

## **OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 2024**

### **REUNION XXIV: COLORADO SPRINGS, COLORADO**

By Terry Sarul

Greetings again to all you 119ers out there. Well, here we are, one more year has passed since I wrote the last Reunion Recap after Reunion XXIII in Washington DC. My, how time flies!

The first thing I would like to cover is the fantastic turnout we had for this year's reunion. The official count of attendees for Reunion XXIV is 133 AC-119 members/family. Even though the numbers are not what they used to be when we started this annual affair, we must face the reality of our membership getting a bit older and some of us find it a bit more challenging to travel. However, we STILL get great participation. The turnout was truly amazing, and what makes it even better is that we are still getting first-time reunion attendees! This year we added seven! If you have NEVER been to a reunion, PLEASE give it some serious thought and plan to attend. You WILL NOT regret it and will be pleasantly surprised how good it feels to reconnect with the individuals you served with over fifty years ago. I guarantee at some point during the week, you will experience laughter, tears, joy and sadness, along with a healthy dose of camaraderie and a dash of brotherhood. Oh! Did I mention pride and honor? Our get-togethers can be addictive, so pull out your calendar and plan accordingly!

Conversations in the "Hootch" will rekindle memories, some good ones and some not so good ones. We guarantee you will be surprised and delighted. Regarding those conversations in the "hootch" - the first liar DOES NOT have a chance! And do not be surprised if the first story you hear suddenly takes on a life of its own and becomes even more fantastic and spectacular by Thursday or Friday. But that's OK, that's part of the fun!

OK! Let's get down to the "nuts & bolts" of what this year's reunion events included, along with a few behind-the-scenes" event planning and problem solving encountered this year.

#### **REGISTRATION & HOOTCH NOTES**

I, along with Mike Drzyzga and Wayne Laessig, got to Colorado Springs on Tuesday. We got busy on the Hootch set-up, which included table and seating arrangements and Mike's "office" with all the IT equipment. The two of us, plus Andrea and Theresa, made a trip to Costco to purchase all the Hootch supplies.

Attendees started arriving on Wednesday. By Thursday, the registration area was in full swing, with a steady stream of attendees arriving and getting their goody bags with the week's schedule, name tags, meal and tour tickets, etc. The first order of business for most attendees was to visit the "Hootch", grab a drink and a few snacks, and mingle with the earlier arrivals including renewing old acquaintances and meeting new ones.

#### **THURSDAY**

**ROYAL GORGE TOUR:** The first organized event of the reunion was a train ride through the beautiful Rocky Mountains aboard the Royal Gorge Railroad. Observing the magnificent rock formations and riding under the Royal Gorge Bridge was a unique and rewarding experience. Beautiful scenery abounded and plenty of pictures were taken from the open observation car.

#### **FRIDAY**

**AIR FORCE ACADEMY TOUR/AC-130J GHOSTRIDER TOUR:** Due to unforeseen circumstances, the AC-130J Ghost rider tour was cancelled. Although this was disappointing, we knew all along that something like this may happen, considering the nature of AFSOC, with more pressing commitments always a priority. Such is the reality of our gunship brothers. Nonetheless, we pressed on with our tour of the Air Force Academy. We boarded the buses and proceeded to the AFA campus accompanied by our two tour guides, Maj. Ryan Wichman and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Nolan Landroth. For those that do not know, I first met Maj. Wichman two years ago while participating in a gunship presentation at the EAA museum in Oshkosh, WI.

Maj. Wichman, along with Maj. Clay Ten Eyck were the two AC-130 participants in the presentation. We got to know each other like brothers over the two-day event and have kept in touch ever since. They were the perfect contacts, as I knew they were BOTH Academy graduates, were also AC-130 pilots, and they BOTH live in Colorado Springs! When we decided to organize the AFA tour, I reached out to ask if they would help with organizing it. They gladly agreed. Clay had a scheduling challenge, so Ryan stepped in and guided us the whole way. He was involved in every aspect from the start and in every detail from deciding where the buses would park (which was a real challenge due to the many projects taking place on campus), the walking route from the buses to the Southeast Asia (SEA) Pavilion and arranging for an area at the AFA Fam Camp so the attendees could relax while partaking in a box lunch.

After disembarking from the buses, we made our way to the SEA Pavilion. This was the highlight of the tour – the item on the itinerary that this tour was built around. We split up into three groups, with each group led by a docent that provided a guided tour through the Pavilion. Hearing the history of the Pavilion and SEEING our bronze plaque was very rewarding. We, as an Association, helped design, purchase, and dedicate it on June 13, 2023. You could see and sense the enormous pride evident in everyone. Our plaque is an amazing work of art, and it was so gratifying to see our Shadow and Stinger AC-119s on that honored wall with the rest of the SEA organizations with plaques honoring their units.

All five docents were part of the 1970 graduating class that was paramount in building the SEA Pavilion - organizing, funding and designing the entire Pavilion. Three of the docents were classmates of one of our very own, Col. Steve Mac Isaac. He was the person that organized the Pavilion portion of our tour and arranged for the five docents to guide and explain what we were seeing. Our gratitude goes out to the docents: Rich Downing, Curt Emery, Mike Torreano, Greg Gillis and Gary Darlene. Hearing the docents describe how the Pavilion came about, who and how the copper relief map of SEA was designed, along with the plaques and bronze sculptures, was very informative and emotional.

When the AC-130J tour was cancelled, Ryan and Nolan came up with an alternate tour of the flight line and hangar where the gliders used for initial cadet flight training were housed. They explained the whole process of how the cadets are given their initial flight training on the gliders, which is their first step into the Aviation Cadet Program. It was very informative and well received by the attendees. After returning from the Academy, everyone got ready for the Friday night “Meet & Greet”. We had a great buffet dinner, and the festivities were emceed by Wayne Laessig. New and first-time attendees, along with their families, were introduced and asked to stand up for all to see the new faces and were greeted with a round of applause. Our “Meet & Greet” is traditionally the first event at the reunion where the attendees can gather, introduce themselves to one another, personally welcome the new attendees, and reacquaint old friendships.

## **SATURDAY**

Saturday began with the traditional membership business meeting. All official business occurs at this meeting including election of officers, amendments to the by-laws, and review of sites for future reunions. It also includes the Board of Directors’ presentations, including reports from the treasurer, membership coordinator, and quartermaster. Also covered were the Facebook and website reports. The remainder of Saturday was a free day for the attendees, giving them time to do as they wished. It allowed them to relax in the Hootch and have a beer and swap a few more lies with old friends. It also allowed attendees to go on their own excursions to explore the Colorado Springs area. A few of the options available were the “Garden of the Gods” and “Pike’s Peak”. Mike Krause, Ron Hinton and I opted to take the cog train up to the top of “Pikes Peak”. Amazing how thin the air is at 11,000 feet!

The big event for Saturday evening is always the Awards Ceremony and Banquet. The President is the emcee of this event and Mike Drzyzga did the honors, keeping the festivities orderly and at a brisk pace. This year’s banquet opened with the presentation of the colors by the Colorado Springs Chapter of the Civil Air Patrol, commanded by 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Sophia Byrd. They did an outstanding job. Unlike past banquets, instead of the color guard sitting at one table for dinner, each member was seated at a different table. This allowed our members to meet and interact with these outstanding young men and women. It also allowed the color guard members to interact with many of our veterans and hear firsthand some of their stories and experiences, with hope that these young men and women would learn a bit of history and pass the stories on to their fellow CAP members.

The highlight of the banquet is always the awards ceremony, with the presentation of the Terry Courtney “Above and Beyond” award. This year’s recipient was David Voisey for the time and effort he put in as Membership Coordinator. He restructured the member category definitions and incorporated all the new definitions and requirements into an amended by-law. David was not able to attend this year’s reunion, but Mike called him with the good news. As relayed by Mike, he was totally humbled to receive the award and insisted that compared to others, his contribution paled in comparison.

### **SUNDAY**

Sunday started with the Board of Directors meeting to discuss lessons learned, hotel and AFR contracts, future reunions, and any other association business. We welcomed our brand-new President, Bill Petrie to the Board and pledged our cooperation and assistance in all matters. We were also pleased to see a few members step up and offer their help in the daily operations of the Association. Lloyd Froelich and his wife Mary Ellen offered to help with any special projects we undertake. To their chagrin, we immediately assigned them the task of researching all reunion coordinators to compare with our current coordinator, Armed Forces Reunions. The Board also welcomed Bob Safreno as the new Secretary. Sunday wrapped up with the “Farewell BBQ” which was attended by 50 people. A good time was had by all and the BBQ afforded everyone the opportunity to have a farewell toast and say their goodbyes to old and new friends alike.

### **IN CONCLUSION**

On a personal note, the Board of Directors would like to thank all the members that pitched in to help make this reunion a resounding success. They include, but are not limited to: Col Mac, Andrea Drzyzga, Theresa Sarul, Mike Krauss, and Ron Hinton. Their help was much appreciated. Several photographs from the reunion are displayed below with additional photographs available at this link -

<https://mikedrzyzga.smugmug.com/AC119AssociationImages/ReunionXXIV-CO-Springs/n-2kB8pt>

So, till next year we would like to wish you all a safe and healthy year and to consider making your plans for Reunion XXV!



## **REUNION XXV INFORMATION**



The Association's twenty-fifth reunion will be Tuesday Nov. 11<sup>th</sup> – Sunday, Nov. 16, 2025, at The Island Resort in Ft. Walton Beach, Florida. New information pertaining to the reunion will be sent via Flashes as plans proceed.

### **ADMINISTRATIVE UPDATES AND REMINDERS**

1. Our website has a great feature called **Meet Your Brother – Spotlight of the Week**, where we randomly select one of your Bio Stories and provide a link directly to it on our main page. Our goal is to give everyone visiting our website the opportunity to learn a little more about the men who flew and supported our AC119s.
2. PLEASE remember to contact your group POC, the **Membership Coordinator DAVE VOISEY** at [dvoisey@hotmail.com](mailto:dvoisey@hotmail.com) or 713-818-9234, or Association Secretary Bob Safreno when you **change contact information, especially your email address**. If you are currently receiving the *Firing Circle* by mail, AND you have an EMAIL ADDRESS, NOTIFY your unit POC, or our Membership Coordinator NOW so future *Firing Circle* newsletters can be emailed, greatly reducing our mailing costs. FLASHES are ONLY available via email.
3. Are you interested in some AC-119 Gunship historical facts, current events, interesting dialogue, photos and stories about AC-119s? Then you need to join the Association's **Facebook page (AC-119Gunships)**. It now has **over 763 members** – not just directly related AC119ers, but also history buffs, AC-130 folk (including some former 73<sup>rd</sup> SOS Shadows or 17<sup>th</sup> SOS Jackals), model makers, etc. Just link to: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/195912423919726/>. Also, there are Facebook Pages dedicated to “Air Force Gunners”, “Air Force 462 Weapons”, “Happy Valley – Phan Rang” (almost 1400 members), and

“U.S. Military Veterans - News you can use” – very interesting pictures, history, current news, and other valuable information.

4. **Awards and Decorations** coordinator Steve “Col Mac” Mac Isaac continues to aid us in fixing incorrect DD214s. He has helped many get on the trail to receiving decorations they earned through research of documentation and orders shared by association members. Questions and comments: Contact Col Mac by email: [colmacmac@mac.com](mailto:colmacmac@mac.com), or cell phone: (302) 249-1499 (MT).
5. **WE NEED YOU TO SEND US YOUR SPECIAL ORDERS.** Please send copies of your special orders, PCS orders, etc. to Mike Drzyzga. We need these to help our comrades with claims and family members after their loved one passes. Email them to Mike Drzyzga at [drzyzga513@hotmail.com](mailto:drzyzga513@hotmail.com), or mail to 37 Pecan Lane, Oak Ridge, NJ 07438, or call Mike at (201) 310-2943. Please do this as soon as possible.
6. **Books:** Our web Store has seven books written about and by AC-119ers. Their experiences and legacy are treasures to read, learn from, and enjoy! Some of these include the *AC119 Gunship History* with bios and individuals’ stories, *Spooky, Spectre, and the Man*, by Mike Friel about Ron Terry’s battles to create and utilize fixed-wing gunships, *Stinger Gunship Cartoons*, a book of cartoons that were our way of inserting humor into SEA, *The Gunship Chronicles* by Larry Barbee including his Stinger 41 story, and *History of Fairchild C-119 Flying Boxcar* by Wendell Cosner. Your actual selections and purchases in the store are via Amazon.

### FINAL FLIGHT

***We remember and honor our Brothers who made their Final Flight. Please remember their families in your prayers. R.I.P. Brothers.***

NAME	POSITION	DATE PASSED
Troy Adams	14 <sup>th</sup> FMS Maintenance	August 8, 2012
Allen W. Arthur	18 <sup>th</sup> SOS Maintenance	May 20, 2012
James (Jim) R. Alvis	71 <sup>st</sup> SOS Crew Chief	August 1, 2024
Vernon H. Amundson	18 <sup>th</sup> SOS Navigator	June 17, 2021
Lawrence ‘Duane’ Arnold	18 <sup>th</sup> SOS Navigator	March 27, 2023
Carl Bridgeforth	17 <sup>th</sup> SOS Maintenance	December 8, 2019
Ronald E. Cross	71 <sup>st</sup> SOS Crew Chief	October 25, 2023
John (Jay) R. Downs	18 <sup>th</sup> SOS	June 24, 2021
Ronald (Ron) Faison	18 <sup>th</sup> SOS Illuminator Operator	October 28, 2024
Samuel (Sam) P. Gallo	18 <sup>th</sup> SOS Gunner	October 13, 2023
Jimmy E. Grant	18 <sup>th</sup> SOS Illuminator Operator	September 2, 2024
Richard (Rick) Hardin	17 <sup>th</sup> SOS Avionics	March 2015
Ralph (Bud) V. Harrell	71 <sup>st</sup> SOS Pilot	September 14, 2012
James N. Holt	18 <sup>th</sup> SOS Navigator	August 21, 2022
Louis Jarman	14 <sup>th</sup> SOW Maintenance	February 2, 2023
Gale (Pat) Jones	71 <sup>st</sup> and 17 <sup>th</sup> SOS Illuminator Operator and Shadow 76 Survivor	November 24, 2024
David C. Kirchner	18 <sup>th</sup> SOS Maintenance	March 19, 2018
William (Billy) D. Kitts	18 <sup>th</sup> SOS Illuminator Operator	October 19, 2011
Deane (Mike) E. Lawless	18 <sup>th</sup> SOS Maintenance	January 18, 2022
Peter B. Mangum	18 <sup>th</sup> SOS Navigator	August 26, 2020
Josep Mauro	18 <sup>th</sup> SOS Life Support	July 12, 2023
Clair (CJ) Millard	17 <sup>th</sup> and 18 <sup>th</sup> SOS Gunner	July 24, 2024
John A. Murdock III	17 <sup>th</sup> SOS Gunner	March 18, 1997
Gerald (Jerry) W. Parr	18 <sup>th</sup> SOS Crew Chief	April 20, 2021
Marvin C. Septor	18 <sup>th</sup> SOS	February 22, 2019
Richard E. Stone	17 <sup>th</sup> SOS Maintenance	March 5, 2002
John F. Windsor, Jr.	17 <sup>th</sup> SOS Pilot	June 19, 2024
Robert (Bob) J. Wojcik	71 <sup>st</sup> SOS Illuminator Operator	August 8, 2019



You can view Tributes on our Facebook Page at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/195912423919726>.

Although some Brothers may have passed years ago, please let us know. It helps our efforts to find more of our Brothers who are still alive, as well as to honor the memories of those no longer with us. Please visit <https://www.ac119gunships.com/membership-contact-information/alpha-roster> to add any missing names.

### REUNION XXIV PICTURES



Dr. Roy Dowdy, left, from AFSOC History Office, listening to our “war stories”



Bob Hamorsky and Jerry Snyder



Dan Thompson and Ralph Lefarth



Joaquin Ramirez (1<sup>st</sup> reunion!) and Larry Swanson



Mike Drzyzga, Dan Thompson, Bill Zito (Shadow gunners)



Rambin' Bus Co. provided service for both tours



Rich Hall distributing Railroad info on the way to Royal Gorge Train Tour



Open train car available to enjoy breathtaking ride through the gorge



Jason Starne (Stinger family) interviewing for a potential documentary re: AC-119 Gunships



Bill and Karen Petrie, on the train



Another great day for a bus ride – this time to the USAF Academy



Andrea Drzyzga, helper bus captain





A "Docent" from Grad Class '69. Explaining the monument on the path to the SEA Pavilion



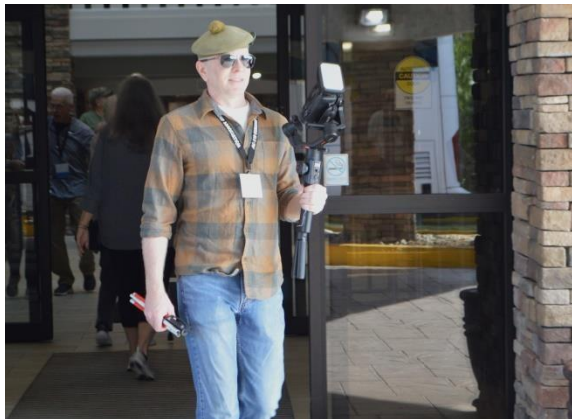
Lower Memorial Plaque display area for MIA and POW



Southeast Asia Pavilion, funded by the Association of Graduates (AOG)



Lunch provided from Chick-fil-A at the "FamCamp" – Academy campgrounds



Association Videographer John Paul Mac Isaac



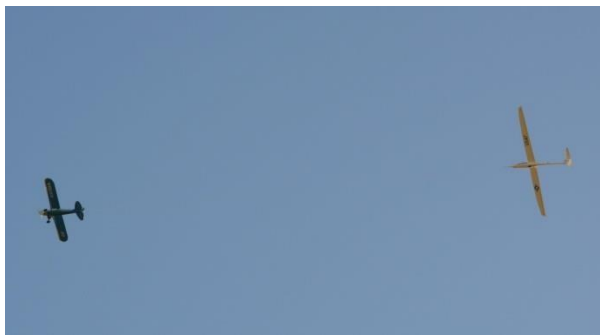
Steve "Col Mac" Mac Isaac and Maj Ryan Wichman discussing the plans for the day



Cadets learn to fly using a glider at the Davis Airfield on Academy grounds



Instructor Lt. Nolan briefing us on operation and cadet training



Glider in tow!!



Near the end of the day, group visited the Visitor's Center and Gift Shop



Gus Sininger and Wayne Laessig auctioning a pair of NEW Nomex (Fire retarding) gloves



Treasurer Doug Wohlgamuth and Quartermaster Gus Sininger in the Hootch