

Reunion from page 1A

"I was not," chimed in Goossens. "I was a baker. And a shoe maker."

Reunion tour

On the second floor in the hotel hospitality suite, a World War II news reel played on a corner television set. Some of the crew's 27 active members and their guests sat at round tables, shooting the breeze and Bacardi.

Hampton, who writes a regular newsletter for the crew, opened up one of the photo albums he brought to Florida for the 27 active members and their guests to enjoy. He talked about how the annual get-together is helping them explore the United States. Reunions have taken place from California to Maine.

"We have a different location every year," Hampton said. "It gives the wives a chance to get out and we see a different area."

According to Hampton, the reunions pretty much run like clockwork: The first day is settling in, the second day is for sightseeing tours and the last day is the banquet. "We'll go on the outings, and if not, we'll go to the hospitality suite" and chew the fat.

Hampton said the guys tend to not get overly sentimental about renewing friendships. "They can talk about it but they don't get emotional."

He joined the crew in August, 1943, at the ripe old age of 14 and was discharged 10 months later.

LCIG-450 Lt. Bob Main of Columbus, Ohio walked into the suite.

"He was my boss," said Kern, sheepishly.

Main, now in his 80s, talked about how the ship was converted into a gunboat in August 1943. The ship sailed from Little Creek, Va., down the Atlantic and through the Panama Canal on the way to the shores of San Diego, Ca. After reaching the destination, its 20-millimeter machine gun was replaced by a 40-millimeter. And 10 rocket launchers were added, as were many more men.

"It (the conversion) changed our purpose," said Main, in somewhat of an understatement. Kern and Main discussed a famous photograph of three guys on a beach raising the American flag, after the 1944 invasion of Iwo Jima. "We dropped them off before the battle on the beach," said Kern, about the guys in the photo.

"It's not like making a delivery to UPS," Main said. "A landing on the beach is just the beginning of the total invasion." After those men were left on the beach, Main explained that the gunboat went in circles, keeping a constant eye on the shore line, "just to see if anybody was escaping, swimming."

Looking back
Hampton's photo album was turned to a page featuring an interesting war-era snapshot. It revealed Ed Gray, a rippling muscleman, hamming it up with a gunboat pal.

These days Gray looks rather jovial, even though he added quite a few pounds around the midsection. Hampton flipped the album page and saw another old, worn photo, featuring several members of the crew. One of them was a youthful George Kern.

"We were one small item in a bunch of different things," Hampton said. But were they essential to the war effort? "Yeah, we think so," Hampton added.

Several hours later, after the reunion-goers relaxed in their hotel rooms and ate dinner, many returned to the hospitality suite. The barbs were getting sharper by the minute.

"You write what these guys say and somebody's going to call you a liar," quipped Kern, a reference to how two sailors often have totally different recollections to a single event.

Jokes and cigar smoke filled the air in the hotel hospitality suite during a classic bull session.

Some off-color stories from Ed Gray had everybody in stitches, including LCIG-450 crew member Jack Manuel of Rhode Island and his special guest, Charlotte Caplette.

"We like to hear the stories getting bigger and bigger every year," said Charlotte. "And ... the women



look forward to seeing each other, we're old friends."

Meanwhile, Manuel chimed in with a common lament on this particular weekend. Their crew's captain, Wally Brady, died this summer.

"This year, the skipper's not here," Manuel said. "But we go on. His wife is here, and his son is here," a reference to Mary and Tim Brady.

What's the reunion all about? "Just what we're doing right here," said Manuel with a smile. "Yackety-yackety-yacking."

"Yeah," joined in Nick Grosso, another member of the crew, who traveled to Ft. Myers from New York state. "And we can say what we want because there's no officer here."

As the bull and adult beverages flowed, Grosso recalled his duty as a cook on LCIG-450. His specialty: Spam and chili.

"Spam is underrated," Grosso said. "It goes good with dehydrated potatoes ... and powdered eggs."

But, those days obviously are a hush-fling of the past. The physiques of some of his comrades indicates that their meals today are much more substantial.

Another kind of boat

On day two, Kern and the reunion-goers enjoyed various outings, including a manatee boat ride and lunch at a seafood restaurant.

"We never saw one manatee," said Tom O'Brien of Farmington, a friend of George and Betty Kern. "We did see a gator sunning itself and some turtles sitting on a log."

Late that afternoon, they reconvened in the hotel lobby for a caravan of their rented vehicles to The Burroughs Home, a nationally registered historical landmark on the banks of the Caloosahatchee River.

Nelson T. Burroughs, a millionaire businessman during the early 1900s, owned the mansion — built during the Georgian Revival architectural era. At that time, an architect-designed home was rare in southwest Florida.

"It's wonderful meeting all the guys," said another Navy vet, Roy Gladen of Texas, who was at the reunion with his fun-loving wife, Mary.

Francis. "It's a special bond, I guess. They're just like brothers, all of them are to me."

Besides, Gladen added, he hasn't been to a LCIG-450 reunion he didn't like, and south Florida definitely agreed with him.

"I love it down here," he said. As dusk settled in over the Burroughs Home and sprawling grounds, not to mention the spectacular Caloosahatchee, gunboat guys and their gals feasted on catered hors d'oeuvres and listened to the Jo List Jazz and Blues Quartet.

Many wanted to tour the home, too. Among those who did were the late Captain Brady's widow and son, enjoying the relative calm of the back porch.

Mary Brady said her husband organized the very first two reunions and hosted them at their Wisconsin house. Ironically, he was planning to have another reunion there in 2000.

Tim Brady said he wasn't surprised that the reunions are continuing. He described the members of the LCIG-450 as close-knit, a "tight bunch of guys."

Waltzing in

The seemingly unending stream of good-natured ribbing displayed throughout the reunion, and at the Burroughs jazz fest, indicated the camaraderie hasn't wavered very much.

"Good timing, George," joked someone from the gallery, after the Kerns waltzed out onto the outdoor dance floor only for music to stop.

Nearby, LCIG-450 communications officer Len Rochon and his wife, Helen, from Belleville, Mich., soaked up all of the fun along with Mike and LaBelle Ross. "I've got a million of them," said Rochon about war stories. "But you've

heard them all."

Asked about whether he ever thinks back to being in battle with the guys, Rochon nods yes.

"We were a family, one big family," he said. "The bulk of these guys were together for that long (two years)."

As with any large group of people, there were personality clashes and those who didn't socialize with each other. "Oh yeah, but they're here. And they change."

Rochon talked about how he was one of four guys from Michigan on the gunboat. One was old school chum Goossens, who sat nearby and listened to the guy nicknamed "Rocky."

The two enlisted together into World War II and came home together. In between, however, after boot camp, they were separated for a while when Goossens had to go in to the hospital. Banter continued unabated.

The gunboat experience was "like McHale's Navy," said Rochon, referring to the madcap television program from the 1960s.

Nick Grosso said the reunion was the "invasion of Ft. Myers."

"He's one of our millionaires," Rochon, a native of Ottawa, Canada, said, referring to Goossens. He wasn't joking this time.



Gathering point: (Photo above) Crew members, family and friends gathered outside the Holiday Inn Sunspree Resort in Ft. Myers. (Upper left photo) LCIG-450 surviving crew member Len Rochon (center) enjoys the jazz party along with wife Helen (left) and LaBelle Ross. The Rochons live in Belleville.



Down time: Crew member Jack Manuel and his special guest, Charlotte Caplette, relax in the hotel hospitality suite the first day of the reunion.



No bull: Stories told by crew members Ed Gray (left), Nick Grosso and John Socha gain greater significance over the years.

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