

Silver Spur Reunion 2014  
23-27 April, Branson, Missouri  
After Action Report

The Radisson Hotel hosted our reunion in Branson. The location was in the heart of the Branson show district, and also adjacent to many restaurants. Their internal bar and restaurant were outstanding. Silver Spurs enjoyed two complimentary breakfast coupons for every night booked in the hotel.

Most arrivals came into town Wednesday, 23 April, and the registration desk was ready for them. At least 88 persons registered for the reunion, but with late arrivals, we think we had in the neighborhood of 90. One man from B Troop, two from C Troop, and one from the 575<sup>th</sup> Maintenance Detachment attended. John "Waldo" Pepper, outgoing president and one of the Reunion Committee members, helped with registration and was responsible for the very successful hospitality suite, which was open throughout the reunion and went through a lot of beer. Spurs met there to talk and compare war stories. The Radisson is one of the few hotels which allows us to bring in food and drink.

Waldo also provided his usual outstanding Cavalry table display, which the hotel allowed to stand in a prominent lobby location during the entire reunion period.

Our first big gathering, a welcome reception, occurred Wednesday evening and gave all arrivals a chance to renew friendships and make new ones. We were honored to have Possum 22, David Earley, who flew with the Silver Spurs in 1970, travel all the way from Australia with his wife to attend this reunion. While with our unit, we modified his call sign to "Possum Silver Spur 22."

On Thursday, registration continued briefly just prior to our Memorial Ceremony, which was conducted in a theater-style room. A Missing Man Table was set up at the front, and Chuck Oualline gave an explanation of all symbology of the items on the table. He then led all in the Pledge of Allegiance, and read the names and dates of passing of the six men we have lost since the last reunion, or of whose passing we were not aware during the last reunion: Harold R. "Hal" DeGraw, 2 July 12; SGT Joseph Eugene Smith, Rifle Platoon Sergeant, 1 Jan 13; COL Jerry M. Thiels, Gun Platoon, Spur 36, 17 June 13; Donald Bates, Rifle Platoon '70-'71, 28 June 13; Tom Runkle, Lift Section Crew Chief, '69-'70, 9 July 13; and SGT Elmer Bob "Bobby" Boughton, Rifle Platoon '67-'68, 11 Feb 14.

Chuck then conducted a moving Memorial Ceremony, during which the names of our KIAs were read during a DVD presentation, professionally produced by John Pepper. Our fallen include one whose remains may have been returned from Cambodia, but who has not been identified (Gregory Antunano.) We included the four KIAs suffered by the present-day Silver Spurs during a tour in Iraq, and one KIA suffered during the latest of three tours in Afghanistan. CWO James D. Groves III of Kettering, Ohio, was lost on 16 March 2013 in the crash of an OH-58D. The ceremony concluded with the playing of Taps with the troop at Present Arms.

That afternoon, Thursday, 61 troop members and their ladies boarded busses for a short ride to the giant, 35,000-square-foot indoor arena, which is home to the Dixie Stampede Show. The show included magicians, jugglers, horses, skilled riders, live buffalo, and other animals, all performing as guests enjoyed a meal. And – surprise – the meal was eaten using no utensils!

John “Waldo” Pepper, our President, next presided over a Silver Spur business meeting on Friday morning. Once again, Waldo held to his reputation of efficiency and brevity. Al LaGrange was elected to a two-year term as our new President. Tom Hennessey was elected as Vice President. Bill McCalister was re-elected as Treasurer and Charles Stutzman was re-elected as Membership Committee Chairman. Bill did such a good job on this reunion that he gets to do it again as head of the 2016 Reunion Committee. His committee members are Al LaGrange, John Earwood (who volunteered), Roger Young, and Chuck Oualline. Clayton Marsh also volunteered to continue the task of forwarding mass e-mails to our members. Thanks again, Clayton. Roger “Bear” Young remains our Webmaster, of course (how could we possibly replace him?)

Discussion followed about the location of the 2016 reunion. About seven cities were named and noted by the Reunion Committee. Paper suggestion forms were included in each reunion packet, and forms were still being received as late as mid-May. Reunion 2016 location and date decisions likely will be made in the spring of 2015.

Later that morning, 61 Silver Spurs and their ladies loaded up to “Ride the Ducks,” an outing which many considered to be the most fun of this reunion. A DUKW is an amphibious, wheeled, World War II truck. In Branson, a fleet of these has been rebuilt, refurbished, maintained, and outfitted to carry 35 passengers each. Two of these “Ducks” picked us up at the hotel.

The original plan was for the Ducks to carry us to a paddlewheel showboat on Table Rock Lake, where we would go aboard for lunch and a show while sailing on the lake. But some months before the reunion, the Showboat cancelled our cruise without warning. No amount of pleading could restore their schedule. So the committee sought the help of the Duck management people. Their outstanding sales representative coordinated with Barbara Fairchild, the famous country and gospel singer, who graciously agreed to a private show, just for us Silver Spurs. The Ducks took us from the hotel to the Golden Corral, which is owned by Barbara and her husband, Roy Morris, and which contains their private theater. True to her word, Ms. Fairchild treated us to an intimate, enjoyable show of singing and joking, during which she and Roy continuously interacted with the Spurs audience. After the show, Nate Pulliam presented Silver Spur coins to both Barbara and Roy. Then we enjoyed lunch at the Corral.

After lunch, we again boarded our two Ducks for a tour of the Branson area. Eventually we drove across the dam to the lake. After a required Coast Guard safety briefing, we actually entered the lake for a 30-minute swim! Although the Ducks have a propeller driven by the truck engine, much of their propulsion comes from the turning

wheels, with a top speed of about 5 knots. The entire time we were aboard, on land or sea, our drivers (captains) kept up a running account of what their vessels could do and what we were seeing. All too soon, they took us back to the hotel.

But this day was not over. Later that evening, 72 of us boarded busses to travel to the nearby Baldknobbers Jamboree Show. We learned that the Baldknobbers were a vigilante band which met atop a hill's "bald knob" in early, lawless days of Branson. The show included classic and contemporary country music, some gospel, and lots of clean comedy, which reflected the character of the Ozarks. This longest-running show is the first which started the show business industry in Branson.

Saturday morning, Bill McCalister led an informal Personal History Forum. Insights and memories of the war years were shared. Al LaGrange gave an interesting account of how operations appeared from an infantryman's perspective. Mrs. Earley related how she felt about reading her husband's letters. Several others gave insights of how things seemed from their various perspectives. Several noted that they were awed by the team effort required for an Air Cavalry unit to get its jobs done. Each platoon was quite different, and members viewed things quite differently from inside the platoon structure. Yet each platoon gave its wholehearted and unquestioned support to the other platoons. Any Spur would risk his life to save any other Spur. Although we were proud of our individual efforts, we knew that all efforts of all platoons and every individual were required to accomplish our missions.

We met again at 1700 on Saturday for cocktails in our private banquet room at the hotel. A small Missing Man Table greeted Spurs as they entered. About 90 Spurs and their guests attended the banquet, and we invited the hotel Sales Manager. As with all our events, the U.S. flag and our guidon were prominently posted. Thanks to Pam and Roger Young, who always ship the guidon both ways to our reunion sites.

The Wings of Swing Band provided enjoyable music during the reception and meal. This outstanding 13-piece orchestra added a pleasant, dignified touch to our gathering, and its members did their best to please us, and succeeded.

After an outstanding dinner, Bill McCalister welcomed all, then recited a touching poem, A Toast to the Flag. Bob Scurzi led us in the Pledge of Allegiance and Charlie Stutzman led us in prayer. Chuck Oualline again gave an explanation of the Missing Man Table, for the benefit of guests who had not been at the Memorial Ceremony. We toasted our fallen and missing. Nathan Pulliam, the first commander of our unit, delivered his commander's remarks. Asserting that he was the eldest Spur present, Nate stated that he now "truly is The Old Man."

Bill McCalister ended the evening with a number of presentations. First was a miniature, framed Silver Spur guidon given to Sarah Hord, the Radisson Hotel Sales Manager, with a request to hang it with the other military memorabilia in the hotel's "Hall of Honor." Sarah said she would, and she did, the very next morning. Chuck Oualline's book about the Silver Spurs and Silver Spur coins were presented to Sarah

Hord; to David Earley, our Australian ally; to Janie Score, widow of Randy Score, deceased Spur crew chief; to William Score, his son; and to Bud Smith, a former Silver Spur commander. Including Smith and Nate Pulliam, Bob Witcher made a total of three former commanders who attended. In appreciation for their service to the troop, special Silver Spur watches were presented to Nate Pulliam and John Pepper, and one will be mailed to Roger Young. These beautiful watches were graciously provided by Trooper Henry Sanchez. His son designed and produced the watches.

. We did not want the night to end, and the night did not end, for some who did not have early flights. The downstairs bar rocked on until early morning.

Bill McCalister should be commended for all his very hard work as the Reunion Committee Chairman, while also acting as the unit's Treasurer and paying the bills. Out of his pocket, Bill provided to all registrants the very nice Silver Spur mouse pads. Bill personally presented, also, some attractive "Benchmarks," three-inch metal discs modeled after the actual benchmarks which the National Geodetic Survey places atop each mountain to record the mountain name, exact elevation, latitude/longitude location, and date placed. Bill's benchmarks are of Di An, with the actual location and Silver Spur crest. He presented these to Nate Pulliam, John Pepper, Al LaGrange, Sid Kelley, Roger Young and John Hays (by mail), Charles Stutzman, and Chuck Oualline.

Roger Young, our webmaster, was also a committee member who helped plan events and spent countless hours on his outstanding website to update all the reunion information and registration forms. Another committee member, John Pepper, also was invaluable in planning, printing name cards and table cards, and providing the very professional video used in our Memorial Ceremony. John also designed and produced the outstanding program for our banquet, which included descriptive depictions of crew chiefs, door gunners, combat medics, and all Air Cavalry troopers.

Most of us departed on Sunday, 27 April 2014. We had renewed old friendships and forged some new ones. We hope that our brothers from other troops and from the 575<sup>th</sup> will return and bring others. I said this in previous after action reports: It is sad to think that all of us might not be around for the next reunion in 2016. I pray it is not so. But reality and age tell me that it is likely. Each time we meet could be our last. So, don't blow off the next reunion. Don't put off attendance until the one after that. Be there. For each other. And for loads of fun, just like old times.

Chuck Oualline  
2014 Reunion Committee Liaison/Advisor