The Meeting was called to order at 10:00 AM by Chairman Don Loudner who led those assembled in the “Pledge of Allegiance”. Introductions were made of all present.

Acting Director Summerside was asked for opening comments and he thanked the American Legion for hosting the meeting in the Watertown locale.

Commissioner Locken moved to approve the April Minutes as printed, second by Commissioner Murphy. Motion carried.

MG Gorman presented his report. Included were the following:

- An update on SD National Guard members who have recently returned from Iraq and on those members who are still deployed overseas.
- The strength of the SD Army & Air Guard are both over 100%
- The Bring Corey Briest Home Fund has raised over $10,000 and Corey should be returning in the very near future.
- The strategic plan for the State Veterans home is in a ‘hold pattern’ pending federal legislation that may provide for veterans to be placed in private nursing homes closer to their homes and families. Currently there are over 1,000 empty nursing beds per day throughout South Dakota.
- He felt it was not timely to recommend a state veterans cemetery at this point, Division staff have researched the issue and will provide a report later this afternoon.
- The Depleted Uranium issue should be studied by this body. The Division has requested the facts on this issue be presented at the July meeting.
- The proposed movement of the Division of Veterans Affairs to a Cabinet level Department is not in the best interests of our state’s veterans, the State Veterans’ Home, or the National Guard.
- There is a Strategic Plan for the Department in development with the consultation of Jim Books, which includes the SD Veterans’ Home.

MG Gorman also reported that he will retire effective September 15, 2007. The advertising and appointment of a new director for Veterans Affairs will wait until the new TAG comes on board.

Gene Murphy stated that outreach to veterans is a very important issue. He doesn’t feel that the VA and the South Dakota Department of Military and Veterans Affairs are doing an adequate job pertaining to the Depleted Uranium issue or Undiagnosed illnesses. He also stated that the move for a state veteran’s cemetery is not a bad thing but he wonders if we want to take money from programs that could be used for living veterans.

Don Clarke stated that he feels VA cemetery personnel should be involved as we study the state veteran’s cemetery issue. Additionally he feels we should look at the feasibility of allowing veterans who currently live out-of-state to be buried there.

Don Loudner reported that he was at the dedication of the new Veterans’ Cemetery in Georgia. Most of these cemeteries are being placed close to large urban areas.
A question posed by Commissioner Evenson regarding Veterans Education was referred to George Summerside for an answer. George advised the Commission that during this transition period staff is being cross-trained in veterans education duties and responsibilities. Steve Olivia is assisting with educational claims, John Fette with publication review, and Mike Holzhauser will receive training in approval/supervision of training programs.

It was the consensus of the Commission, Veterans Organizations and others present that General Gorman had been an exceptional leader during his period as Department Secretary. Specifically, his efforts in the establishment of a very comprehensive reintegration effort which will ensure our returning veterans are aware of the services available to them. General Gorman was praised for his compassionate and progressive approach to serving our state’s veterans.

Andy Gerlach gave a report on the Department Budget and on the procedures that must be followed and timelines that must be met during the budget process.

Mike Birnbaum reported on the VSO Task Force which is a result of the Legislative Review Committee Study during the summer of 2006. The Task Force was requested to address the need for increases in the VSO Supplemental Salary program and to study options to improve the delivery of services to our state’s veterans.

The meeting was adjourned for a lunch break at 11:45, to reconvene at 1:00 PM.

Chairman Loudner reconvened the meeting at 1:00 PM. The afternoon session began with reports on the veterans’ organizations’ various programs for veterans and their family members and on legislative issues presented at the recent state conventions.

The American Legion provided legislative information handouts to the Commission and those in attendance. Information included the state/national resolutions and national legislation that is impacting our veterans and their families. Ron Boyd presented the Legion’s position supporting a state veterans’ cemetery (Resolution 003), supporting a study to elevate the Division of Veterans Affairs to cabinet level department (Legislative Committee Resolution 2007-001) and supporting sufficient funds for LVER and DVOP positions (Employment Committee Resolution 2007-001).

The DAV provided legislative and program information handouts to the Commission and those in attendance. Information included State Convention overview, Department Newsletter outlining organization programs and issues, national legislative overview, and an invitation to the Roger Andal Appreciation Day/Memorial Dedication. Gene Murphy presented the DAV’s position to support a study to elevate the Division of Veterans Affairs to cabinet level department. Gene gave a comprehensive report on the DAV transportation program, outreach effort to wounded veterans of Iraq, offering free lifetime membership/organization polo shirt, and a brief overview of national legislative concerns.

Bill Locken expressed concern that the DAV van sets up in a community and signs veterans up, then leaves town without providing them any local contact person for assistance with their claim. They need to involve the local Veterans Service Officer and refer the veteran to him or her.

George Summerside asked Gene if there is a way SDDVA personnel and C/TVSOS can receive training from the DAV? Both the VFW and American Legion allow this. Gene said he would talk to their National Service Officer to see what accommodations can be made.
The PVA report was presented by Jim Foster. The Commission and those in attendance were provided an informational brochure outlining the PVA programs. Jim discussed in detail their legislative and advocacy programs which promote and advocate to improve the lives of paralyzed veterans and individuals with disabilities.

The VFW provided legislative and program information to the Commission and those in attendance. Information included state and national resolutions which have been approved. Rick Barg presented the VFW’s position to create an independent cabinet level agency for the Department of Veterans Affairs and supports sufficient funds for LVER and DVOP positions to ensure one full-time DVOP or LVER position per local employment offices. The VFW does not support the state cemetery issue.

Chairman Don Loudner presented the views for the American Indian Veterans Organization. He reported that the Woodrow Keeble Medal of Honor should be awarded in the near future and the Code Talker Bill continues to be pursued with additional legislative efforts required.

Dale Bertsch from Governor Round’s Staff raised a question on separating the Division of Veterans Affairs from the Department of Military & Veterans Affairs. The DAV provided their position that by being a cabinet level position it would give veterans a stronger voice.

George Summerside presented an overview of his Congressional Testimony concerning the State Approving Agency funding issue. He stated if this funding solution is not resolved, South Dakota’s contract would be reduced by 32% next fiscal year. This would be a reduction of over $66,000 dollars. This will have a negative impact not only on our state but across this nation. The many things that we are doing in outreach and customer service would no longer be possible.

Larry Person presented a report on the initial study done regarding the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) application process and projected costs of a state cemetery. Based on data provided by the VA personnel, the start up cost for a cemetery would approach $3.5 million. While a large percentage of the start up costs can be reimbursed by VA, it could take up to eight years for the state to receive the reimbursement due to the large number of requests they have to construct veterans’ cemeteries and the limited budget they have to meet these requests. Additional expenditures, which are not reimbursable by the VA, are the annual costs for personnel and maintenance which are estimated at $350,000.

Future Meeting dates are 16-17 July, 2007 in Sioux Falls at the PVA North Central Chapter Home and 22-23 October, 2007 in Hot Springs at the SD Veterans’ Home.

There were no items for open discussion, unfinished, or future business.

The motion to adjourn was made by Murphy, second by Locken. The Meeting was adjourned at 4:10 PM.

Acting Director of Division of Veterans Affairs  Recording Secretary

July 16, 2007

SD Veterans Commission Meeting 22 June, 2007