

The 401st Tactical Fighter Wing (TFW) Reunion

The 401st TFW Reunion Association had its eighth biennial Reunion on April 29 through May 1, 2003 at the Hotel of the Palace Casino Resort in Biloxi, Mississippi with 140 Members in attendance. The Reunion Attendees traveled to Biloxi from all over the USA. The three-day event was most enjoyable to all Members who attended. Anthony J. "Tony" Gagliano, Sr. of Ocean Springs is the Reunion Organizer, Secretary and Treasurer.

A highlight of this Reunion was the attendance of our ex-401st TFW Wing Commander, from the late 1950's, Retired Colonel C.L. "John Black" Van Etten, who is now eighty-nine years old and still going strong. When "John Black" entered the Reunion Hospitality Room, the room was called to attention out of respect for him. During the "Gathering of Eagles" in the Hospitality Room, "John Black's" war stories were very descriptive and entertaining, with an all-military and slightly colorful vocabulary to match the subject military time period about which he spoke. Each person in the room contributed to the many stories being told there.

There are tremendous amounts of fantastically entertaining stories about Military adventures and experiences told at our Reunions. War experiences are always in abundance and are described in detail by each storyteller. The camaraderie during our "Gathering of Eagles" is so intense, that it is often felt like an exciting adrenalin producing time period.

At the Thursday, May 1, 2003 morning Membership meeting, we voted in a new Reunion Chairman. The past Chairman, William M. "Bill" Procter, had a stroke on his left side over two years ago and could no longer carry on in that position. The newly elected Chairman is now Paul D. Lambrides, a resident of Gulf Hills.

Our very erstwhile Master Of Ceremonies, James C. "Jim" Ryan, opened the Thursday Evening Banquet and performed excellently at handling the introduction and conducting of all the planned entertainments and programs.

Pastor Julian Gordy, of Christus Victor Lutheran Church, accompanied at the Banquet by his Wife, Morgan, performed the opening and closing Invocation. Ms. Gigi Reeks, a fantastically accomplished Singer, Organist, Pianist and Choir Director for Christus Victor Lutheran Church, sang the National Anthem and God Bless America while playing the Grand Piano. Everyone there stood and sang with her.

A very dedicated Reunion Member, Donald E. "Don" Duhamel, memorialized in prayer the Prisoners-of-War, Missing-in-Action and Killed-in-Action Military of past wars and the recent action in Iraq and Afghanistan. He followed that by doing a roll call of all recently deceased 401st TFW Reunion Members. Major Michael Gilbert, a Chaplain at Keesler AFB, wearing Celtic Garb and Kilts, played the Shuttle Pipes softly in the background during the memorializing reading and during the roll call of the deceased. A short time later, Major Gilbert played two heartfelt patriotic tunes on the Bag Pipes.

The Guest Speaker at the Banquet was Brigadier General Michael W. Peterson, Commander of the 81st Training Wing at Keesler AFB. His speech was most informative and educational with much emphasis on the recent Military action in Iraq and Afghanistan. He received a standing ovation for an outstanding and most patriotic speech.

The next Banquet speaker was Colonel (Retired) C. L. “John Black” Van Etten, accompanied to the Reunion by his long time friend, “Mary Betts”. His impromptu speech was a most enjoyable combination of history and Military style humor. He also received a standing ovation for his speaking abilities and out of respect for the memories of him as the great Wing Commander that he was to all ex-Members of the 401st TFW.

Before the end of the Banquet, Henry P. “Hank” Phillips presented Tony Gagliano with a special woodcarving of an F-100 Super Sabre Jet Fighter, mounted on a base which included a small clock and a dedication plate, from the Reunion Members in appreciation for continuous dedicated work to organize and conduct eight biennial 401st TFW Reunions. The presentation was followed by a standing ovation for Tony Gagliano.

Please note that the employees of The Mississippi Gulf Coast Convention and Visitors Bureau were extremely helpful to the success of the Reunion with their valuable services before and during the Reunion. They provided professionally produced name badges and holders, with pre-printed names and the 401st Insignia, for the Reunion attendees. They assisted Reunion attendees for locating and experiencing local tourist attractions and greatly contributed to operations at the Reunion Registration Desk. The Reunion Secretary prepared and sent a Letter of Commendation to the Executive Director, Steven B. Richer, on behalf of Dana Neilson, Manager of Convention Services and Carolyn Rushing, Registration Assistant, for their very professional services.

Overall, most Reunion attendees commented that this, our eighth biennial Reunion in the past fourteen years, was by far the best. This is not to say that the other Reunions were not enjoyable. However, this one was in an excellent Reunion Hotel facility, in a fine location; namely the Mississippi Gulf Coast, had great weather conditions, a very patriotic Banquet program with fantastic entertainment and great guest speakers.

The next 401st TFW Reunion will be held in the exact same location; the Palace Casino Resort in Biloxi, Mississippi on April 26 – 28, 2005.



Anthony J. (Tony) Gagliano, Sr.
Organizer, Secretary and Treasurer
401st TFW Reunion Association