

## CHAPTER 5

### REUNION 2014

## AFTER ACTION REVIEW

1. **CONVENTION PLANNING.** Specific convention planning began two years prior to the event with key decisions made early. Initial planning occurred at several planning meeting conducted off-site. As the convention neared off-site meetings were conducted monthly. As has been our experience with the two previous reunions hosted (1999 and 2006) the core members involved remained small. We lost some help but others stepped up to keep our numbers around 12. We also knew that we could not rely on active duty units from Fort Bragg due to on-going deployments.

#### Lessons Learned

- A. You can never begin planning too early.
- B. Expect unexpected and late changes.
- C. Long planning hours pay off.
- D. Expect that planning will be done by few members.
- E. We needed to have a clear cancellation policy. We offered full refunds to anyone who cancelled right up to the last day prior to the reunion start.

2. **PRICING.** Pricing is an important and crucial component to convention planning. Members were divided early on pricing. Part wanted it priced low to encourage higher attendance, while others wanted a high price to provide attendees with a higher valued experience. All agreed that we must price it high enough to minimize financial risk to the Chapter. After review of prior reunion expenses, inflation, and expected costs of key elements we approved a regular registration fee of \$173.00.

#### Lessons Learned.

- A. Don't be afraid to charge a fair price and deliver an awesome reunion.
- B. Find better ways to encourage early registration to minimize financial uncertainty.
- C. Do a more careful job of budgeting. Numerous items caused us to lose money on the reunion. First our cost for bus transportation was twice our budgeted amount. Second we budgeted for 700 attendees but only had 560. We expected around



\$5,000 in hotel room rebates which did not occur (we missed the fine print in our hotel contract). We had too many registered attendees cancelled with full refunds of around 35. We had too many people attend, we think about 60) who were not registered and purchased only banquet tickets or nothing at all.

3. **MEMBER PARTICIPATION & STAFFING.** Chapter 5 has over 200 members but could only rely on about twelve regular meeting attendees. This core group carried the whole load of planning and most of the reunion operations load. During the reunion we were greatly assisted by five spouses who worked a variety of tasks as needed. Our registration area was staffed by volunteers from the local Postal Alliance Auxiliary.

Lessons Learned.

- A. During planning action items were developed but few volunteered to take charge of those items.
  - B. During the reunion we should have had "greeter/hosts" stationed at the hotel entrances to direct attendees. Several of the events such as the banquet we did have covered.
  - C. On the day prior to the reunion we should have had all active members and volunteers present to cross train and practice all activities.
  - D. As with most volunteer organizations, we need to do a better job of getting membership involved.
4. **COMMUNICATIONS.** Communication during the reunion planning consisted of informal contacts among members, regular monthly meetings, and scheduled planning meetings. Since so few of our active members use email that tool was minimized. During the reunion communications were mainly face-to-face and cell phones. Wanted to have daily morning staff meeting but that would have failed due to the wide range of "work times" our member had. Some began as early at 6am and others finished up after midnight.

Lessons Learned.

- A. Action items at planning meetings were reviewed but in many cases were not addressed between meetings.
- B. The delayed delivery of the *SKY SOLDIER* magazine adversely impacted our early registrations. We think this may have reduced our registrations by as many as 100.



- C. Overall on-site communications went fairly well. We had good communication between the registration area and our transportation representative.
5. **WEBSITE.** With the changes in web technology a growing number of 173d members use and expect accurate and timely information from web sites. This was our first use on on-line registration. Around 25% of all registered attendees utilized on-line registration. They also used it for current information about hotels, tours, mail in registration forms, list of current registered attendees, and reunion activities.

Lessons Learned.

- A. Maintaining the web site was a huge task. It took numerous hours daily to keep up.
- B. The setup of the on-line registration "shopping cart" was a difficult technology challenge. The difficulties were mostly related to us not knowing web lingo and the need for secure transactions.
- C. We should have had the reunion forms and on-line registrations available immediately after the prior year reunion.
6. **MAJOR ACTIVITIES.** Major venues and activities were identified early to ensure smooth operation of those areas and activities.
- A. **TRANSPORTATION** (between hotels, airport, and major events). The reunion offered transportation to and from the Fayetteville airport, between overflow hotels and the reunion headquarters, travel to off-site activities. The heavy lift (multiple busses) required additional attention to detail.

Lessons Learned.

- 1) The transportation costs exceeded our budget by nearly 100%. This was caused by high fuel costs and competition for busses with the Women's US Open in Pinehurst. Additionally we failed to nail down the contract price early enough.
- 2) Should have planned on smaller busses, when possible, for the hotel shuttles.
- 3) We needed more member help with bus coordination during the reunion. One member was present for most of the day and night for all days.



- B. SIGNS. Based on prior experience reunion attendees did not have enough information on how to get around. We solved this issue with more signs with better placement. The signs were high quality and well placed. We did experience some low-life attendees who stole our signs right off the walls in the hospitality suite on the second night.

#### Lessons Learned

- C. VENDORS. The location and size of the vendor area this reunion was the best ever. The location was near the main hotel entrance, was large, well organized, and used.

#### Lessons Learned

- 1) We may have limited the number of vendors because the room turned out to be much larger than planned.
- 2) There may have been too many vendors selling the same items. However, supply and demand helped resolve that.

- D. HOSPITALITY. The Hospitality Suite was again the hit of reunion. The room was large with plenty of seating, a DJ, dance floor, two open bars, a food service area, and plenty of networking area. As expected we had complaints about food availability and selection. For some reason attendees think we are feeding them dinner in addition to the free drinks. We needed to have additional help for our two hospitality members. We also had some push-back from those not registered for the reunion that thought they should be able to eat, drink, and socialize at the expense of those who did register. May paid their \$15 willingly and some complained or snuck in.

#### Lessons Learned

- 1) The presence of large numbers of non-registered attendees necessitated the need for door hosts to collect \$15 from those without name badges. This caused several "incidents" at the doors with those who thought they should get in free.
- E. HOTEL. The Holiday Inn, Bordeaux was again our headquarters hotel. It is the only hotel in the Fayetteville that can handle most of our reunion needs. The hotel blocked all but



about 30 rooms for our use. We also had several overflow hotels. We had a room problem as a result of the Women's US Open being held the same time as our reunion. Hotels wanted to charge as much as three times their normal rate in expectation of the need for golf rooms. Closer to the reunion date more rooms became available at lower rates. The Holiday Inn, Bordeaux was responsive to all our needs during the reunion and allowed us to deal with other issues.

#### Lessons Learned

- 1) We should have included maps of the hotel both in the packets as well as signs located at the major gathering spaces of the hotel.
- 2) Many of the sleeping rooms were still not renovated to adequate standards. Most of the public rooms were fine.

F. REGISTRATION AREA. As with most reunions/conventions an effective well located area is critical in a well run event. With our prior reunion experience the registration area continues to improve. Although the rooms were not perfect in location and layout they fulfilled our needs.

#### Lessons Learned.

- 1) For future planning the location and ease of access to the registration area is critical for handicap access and for those who don't do well with steps. The elevator was too far away and the stair access included a long stairway.
- 2) The publication of open hours for registration seemed to eliminate some service problems.
- 3) The use of outside volunteers (paid a donation to their organization) reduced stress and improved check-in process. In years past we used our own spouses that were often not quick or accurate enough for our needs. The outside volunteers were younger than us with a lot of energy and quick thinking.
- 4) We used two rooms and would have operated better if all packet items were located in one room rather than two.
- 5) Our internet credit card payment process was too cumbersome and time consuming.
- 6) Use of a greeter at the entrance to the registration/check-in area facilitated a smoother check-in process. The greeter moved attendees to the next available check-in or new registration staffer. The greeter answered questions for people and made sure on-site registration folks had their forms completed prior to entry.



G. FORT BRAGG. Due to the reunion proximity to Fort Bragg we needed opportunities for attendees to get back into the "airborne" military base. Numerous activities were planned to satisfy that need.

H. MAJOR ACTIVITIES. The identification of major activities for the reunion enhanced our ability to address the specialized needs of those events. Listed in order of occurrence:

- 1) Check-in. See above for registration area.
- 2) Special Operations Museum Shuttle. Shuttle vans offered to take attendees to the SOM as needed.
- 3) Hospitality Suite (Wednesday). Offered full bar, pizza, snacks, DJ music, and 50/50 raffle.
- 4) Golf Tournament. Although not sold out, it was a popular activity. The event was off-site at Fort Bragg and included prizes, food, and beer.
- 5) Off-Site Tours. Tours to Fort Bragg (2 busses), and Wilmington were well attended. The tour to Smithfield (outlet mall shopping) was poorly attended.
- 6) Hospitality Suite (Thursday). Offered full bar, snacks, DJ music, pistol raffle, and 50/50 raffle.
- 7) Freedom Express. Hotel and CVB event was appropriate and well attended.
- 8) Gold Star Reception. Small event for Gold Star families was attended by all Gold Stars.
- 9) Pig Pickin. Off-site picnic at Fort Bragg attended by over 700. We did run out of food at times.
- 10) Gold Star Invitation Dinner. Dinner at the Vimoto residence at Fort Bragg for Gold Star families. We transported them to and from the dinner in our two trooper driven vans.
- 11) Hospitality Suite (Friday). Offered full bar, live entertainment, BBQ, DJ music, pistol raffle, and 50/50 raffle.
- 12) National Board Meeting. Closed meeting for National officers.
- 13) Ladies Breakfast. Breakfast was sold out to first 100. We were able to accommodate several wait list women to fill "no show" seats.
- 14) General Membership Meeting. Meeting was run by National.
- 15) Banquet. Dinner for 700 off-site with live music (82d Airborne Chorus), cash bar, and other components of a formal military banquet.
- 16) Hospitality Suite (Saturday). Offered full bar, limited snacks, DJ music and 50/50 raffle.



17) Memorial Service. Well attended (around 100) event.

18) Departure of Attendees. Chapter members completed all hotel clean-up activities and thanked all for attending.

7. **FINANCIAL.** Early in our planning process a budget was developed. It helped identify critical areas of planning and gave direction to members responsible for specific areas on what they could spend on items.

Summarized (not yet audited):

Item	Budget	Actual
Attendees	825	561
Income	\$176,000	\$126,278.03
Expenses	\$162,481	\$126,999.95
Net Income	\$13,519	\$-721.92

#### Lessons Learned.

- 1) We planned on attendance being around 825 since we had over 800 at our two previous reunions. Actual was only 561.
- 2) Bus transportation was nearly double our budgeted amount. This was a failure on our part for not getting a signed contract earlier. Items that impacted the price were high fuel prices and completion for busses (Women's US Golf Open).
- 3) Changes in the Holiday Inn Bordeaux contract cost us an expected \$4500. This was a failure on our part for not understanding the contact and communication of the change among planning members.
- 4) Greater than expected cancellations. The actual cancellation refunds were around \$2500 higher than expected.
- 5) The numbers of people attending without being registered we think was higher than expected. We did expect some that would buy separate banquet tickets, pig pickin tickets, and pay to enter the Hospitality Suite. That actual number may have been as high as 60. We had numerous people who registered then cancelled because they thought they were registering for the 4<sup>th</sup> Bat event only.



- 6) During planning the planning members expected around thirteen thousand in profit to be shared with National instead of the actual \$721 loss. This is the first reunion for Chapter 5 resulting in a net loss.

#### 8. OTHER ITEMS.

- 1) Our registration greeter heard countless comments from attendees about their positive impressions of the reunion. It was well organized (100% better than Las Vegas), easily assessable, always had someone to answer questions, and staff was polite and helpful.
- 2) The value added registration packages (backpacks, purses, jewelry, and pocket watches) were a great hit.
- 3) Fort Bragg bus tours had both busses sold out. Tour participants enjoyed the tour including the sites visited, narration by Fort Bragg Public Affairs staff, and dining in a new troop dining facility.
- 4) The banquet featured the always popular 82d Chorus with their special "airborne" brand of singing.
- 5) The Hospitality Suite combined the best of music, food, drinks, and entertainment to satisfy all attendee needs.
- 6) We, the planning members, felt the reunion was our best ever.

Respectfully Submitted by

Walt Thompson, Secretary, Chapter 5