



2016 REUNION FT. BENNING COLUMBUS, GEORGIA



Several years ago, while a few of us enjoyed a cool beverage after attending a Chapter meeting, someone suggested we host another reunion. It was mentioned we should use Myrtle Beach again. After some discussion, it was decided a new and different venue would be more appropriate. Charleston and Ft. Jackson were mentioned when someone suggested Ft. Benning since most Sky Soldiers attended Jump School there.

At the next Chapter meeting, this idea was brought up for discussion. A large number of our members were opposed to the idea, saying we were too old, too fat, it takes too much effort and Ft. Benning was too far from Columbia. After conducting a vote, it passed by a slim margin.

Our next move was to contact Chapter 3 (Ft. Benning) to 'feel out' their thoughts and inquire if they wanted to co-host with us. We were told no one in their chapter wanted to host, but they had no problem with us hosting.

We then let it be known to the Association that SC Chapter 30 wanted to host the 2016 Reunion in Ft. Benning/Columbus.

After being granted hosting rights, we attempted to form a committee to begin planning. In the beginning, it was difficult to muster volunteers. After stating a discount in registration fees would be granted to the planning committee, it became easier to fill our needs.

Realizing Columbus, Georgia was a five hour drive from Columbia, SC, we knew it would challenge our planning efforts. In January of 2015, we contacted the Columbus Convention & Visitors Bureau and were put in contact with Ashley Woitena. Ashley began instantly making suggestions, answering our questions and easing our concerns about being five hours away. Without her assistance we would surely have failed. We were sent brochures and videos detailing what Columbus could offer our reunion.

In March of 2015, several members of the reunion committee made an overnight trip to Columbus. We met with sales people from the Marriott Hotel and the Columbus Convention and Trade Center. We discussed our wants and needs, and they assured us they could fulfill them.

We also met with the Public Affairs Office at Ft. Benning to inquire how the Army could play a major part in our reunion. After leaving there with a long list of 'possibilities,' we met with the Infantry Museum to listen to how they could host our large group.

Several days later, back in Columbia, the committee decided we would use the CC&TC for all reunion activities i.e., sign-in, hospitality, vending and banquet. We knew accommodations would be a major challenge, as there was not a large enough hotel in Columbus to house our entire group. We discovered a large number of hotel properties in Columbus were owned by the same company. We agreed to use their hotels if they would, 1) give us a reduced rate, and 2) include a hot breakfast. With several hotels being as much as a 12-minute drive from the CC&TC, we knew shuttle buses would be necessary.

The committee wanted to offer the option for several day trips to some of the local areas of interest. It was decided the Andersonville Civil War Prison, Callaway Gardens and the Little White House in Warm Springs would be our offerings.

The Army was our biggest challenge. For some reason, we could not convince the Army to change their training schedule to meet ours. We requested to view a training jump, see a Ranger demonstration, jump from the 34-foot towers, attend an Airborne Graduation, pin wings on the class and eat in the Mess Hall.

In the next few paragraphs, I will offer our thoughts, both pro and con to, the various segments to the 2016 reunion.

ATTENDANCE

Including full registration (\$173), Chapter 30 and Reunion Committee members, Banquet Only (\$50), Gold Star, and walk-ins, we had 968 in attendance.

We also offered daily hospitality passes for \$20 each. We sold 45 which brought our total attendance to 1013

Had we a 'do over,' we would have only ONE registration price as to prevent dishonesty by many. We observed many without name tags.

Excluding the walk-ins, of those who registered, 266 (30.33%) registered by mail and 612 (69.15%) registered on-line.

As a side note, we made 18 full refunds (over \$6,000) for reasons ranging from poor health, high school graduations, death of family members and others.

HOTELS

Several hotels were used with the Marriott being the closest and largest. The Marriott has 170 rooms, but would only block 145 for us. We feel they did a good job accommodating our needs. The only complaint that reached the committee was the temperature of the lobby was too cool. We received no other complaints concerning the out-lying hotels; we therefore believe all was well. The Marriott staff was very well trained in the area of customer service.

Those who arrived at the Marriott on 6 June were told breakfast was not included in the room price. We (the committee) had to present a copy of our contract to clear this matter. The daily breakfast was a big hit.

In a perfect world, we would conduct reunions in cities with a single hotel which could house our entire group and offer space for all our meeting and catering needs. Telling a hotel we could fill their hotel with Sky Soldiers and guest would give us more bargaining power. It would also eliminate the need of shuttle buses.

BUSES

As stated earlier, due to using out-lying hotels, we saw a need to offer shuttle buses. This was our biggest failure. When contracting buses to shuttle (\$650 per bus, per day) we were told one bus could run the south route in 35 minutes and one bus could run the north route in about 40 minutes. We therefore advertised to our attendees that a shuttle bus would be at their hotel every 45 minutes. It was reported to us that many attendees waited over two hours for a bus to arrive. When reported to the bus company, we were told they had new drivers who did not know their way around Columbus. The bus company offered no refunds.

The trip buses were on time and well represented. They were clean and comfortable.

When we were in Columbus in 2015, we were told the buses were \$500 per day, but when we signed contracts in 2016 they were \$650 per day. This effected our budgeting.

TRIPS

Andersonville: (262 attendees)

The \$30 price for the Andersonville trip was decided based on \$500 bus price, military discount for admission and a boxed lunch. The buses turned out to be \$650, and the military discount was given only to those with military ID cards. If we break down the price we see the bus price of \$650 divided by the occupancy of 55 equals \$11 per person. The admission for those without ID was \$16 and the boxed lunch was \$12 per person. We had no complaints about the trip and everyone seemed to enjoy it.

We should have charged \$40 per person.

Callaway Gardens/LWH: (184 attendees)

The price was \$40 per person. Again, the bus was \$650 plus \$50 fuel fee, because the trip was over 50 miles outside of Columbus. Lunch was at the Bulloch House restaurant for \$15 per person. The meal was outstanding, and we believe it was enjoyed by all. The Little White House was an excellent tour for those who enjoy history. Our only complaint revolved around not having enough time for the Gardens tour.

We should have charged \$50.

Ft. Benning: (655 attendees)

The price of \$10 per person should have been \$15, as the bus equates to \$11 per person. The meal in the Army Dining Facility (not what we old soldiers used to get) was \$5.50 per person. The line was long, but the meal was excellent. We believe everyone enjoyed the Benning trip. A trip to the 173d Memorial was included with Ft. Benning. The presentation was conducted professionally and the evening weather was fine. More chairs should have been provided.

TRADE CENTER (REUNION SITE)

Sign-In Area:

This area was excellent in that the hall was very wide, which gave everyone room to gather and socialize while waiting to sign in. The counter space worked well, giving attendees an area to

conduct sign-in business. Adjacent space to store registration gifts under lock and key was a great amenity.

Vendor Area:

Having the vendor area in the hospitality room saved us over \$400 per day. Separating the vendor area from the hospitality room by using pipe & drape worked well. A large variety of items and price range was offered. We received no negative comments from any of the vendors or anyone concerning vending.

Hospitality Room:

It was our desire to have an open hospitality room, allowing anyone to enter to socialize and interact with each other. However, it made controlling the bar next to impossible. Having two bars in the hospitality room seemed to work well. We should have designed a better way to control distribution of drinks. The bartenders were instructed to check name tags before giving a drink. We viewed many “free loaders” being given drinks.

The South Hall was perhaps a bit large, but it worked well for housing the APC, Cobra Gun Ship and Scout Dog exhibits. The size of the Hall had a negative effect on playing of music and singing. We had tables and chairs for 800, but probably only needed 500.

BANQUET

Room:

The room was spacious and well suited for a large group. We believe the sound system worked well.

Meal:

Having a double serving line on both sides of the room was very helpful in expediting service. The serving staff was excellent.

COLUMBUS CONVENTION & TRADE CENTER

Accommodations:

The physical plant was excellent. We had plenty of space and the entire building was clean and comfortable.

Staff:

The entire staff from the janitors to the director was well trained, polite and very accommodating.

Catering:

The food for the welcoming meal was well presented and plentiful. The hamburger and hot dog buns could have been warmer. We felt \$18+ per person was over-priced. The banquet meal was well presented, but some of the items were not kept hot. When we contracted for the banquet, we requested one cash bar be placed in the hallway for those wanting a cocktail before dinner. Four cash bars (\$200 each) were brought out for service. We compromised and used two.

Hospitality Room Bar Service:

Our verbal agreement with Catering was to have two free bars each night, giving beverages only to those with reunion name tags. They were to use only "bar brand" liquors (\$5.25 per drink) and draft beer. However, when we received our final invoice it showed 19 bar brand drinks, 632 premium drinks (\$5.75), 712 super premium drinks (\$6.25), 372 bottles of domestic beer and 40 bottles of imported beer. It took several strongly-worded emails and telephone calls before they agreed to charge all mixed drinks at the \$5.25 rate.

With that being said, we probably would not use their Catering Service again.

Gaging attendee commits, we feel the 2016 Reunion was a success. The committee along with other Chapter 30 members supported each other and gave a good accounting of themselves. We would like to thank all who added to our success to include Chapter 3 and the Color Guard from the Airborne and Ranger Training Brigade.