

USS TELFAIR -- Future Reunion Considerations

The small group that attended the crew's meeting in Albuquerque did not want to make a final decision on future reunions without first presenting the question to the larger Telfair group (at least, those roster members who have an email address on file), and I agreed to write this separate report outlining the various options that were discussed at that meeting. We considered the following four possible options going forward:

- Discontinue Telfair reunions in the future.
- Attempt another traditional Telfair reunion next year somewhere in the East.
- Ask to join the bi-annual weekend get-togethers that a small group of 60s-era Telfair shipmates have with their families.
- Join a larger AKA/APA joint reunion group who has invited Telfair participation in the past.

Each option is discussed below for your consideration.

Discontinue Telfair reunions in the future.

While no one at the reunion favored this option for sentimental reasons, it still needed to be considered. This year's reunion had only 22 attendees, which is probably below the number needed in the future if we wish to continue to have traditional reunions with group hotel rates, courtesy hospitality room, catered banquet, etc. Last year's reunion in Branson managed only 30 attendees, even though Branson is considered a premier venue for military reunion events. Unfortunately, aging and health issues have drastically reduced the number of shipmates who might be able to attend a traditional Telfair reunion. But doing nothing probably may not necessary at this point as long as there remains a handful of loyal shipmates who can still attend some kind of reunion event. Yet, that time ultimately will come when there are but a few or no Telfair veterans left.

Attempt another traditional Telfair reunion next year somewhere in the East.

I've received several emails from shipmates stating hopes of attending some future Telfair reunion. We can again try this, but will need someone new to raise his hand and volunteer to organize and conduct it. Susie and I have now done four reunions and others have done as many or more. I can safely say that it involves a bit of effort if it's to be done right, and it takes just as much work to organize a gathering of 20 as it is for 60 or more.

We've used the event services of Sarah Hord at Ozarks Kirkwood for the last two reunions to locate and coordinate hotel accommodations, banquet and tour planning, and that assistance was invaluable. However, even with that help there are a lot of other details that need to be personally handled as some of you already know from having being reunion coordinators in the past.

Regardless of personal effort and a shipmate's willingness to volunteer, we still could be faced with the issue of not reaching hotel and event minimums. One of my greatest worries in Branson and leading up to the Albuquerque reunion was whether we had enough people showing up and staying to satisfy the hotel for its offered group room rate, the courtesy hospitality room, banquet

and tour events. We were very lucky in Albuquerque as we technically did not meet some of the minimums originally agreed to, but were given a little slack just to keep our business. Last year in Branson we weren't so lucky and were billed an extra \$200 afterwards for the hospitality room because room minimums weren't achieved. Small numbers also can create transportation problems. We could not afford professional transportation services given our small attendance in Albuquerque. Instead, both Bill Bunger and I each needed to personally rent and drive a large van one day to ferry everyone to the two museum events we had planned.

Here's some interesting participation numbers from the four reunions that Susie and I handled -- Milwaukee (2005 - 69 attendees), Hot Springs (2013 - 47 attendees), Branson (2017 - 30 attendees), Albuquerque (2018 - 22 attendees). As our group continues to age, future participation numbers don't look promising. Unfortunately, the plan this year to have a reunion in the West in hopes of attracting more or new attendees did not work out as hoped, and any future traditional Telfair reunion likely will need a venue somewhere in the East where it seems a majority of remaining Telfair veterans live.

I would again recommend using the services of Sarah Hord at Ozarks Kirkwood if it is decided to again try to have a traditional reunion next year. She has proven her ability to find accommodations and rates that we probably could not do ourselves. Her compensation for those services is limited to a commission paid by the hotel for the rooms booked, and in some cases, from attended shows that provide group rates. Speaking with Sarah, she said that the hotel industry standard is a minimum ten rooms for an event in order to receive any kind of group rate. Minimums required also to have a courtesy hospitality room or catered banquet may be higher based on the hotel and event city. The availability of other no-cost amenities like breakfast, parking and wifi, plus the ability to have your own refreshments in the hospitality room also varies greatly by hotel, if available at all. All of these details must be covered in a contract that must be signed on behalf of the Telfair, whether with Ozarks Kirkwood or the host hotel.

We certainly don't want to discourage anyone who is willing to take on the task next year, and we're always happy when someone raises their hand to volunteer. But they should know all that is involved before volunteering. The worse that could happen is for one to incur the expense and do all the work only to have to cancel the reunion due to insufficient participation or funding. According to Sarah, the older the group, the more time people take to make their reservations and pay their fees as they are unsure of health, travel and other family concerns. As a result, you really don't know how many ultimately will attend until the last minute. Even this year, we had three registration cancellations due to health issues the week just before the reunion was to start.

Ask to join the bi-annual weekend get-togethers that a separate group of 60s-era Telfair shipmates have with their families.

For several years, a group of Telfair veterans from the mid-60s and their families have gotten together every two years for an informal weekend reunion. Sometimes that involves an afternoon barbeque at the host's home or meet at some other local venue. I spoke with one member of that group, and he informed me that it consists of guys who always stayed in contact after leaving the service, with their families doing things together (weddings, etc.). Even their kids grew up together and likely will continue the bi-annual practice once their parents are gone. But participation numbers for this group also have been dropping with the passage of time.

While any Telfair veteran was welcomed, their events are very informal compared to the more traditional Telfair reunions and are not attended by WWII or Korean-era shipmates. Also, they only get together once every two years, as opposed to the annual reunion events we've been otherwise conducting. We've always encouraged this group to attend our regular reunions, and a few have in years past. However, conversely, their family events probably would not effectively serve as a replacement for our traditional annual Telfair reunions.

Join a larger AKA/APA joint reunion group who has invited Telfair participation in the past.

Over the last few years I've been in contact with Skip Sanders, the coordinator and webmaster for the USS Rankin (AKA-103), a ship with a lineage very similar to the Telfair. Having annual reunions dating back many years, the Rankin group also was challenged by an aging membership and dwindling reunion attendance. A few years back, they decided to start having joint reunions with other ships and created the Amphibious Ship Reunion comprised of only AKAs and APAs. Having joint reunions with similar ship types have allowed ships and reunion groups with declining numbers to still enjoy getting together with shipmates having similar backgrounds and experiences. This year's joint reunion is being held in Dallas (October 25-29) and involves veterans from such ships as the Rankin, the USS Bexas (APA-237), the USS Pickaway (APA-222) and the USS Yancey (AKA-93). Information on this reunion can be found at <http://ussrankin.org/reunion2018.htm>.

The Amphibious Ship Reunion group uses Military Reunion Planners as its reunion planner and have been very satisfied with their performance, as they handle all registration and event details for the group. The only exception is that attendees make their own hotel reservations, as some may elect to stay elsewhere. Last year's reunion was in Harrisburg, PA and had over 160 participants. This year in Dallas there will be approximately 106 attending, with 60 of those being amphib veterans. Attendees include veterans from all relevant eras, both enlisted and officers. The dates for next year's reunion have yet to be set, but it will be in Buffalo, NY, including an available side trip to Niagara Falls.

This option was discussed at length at the crew's meeting. While viewed favorably, there were a few who expressed concern that we could lose our sense of the "Telfair family" if we were to become part of a larger joint group. In subsequent conversations with Skip I was told that Telfair attendees still can remain together, whether that means having reserved Telfair tables in the hospitality room to even having their own hospitality room at their own expense, if they wish. The also provide for a separate "crew's meeting" for each ship. The joint reunion format is very similar to what we traditionally have held for the Telfair. Every aspect of the reunion, whether the hotel, the tour events and even the banquet, is optional, and an attendee signs up only for what they want to participate in and pay for.

One important consideration is cost. In recent years, we have tried to keep our costs down to the point where we are now using "shipmate car pools" to get around, finding low-costs attractions and choosing hotel venues that don't always meet everyone's expectations, all in the hopes of attracting attendees. Whether this has been effective or not varies by opinion. Looking at the registration form for this year's joint reunion reveals a cost structure that is higher than what we may be used to. For example, the host hotel rate at the DFW Marriott Hotel in Dallas is \$123 (we paid \$97 in Albuquerque) and does not include a free breakfast. Their tour prices also are a bit

more expensive, but use regular motor coaches for transportation. I can only guess that some will be attracted to having better accommodations and others may find it a reason not to attend.

Currently, I don't believe the group reunion registration provides a means for each ship to collect funds for their own needs. We probably would need to maintain our own "tip jar" for that purpose to help defray any costs that we would incur on our own.

Other than the cost and funding concerns, the group reunion approach may be the only real way to preserve our traditional approach to reunions long-term. Skip Sanders made it clear to me that there is no on-going commitment to join the group -- a ship can try it one year and then go back to the way they were doing it before. Without speaking on their behalf, I think the attendees at our crew's meeting were very open to at least try it one year to see if people liked it.

There is an explanatory write-up on the Amphibious Ships Reunion that Skip Sanders gave me, and I will separately post that for everyone to read.

+++++

Okay, these are our options. What we need to hear are your comments and desires going forward for next year, but would ask the following:

- Don't say continue the traditional Telfair reunions if you do not plan to attend them or simply can't for whatever reason. This kind of reunion can only happen if we have enough who really do attend.
- If you are truly willing to volunteer and coordinate next year's reunion, please let us know. We can't say that the offer will be immediately accepted, but the ship's committee will give it serious consideration. We still have limited financial resources and must be prudent in how they are made available to help fund another reunion.
- If you don't respond at all, we can only assume that you don't have an opinion or don't care what happens, one way or the other. I only received 36 replies from over 160 email addresses when asked for votes on where to have the reunion this year. If you don't respond, others will decide for you.

Comments received will be reviewed by our ship's committee, and they will make a decision as to what will happen next year. **We are asking that all comments be made no later than November 15th**, either by email to usstelfair@gmail.com or by using the "Contact" page of our website at <http://www.usstelfair.org/contact-1.html>.

Your participation and comments are needed and will be appreciated. Thank you.

Jim Rosenow