

2009 OFLAG 64 REUNION SUMMARY **By Lucy Lussenden**

This summary of our 2009 Reunion is for all those kriegies and their families who were not able to attend this year, and for those who did attend and would like to relive their memories again.

This year's reunion was held in Fort Collins, Colorado, hosted by Julie Gionfriddo, daughter of our late kriegy Jack Rathbone. Julie handled the arrangements for the reunion almost single-handedly. This was quite a feat considering Julie is a working Veterinarian Ophthalmologist teaching in the Veterinarian School at Colorado State University in Fort Collins. Gail Bradford Brown, "Brad's" daughter, helped Julie with arrangements, too. I hope I haven't left out anyone else who may have helped. Julie sure knows how to put on a great party. She deserves many, many thanks for all of her hard work and planning. Julie provided us with perfect weather as well—warm temperatures, sunshine, and blue skies. She even brought her husband, Jim, to the Saturday night Reunion dinner for the first time. What more could we ask for?

About 10 kriegies attended this year's reunion along with their wives, children, grandchildren and other family members and friends. Together about 84 people were at the reunion. Many kriegies were unable to attend this year either due to health concerns or conflicts in schedules. The kriegies who could not come were sorely missed, but were in our hearts and minds the whole time. The late Bill Warthen's family could not attend. The Rosenthals, the Baums, the Heislars, the Chappells were among those unable to attend. On the other hand, we had the joy of seeing "Brad" Bradford, Herm Littman, "Doc" DiFrancesco, Ed Graf, Ray Klinkenborg, and their families, and many others. Marcia Kanners came alone this year. Her son David passed away earlier this year, and it was he and his wife who often accompanied Marcia. We had the good fortune of meeting Karen Rossi, a grand-niece of Col. Thomas Drake, who attended for the first time. She was warmly welcomed and told by our kriegies how much they loved and respected her uncle. Several families were only able to attend the dinner on Saturday evening, and we were happy to see them. Evelyn Korber, widow of kriegy Bill, and her family were among those who came and whom we hadn't seen recently. I apologize to all those whose names I have missed.

A few of Julie's favorite cousins assisted her in various ways. One cousin, Micah, had prepared a software program which was shown at the Business Meeting. The program showed photos of some of our kriegies, giving the dates and places where they had been captured. Another cousin, Cheri, brought an assortment of lovely gifts, handmade by another relative, which were raffled off after Saturday evening's dinner. A third, "Ginny", attended the reunion from Houston, where she works in research at the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Clinic. She assisted Julie throughout the reunion and offered explanations of some of the things we saw on our tours. All in all, Julie has some very interesting and well-informed family members, and we enjoyed their company immensely.

The reunion was held at the Hilton Garden Inn Hotel in Ft. Collins. This is a beautiful hotel with excellent accommodations. They provided us with a large conference room for our meetings and meals on the first floor, right across the hall from our well-stocked hospitality room. Beverages, snacks, and fruit were available in the hospitality room. Maps, stories, and other items of interest were on display there. The room was open throughout the entire reunion, including the morning of the Memorial Breakfast.

Thursday was check-in day, as usual. In our "goodies" bag was the itinerary, a print out of all the kriegies and family members addresses and those whose e-mail addresses Elodie Caldwell presently has, a list of businesses in Fort Collins who offered special discounts to us as a show of appreciation for the sacrifices made by members of our "greatest generation." Brad Bradford's daughter, Gail, gifted us with T-shirts imprinted with "Oflag 64" and a photo taken by Jack Rathbone of the beautiful Rocky Mountains printed on the front. Also included were the words "POW Reunion, September 2009, Ft. Collins, Colorado." Some of us wore these shirts at times during the rest of the weekend.

On Friday morning we held our Business Meeting after breakfast. Elodie conducted the meeting and brought us up to date on improvements and changes made to our Oflag 64 website. Our new site name is OFLAG64.US. Elodie's husband, Bill, has been responsible for improving and maintaining this important site, and we thank him very much for that. We have all been able to stay in touch and informed because of this website and the outstanding work being done by Elodie and her family. Many people

have been able to find us who are seeking information about Oflag 64 and to learn about what life was like for their loved ones in the POW camp.

Elodie announced that next year's reunion would be hosted by Herm Littman's daughter, Carole. The reunion will be held in Dallas on a date that will not conflict with the Jewish High Holy Days. Bob O'Neill brought this matter to our attention during the meeting, and we are very grateful to him for that reminder. "Doc" DiFrancesco talked about the POW-Veterans History Project at the Library of Congress and encouraged all POWs to get their story included in this project. The budget was presented orally by Bret Job, who said there was about \$9,000.00 in the fund. He has provided a printed copy of the full budget which appears in this ITEM. We were told about Dale Nitz, who has a traveling POW exhibit that he is taking across America. Dale sleeps in the back of this van containing the exhibit and moves from town to town, usually staying only one day and night. He receives no funding for this project except for whatever donations he receives from visitors to his exhibit. Dale is doing this because he thinks that it is vitally important for everyone to know about the hardships and sacrifices endured by our veterans. Dale brought his exhibit van to our main library here in Livonia recently. Charlene and I met Dale, toured his exhibit, and were very impressed. Jimmie Kanaya told us about Dale Nitz, and we thank him for that information.

Elodie reminded us to watch for a program that includes our own Jimmie Kanaya on The History Channel HD. The History Channel is preparing to launch a new 10-part series called "WWII in HD". It will air in the 4th Quarter of 2009. The program is scheduled to begin airing on November 15. The program will air two episodes a night for five days (Sunday through Thursday nights). Jimmie will be in episodes #7 and #9, a Wednesday and Thursday. There will be still shots of Jimmie in promos. Thanks to Jimmie's lovely wife, Lynn, who brought this to our attention. Of course, these dates may be changed by The History Channel, but watch for this to run in the next few months.

After lunch, our tour guide and her bus driver took us to the Budweiser Plant for a tour. The plant guides did a great job escorting us through the facility and explaining how beer is made using various ingredients to get different kinds of beers. We saw the huge vats where the beers were brewing and the assembly line of how the beer is bottled and prepared for delivery all across the country. An especially wonderful part of this tour was to the stables where we got to see the gorgeous Clydesdale horses and their beautiful tack. The guide explained the criteria used to decide which horses are chosen to become members of this impressive team. Part of it depends on their color and markings, their size, and their dispositions and personalities. It's not just "any old" horse who can have the honor to pull the big red Budweiser beer wagons! At the end of our tour we were treated to a complimentary glass of any kind of beer we wanted to try. That was a lot of fun, as was perusing through the gift shop before we left there.

After our Budweiser tour, we were given a tour of Fort Collins itself. We had a very fun and efficient tour guide with us who explained about the many things we were seeing on the route. Part of our tour included the campus of Colorado State University, including the veterinary clinic where Julie worked with "all God's creatures great and small." Julie told us that she has treated just about every kind of creature you could think of. These include snakes, birds of prey, including owls, fish, house pets, and wild animals. Julie performed a very delicate and complicated surgery on the eye of a great-horned owl in her clinic while the late Steve Irwin watched. You may remember Steve as the famous "Crocodile Hunter" on his TV show from Australia. Steve and his family were touring America a few years ago on a combination family vacation and the making of a film to be used at a later date on his show. This surgery was filmed at the time and shown on Steve's television show later in the year. If you had ever seen Steve's show, you know how enthusiastic and excited he got about his work. Needless to say, he was sure excited and impressed by Julie's precision and skill. I saw this show and was very impressed with Julie's amazing work. I know where I'll take my pet if I ever get one and it needs eye surgery!!!

Our tour then took us through the city and past some very interesting places. At the end, some of our group exited the bus and shopped in the old town for a while. The others returned to the hotel to rest. The bus later picked up the folks who had stayed in town.

Saturday morning began with breakfast together in the conference room. Our guest speaker at breakfast was Betsy Markey, Colorado Freshman U.S. Congresswoman. Elodie provided me with a summary of Ms. Markey's visit, as I was unable to attend the breakfast. Following is Elodie's report:

Ms. Markey spoke about the need and the right we all have to live in a safe democracy and what that means to us as citizens of our country. She also emphasized the debt of gratitude we all owe to those who have sacrificed their lives either by giving their own or by serving in WWII and subsequent conflicts up through today. She spoke to the Kriegies particularly, thanking them for their selfless service, especially during captivity.

As a congresswoman, she is working with bipartisan committees and has co-sponsored:

1. a bill to extend the GI Bill to the national guard as well as to the reserves
2. a bill to treat traumatic brain injuries that result from combat

Congresswoman Markey was elected last November and has been in office just since the beginning of this year. She went around the room before breakfast shaking everyone's hands and introducing herself. She was an enthusiastic speaker and seemed to know what she was talking about. Ms. Markey answered questions from the group after her speech.

Following breakfast, our tour guide took us up to Rocky Mountain National Park. While the bus driver maneuvered the narrow, winding road leading up to the top, our guide pointed out places of interest along the way. She told about a terrible flood that had occurred years ago in the canyon. A huge wall of water rushed down through the very narrow canyon and washed away hundreds of homes, businesses, people and all the things connected with the homes, like huge propane tanks that were used for heating the homes. No one in the area will ever forget that terrible storm. Our bus climbed slowly to an elevation of almost 10,000 feet at our destination on the top of the mountain. We saw breathtaking vistas in every direction we looked. Julie pointed out many high peaks that her dad had climbed during his lifetime in the mountains, some more than once. Her mom and dad had spent their honeymoon in the mountains, climbing the peaks. Our late kriegy, Jack, loved the mountains so much that he photographed them over and over. One of his beautiful framed photos was one of the gifts raffled at Saturday evening's dinner. We returned to our hotel in time to change and prepare for our evening dinner.

Our guest speaker at dinner was Dr. Tom Sutherland. He had been Julie's professor at CSU. Dr. Sutherland and his wife, Jean, wrote a book entitled *At Your Own Risk*, copies of which were available gratis that evening. Dr. Sutherland told us how he had been teaching at Beirut American University in Lebanon when he was taken hostage in 1985. He was held for almost seven years in various locations during that time. He told an amazing story of how he and other hostages survived those years, some of which were in windowless rooms. Terry Anderson later became a hostage, and was held with Dr. Sutherland. He and his wife, Jean, were very interesting speakers and we were held spellbound by their stories.

Our Memorial Breakfast ceremony began with the presenting of the colors by a Color Guard from Colorado State University Military Sciences. Evonne Pierce provided lovely music with her guitar and sweet voice. Our speaker was Leonard Sokolowski of the Unitarian Church. After a brief talk, he read the names of our Kriegies lost since the last Reunion. Sadly, the list grows longer every year. Afterward we all said our "good-byes" with hugs and "just one more picture" of each other until next year. I close with the following quote:

Printed on the front of the Memorial Breakfast Program:

"Let no man believe that there is a stigma attached to having been honorably taken captive in battle. Only the fighting man ever gets close enough to the enemy for that to happen. That he is not listed among the slain is due to infinite care of providence. Be proud that you carried yourselves as men in battle and adversity. You will be enriched thereby."

--Col. Thomas D. Drake