

2008 Oflag 64 Reunion Report

Washington, DC

The Kriegies of Oflag 64, along with their families and friends, gathered on Oct. 9-13, 2008 for their annual reunion at the Holiday Inn National Airport Hotel in Crystal City, VA near Washington, DC. Check-in, efficiently coordinated by Armed Forces Reunions, Inc., was held on Thursday and Friday. From the time of arrival and throughout the reunion the “hospitality room” was a popular gathering place for snacking, visiting, viewing books, photographs and documents, and of course, swapping stories.

On Friday morning, following a buffet breakfast, the annual business meeting was conducted by Elodie Caldwell. First time attendees were recognized. Joe Seringer provided his Treasurer’s Report (found on page 2 of this ITEM) and announced that he is retiring as Treasurer. Everyone enthusiastically thanked Joe for his many years of service keeping us solvent. Due to his frugality, accuracy, and sheer wizardry at managing our money, the group unanimously agreed that Joe should be nominated for the Federal Reserve Bank Board. Bret Job has consented to assume the responsibilities of Treasurer. There was discussion about next year’s reunion.

Following the meeting, Vincent Santucci, Chief Ranger and Brandon Bies, Cultural Resource Specialist of the National Park Service, presented a captivating program on “**MIS-X at PO BOX 1142**”. This highly secret project was established during World War II at Ft. Hunt just outside the District of Columbia. It was designed to aid American POWs by: 1) providing training to assist POWs with escape and evasion; 2) devising communication techniques, including coded messages; 3) designing and producing technological devices for hidden instruments storing coded messages; and 4) setting up fictitious non-profit organizations, such as the “Soldiers Aid Society” to distribute what appeared to be care packages but included “stuffed” items containing secret information. After the war, this program was dismantled and all participants were sworn to secrecy. The existence of a mysterious P.O.Box 1142 was known but its meaning and mission were only recently discovered. The Rangers are working to preserve this part of our history and were most interested in learning whether any of our Kriegies had any information or had received items from P.O. Box 1142. Some of our men shared their experiences and knowledge related to these kinds of activities. Naturally the “bird”, the Oflag 64 Kriegies’ secret radio, figured prominently in the discussion. The Rangers described their efforts at attempting to locate veterans who were involved with MIS-X to record their oral histories. (Should any readers know such persons, the Rangers would be most interested in talking to them.) Filmmaker David Taylor and producer Nils Cowan were introduced. They have just received funding to do a documentary on this fascinating and little-known project for National Geographic.

At noon on Friday, Reunion Chairman Pat DiFrancesco Bender and 16 Kriegies boarded a bus for a special tour of the White House. While there, they were accompanied by 10 White House staffers and 3 Homeland Security agents. The tour guide for the West Wing area was a secret service agent who has worked at the White House for 18 years. Our men were allowed to get much closer to the paintings and

artifacts than ordinary tourists who usually have to view them from behind a security rope. In fact, it's next to impossible to even get to tour the White House these days, so this was a special opportunity. In addition to Pat, we all thank Stacy Bolten for her assistance in making this very special tour possible. Saturday was a beautiful day--perfect for our "City Bus Tour" of Washington, DC. Accompanied by knowledgeable guides and skilled and extremely patient drivers, we were taken to see sights such as the magnificent Lincoln Memorial, Jefferson Memorial, The Capitol Building, Washington Monument, White House, DAR building, Justice Building, the Treasury, the Pentagon, many Smithsonian buildings along the Mall, the Vietnam Memorial, Iwo Jima/USMC Memorial, the Korean Memorial, and the Holocaust Museum—to name a few. Somewhere in all this sightseeing there was a stop for lunch at the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center. Afterwards a special stop was made at the World War II Memorial where we disembarked. Ted Rinehart offered remarks on behalf of our veterans and a memorial wreath was placed and dedicated by our group. We were given plenty of time to walk around the vast memorial site, and of course cameras were snapping. A very moving sight was the arrival of a group of handicapped veterans, each accompanied by a "buddy", who were brought to see the Memorial as part of the Honor Flight program. The goal of this organization is to make it possible for every WWII veteran to travel, at no expense, to our Nation's capital to see the beautiful memorial honoring their service.

We were left to our own devices Sunday morning. Some went to church, while others squeezed in a little touring or just used the time to visit and relax. About 30 attendees met at noon for a second bus tour. The first stop was an opportunity to grab a bite of lunch at the Pentagon City Food Court. (Naturally, some—who shall remain nameless--would rather shop than eat, and this was their chance!) Soon we headed for Arlington National Cemetery where we could view Arlington House, which was the home of General Robert E. Lee and his wife Mary Parke Custis Lee at the time of the outbreak of the Civil War. We were told poignantly that the 1,000-acre cemetery built in their very yard after the war ensured that they would never be able to return there to live but was the start of what is now our national cemetery. We stopped for a short hike up a hill to the eternal flame and gravesites of President and Mrs. John F. Kennedy and found nearby the grave of Senator Robert Kennedy, which was marked with a simple cross. The next stop was for an extremely impressive ringside view of the changing of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknown. This intricate 20-minute procedure occurs every hour on the hour, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. We understand that Kriegy Bud Bolling's father assisted in "designing" this ceremonial procedure over 70 years ago. Upon our return to the hotel, Mark Berman, a Washington Post staff writer, interviewed several of the Kriegies for an article which subsequently appeared in the Washington Post.

Sunday night marked the occasion of the annual reception and banquet at the hotel. Elodie Caldwell was the Mistress of Ceremonies. Thanks to Judy Casner Fletcher and Karen McConnell with Metro Reporters, we didn't miss a thing. Judy had arranged for Karen to provide translation of every word spoken to on-screen captions for all to read. After the presentation of Colors, we learned about "The Freedom Team Salute", a

program established to recognize United States Army Veterans for their service to the nation, no matter where or when they served, or for how long. Appreciating the essential bond between soldiers, their families and their communities, Freedom Team Salute celebrates the sacrifices made by all. They especially honor the veterans who served and who remain our living connection to generations of duty, honor, and patriotism. As a representative of this group, Kevin M. Hymel, a writer/editor with Summit Marketing, read the names of the Kriegy attendees and MSG James Boughner, Soldier Outreach, Freedom Team Salute, presented each honoree with an official commendation package, including a certificate of appreciation, a personalized letter signed by the Secretary of the Army and Army Chief of Staff thanking them for their support, an official U.S. Army lapel pin, and two Army decals.

Tom Cobb, son of the late Kriegy George Cobb, and Tom's Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina were responsible for arranging for the keynote speaker, Brigadier General Ben Hodges. Tom located the OFLAG64 group through the website and attended his first reunion last year in Tulsa. He personally arranged a surprise for each Kriegy attendee. After Gen. Hodges' inspiring address, Tom presented each a US Flag that had been flown over either The Capitol Building or the Pentagon. Gen. Hodges was presented with a copy of "Roads to Liberation from Oflag 64" written by the late Kriegy Clarence Meltesen, then graciously went from table to table getting the autographs of each Kriegy present.

Judy Casner Fletcher, daughter of Alexander Casner, one of our Kriegies who was unable to attend the reunion, brought a wonderful photograph of the first Oflag 64 reunion held in 1947. She thoughtfully provided copies that could be purchased for \$5.00 in the hospitality room. All proceeds from these sales will be added to the OFLAG Treasury. Thank you, Judy!

On Monday, a breakfast and Memorial Service were held. The Colors were presented. Lt. John R. Logan, Chaplain of the MBW Religious Ministries Team, conducted a moving service especially honoring our beloved Kriegies who have passed on. Originally from Puerto Rico, John is a Chaplain in the US Navy assigned to the Marines. Following this service were hugs, fond farewells and promises to gather again next year, as attendees dispersed for their trips back home.

There are not enough words to express our thanks to Pat DiFrancesco Bender and her entire family for their hard work in planning and arranging this wonderfully eventful weekend! As always, Elodie Caldwell was present to guide us in each meeting. We are grateful for her selfless and tireless work, a gift to us all in memory of her father Reid Ellsworth. Elodie continues to make it possible for this group of dear comrades and families to stay in touch.

Looking forward to our gathering next year! Warm regards,
Ellen Warthen and Kathy Warthen Ezell