

# GMF honors July 4 with fireworks, patriotism

**By Shelly Knight**  
**Towns County Herald**

The Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds put on a beautiful show for the nation's 249th birthday on Friday, July 4, as fireworks lit up the sky and flooded the night with color.

Hundreds of families from all over gathered to watch the free display and celebrate with family, friends and neighbors in the gorgeous North Georgia Mountains overlooking stunning Lake Chatuge.

"We come camp up here every Fourth of July," said Chris Page of Ranger, North Carolina. "The kids get so excited. We put the boat on the lake and fish all day, and the kids swim," with Samantha Page adding, "One of their favorite things is smores by the campfire."

In the run-up to the big spectacle, Tram Katz from Naples, Florida, said her family

had never seen the fireworks at the Fairgrounds but have plenty of experience with the area.

"We own a second home here in Hiawassee and have been to the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds for the holidays, but this is our first time for the fireworks," Katz said. "I love the Fourth! It's always such a celebration; it's like one big party."

Another attendee, Ashley Wilkes of Haysville, North Carolina, said that Independence Day means "a lot to me."

"My dad and granddad were both soldiers, so respect for the military runs in my family," Wilkes said. "When you think about it, the first soldiers in our country put their lives on the line just as much as guys in the military today."

"Yeah, we have better weapons and such, but the King of England would have

hung every one of those guys if they had been caught. There wouldn't be an America if they had been caught, and I love America."

After a short but heavy downpour, the fireworks started shooting around 9:45 p.m. and continued for a generous amount of time.

According to General Manager Hilda Thomason, the Fairgrounds spends about \$10,000 each year to put on the display, though they do solicit donations from guests to help offset costs associated with hosting the annual tribute to the country, the community and visitors.

"Happy Birthday, USA!" said Rebecca Allen, a visitor from Snellville. "We're camping up here and had no idea this was going to happen, but it's pretty awesome. We just heard all this commotion and grabbed the kids, and here we are!"

"Everybody is waving flags and hooting and hollering," added Jerry Allen. "Ain't no difference what color you are or where you come from. Right here, right now, it seems to me everybody is American."

In addition to the fireworks, Calvary Baptist Church offered free activities for children, and the Nathan Morgan Band out of Knoxville, Tennessee, performed a free concert from 6-9 p.m. There were also several vendors for people to purchase food and drinks before the main event.

Independence Day commemorates the passage of the Declaration of Independence written by Thomas Jefferson separating the 13 colonies from Great Britain. Today it continues to be an important symbol of nationalism and, more specifically, the American qualities of barbecues and freedom.



Despite rain earlier in the evening, the Fourth of July Fireworks at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds once again provided free patriotic entertainment to hundreds of local and visiting families.

Photo by Lowell Nicholson

## Veterans celebrate opening of new VFW Post Building

**By Brittany Holbrooks**  
**Towns County Herald**  
**Staff Writer**

On Saturday, July 5, the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post #7807 and The American Legion Post #23 held the long-awaited ribbon-cutting for the new Garrett-Owenby Post #7807 building on Sunnyside Road.

Serving as a hub for Towns County veterans and their business, the milestone was well attended and celebrated alongside associate organizations such as the Sons of the American Legion and the American Legion Riders.

Featuring a community room, a kitchen, a bar, several offices, a pool table, dart board and more, the building also has motorcycle parking out back to accommodate those Riders and anyone else who likes to feel the wind in their hair.

To give an idea of how the place measures up, the old post features about 1,400

square feet, while the new post clocks in at 1,600 square feet.

As recounted by local veteran leader Mel Halfon, Post #7807 has a storied history. The original building opened in 1976 on land purchased by World War II and Korean War veterans who wanted to create a safe space for those who could understand what they had faced.

With age and growth came the desire for a more

See New VFW Post, Page 6



The Hiawassee-based VFW and American Legion posts were thrilled to welcome guests for a ribbon-cutting ceremony that heralded the opening of the new VFW Post Building on Sunnyside Road Saturday.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

## Slain officer remembered as public servant, family man

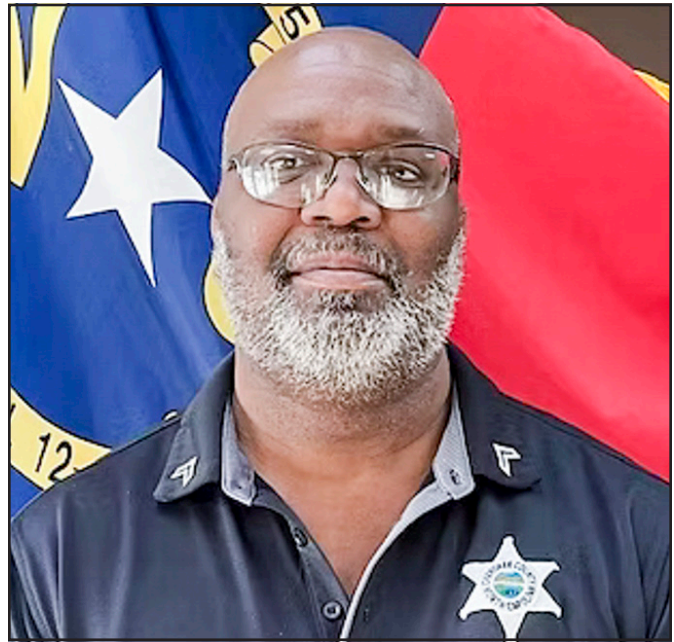
**By Shawn Jarrard**  
**Towns County Herald**  
**Editor**

The line-of-duty death of Detention Officer Francisco Flattes of the Cherokee County Sheriff's Office saddened the region last week after an inmate gunned him down to escape custody.

Flattes, of Hayesville, North Carolina, ended his watch on Monday, June 30, at the age of 56. He led a distinguished career with service in multiple law enforcement agencies and leaves behind a grieving family and community.

The alleged shooter, a federal inmate named Kelvin Simmons who was being housed at the Cherokee County Detention Center in connection with multiple bank

See End of Watch, Page 5



Detention Officer Francisco Flattes  
Cherokee Co. Sheriff's Office - End of Watch 6-30-25

## Summer Heat continues support of first responders



Hiawassee Mayor Jay Chastain Jr. kissed a pig for a good cause during the Summer Heat's first responder fundraiser on June 28.

Photo by Lowell Nicholson

**By Shelly Knight**  
**Towns County Herald**

On Saturday, June 28, nonprofit Towns County Summer Heat threw its annual fundraising bash benefiting local first responders inside the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds.

Billed as "First Responders Appreciation Day," the event was fun for the whole family with numerous food and craft vendors, classic cars, live music courtesy Roy "Elvis" Perren and others, the "Guns & Hoses" law enforcement/firefighter kickball game, kids' activities, fire safety training classes, Santa Claus and more.

"Summer Heat is a non-profit volunteer organization created to help support Towns County first responders when their benefits have been exhausted," said Committee Member George Krivas. "That includes 911 operators, ambulance drivers, fire fighters and more."

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## Local Veteran Roger Pilcher turns 90 with family, friends

**By Shelly Knight**  
**Towns County Herald**

BLAIRSVILLE – Retired U.S. Marine Corps Lt. Col. Roger Pilcher celebrated his 90th birthday on Friday, June 27, and people from all over North Georgia attended the birthday bash held at The View Grill inside the Union County Community Center.

Pilcher enlisted in the Marine Corps at the age of 17. The Corps recognized his leadership and abilities early on, and he rose through the ranks to become an officer quickly.

Over the course of his 28-year career, Pilcher received numerous medals, highlighted by the Meritorious Service Medal. He had several tours overseas, including Vietnam, Japan and Okinawa. He was even once stationed at Quantico.

Crystal Gaylord, Events and Marketing Director for the Community Center, hosted the event.

"I happened to meet Mr. Pilcher at a community center event and we became friends," she said.

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Veteran Roger Pilcher had a big party at the Union County Community Center last month to celebrate turning 90.

Photo by Shelly Knight

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# Chamber Chronicles

The official source of Towns County Chamber News

Wednesday, July 9, 2025

## Welcome to our Newest Members!

**House Doctors of North Georgia- Amber Thomas, Owner-** 401 Fannin Industrial Park, Ste 200 Blue Ridge, GA Phone: (706) 455-8092 Email: athomas@housedoctors.com Website: www.housedoctors.com/north-georgia Trusted Property Maintenance Services for Homes & Businesses. Keeping up with property maintenance—whether for a home or business—can quickly become overwhelming. From routine upkeep to large-scale improvements, finding the time, tools, and expertise to get it all done isn’t always easy. That’s where House Doctors of North Georgia steps in.

**Cats on the Lake – Leslie Passero , Owner -** 2397 NC-175, Hayesville, NC Phone: (828) 278-8550 Website: www.catsonthelake.com Facebook: Cats on the Lake-Lake Chatuge. Powered Catamaran Rentals on Lake Chatuge -Feel the purr of a 30 HP motor powering you across Lake Chatuge as you take in beautiful views from your seat inches above the water in one of our 2-seat catamarans.

**Towns County Republican Party, Inc.- Shelia M. McDevitt, Chair-** 3921 Hwy 76-Patriot Plaza, Young Harris, GA Phone: (706) 514-6437 Email: Towns@ga9.gop Facebook: Towns County GOP Website: www.townscogagop.org TCGOP is dedicated to serving our community.

**Ansley Real Estate Christie’s International – Bruce Olsen, Realtor –** 165 Depot Street, Blue Ridge, GA Phone: (706) 675-5228; Website: www.ansleyre.com/agents/23848/bruce-j-olsen Please let me help you create your own unique mountain lifestyle. I love working with both buyers and sellers alike. I am a “pet friendly” Realtor....so pets are always welcome. Licensed in Georgia & North Carolina.

## Chamber Events & Programs

Follow us: Facebook & Instagram: Visit Lake Chatuge & Lake Chatuge Chamber of Commerce

Thanks to all our members for their continued support!

Additionally, we’d like to thank these Platinum and Gold Members:

**PLATINUM MEMBERS:** Blue Ridge Mountain EMC; Century 21 Black Bear Realty; Hiwassee Holiday KOA, Lake Chatuge Lodge; Mountain Realty; Peach State Federal Credit Union; SouthState Bank, N.A.; The Ridges Resort on Lake Chatuge; United Community Bank; Windstream Communications.

**GOLD MEMBERS:** Bennett Equipment; Brasstown Manor; Brasstown Valley Resort & Spa; Brother’s Restaurant at Willow Ranch; Chatuge Regional Hospital; Chick-fil-A of Blairsville; Erlanger Western Carolina Hospital; Hughes Accounting; K. Boyer Photography; Little Bear Rentals & Property Management; MainStreet Grill; Men on The Move; NeuroSport Physical Therapy LLC; Phoenix Roofing Systems, LLC; Ridgeline Exteriors & Roofing; ServiceMaster Restoration; Tri-County Office Supply, and Young Harris College.

For information on becoming a member of the Lake Chatuge Chamber of Commerce, visit [www.golakechatuge.com](http://www.golakechatuge.com) or call Mary Ann at (706) 896-4966 or email her at [LCChamber2021@gmail.com](mailto:LCChamber2021@gmail.com).

## End of Watch...from Page 1

robberies, was apprehended following a brief chase.

Simmons, 48, has been charged with first-degree murder, and additional charges are pending.

On the afternoon of June 30, Cherokee County Sheriff Dustin Smith held a news conference about the fatal shooting, chase and apprehension from earlier that day.

“Francisco was shot today at Murphy Medical Center (Erlanger Western Carolina Hospital) facilities here in Cherokee County,” Sheriff Smith said. “There was an inmate that was transported to Murphy Medical Center for treatment.

“While there, there

was a scuffle, and during that scuffle, the inmate (overpowered the officers and) took the detention officer’s weapon and shot the detention officer. The detention officer was transported to Murphy Medical Center and was pronounced deceased.”

Sheriff Smith recounted how, after firing on Flattes, Simmons fled to the facility parking lot and stole a vehicle from someone who was just arriving at the hospital.

“He drove away and was later spotted in Clay County, North Carolina,” the Sheriff’s Office said. “A pursuit was initiated by the North Carolina Highway

Patrol assisted by Cherokee County, Clay County and continued into Macon County, where Macon assisted the chase.

“There, the suspect’s vehicle was disabled by Capt. David Williams of Cherokee County Sheriff’s Office. Following a brief standoff, Simmons was taken into custody by Macon County Sheriff’s Office”

District Attorney Ashley Hornsby Welch of North Carolina’s 43rd Prosecutorial District relayed Kelvin’s charges in the press conference while noting that “the State Bar Ethics Rules only allow me to say so much” regarding suspects who have been charged.

“We have also been in contact with the United States Attorney’s Office, and I do believe that charges will likely be coming from them as well – we both have jurisdiction,” Welch said.

A representative of Erlanger Western Carolina Hospital, Administrator and Associate Chief Nurse Teresa Bowleg, also addressed the press conference.

“We are saddened by the tragic events that occurred today at Erlanger Orthopaedics Office in Murphy, North Carolina, involving the fatal incident between a law enforcement officer and an inmate in custody,” Bowleg said. “Our thoughts are with the fallen officer’s family, colleagues and those impacted.

“Our top priority is the safety and security of our patients, visitors and staff. While this heartbreaking incident appears isolated, we are working with local authorities to ensure our campus is safe for everyone.

“Out of respect for the ongoing investigation and the families involved, we will not be providing further details. Any additional inquiries on the investigation should be directed to the Cherokee County Sheriff’s Department.”

According to the Sheriff’s Office, Simmons was awaiting trial for a previous escape attempt from October 2024, when he climbed over the Detention Center fence.

Due to his attempted escape last year, two officers were sent to escort Simmons to a specialist appointment for a foot complaint that Monday. The second detention officer was not shot but did sustain injuries during the violent altercation and is recovering, the Sheriff’s Office said.

Calling June 30 “the hardest day of my career,” Sheriff Smith is asking that everyone “pray for our office, for Officer Flattes’ family.”

“We are all mourning the loss of Francisco and doing everything we can

to support each other and the family and loved ones of Officer Flattes,” Sheriff Smith said.

Nonprofit “Back The Blue NC” has sponsored a GoFundMe campaign, which can be found by searching the charitable-giving website for “Benefit for the Family of Cherokee Co. NC Officer Flattes.”

“Officer Flattes served the Cherokee County Sheriff’s Office with honor and integrity for the past four years,” the campaign reads. “A dedicated public servant and family man, he leaves behind a loving wife – who also works at the Cherokee County Detention Center – and a son-in-law who continues to serve with the Cherokee County Sheriff’s Office.

“Their grief is compounded by the nature of his loss: an unthinkable act of violence while fulfilling his sworn duty.

“Officer Flattes dedicated his life to public safety and had a long history of service, including: the Cherokee County Sheriff’s Office; The Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians;

the Clay County Sheriff’s Office; the Florida Department of Children and Families; and over 10 years with the Florida Department of Corrections.

“This fund has been created to support Officer Flattes’ grieving family as they navigate the days ahead without their husband, father, and hero. All donations will help ease the financial burden of funeral expenses, lost income, and the many unforeseen costs that come with such a sudden and devastating tragedy.

“At a time when words are not enough, let us show this family that they are not alone – that the law enforcement community and the citizens they serve are standing beside them.

“100% of proceeds will be delivered directly to the surviving family members by Back The Blue NC, Inc., a nonprofit organization dedicated to honoring fallen officers and supporting their families.”

All individuals are presumed innocent until proven guilty in a court of law.

## Backpack Emergency Go Kit for Kids and Pets!

Disaster planning usually is about important things we will take if we have to leave if a natural disaster that could be a wildfire, windstorm, or flood, but what about our children who may be at school or a friend’s house when the need to go quickly arrives. Kids need to be prepared too!

Here are some suggestions for things kids can do to prepare for the unthinkable, must escape to safety when a natural disaster is headed their way. A natural disaster could knock out your cell phone! Planning will help build your emergency “Go Kit” and get back to normal faster! What would you do if there was a wildfire, or tornado, and you were stuck at school or home alone? It sounds scary, but if you plan ahead of time you’ll have the things you need, making it easier to leave your house quickly, and in the case of an evacuation, to make your temporary housing situation more comfortable. And when fire ignites trees, grass and shrubs and burns into neighborhoods, not only do houses burn, but power lines can get knocked down and there is no electricity to pump gas for the car, get money out of an ATM machine, or to let you recharge your cell phone. Wildfires or windstorms can also destroy cell towers making it impossible for you to use your cell phone, tablet, or laptop even if they are charged. So, what can you do to prepare for a natural emergency?

Follow these key steps to help you get started: Bring your parents and talk to school officials to learn about their plans in case of a wildfire or other emergency. Create an emergency plan with your family, including knowing where to meet if you are separated. Build your own “Go Kit,” to keep at home. The kit will not only provide comfort during rough times, but it will also allow you to be better prepared to help someone else if they need it. Create a “secret password” with your parents - one that only you and they know. In case you are home

alone and need a ride, your parents can provide the password to the family friend or neighbor who picks you up. That way, you will know this person can be trusted.

Create a second “Go Kit” to keep at school. Before including any items in your backpack for school, make sure to check with the school about any items you may not be allowed to carry on school grounds. Suggested items and actions to take to complete your Go Kit: Fill a small notebook with information about your important contacts. Work and cell phone numbers for your parent(s) or guardian(s), as well as their work address and an alternate contact at their work in case they are away from their phone. Phone numbers of relative(s) who live out of state, in case local cell towers don’t work. Addresses and phone numbers of your closest friends. Names/addresses of three safe locations to meet in case you are away from home and school, such as the local library, a friend or neighbor’s home, local police station, hospital, or community center. Information about any medical condition you have or medication that you are on and the name and phone number of your doctor. If you wear glasses, the prescription information for them. Phone numbers for neighbors. It is better to be prepared for the natural disaster that might come one day even though you think it cannot happen here. It is good insurance we hope we never have to use!

Here is something most of us do not think about in evacuation planning, what to do with Fluffy, Tweety bird, or Ole Blue? Pets are family too and need to have supplies to go with them when we must leave. Simple tools you’ll need to start building your pet’s evacuation kit: Large bin or tote with a lid; A Sharpie for labeling and marking contents; Notepad for documenting special details and needs; Storing all the information outlined in the following sections on a flash drive will provide ac-



cess if you’re evacuated and unable to take the kit due to limited time. Having a backup flash drive that you provide to a friend or relative, is also a good idea so you have an alternate source if you are unable to take the primary one with you.

The following items need to be included in each kit and also stored on your flash drive(s): Pet Vaccination Records: Copies of all current vaccination records for each pet (NOTE: Your pet’s most recent rabies registration tag needs to be attached securely to its collar.) Medications: Keep a list of all current medicines and their associated doses; Your vet’s office may also be evacuated or closed during a wildfire, so this information will be important if possible, keep an extra supply of medicines that your pet takes on a regular basis. Ensure each is labeled with the pet’s name and a description of that pet. If you have multiple pets, consider enclosing a photo of the pet that needs the medication. Periodically check the expiration dates and replace as needed. Special Needs Documentation: List of each pet’s current physical disabilities or illnesses. Special feeding schedule/requirements and feed; Dietary restrictions; Allergies; Copies of Ownership Records: Adoption records; Registration paperwork; Pet health insurance policies; Municipal or county license tags and paperwork and copies of the animal’s microchip paperwork.

The time to plan for evacuation is now while before an emergency, not when smoke, wind, or flood is headed into your backyard. Be Firewise, be prepared, and be safe!

For more information on evacuation plans check out [www.nfpa.org](http://www.nfpa.org). NTJuh9J212/CA



## Movers & Shakers Welcome Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw

The Mountain Movers and Shakers welcome Towns County Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw to the exceptional Sundance Grill this Friday, July 11 at 8 AM.

He comes 6 months after his last visit to give an update on the goings-on in Towns County.

This is your opportunity to hear directly from your Commissioner in an informal setting, where all are gathered for information, conversation and breakfast, and ask questions directly to your Commissioner. Get there early to get a good seat to get answers from Towns County’s top Elected Official.



Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw



# New VFW Post...from Page 1

modern facility, and the land directly beside the old post became the proposed location to build a new post. The site broke ground in 2019, and though much of the construction was handled by veterans themselves, there was still a long way to go as far as covering costs.

“We came up with a campaign called ‘Build the Building,’” recalled Halfon, sharing that each VFW member had received a note in the mail with a run-down of the situation and an option to donate. The response was overwhelming.

“Ninety percent of the people that contributed on

the fundraiser gave us \$100 or more, and that’s very, very thoughtful and generous,” Halfon said.

Fundraising among the community and loans went a long way, too, and on the day of the ribbon-cutting, along with shoutouts to individuals and organizations that made a difference, a special thank you went out to those who donated.

Likewise, recognition was offered to past commanders and officers, blueprint designers, and community members for their roles in managing the ongoing necessities of making sure Post #7807 got a fresh start.

“We have one common

goal here, and that is to help veterans and their families,” said Post #7807 Cmdr. Mark Newman, adding, “We built this new post to bring people in and to socialize and relax ... and (so they can) know that if they have a problem that needs fixing, they have somebody to come to.”

“I am so excited about being in this new building,” Halfon admitted when he stepped up to the microphone with a celebratory whoop.

Other speakers echoed that sentiment, including American Legion Post #121 Cmdr. Mike Merritt of Blairsville, who was impressed with the fact that much of the manual labor was completed by members of the post.

“I appreciate what you

# Pilcher Turns 90...from Page 1

Roger Pilcher through the Marine Corps League Unicoi Detachment, where I became an associate member,” Gaylord said. “The Corps are frequent visitors here. They come in to socialize a lot. We’ve done some fundraisers for them.

“Because of all the ways they help the community and the time we spend together, you start to become family. Mr. Roger came in several months ago and told me he wanted to hold his birthday here. When we found out it was his 90th birthday, I knew we had to make it special.”

His guest list was extensive, including family, members of the American Legion Ira Weaver Post 121, the Rotary Club of Union County, the Marine Corps League, and many of his friends.

“He was president of the Vietnam Veterans of America, and several of them are here,” Gaylord added. “I think he even invited the lady at the Post Office. He really wanted this party to be a big one.

“He picked out the menu he wanted to serve his guests. We have hamburger steaks and gravy, baked chicken, garlic mashed potatoes, green bean almondine, and his favorite dessert, peach cobbler and ice cream. And we made him a custom-shaped 90 birthday cake.”

As for the “birthday boy,” Pilcher said he never thought he’d live to be 90 years old.

“I never thought about age as I went along, and I nev-

er really retired,” Pilcher said. “I quit working for money, but if I was still physically able, I’d still be working. I was always taking classes and furthering my education because the Corps offered it. That went a long way toward becoming an officer.”

Pilcher’s daughter Chris, up from Florida, described herself as “his girl,” saying how she is “always there” for her father.

“We are the closest in the family,” Chris said. “When we were growing up, his being in the service and doing three tours in Vietnam, he was away a lot. So, there was a lot of separation in my younger years, and it makes you long for the times together. It’s so great to be here celebrating a momentous 90th birthday.

“Several years ago, dad moved here from Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. I think he was seeking a less busy life and a little serenity. He’s originally from Georgia, so this was a natural place for him to gravitate to. My favorite memory of my dad was him teaching me how to do the Jitterbug to a Christmas song!”

One of his other daughters, Donna, came down from Nebraska to attend the party, and she shared a memory, too, saying she remembers being little and getting so excited when he came home from trips in the service.

“I would drop everything, no matter what I was doing, and run to him,” Donna said. “I was always so excited

to see him. And I remember him putting me on the back of his bicycle and riding around. It’s amazing that he’s 90 years old. He is a force of nature.

“I’m so grateful for this veteran’s community and the people who check in on him and help him. They are so wonderful. We are so far away, and he couldn’t still be living on his own without the support they provide. We couldn’t do it any other way.”

Jim Yohe, friend and Air Force veteran, said that “Roger has always been special to us.”

“He has done an awful lot for the community,” Yohe said. “When Hurricane Helene hit, he went out and started collecting items for the Blairsville Veterans Association to send up there. He’s a dynamite activator. Whatever needs to be done, he does. There are an awful lot of people who would rather just sit and watch.”

Remarking on the recent natural disaster relief efforts, Pilcher said people wouldn’t believe how they got the backpacks full of supplies up to the devastated areas of Western North Carolina.

“We put them on mule trains,” Pilcher said. “There was no other way to get those items to the people who needed them.”

The birthday party served as a lovely celebration for a very special soldier, husband and father. Pilcher is a resident of Young Harris and is active in multiple North Georgia communities.



The spacious interior of the new VFW Post #7807 featured a full house for the July 5 grand opening. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

do for not only the district, but what you do for veterans,” Merritt said. “I appreciate all that you’ve done, (and) I appreciate what you’re going to do in this facility.”

Along with VFW and American Legion administration and excited veterans and their families, Lake Chatuge Chamber of Commerce President Julie Payne attended the ribbon-cutting, congratulating post members on their new headquarters and remarking

on the building’s beauty. Before administering the blessing and praying over those in attendance, Chaplain Dwight Moss declared that “it’s certainly a blessing to be here, a blessing for me to see everything going on at this post.”

“I’ve seen some firsthand work of what the post actually does,” Moss said.

The fully functioning bar was put into use that day, and guests also got to enjoy a meal of barbecue prepared

in-house and an assortment of homemade dishes that veterans and their families brought with them as part of the celebration. As the evening wound down, Bill Renaldo performed live music from 3-5 p.m.

Even when it was time to head home, Towns County’s veterans – and even those in the surrounding areas – looked forward to a new era defined by camaraderie with physical proof of their efforts standing tall.



A brand-new feature of the post is abundant dedicated motorcycle parking against the building. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks



# Summer Heat...from Page 1



**Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw eagerly anticipating a drop in the dunk tank for Summer Heat’s First Responders Appreciation Day annual event.**

Photo by Lowell Nicholson

bulance drivers, firefighters, sheriff, and police officers.

“We collect funds for anyone in good standing in any of those organizations. Many individuals are too proud to ask for help, so generally someone must apply for them. But this organization gives people in need the help they deserve.

“Our first responders are very underpaid. What these folks do up here is incredible. I would like to see (this fundraiser) busier, but it’s definitely better attended than last year. I’ve been busy as a transport person going back and forth. The fairgrounds are a better venue for this event.”

When a first responder suffers an injury or illness and this or her benefits run out, he

or she can apply for financial assistance through Summer Heat. Such assistance is critical because, oftentimes, an injury or illness lasts longer than sick leave or vacation time, even though the monthly bills still come in monthly.

“It was great for them to come up with the idea and put this together,” said Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw of the volunteer effort. “We really need this for our first responders who do such a great job.”

Bradshaw helped entertain the crowd from the dunk tank where he took a dip thanks to a young lady with a good arm.

Hiawassee Mayor Jay Chastain Jr. did his part, too, volunteering to kiss a pig to

entertain attendees.

“This event is designed to help first responders in their hour of need,” Chastain said. “As you know, I’ve been a first responder basically all of my life; I’ve been a paramedic in Towns County since 1987.

“My father served this county (as sheriff) and was killed in the line of duty in 1974. My mother continued to work for the Sheriff’s Department up until she retired.

“These people (with Summer Heat) get together and work their hind ends off for over a year to plan this and put it on. Kissing a pig is the least I can do! I’m taking one for the team.”

For more info, be sure to visit <https://www.summerheatoftownscounty.org/>



**For another year running, local leaders were happy to support Summer Heat’s efforts to provide financial assistance to first responders in need, this time at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds.**

Photo by Lowell Nicholson

# Vote early this week for the Special Primary Runoff

**By Shawn Jarrard  
Towns County Herald  
Editor**

Early in-person voting began Monday for the state-wide Special Primary Runoff Election to decide the Democratic nominee for Public Service Commission District 3.

As this is a runoff, the early-voting window is one week only, so registered voters have between now and Friday to cast ballots early ahead of Election Day on Tuesday, July 15.

The June 17 primary election featured very low turnout of just 2.8% of Georgians voting, and Towns County underperformed the state average with 1.8% of the local electorate showing up at the polls for a total of 199 ballots cast.

Since this was a primary, voters had to pick a political party ticket to vote, and, statewide, the Public Service Commission District 3 race failed to result in any Democratic candidate receiving a majority vote to become

the party nominee, hence the runoff.

And because Democratic turnout featured fewer than 1% of registered voters here, all runoff voting will occur at a single polling location, including on Election Day. The polling place will be the Towns County Civic Center at 67 Lakeview Circle, Suite A, in Hiawassee.

In other words, there will be no voting at the Young Harris precinct – Towns County only has two precincts, the other being the Civic Center for Hiawassee – at any point during the upcoming runoff, as authorized under state law.

Early Voting hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., even during lunch, with Election Day voting to take place from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., all at the Civic Center.

Voters eligible to cast ballots in this runoff election are those who voted on the Democratic ticket for the June 17 Special Primary and those who were eligible to vote in the primary but did not. People who voted in the Republi-

can Primary cannot vote in the runoff.

The deadline to register to vote in this election was May 19, and the deadline to request an absentee-by-mail ballot was Monday, July 7.

Residents may visit <https://mvp.sos.ga.gov> for mail-in application and ballot status, registration information on file with the county, sample ballots for upcoming elections, provisional ballot status and more.

The Special General Election to follow will be Tuesday, Nov. 4, from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Also Nov. 4 is the regularly scheduled Municipal General Election to fill two seats on the Hiawassee City Council as well as the Hiawassee mayoral position. This municipal election will only be available to eligible residents of Hiawassee.

People with election-related questions may call the Towns County Board of Elections & Registration at 706-896-4353.