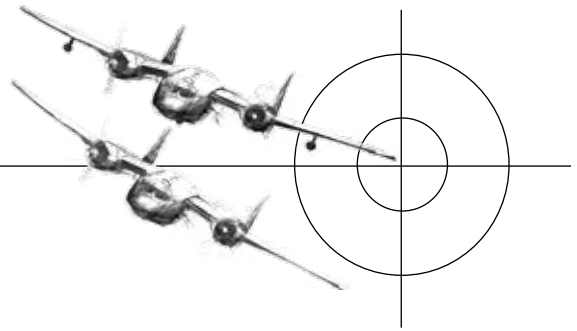


# Firing Circle



Winter 2011/2012

A Newsletter of the AC-119 Gunship Association

## AC-119 Gunship Day Declared in North Charleston

There were tours aplenty, but there was much else to do while in Charleston attending **AC-119 Gunship Reunion XII**. Beer and food pairing seemed to be quite a popular experience for the Gunship group. Whether by land, by sea, by foot or horse we were never at a loss for something to see, do or learn about Charleston. With her lengthy and diverse history, dating back to the birth of America, we toured sites where some of our forefathers planned to declare independence from England and viewed other sites where South Carolina participated in the war that followed that declaration and fought to win that independence. Antebellum plantation tours at Drayton Hall and Magnolia Plantation, Middleton Place, Hampton Plantation, The Charleston Tea Plantation or Boone Hall, gave a glimpse into the lives of the captains of rice, cotton and tobacco industries and the privileged lives of their families as well as the country's contrasting inglorious period of slavery.

We were able to travel through wartime and history to scrutinize the actual historical forts and war-sites as the time of slavery came to its end with the Civil War. Some visited Fort Sumter and then came forward all the way

(Continued on page 5)



Association president Gus Sininger and North Charleston Mayor R. Keith Summey present proclamation to the group.

## BAD NIGHT ON THE TRAIL

by Peter St. Jean and Bob La Rosa  
With Notes from John Bielstein

***"PANAMA, PANAMA, Stinger zero three on Guard!"***

***"Go, Stinger three."***

***"PANAMA, Stinger three is squawking 7700, making a dash for the fence and channel 69. We took a severe triple-A hit and are leaking fuel badly - request you have PAMPER shut down all Arty on the 270 of channel 77."***

What you just read are actual radio transmissions recorded on cassette tape by Major Peter St. Jean on a Stinger combat mission out of Danang, Vietnam on May 15, 1971.

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17th SOS Coordinator  
**John Morrow**

18th SOS Coordinators  
**Everett Sprous, Eastern U.S**  
**Bill Reffner Jr., Western U.S**

Maintenance Coordinator (All Sqdns)  
**Robert "Andy" Bright**

## AC-47 Group to Formerly Organize

*by Norm Evans*

Like us they started small and also many years later. Now their numbers, as well as interest, are growing. During their last reunion they decided to regroup and organize on their own.

As you know the 3rd and 4th Air Commando Squadrons (ACS), nicknamed Spooky & Puff, started the side-firing fixed-wing gunship program, the rest of us followed on with the AC-119 and AC-130 gunships. A few of us had the opportunity to fly on other, if not all versions, of the gunship's. As an old 47 guy I can tell you one thing, it was quite an experience flying on the AC-47.

Air Force gunships have come a long way from the feared AC-

47 to today's formidable AC-130U gunship. Sort of a "we had the Volkswagen and today they have the Rolls-Royce."

We wish them good luck with their reunions and want them to know they'll always be welcome at ours. We hope their numbers grow and not lessen.

To all our AC-47 brothers thank you for your bravery and leading the way in Air Force Gunship aviation history. A big thanks to all the AC-47 guys for their assistance and support of the 119 Association.



## Reunion 2012 Back in Ft Walton!

Ft. Walton Beach, FL will once again be the site of the September 26-30th AC-119 Gunship Reunion.

No theme has been announced but all AC-119 Aircrew, maintenance and support staff, and their families are invited to get together for another great reunion.

Reunion Coordinators for the 2012 reunion are: **Gus Sininger** and **Norm Evans**. One major change this year is NO FREE BREAKFAST with room. Breakfast is now offered at 50% off at \$4.50 +tax per person. Keep an eye on the Reunion Information page on your AC-119 website **www.ac-119gunships.com** as well as the next newsletter for updated information. Mark your calendars now and we count the days to when we see you once again on the white sands of the Miracle Strip.

## President's Message

Yep! It's me again, in for another year as your Association President. So, let me reflect on this past year and look a just bit into next year.

This reunion turned out to be a very nice one. Everyone said they loved the Hotel, the Tour, the Food was great and everything was in one place.....Although the walk to the Ball Rooms was just a bit far off. The Hootch area was big enough for all to be able to sit down and enjoy.

Many attendees went on the Bus Tour of Charleston and had a good time walking down town in the Market and having Lunch in the Market area. Friday's Meet & Greet had the Mayor of North Charleston giving us a proclamation for the city for one day.

On Saturday night we had a great guest speaker, and one of our own, George Hardy. George was a Tuskegee Airman with the famous *Red Tail Squadron* (watch for a movie coming early next year). Everyone was enthralled as he Spoke about how he became a Red Tail in WWII and the problems he experienced because of his color. He said the Air Force was the first to break the segregation barrier for Blacks.

I presented Hardy with an AC-119K Gunship Model and a P-51 Red Tail Model. You should have seen his eyes when he received the two aircraft. They really lit up.

At the Farewell BBQ there were more attendees this year than in past years. Folks hung in and enjoyed the reunion to the very last.

Bill Petrie surprised me with a Soda named after me (GUS). It stood for Grown Up Soda. *If only.*

Reunion for 2012 will, once again, be back in Fort Walton Beach, Florida. The Dates are September 26th thru the 30th of September. Let's make this a BIG one once again.

We have the Sheraton 4 Points Hotel just as before. However, hotel management has changed and there are some changes. Rooms are \$116.00 for the King Standard and Courtyard units and up to \$136 for Beach Front suites. The biggest change is breakfast which is now offered at \$4.50 per person. That's 50% off. Everything will be at the 4 Points except for the Banquet and that will be at Elks Lodge, (but I will have a back up in case we go over 350) which is just down the road on the left.

The 2013 Reunion was voted on and will be held in San Antonio, Texas. The coordinator for the SA Reunion is Jerry Hester. There is lot's to see & do in the area... Lackland AFB museum, and the parade ground, also the River Walk, the Alamo, Tower of the Americas and others. Watch for information as it becomes available.

There is one more thing I want to let you know about and that is the Women of the association wanted a way to communicate with each other so I asked Tony Pakutinski to start up an **AC-119 Gunship spouse Face Book Page**. So, All you spouses, and others, check it out and put it to good use. Please be sure to click on "be our Friend."

*Firing Circle 3*

## Your new Board is as Follows:

**Gus Sininger – President**  
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**Bill Petrie – Newsletter Editor & Web Site Manager**  
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**Tony Pakutinski – Face Book Manager**  
email: pak409@hotmail.com

Other Association Officers are listed on page two. Please email any one of us with your suggestions or Ideas.

Remember! We are only as good as our volunteer Board. Please keep in mind that we are always needing volunteers to help in any form especially at our reunions and with special projects for the board. I encourage you to email one of the Board Members if you would like to help out and keep this association going strong.

*Once again, thanks for the confidence in letting me be your President for another year.*

*Warmest wishes and have wonderful and healthy New Year.*

*Gus Sininger, President*

# Band of Missouri AC-119 Brothers

AC-119 Gunship Warriors from Missouri; Shadow pilots Larry Fletcher and Ralph Lefarth, Shadow gunner Wade Dunn, and Stinger gunners Ev Sprous and Ron Gilbert were guests at the Missouri Aviation Historical Society (MAHS) meeting on Saturday afternoon, November 5, 2011 on the campus of Logan College of Chiropractic in St. Louis. MAHS founder, Dan O'Hara and AC-119 Assoc./MAHS member, Ev Sprous instigated the meeting program about AC-119 gunships. Coordinating with O'Hara, Sprous was instrumental in organizing the program which included keynote speaker Fletcher with timely input from Lefarth, Dunn, Gilbert, and Sprous. A slide show and a video about AC-119s complimented the speakers. Models of the Shadow and Stinger aircraft were displayed along with other memorabilia such as a flight suit, 7.62mm and .20mm ammunition, posters, and books.

Fletcher, seen below, with a 20MM round, presented signed copies of his books, *Shadows*



*of Saigon and The Shadow Spirit* to the MAHS, followed by the presentation of the *AC-119 Gunships History Book* (signed by Pres. Gus Sininger) by Lefarth to O'Hara and the Society.

AC-119 Gunship challenge coins were presented the Society

as follows: 71st SOS by Dunn, 17th SOS by Lefarth, 18th SOS by Gilbert, and AC-119 Association by Sprous.

The Missouri Aviation Historical Society is currently an informal group of aircraft lovers, striving to record and document the rich aviation history that has existed in Missouri for the past century. From Benoist to Zenith, the aviation industry in the "Show Me" State has always been at the forefront of technology and has produced some of the world's best known aircraft. Famous pilots from Jimmy Doolittle to "Slim" Lindbergh called Missouri home for a portion of their lives and made significant contributions to the advancement of aviation.

While the focus is primarily on Missouri aviation history, the Society welcomes all regions of the country, as well as international interests.

Special Operators now know more about their heritage as well as about us and our AC-119 mission and experiences!



**Photo, at left, of AC-119 Brothers at MAHS meeting:**  
L-R: Sgt. Wade Dunn (71st & 17th SOS) Gunner, CMSgt. Ron Gilbert (18th SOS) Gunner, Lt. Larry Fletcher (17th SOS) Pilot, Capt. Ralph Lefarth (17th SOS) Pilot/IP, Founder Dan O'Hara (MAHS), SSgt. Ev Sprous (18th SOS) Gunner.



## **GUNSHIP ASSOCIATION DAY**

(Continued from page 1)

visited Fort Sumter and then came forward all the way to WWII by stepping onto the flight deck of the U.S.S. Yorktown at Patriots Point Road where the Naval & Maritime Museum is located.

Some attendees rode horse-drawn carriages and viewed homes that still stand after enduring over two centuries and several natural disasters. We rode the streets to count the steeples on churches to see why Charleston got it's nickname...the Holy City. A brave few grabbed the handle of a ghost tour lantern as the sun set, and embarked on a nighttime tour of places purported to spark some ghostly entities.

Many of us shopped the Charleston City Market to gain a bit of history, local culture and of course a souvenir to take home. Imagining the same market in operation some 200 years ago we quickly learned why it is one of Charleston's must see attractions.

Topping it all off, the City of North Charleston (who knew there were two mayors of Charleston) Declared it **AC-119 Gunship Association Day**. The Mayor of North Charleston, the honorable R. Keith Summey, was on hand to present a proclamation to Association president Gus Sininger, stating "the city is truly honored to have the AC-119 Gunship Association assembled in the lowcountry."

Yes, there was much to do and it was quite an experience. But as always, the best experience was seeing old friends and making new ones, especially making friends with the good people of Charleston.

## **BAD NIGHT ON TRAIL**

(Continued from page 1)

It all started out as a routine mission for this "seasoned combat crew" into the Hotel Route of the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos, searching for VC trucks headed south.

The Triple-A was especially intense as was the truck traffic that night. We were glad to have been "acclimated" to the combat environment by now as the scanners called only close breaks, and the two sensors coordinated smoothly in locating and verifying valid targets before giving the pilot "consent" to blow them away!

We did not appreciate the sizeable moon and haze in the air that night, as it silhouetted our AC-119K gunship for enemy AAA gunners on the ground, especially while flying in firing orbits over targets. When both scanners called, "break right" and "break left" at the same instant enemy anti-aircraft artillery rounds came streaking up under Stinger 03, we puckered because we knew the 'you-know-what' was about to hit the fan!

Lead Gunner Bob La Rosa and Aerial Gunner J.D. Hughes were both seated on empty ammo cans behind the forward-most number one (#1) twenty (.20) millimeter (mm) Vulcan cannon, insuring the cannon fired properly. The aircraft commander, pilot Captain John Bielstein had Stinger 03 banked in a left turn firing orbit. The 20mm gun was blazing away at the target on the ground when suddenly it jammed. Gunners La Rosa and Hughes feverishly worked at clearing the jammed weapon while the aircraft winged its way through waves of AAA ground fire coming up at Stinger 03.

La Rosa informed Captain Bielstein over the intercom that the #1 20mm cannon could not be fixed and that he was shutting the gun down to be replaced online with the rear 20mm cannon (gun #6). La Rosa & Hughes immediately picked up the empty ammo cans they had been sitting on and carefully walked to the



**Gunner, SSgt Bob La Rosa**

rear of the plane and checked the cannon. La Rosa then turned on the arming switch for #6 gun (the rear 20mm Vulcan cannon) and informed Captain Bielstein that the gun was armed and ready to fire.

Approximately, twenty Five seconds later.... and exactly where Gunners La Rosa and Hughes had been sitting behind the # 1



Reunion XII Charleston, SC



Firing Circle 6



*Firing Circle 7*

## BAD NIGHT ON TRAIL

(Continued from page 5)

cannon, two (2) rounds of AAA ground fire ripped through the belly of Stinger 03. The first round of AAA ripped open the belly of the gunship just below where gunners La Rosa and Hughes had been seated. The round exploded as it passed through the aircraft's fuselage, sending pieces of shrapnel flying everywhere in the gun compartment. Shrapnel tore into a nearby fully loaded twenty millimeter ammo storage can called the "609 can"; so named because the can held six hundred nine rounds of spare twenty millimeter ammunition.

The two AAA rounds were later determined to be Soviet made /supplied .57 mm shells that smashed through the outer skin and detonated in the gun compartment before exiting through the top of the fuselage.



In so doing, the enemy rounds took out the co-pilots rudder control cables; a primary hydraulic line that all but emptied the main reservoir, and a fuel cross-feed line that started spraying 115/145 octane aviation fuel all over the aft crew (gun) compartment and its occupants...first, one tank, then another. Miraculously, not one crew member was hit by the flying shrapnel!

*(Note: PANAMA Control came up on "Guard" to warn us that our escort "Gunfighter 44, an F-4 Phantom fighter/bomber jet flying out of Udorn Air Base, Thailand was circling high above us, watching a ever-growing white cloud of fuel vapor trailing behind us, just looking for any spark to ignite it!)*

The onboard APU (auxiliary power unit) was shut down by the crew to help eliminate the chance of an electrical spark igniting the fuel that was

now pouring down on crewmembers in the cargo/gun compartment. Gunners La Rosa, Hughes, and Alvarez started dumping all live ammunition and spent brass cartridges overboard to lighten the aircraft. Every thing that wasn't needed or tied down was thrown overboard from the battle damaged Stinger Gunship.

All of the crewmembers in the cargo compartment had by this time strapped-on their chest parachutes and were readying themselves for what looked like a good chance of having to bailout! Up in the cockpit on the flight deck, Captain Bielstein and his co-pilot Captain McCartney were hard at work attempting to keep the badly damaged gunship in the air while flying the wounded gunship out of hostile enemy territory toward home base.

The 45 minute dash for DaNang seemed like 45 hours. Worried about the loss of fuel with continued fuel leaks and the danger of a fuel explosion, the flight back to DaNang did give Captain Bielstein and



the crew time to formulate plans for approach and landing if we actually made good on our "RTB". At about 12 miles out of DaNang, Flight Engineer (FE) Scoggin and Gunner La Rosa started manually hand-pumping the left main landing wheel and the nose gear down because of hydraulic pressure loss. We would have to do without Landing Flaps for the same reason. It would be a no-flaps landing!

The nose gear and left main indicated "Down and Locked" with two green lights on the pilot's panel; but no amount of pumping could do the same for the right main landing gear. A bailout into the South China Sea started to look like a better alternative than landing with a collapsed gear, showering sparks on a fuel trailing slide down the runway!

When FE Tech Sergeant Tommy Scoggin was sure we were all convinced that our efforts for landing were in vain, he had our full attention when he suddenly called out, "Hey! We've got 3 in the green. Let's land." John said, as we turned final for 27. One hurdle remained, landing. As we touched

## BAD NIGHT ON TRAIL

(Continued from previous page)

down the brake disks got white hot from one continuous application of the emergency air bottle brake pressure. Emergency fire trucks zoomed in around us and the fireman considered hitting the brake disks with cold water! Thank goodness the fireman didn't and we taxied off the runway and



stopped with ten guys setting a new world record for aircraft egress with no step-down ladder, lights or anything

but adrenaline! Maintenance was glad to get the bird back, but it was soon determined that our bird was no longer flyable as field repairs for that much damage were impossible. It was decided that our Stinger gunship would be cannibalized for parts to repair and replace parts on operational AC-119 gunships in the Squadron.

Our aircraft commander, Captain John Bielstein was most deservedly put in for the Air Force Cross while the rest of the crewmembers were nominated for Distinguished Flying Crosses. For Major Peter St. Jean, May 15, 1971 was the first day of his 20th and final year in the United States Air Force. Peter only hopes that all his fellow-crewmembers realized that their safe recovery and landing was living proof that God had something else for each of them to do in the furtherance of His Kingdom and that each of them stay as close to him as they did on that *Bad Night on the Trail*.

(Pete St. Jean 9/11/06)

Following are the crewmembers of Stinger 03:

AC - Captain **John Bielstein**  
CP - Captain **John McCartney**  
FE - T/Sgt **Tommy Scoggin** (now deceased)  
FLIR - Major **Peter St. Jean**  
NOS - Major **Jack Deal**  
NAV- Lt. Col. **Brubaker**  
Lead Gunner - S/Sgt **Bob La Rosa**  
Gunner - A/1C **J.D. Hughes**  
Gunner-A/1C **Joe Alvarez**  
IO- **unknown**

### Notes from John Bielstein:

The flight back to DaNang was indeed forty-five minutes while losing 4,500 lbs. of 115/145 avgas on the return flight. (115/145 Avgas was the most potent fuel made back then.) We turned final and landed on runway 18 at DaNang. I called for Scoggins to shut down the Jets on short final. No reverse power after touchdown, just air brakes for stopping. I was able to turn off the runway at mid-field using the air brakes. After we stopped the engines and everybody jumped out, the aircraft dripped gas on the taxiway for nearly another 45 minutes.

Crewmembers in the cargo department were saturated with 115/145 Avgas. What a King-Size shower! Needless to say, we all headed to the barracks for a real shower and then we all met at the O' Club for some much needed Beer. I did receive the Distinguished Flying Cross for that "Bad Night"; thanks to my crew and the outstanding support they gave to me.



## Important Reminder for Association Members

If you change your contact information, email or postal mail address, please remember to contact the Association Secretary with your updates. Also, mailing costs are increasing, If you are getting the Newsletter by postal mail, and are able to read it on a computer, please tell the Secretary to change the distribution list from postal to email.

# AC-119K "Stinger" May Fly Again

It's a long-shot but an AC-119k "Stinger" gunship just might be making low passes at one of our next reunions. That would make it the first gunship version of the once docile C-119 cargo/troop carrying aircraft to fly since the Vietnam War.

Actually, the Stinger is a remote-controlled scale model originally built in Nakhon Phanom, Thailand during the Vietnam War. The model was constructed by Captain John F. Hupe, a navigator with the 18th Special Operations Squadron.



To plan the model, Hupe used a yardstick and a camera taking more than 30 detailed photographs and measurements of the actual Stinger gunship.

Shots were taken from every angle, including three views of the reciprocating engines, four shots of the guns, and a close-up of the wheel-well interior.

Armed with his photographs and specifications, the captain drafted plans for a 20-1 scale model with a 72-inch wingspan. Construction started with the fuselage, and then moved to the wing center section and booms. The spars and fire walls were carved out of birch plywood while balsa sheets were used for the outer skin. Held together with nylon bolts, the plane's body may be disassembled into small sections for transport.

The only tools Captain Hupe had were carving knives, sandpaper, an electric drill and a soldering iron. Members of the airbase sheet metal section and machine shop did the welding and fashioning of the landing gear in their off time.

The plane is powered by two Ehya .45 engines at .8 horsepower each with no help coming from the two dummy jet pods;. Flight control is centered in a 4-channel radio transmitter with two joy sticks. One stick



controls the nose wheel rudder and throttles, while the other controls the elevator and ailerons. The original ten pound model carried 20 ounces of nitro methane fuel for an endurance of 20 minutes.

During one of the Model's test flights, control to the aircraft was lost. The plane rolled and crashed nose first into the ground causing damage to the wing and front end of the aircraft.

Lee Kyser, Former flight engineer and Association member, was on hand to see the model fly and the subsequent crash and provided the following Accounting.

"I arrived at NKP for my first duty assignment in early June, 1972 and soon learned of 1/Lt John Hupe's plan to fly his Stinger. Built over an extended

period of time he did everything he could to have it ready for it's maiden flight prior to his rotation back to the states. He barely made it! He was to rotate within 2 weeks of the flight.

Several of us in the enlisted barracks heard of the plan. I don't recall who all attended, but there were, in my estimation, about 40 to 50 aircrew members attending the event. I went to watch with two others, one of them probably being Mike Krauss since he and I flew many missions together.

The "runway" was the perimeter road of the base. That allowed for any problems since there was a good distance of open field between the road and any base structures. John took off with out any hitches. He made several maneuvers and came around for a high speed run, low and over the runway. He took it back up for more maneuvering and then made another low level, low-speed run over the runway. Once again, he went



**Left, The Nakon Phanom Camera Crew looks on. Anyone look familiar?**

When I rotated in 1973, I was assigned to Vandenberg AFB, Ca. One day, at the golf course, I met a Maj. Dewitt Cooper, probably between 1975 and 1980. Somehow, we learned of our both having served duties on the Stinger. He was a navigator – his wife’s name was Becky. He died from a heart attack while on vacation sometime after he retired.

Up to that time, he was the only person I had ever encountered who had witnessed John’s Stinger flight. At one of our early reunions, Mike Krauss confirmed that he had watched the Stinger flight/crash, as well. Periodically, I would ask people at the different reunions if they had witnessed it. I never found any others until the Charleston reunion. That is when I learned that Wayne Laessig, Doug Wohlgamuth, “Baby Huey”, and Andy ? had also witnessed the flight.

Prior to the banquet on Saturday night, I called John Hupe. He was thrilled to learn that we were seeking him and the information on whatever happened to him and the plane. I asked John if he would search his memory for others who might have

up for more maneuvering and then came back down for a third run over the runway. That would be the unintended finale.

When John got to the mid-point of the approach, he hit the throttles to “go around” and the left engine quit causing an instantaneous roll and dive into the ground in the field just to the left of the runway. There was no way to have avoided it since the good engine went to max power when the other one failed. I vividly recall someone shouting, “Yep, that is exactly what will happen!”.

As it turned out, the plane was done for the day having suffered minor damages to one wing tip and the front of the fuselage. It had to have been extremely sturdy to have only suffered such minor damages. However, since John was too “short” to make any repairs, he packed it up, as it was, and shipped it home along with his scheduled hold baggage.



**John Hupe shows the damage done to the AC-119K “Stinger” model.**

been at the maiden flight. We agreed to have another phone conversation following the banquet since that would give him time to mull over long forgotten names and I would have a chance to have an announcement made at the banquet to find anyone at the banquet who witnessed the flight. When the call was made, following the banquet, Wayne

Laessig, Doug Wohlgamuth, Larry “Baby Huey” Hunter, Andy Turlington, and I were able to chat with him. He was thrilled that we had made the contact and stated, “*You guys have made my weekend!*”. In addition to that, he said he will do everything he can to make the next reunion and will bring the model with him to Fort Walton Beach.

As radio commentator Paul Harvey would say “And now you know the rest of the story.” But do we? Will the AC-119 “Stinger” gunship fly again?



## Transitions

### Final Flight

**Jim Davis** - Ret. Lt. Col. James "Jim" Davis, 76 of Austin, Texas and formerly of Blue, Texas, passed away in November following an 8 1/2 year battle with Cancer. Colonel Davis was buried with full military honors at the Burns Cemetery in Blue. Davis proudly served in Vietnam War with the 71st Special Operations Squadron as a navigator on AC-119 Shadow gunships. He also contributed to the effectiveness and success of Air Force Reserve air refueling units while at Bergstrom Air Force Base. Jim retired as a Lieutenant Colonel from the United States Air Force on September 10, 1985.

Memorials may be made to the Blue United Methodist Church, P.O. Box 116, Lexington, Texas 78947-0116.

## Mark Your Calendars

Reunion 2012

Ft. Walton Beach, FL

September 26 - 30th

Sheraton Four Points

Reunion 2013

will be in San Antonio

### Help Save Association Resources

If you receive multiple copies, or wish to receive the newsletter via e-mail, contact Association secretary Mike Drzyzga at [drzyzga513@hotmail.com] so we can update our mailing list.

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Place  
Stamp  
here