

## **2006 Oflag 64 Reunion Report**

Excerpted from Lucy Lussenden's Account

Pat and Martha Waters put on a very special and fantastic reunion. The hotel was beautiful—Hilton Riverside in New Orleans. We had a view of the Mississippi River. Everything just went so beautifully and efficiently. Pat arranged for the 4<sup>th</sup> Marine Support Group to send some Marines to us to provide any help that we needed. That included pushing wheelchairs, whatever. These men were just so wonderful. Most, if not all, had served two tours in Iraq already, and are expecting to be sent back for a third tour. The men were just so sharp—looked sharp and were sharp in demeanor, mind, etc. They stayed with us for the complete reunion, beginning on Wednesday and right through our Memorial Breakfast. They went with us to the World War II and D-Day Museum and escorted us everywhere. The Commanding Officer O'Dell spoke to us at the Welcome Reception on Wednesday evening. He was just wonderful and appeared to be a very fine leader. He was proud of his men and proud, also, to be in the presence of our wonderful heroes, the men of Oflag 64. All of his men felt the same way. You know that wherever we have had reunions and visited military facilities, all of today's soldiers strongly admire and respect our Oflag 64 men who served their country to preserve our freedom and protect, not only America, but also other western civilizations (Europeans) who were at risk of being taken over by the Nazi regime.

Pat and Martha provided the Oflag 64 men a bag of “goodies” especially designed for them which included an Oflag 64 baseball-style cap, a tall metal Oflag 64 beverage mug and an umbrella, and to all the women a beautiful large “tote” bag in a deep red with “Oflag 64” on it. Inside each bag was an umbrella—just in case of rain! In our envelopes were a list of the people attending and a large list of restaurants open in New Orleans, with recommended ones specially marked. That was a great help to all. The list of attendees included the children and other family members of the POWs. Most of Bob and Gladys Thompson's family came, as did “Doc” DiFrancesco's, Reid “Ells” Ellsworth's, Bill Warthen's, and many others. The Waters' son and daughter were there, each with their spouses, and grandchildren. I know that Pat and Martha were so proud and pleased that their family had been able to attend with us.

At our business meeting on Friday morning, the Marine honor guard presented the colors. They looked wonderful. They did not leave the colors in the room, because, as Pat told us afterwards, Marines never let go of the flag. So they took the colors with them and brought them back to retire the colors at our Memorial Breakfast on Sunday. Of course, our “family” stood to honor the flag, sang the National Anthem and then sang God Bless America. The Marines told us that they were really touched by our singing, especially God Bless America, and said that the hair stood up on their arms as they listened to us.

Back to the beginning of the Reunion—Pat had arranged for a very large Hospitality Room, the Belle Chase Room, which had plenty of space to move around and talk. The room was open from 9 a.m. until 9 p.m. and refreshments were available the whole time. A beautiful buffet breakfast was provided each day.

On Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, buses departed from our hotel to the National World War II Museum. Shuttles were available to and from the museum and hotel each afternoon, so anyone who was tired or whatever could go back to the hotel. The Waters had arranged for a lady from a local tour company to come meet with folks to arrange for whatever tours they wanted to take—for example, a tour to the swamp, tours to gorgeous and preserved Plantation Homes, City tours, etc. Everyone was very happy with her services and the tours.

Several people took the 3-hour city tour through the devastated areas of New Orleans and were able to see with their own eyes what had been seen on TV and in the papers. The tour went through about every neighborhood that was affected, and everyone was stunned. The sights were almost beyond imagination. The tour guide said that there were more than 250,000 homes affected by the hurricane and flooding and these homes were mostly all uninhabitable. The affected homes were not only owned or rented by folks in the Ninth Ward, where most are poor, but also by those in the more up-scale neighborhoods. There were homes in beautiful neighborhoods where the first floor was gutted or had not yet been gutted and were waiting for the insurance company to complete negotiations with them. There has been a lot of grief in dealing with insurance companies who only want to pay a stipend for homes. Mold inspectors, flood damage inspectors, wind damage inspectors, etc. all have to examine homes before acting on claims and allowing people to return to them and it has sometimes been difficult to get insurance companies to do the right thing. Another reason some have not yet returned to their homes is that utilities are still not available in their neighborhoods!

At the business meeting on Friday, Bill Warthen gave the welcoming remarks and Pat Waters spoke as well. Bob Thompson brought up again this year the question of whether people wanted these reunions to continue or have this be the last reunion. Not being ones to give up, the attending men of Oflag 64 voted to try and have at least one more reunion. Abe Baum offered to host the reunion next year in San Diego, if he could put it together at a price we could afford. He suggested possibly taking a little cruise. In this way, people wouldn't have far to walk, and it would not necessitate his having to make all the arrangements for dinners, tours, etc. As Abe explained, more folks want the time to sit with each other and visit, hash over old memories, etc. and not go on tour after tour. This would also make Abe's job of organizing the tour easier with less work. After all, almost all our men are now in their 80s and 90s. Abe will investigate this possibility and let us know what he has learned. After the meeting, buses were available to take folks back to the museum, if they had not been there yet or had not seen everything. By the way, the museum was great and still growing. There were short films to see of both Theaters of the War, which also were excellent. On Friday evening we attended a Cajun buffet dinner in the Versailles Ballroom at the hotel. The food and service were excellent.

Saturday, a panel discussion featuring 3 of our POWs was held at the Museum, open to the public, and was well attended. The panel consisted of Herm Littman, Bill Warthen, and Abe Baum. They did a very good job of telling a little about where and how they were captured, life in the camps, and other things about their captivity. It was well done and appreciated by the large group that attended. In fact, a local newspaper reporter was there, as was a representative with movie camera from the local Fox News channel. That evening a few sound bites of the panel discussion and our POWs were shown on the television, and in the next morning's local paper (The Times Picayune) there was a story and photograph. That evening a cocktail hour and sit-down dinner was enjoyed at the Museum. The evening was sponsored by the Citigroup-SmithBarney of New Orleans. Pat Waters worked for many months to get a group to sponsor this event, and what a great event it was. Our major speaker was Douglas USMC Reserve, Commanding General, 4<sup>th</sup> Marine Division, Marine Forces Reserve, New Orleans. He was the same person who spoke Wednesday evening and whose men were helping during our visit.

On Sunday morning we had a seated New Orleans-Style Breakfast in the Versailles Ballroom, followed by our OFLAG 64 2007 Memorial Service. One of the Marines accompanied us on a keyboard while we sang. Charles Green, Chaplain, New Orleans Support Group, conducted the service. The names of the men who had passed on during 2004 and 2005 were read, and a Marine tolled the bell. The colors were then retired by the USMC and everyone said good-bye.