

“REFLECTIONS OF THE REUNION” BY MILLIE O’BANNON

Millie writes, “I’m not so sure I am the one to write this article. Frank and I were too closely involved. But I’ll say this, we had fun!!!”

We drove to the Doubletree Hotel early Wednesday morning, October 3, 1990. It has always been our favorite hotel in Tucson, and they didn’t let us down. The employees worked very well with us. They tried very hard to make our reunion a success. I have decided that hotel work is like putting on a reunion every day.

Because so many members had already arrived, we knew immediately that we should have stayed in the hotel Tuesday night. Many willing hands from the early birds made the movement of our boxes, etc. easy. Don Lundberg was great on the ladder getting the posters up so that all of Tucson knew the 461st was in town!! The general meeting room was large and was more than adequate for our use. Out came the “goodie bags”, PX supplies and the help to man everything. Our hats are off to Katherine and Don Lundberg, Elaine Bro, Len and Grace Cole and many others that didn’t object to being “gofers”. I won’t say that we had slow sales in the PX department. Total sales exceeded \$800. The men wanted squadron pins, group and 15th Air Force pins, patches and whatever. After all, we are buying for our grandchildren, aren’t we? The new group caps were a big hit! Many a grandson is now wearing “grand pop’s” group cap.

Mementos were laid out on the tables. Even if you didn’t fight in the War, it is like reading history. We all enjoyed each other’s war experiences. It has just occurred to me that we should have interviews with the wives to see how they survived fifty missions. I will remember how mad my boss was at me when I got a call that Frank was back in the States. I packed my desk and fled home.

Sitting at the PX table was a good spot. Sooner or later you saw everyone. It was more strenuous if you had Katherine and Elaine’s job of scheduling banquet table seating (Katherine would have made a great top sergeant!). It is such a strenuous task that we are considering using the same approach we do at the Sunday breakfast. That is, stand in line with your friends, walk in and grab a table. At least, this year we had no arguments at the banquet on who was sitting where. The question is, Is the guff worth it?

On Thursday, the trip to Mexico gave us the first test of the system. The buses reached the hotel at the correct time, but we had neglected to tell them we would load in the front of the hotel. Based on the original survey of those who wanted to go to Mexico we planned on 188 seats. Guess what? We used 188 seats. On the drive to Nogales, the group stopped for a short tour of the San Xavier Mission. The buses arrived at Nogales on time and lunch was just about on the tables. Due to the size of the group, some members had to go to a sister restaurant and received the same menu. Frank thinks the short walk down the block was just a wee bit better. Shopping was the order for the hour. Seems everyone in Nogales was smiling when the buses returned to the U.S.A. Wonder why?

At night some went out to nearby restaurants with friends for dinner. Some just seemed to collapse. Others hit the nice bar in the hotel to talk and eat. You couldn't move two feet without finding someone to talk to. What a friendly group of people we have! It really didn't matter what squadron you had been in, or what your job was, you just talked! At the end of the day Frank complained that his feet hurt clear up to his knees!

After loading five buses for the trip to the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum and Old Tucson things got a little quieter around the hotel. The Desert Museum has been selected as one of the ten most outstanding museums in the world. I think our people felt that they were seeing something out of the ordinary. You just don't realize that our desert is such a green one and such a busy place. We never heard a coyote scream until we moved to Tucson but, if you live in the suburbs, you do in the night. Then it was on to Old Tucson and lunch. The weather turned out to be warmer than normal and the sun seemed to be trying to "outdo" itself. In fact, it was too darn hot for lunch outdoors. After lunch the group roamed Old Tucson trying to remember what movie they had seen this and that building in.

Then it was back to the hotel for the business meeting. The meeting was well attended, with very few taking a short rest. The meeting began with a "report from the President". Frank started with a short review of the searching he had done over the past eight years trying to find our original group flag. Failing to find the flag, he started to work on getting an exact copy made. While Frank was talking, Gail Peterson came down the aisle carrying the flag. Attached to it were the ten campaign streamers and one of our two Distinguished Unit Citation streamers (Ploesti). This was the first time that any of the members had seen the awards that they had worked so hard to earn. Without the help of Willie Gibson (764th) and the heraldry section of the Air Force this project would still be in the searching mode. Frank acknowledged the help of the reunion volunteers and said that without his wife's help the members would still be back in their home towns.

The official attendance at the reunion was 387. The total number of men in the 461st Bomb Group was 5,420. At the present time, we can account for 38 percent of the total. So far this year we have found over 200 men and expect the total will be over 300 by the end of the year. Sad to say, many of the men in the memorial book did not know that we had formed this outstanding organization. We must make sure that the surviving members of the group do know about us. Paid memberships this year exceed 1225.

The business meeting was normal. The minutes of the last meeting and a report on the finances were approved. Under old business the matter of life memberships was again introduced. A motion was made and seconded that the group have life memberships at a fee of \$50. This motion was approved. There was no new business so the meeting was adjourned.

Those that were prisoners of war convened a special meeting.

On Saturday we ran "round robin" buses to the Pima Air Museum. Everyone enjoyed getting into the B-24 and having their picture taken outside with the aircraft tail markings

of the 461st very much in evidence. Some men even made a second trip to the museum. Over 160 aircraft were on display, a great number of them from “our” day.

On Saturday evening we had the usual group banquet and dance. Lt. Col. Johnson, Chaplain at the Davis-Monthan AFB, and his lovely wife were our guests. The food was great but as usual we seem to do more talking than eating. We were fortunate to have found Tony and his orchestra, they were great. We have many wonderful dancers in our group.

Well over 200 members attended our Memorial Service on Sunday morning. Lt. Col. Johnson led the service aided by the color guard from the base. His speaking was as forceful as he was handsome (Editors note: Millie seems to think all Lt. Colonels are handsome). The Memorial Service is always important to us, not on as a way of remembering and honoring our fallen members but also as a way thanking God for how fortunate we have been.

Brunch was great! After the brunch we all went in different directions. Frank says that men came from the four corners of the United States (Maine, Florida, California, Washington and Alaska). 37 states were represented this year. Some took off for home, some went sightseeing and some collapsed in the bar-lounge. But whatever we did, we had wonderful memories of being with old and new found friends. Without a doubt, we are lucky to have known each other. We are a group of special people sharing a special time of our lives. See you next year!!