 women have served in almost every role the armed forces had to offer. Today they can serve in every capacity except on submarines, in the Special Forces or the Navy Seals. Salute! chose to honor this group of our military during 2010.

2011 They Served was the theme and we recognized all veterans and the community service members who so often are overlooked.

Military Through the Ages was the next theme. Salute! believed we could find families with ties to all branches of the military and with ties to the first battle-Our Revolutionary War.

In 2013 the Salute! committee chose the men and women who have suffered injuries resulting from their service to our country, Our Wounded Warriors. Abraham Lincoln once said, "to care for him who

shall borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan.” Lincoln’s words should light the path of Americas’ eternal responsibility to those who served in uniform. Somehow, we must not loose focus on that command. Veterans and families wait too long for earned benefits. Our wounded deserve better than what they get and how they are treated in the communities. The theme for the year was chosen to help the public remember not all injuries are visible; many veterans suffer from invisible injuries.

Thirteen years after our country was so tragically attacked by terrorists, the community was losing its patriotism. In 2014 we choose the theme “United We Stand” to reinforce that time does not mean we are not united as a nation. Again, our community was together.

“Never Again Forgotten” became the theme for 2015. Kinston’s location sets at the heart of our country’s most populated military presence. However, citizens seem so unaware of the multitude of sacrifices our people have had to endure for the freedoms they enjoy. Those at home who served, those who have waited for loved ones to return and those who professed to remember those who never returned, still need to be reminded that there is an extreme price for what we enjoy daily. All who wore our country’s uniforms are not *heroes*. They came from all walks of life; ministers, farmers, cooks, mechanics, and others—rich or poor. They all stood up to a call to protect us. They were ordinary people who did extraordinary things, and for that they should NEVER BE FORGOTTEN.

In 2016 and 2017 we honored our men and women serving in the War of Terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan. So many were away from home, from work and from family. We paid special attention to the families and the sacrifices made by them.

Hurricane Florence in the fall of 2018 had an unwanted impact on the planning and implementation of Salute! Veteran Weekend festivities. For the first time the veteran’s parade and Tribute show had to be cancelled. One due to new requirements from the city and the other due to damage from Hurricane Florence at Lenoir Community College. Tar River Community Band performed their free veteran concert at American Legion Post 43 on Friday evening and a brief ceremony to honor our military was still held at Pearson Park.

Our 19<sup>th</sup> year we chose as our theme “Supporting Today’s Military”. Joel Eberly, formerly stationed in Kinston with the National Guard, was the guest speaker. The parade on Saturday had the largest turnout to honor our veterans. Organizers are now gearing up for our 20<sup>th</sup> year and the theme Salute! Into the Future. Visit our blog to stay informed of the progress and times. You may also visit GI Joe’s Military Living History Museum for more information.