

2025 REUNION RECAP

Greetings, AC-119ers, from cold and snow-covered South Bend! As I stare out my window at a driveway buried under a fresh foot of snow, I'd much rather be back in the sun and warmth of the Emerald Coast where just a few short weeks ago we were celebrating our *25th AC-119 Gunship Reunion* in Fort Walton Beach.

Before diving into the recap, I want to thank every one of you for your patience and flexibility. No matter how much planning we do, Murphy's Law always sneaks in. And yet, every year you roll with the punches, smile through the glitches, and keep the reunion spirit alive. Because of that resilience, we were able to adapt and still enjoy a fantastic "WE'RE BACK" 25th anniversary gathering, government shutdown and all.

MONDAY, TUESDAY & WEDNESDAY

Board members began trickling into the Island Resort early. After Theresa and I wrapped up our two-day drive, we linked up with the reunion crew and got to work setting up the hootch. Tables, displays, flags, A/V gear, and Quartermaster stock. You name it, we touched it. Gus led the usual Sam's Club run (yes, we bought too many snacks again).

With no scheduled activities those first days, folks explored the beach, lounged by the pool, hit the local restaurants, and reconnected in the hootch. Registration kicked off Wednesday, which is always a treat—greeting old friends and welcoming first-timers. That night, about 20 of us hit Benjarong Thai restaurant. Great food all around, and I'm still thinking about those egg rolls.

THURSDAY

This was our big pivot day. The shutdown canceled our bus trip to the Naval Air Museum and Blue Angels practice. Disappointing, yes—but we regrouped fast.

We rerouted to the Special Operations Air Memorial Park at Hurlburt Field to visit the AC-119G Shadow clone and other Special Ops aircraft. For first timers and families, seeing "their" aircraft up close was a real highlight.

Next, although the Air Force Armament Museum was officially closed, the curator graciously opened the doors for us. We enjoyed full access to the incredible displays and the AC-130A "*First Lady*" outside.

FRIDAY

Instead of our usual Friday evening Meet & Greet buffet, we caravanned to Navarre Park for a picnic hosted by our legacy squadron, the *18th Special Operations Test and Evaluation Squadron* (18th SOTES). They grilled brats and burgers, provided drinks, and made everyone feel right at home. Great food, even better camaraderie.

Afterwards, we headed back to the hootch for dessert and storytelling—most of which probably grew a little taller as the night went on.

SATURDAY

Saturday morning kicked off with the Business Meeting led by President Bill Petrie and me. We recognized our first-time attendees, reviewed Association reports, confirmed next year's reunion in Phoenix, and voted back in the current Board's slate of officers (all unanimously approved).

That evening was the Awards Banquet, always the crown jewel of the reunion. The Fort Walton Beach High School JROTC Color Guard opened the event with a sharp presentation of color

AWARDS PRESENTATIONS

This year's **"Terry Courtney Above & Beyond"** Award went to:

- **Jim Mattison**, for building and maintaining our Face Book page, his IT assistance and the Association's *Final Flight* postings memorializing our fallen.
- An *Award of Appreciation* went to **Bill Petrie**, for developing our first website in 1998, spearheading the FIRST reunion back in 2000, and helping lay the groundwork for the Association itself and then stepping up last year to serve as President.

Both recognitions are well-earned and deeply appreciated.

A huge shout-out as well to my daughter Lisa, attending her first reunion. She designed and created all 20 banquet centerpieces, featuring our 25th Reunion "WE'RE BACK" theme. The centerpieces were a big hit and created great keepsakes. If you didn't grab one and want a framed "25," let me know—she'll take care of you.

SUNDAY

We wrapped up the reunion Florida-style with a seafood boil in place of the usual barbecue. A perfect ending to a great week.

Well, 119ers, that's a wrap for 2025. Now I guess I must go tackle that snow. Thank you all for making our *25th Reunion* so special. The Association Board and I hope to see you next year in Phoenix. Stay safe, stay healthy—and stay engaged.

Guns Hot!

**Terry Sarul, Vice President
AC-119 Gunship Association**