



# The Military Reunion Market

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# THE MILITARY REUNION MARKET

To many hotels, this is a niche market with growing importance.

This presentation will show you

**WHO** is involved in the Military Reunions Market

**WHAT** that market is composed of

**WHEN** military reunions take place

**WHERE** they are held

**WHY** you might be interested in hosting some, and

**HOW** you can succeed in pursuing this market

It was prepared by leaders of **The Alliance of Military Reunions**, a membership group for military reunions and those who serve them.

Collectively, these leaders have extensive experience as officer and enlisted personnel in the Armed Forces, as founders and leaders of their own military reunion groups, as hands-on planners of numerous successful military reunions, and as executives in the hospitality industry. We hope you agree they know what they are talking about.

# **WHO** Is Involved in the Military Reunion Market?

**Mostly people who served in the military sometime from WWII through the late '60s**

**Mostly male, but many females**

**Mostly in their 60s and 70s – usually retired**

**Some younger, some older**

**Mostly accompanied by spouses**

**Some in wheelchairs or with walkers, or with special medical needs**

**Sometimes accompanied by**

*Grown children*

*Grandchildren*

*Active duty military personnel*

**They tend to look like this...**



# Who Is Involved in the Military Reunion Market?

**With few exceptions, they are U.S. veterans and their spouses. They served in...**

*World War II: 1941-1946*

*The Cold War: 1947-1991*

*The Korean War: 1950-1955*

*The Vietnam Era: 1961-1975*

*The Gulf War: 1990-1991*

**Most were young when they joined the service: 17-22 years old**

**Most put in two to four years, then left for civilian life**

**Many others spent a career in the service**

*Usually stayed in for 20-30 years*

*Retired in their late 30s to late 40s*

*Had a civilian career after that*

**Most were Enlisted (≈90%)**

*Typically enlisted as recent high school graduates. Some were dropouts.*

*Many went to college after their service*

*Had various civilian careers*

**Some were Officers (≈10%)**

*Typically entered the service as recent college graduates*

*Typically had professional civilian careers*

# Who Is Involved in the Military Reunion Market?

**ALL** have done exciting things

**Most** have a well-developed sense of duty, honor, and patriotism

**Most** have a conservative outlook

**Many** are religious

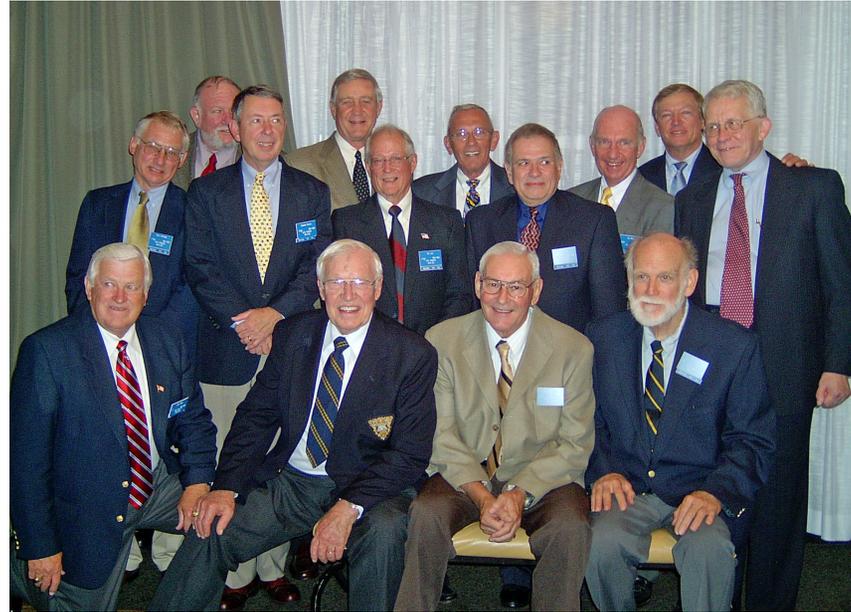
**Some** are rich, some are poor, most are solid middle class

**As you can see, most are Very Happy People...**





Officers of the USS Rankin – 1963



Some of those officers at a reunion 40 years later



**Typical, and then some.** The fellow at the left combines a lot of the attributes of military reunion attendees, especially the “done exciting things.”

He enlisted in the Navy in 1947 as a tenth-grade dropout.

At age 53 in 1983, he became a Rear Admiral.

Along the way, he was Captain of five ships, commander of U.S. forces in Lebanon during the 1982 civil war, deputy chief of all training in the U.S. Navy, and a few other mildly exciting things.

At age 77, he graduated from Liberty Bible College. Recently he and his son, a pastor, have started a church in Virginia Beach.

# **WHAT** is the Military Reunion Market?

**The buyers are Military Reunion Groups** (more on them later!)

**The sellers are those who serve them**

*CVBs / DMOs*

*Hotels*

*Local tour operators*

*Local attractions*

*Reunion management companies*

*Specialized vendors*

**The Alliance of Military Reunions serves both the buyers and the sellers**

*It is a membership organization for military reunion groups and those who serve them*

*It seeks to be a valuable resource for people from all services, eras, and industries*

*It provides its members with information, training, and personal networking opportunities*

*Is a nonprofit, all-volunteer organization*

*Founded in June, 2009*

*One year later...*

**Has 350 Military Reunion Groups as members**

**Has 200 Hotels, CVB/DMOs, and vendors as members**

**Has 2,800 addresses on its email list**

**Publishes a web site, a newsletter, and valuable handbooks**

**Holds Seminars and Town Hall Meetings**

# WHAT are Military Reunion Groups?

They are groups of people who get together to...

*Reconnect*

*Reminisce*

*Have fun*

*See the sights*

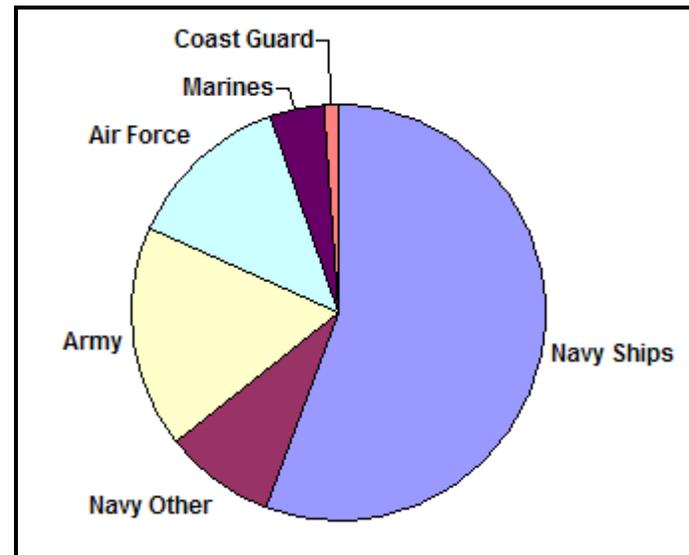
*Bask in their camaraderie*

They are people who have a common bond based on their common service

They often have additional bonds because of their shared experiences at reunions

They are usually organized around a unit in one of the U.S. armed services

Over half are Navy ship reunion groups...



Source: 345 Alliance Members

# What are Military Reunion Groups?

**There are thousands of these groups – some say as many as 12,000**

**The market has historically been *extremely* fragmented – the groups are highly independent, don't know one another, don't work together, etc.**

**There are a few specialized umbrella groups, but only the Alliance works to unify the market**

**The size of the groups varies from twenty members to over 10,000**

**A typical group might have 500-1,000 names on its mailing list**

**Many are run by one person from home, often assisted by a spouse. They do it as a hobby, a challenge, or a labor of love**

**None are run to make a profit**

**The largest have staffs and 7-figure budgets, but most are fairly informal operations with very little money behind them**

*Some are incorporated, but many are unorganized informal associations*

*Few have meaningful sources of revenue outside their reunions*

*Typically, they collect money for their reunion, and spend all or most of it there*

*Often they have only a few hundred dollars on hand after the reunion*

*But occasionally they have thousands of dollars in their bank accounts*

# What are Military Reunion Groups?

The groups may be well- or poorly-organized. Many, but not all, have...

*Officers and a Board of Directors*

*Dues and a bank account*

*A newsletter*

*A web site*

*Many do NOT have active workers other than the leader*

They typically have annual reunions, usually in a different city each year

The size of the reunions varies from twenty attendees to over 3,000

A typical military reunion might put 100 people in a hotel for three to five nights:

## **DAY 1 of 4 - THURSDAY**

Noon: Registration begins. Hospitality Room opens.

5:00-6:00 PM: Welcome reception. Casual dress.

Dinner on your own (good front desks can suggest restaurants)

## **DAY 2 of 4 - FRIDAY**

7:30-8:30 AM: Continental breakfast

8:30 AM: Bus leaves for optional tour. Lunch on the tour.

9:30 AM: Hospitality Room opens for those not on the tour

4:00 PM: Bus returns from the tour

6:00 PM: Social hour. Cash bar.

7:00-10:00 PM: Informal meal in the hotel banquet facility. Raffles, entertainment, etc.

## **DAY 3 of 4 - SATURDAY**

7:30-8:30 AM: Continental breakfast

8:30 AM: Buses leave for optional tour. Lunch on the tour.

2:00 PM: Buses return to the hotel

3:30-4:30 PM: Business meeting in the Hospitality Room

6:30 PM: Cocktail hour and photo session

7:30 PM: Banquet in the hotel ballroom. Coat & tie recommended. If you can still wear a complete and correct uniform, do it.

8:30 PM-???: Guest speaker, entertainment, dancing.

## **DAY 4 of 4 - SUNDAY**

8:00 AM: Private buffet breakfast, followed by a Memorial Service

# **WHEN** do military reunions take place?

**Usually every year, at the same season of the year**

*Some are every other year or less often*

*Occasionally there are mid-year mini-reunions, chapter meetings, etc.*

*Some you talk with will be having their first reunion ever*

**They are most often in the fall, second most often in the spring, very seldom at other times**

**Dates are usually flexible – Money Talks!**

*Weekends at airport hotels are popular*

*Sometimes mid-week at resort hotels*

*If you can offer a good rate on particular dates, let them know about it*

**Military reunions are typically scheduled a year or more in advance**

*Don't expect to host one in the next few months,*

*But all things are possible – there are occasional exceptions*

**When you DO book one, expect solid business scheduled for a future year**

# **WHERE** do military reunions take place?

Which **CITY**?

Which **HOTEL**?

# WHICH CITY?

Usually a different city every year

Can be anywhere

Typically chosen at a reunion, by the attendees, based on recommendations

East is more popular than West

Some groups rotate locations (North, South, Midwest, West, or something similar)

There are many criteria for selection...

*Near the unit's former base or home port*

*Near other military facilities*

*An exciting city*

*Interesting attractions*

*The planner/coordinator lives there*

*They fought there*

*It's someplace new and different*

*Somebody sold them on it (CVB, FAM tour, etc.)*

*Some CVBs set their sights on attracting Military Reunions, and they get them*

**Branson, Missouri**

**Fairfax County, Virginia**

**Northern Kentucky**

**Greene County, Ohio**

**Rapid City, South Dakota**

# Which City?

**Remember: Every city is a candidate to host a military reunion**

**Some cities host a lot of them...**

***Branson, Missouri***

***Norfolk / Williamsburg / Virginia Beach***

***San Diego***

***Washington, DC area, especially Fairfax County***

***Nashville***

***San Antonio***

***St. Louis***

***Cincinnati / Dayton***

***Charleston, South Carolina***

***Philadelphia area***

***Seattle area***

***Myrtle Beach, South Carolina***

***Jacksonville, Florida***

***Rapid City, South Dakota***

*Source: History, plans, and desires of 133 Alliance members*

## **WHICH HOTEL?**

**Most groups use only one hotel**

**Usually it's a full-service hotel with banquet facilities and hospitality space**

**Sometimes it's a cruise ship**

**The hotel is typically recommended/chosen by one person or a couple**

**Usually there's a committee that approves the recommendation or choice**

**Sometimes a reunion management company is involved**

**Usually there is a site visit – without it, you are asking for trouble**

*Room and a meal are usually comped*

*Typically the reunion group pays for the travel, but sometimes the planner does*

*It is important to see the Hospitality Room*

**Price is very important**

**Reunions often want a nice hotel at a good rate**

**They look for \$79-\$99, maybe more if breakfast is included**

**Some groups will trade down to get a lower rate, but few if any want low-end hotels.**

# Which Hotel?

**For most military reunions, the ideal reunion hotel has several characteristics...**

*Reasonable room rates*

*Reasonable food and beverage rates*

*Reasonable local transportation costs*

*Knows the SMERF market and how to deal with it*

**May have a SMERF sales manager**

**Might have a military reunions sales manager**

*Is well-equipped to handle reunion groups*

*Loves them for what they are*

**You don't have to be ideal to get the business, but the closer you come, the better chance you have**

**Remember that overall cost is extremely important to most reunions**

**They also like you to understand them and be responsive to their special needs**

## **WHERE? – One Reunion’s History**

**2004 – Norfolk – Our ship’s home port from 1952-1971**

*Hilton Norfolk Airport – Non-luxurious airport hotel with a friendly staff and a legendary reunion sales manager. Nowhere to walk. Miraculously accommodated our growth in a few months from an expected 50 people to almost 300 at our Saturday banquet.*

**2005 – San Diego – The ship was on the West Coast from 1945-1947**

*Red Lion Hanalei – Very nice hotel on Hotel Circle. Professional but not very helpful staff. Close to things, but nowhere to walk. Memorable as a nice California location.*

**2006 – Washington, DC – An exciting city**

*Marriott Crystal City – Luxurious downtown hotel, with lots going on. Professional staff, not particularly friendly. Great walking in an underground city connected directly to the lobby.*

**2007 – New London, CT – Suggested by our management company**

*Radisson Hotel – A small downtown hotel with a friendly staff. Great walking in a picturesque New England town.*

**2008 – Stuart, FL – The ship is sunk off the coast as a fishing and diving reef**

*Ramada Stuart – Small hotel on a highway. Nowhere to walk. Exceptionally warm and welcoming. General Manager was personally involved in every aspect of our stay.*

**2009 – Norfolk – Back to our old home port**

*Sheraton Waterside – Big hotel on the waterfront. Professional staff, not particularly friendly. No free airport shuttle, but a truly wonderful walking location.*

**2010 – Branson, MO – Popular. Something different for us.**

*Radisson Hotel – Typical large but friendly Branson hotel. Haven’t stayed there yet.*

## **One Reunion's History, continued**

**2011 – Charleston, SC – A popular reunion town with lots of Navy history.**

*The city was chosen more or less arbitrarily – a lot of people just seemed to like it*

*The decision was made by the Executive Board, without a lot of deliberation*

*I'm the sole decision maker about the hotel, and nobody's likely to question me*

*I don't have a lot of time to spend evaluating hotels and making a decision*

*Since we use a reunion management company, the decision isn't particularly burdensome*

*They have a favorite hotel, but it isn't an Alliance member*

*Their favorite isn't necessarily the best hotel for us – business considerations might well come first for them*

*Several Charleston hotels have prospected me*

*One is a stalwart member of the Alliance, and the sales manager is an outstanding military reunions specialist*

*With me and the management company both involved, we'll definitely end up in a nice hotel*

**2012 – City To Be Determined**

*We will probably decide at the Branson reunion in September*

*We've kind of penciled in a return to Stuart*

*But there's been some interest in Chicago, Nashville, New Orleans, and others*

*The decision will probably be made quickly and without a lot of deliberation*

*Our management company can help us avoid bad choices*

*By the way... We're not 100% pleased with the management company, but they know us very well and they've helped us a lot in the past. It would be very hard to replace them.*

## **RECAPPING – The Ideal Hotel**

**For most military reunions, the ideal reunion hotel has several characteristics...**

*Reasonable room rates*

*Reasonable food and beverage rates*

*Reasonable local transportation costs*

*Knows the SMERF market and how to deal with it*

**May have a SMERF sales manager**

**Might have a military reunions sales manager**

*Is well-equipped to handle reunion groups*

*Loves them for what they are*

**You don't have to be ideal to get the business, but the closer you come, the better chance you have**

**Remember that overall cost is extremely important to most reunions**

**They also like you to understand them and be responsive to their special needs**

## **WHY** Should I Be Interested in This Market?

We report, you decide...

*One in four households has a veteran in it*

*There are thousands of military reunion groups*

*They meet all over the country*

*They often look for something or someplace new*

*They typically bring 100 people to your hotel for a 3-5 night stay during an off-peak period*

*Some bring SEVERAL hundred*

*They usually have a well-documented history, so they have a pretty good handle on their numbers*

*They are flexible about dates*

*They won't cancel because of changes in budget, changes in management, Arizona boycotts, etc.*

*They won't trash your property*

*And all in all...*

***It's a fun & rewarding market, without much downside risk***

# **HOW** Can I Participate in This Market?

## **Know the SMERF market**

*It's not hard*

*Assign a sales manager to it*

## **Be able to accommodate the basic requirements of military reunions**

*Reasonable room rates*

*Reasonable food and beverage rates*

*Inexpensive local transportation*

*Reasonable—by their standards—contract terms*

## **Be prepared to meet their special wants and needs**

*They ARE a bit special, but most hotels can deal with them*

*We will tell you what they are*

## **Prospect intelligently**

*It's not difficult, but this is a special market that takes some special care*

## **Network!**

## **Help their planners**

# **HOW? – Basic Requirements of the Military Reunion Market**

## **Reasonable room rates**

*Usually \$79-\$99 or so*

*Maybe more if breakfast is included*

*Some groups are willing to spend more*

## **Reasonable food and beverage rates**

*No hugely expensive breakfasts, please*

*No big food and beverage minimums, please*

## **Inexpensive local transportation**

*Free airport shuttle, or at least an inexpensive one*

*Free parking on site, or at least a break on high costs*

## **Reasonable contract terms**

*No attrition clauses – this market hates them, and has no money to pay for unused rooms*

*No cancellation clauses – there's little chance they'll cancel*

# **HOW? – This Market's Special Wants and Needs**

## **Contracts**

*Most groups have no revenue source except for their reunions, which usually just pay for themselves*

*Most groups have little or no money in the bank*

*If they have any, it was painstakingly accumulated and they DO NOT want to spend it*

*So they are EXTREMELY skittish about what they see as onerous contract terms, especially financial ones*

*Contract terms can be deal breakers – some won't even consider hotels that require attrition clauses*

*If you are creative, almost anything is possible, e.g., work with them on dropping the size of their block as the time for the reunion approaches*

## **Food and beverage**

*They often want breakfast included in the room rate*

*Continental breakfasts may be OK, since they often eat heavily at lunch and dinner*

*Having an on-site restaurant can be important*

*Offer lunch and dinner discounts there*

## **Hospitality Room**

*The Hospitality Room is usually a very important part of their reunion*

*They will expect you to provide it at no charge*

*It's more than a parlor between two sleeping rooms*

*More to come...*

# How? – This Market’s Special Wants and Needs

## More about the Hospitality Room...

*It needs to be In a public area, so people can flow in and out*

*It needs to have tables to sit and relax at – a mixture of small and large ones is good, since it is friendly whether there are five or fifty people in the room*

*The customer probably wants to bring in their own packaged snacks and refreshments*

*They may want you to provide coffee at a reasonable cost*

*They want to drink beer & wine there, and possibly hard liquor*

*They may want to display memorabilia there*

*They may want to sell merchandise there*

*They may want to have a business meeting there*

*They need to lock it at night or when on tours*

## Alcohol in the hospitality room

*Many groups want to bring in their own alcohol*

*For some groups, it’s a deal breaker if they can’t*

*Some hotels just let them do it*

*For the reunion group, cost is really the key*

*If you have to serve it yourself, make it inexpensive. These solutions have worked:*

**\$3 self-service beer in an ice tub, managed by the hotel**

**Cash subsidy by the hotel, CVB, or well-to-do members**

**Drink tickets or special prices at an adjacent bar area**

**Separate “wet” hospitality room in a private parlor**

# How? – This Market's Special Wants and Needs

## The Reunion Attendees

*They are easy to deal with (Usually!)*

*Many don't travel much, except to their annual reunion*

*They appreciate nice people and good service*

*Some will have wheelchairs, walkers, oxygen, special diets, etc.*

*A few will cancel at the last minute for medical reasons (their own or others)*

*Some will want to stay a few days before and/or after the reunion, at the reunion room rate*

*Some don't drive, or are reluctant to – try to make life easy for them!*

*Others will come in RV's – help them find parking!*

*They want a calm and trouble-free hotel experience*

*Nightlife isn't important to them*

*They want a few quiet drinks with their friends*

*In the hospitality room during the day*

*At the bar or lobby later on in the evening*

*They'll be in bed before midnight*

# HOW? – Prospect Intelligently

**Understand the market**

**Use lists of past and future reunions**

*Many reunion notices are published in magazines and on web sites*

*The Alliance has a guide to reunion notice publishers*

*Members get it for free*

**Do your homework – visit their web site**

**Be aware that some people you will contact are highly experienced, while others are totally new**

**Push their military buttons – EVERYBODY has a nice hotel, but not everybody can connect it to a military interest**

**Don't overwhelm them with data**

*They get tons of literature packages, with tons of DVDs*

*They are not particularly skilled at analyzing their contents, or even particularly interested*

*They probably don't care about your fifteen different menu packages*

*If your sales managers are graded on how much literature they send out, please have pity on our volunteer planners, and help us reduce the content of our landfills*

# HOW? – Network!

## Get close to your CVB / DMO

*Reunion planners often go to them first*

*Some of them focus strongly on this market*

*Many will circulate RFP's to hotels that seek military reunion business – if they don't know you're interested, they may not send you the RFP's*

## Join the Alliance of Military Reunions

*We want to make it the best \$100 you've ever spent*

*Reunion groups will see you as being supportive of their market*

*You get a directory listing that will be seen by anyone who visits our web site*

*It has links to your web site and special landing pages*

*It has clever links to Wikipedia*

*You'll get invited to our special events, have access to our publications, etc.*

## Refer your colleagues to the Alliance

*A fragmented market is becoming more united*

*Word of mouth is becoming important*

## Also refer your former Military Reunions

*We are only one year old – they may not know about us*

*You'll be doing them a favor, and they will maybe want to return it*

*They aren't accustomed to joining anything, let alone having anything worthwhile to join*

*The more members we have, the better it is for all of us*

## **HOW? – Help Their Planners**

**It's a relationships market – take your time to understand who you are dealing with**

**Most planners are volunteers**

**Their reunions are serious to them, but this is their hobby, not their business**

**Some have never planned a reunion, some have planned ten or more**

*Assist the former, respect the latter*

*Size up their qualifications before you get too far with them*

**Regarding the first-time planners...**

*They may have been pressured into the job, and will probably only do it once*

*Many are not familiar with business: contracting, negotiating, etc.*

*They may be frightened to death*

*Realize that, in their ignorance, they might make unreasonable requests of you*

*Be patient in explaining things, especially your contracts*

**Regarding ALL Military Reunion planners...**

*Facilitate their site visit*

**Treat them better than they deserve**

**Comp their room and possibly a meal or two**

**Think about reimbursing their travel**

**Offer help with tours and attractions**

**Make sure they're in touch with the CVB / DMO**

# How? – Help Their Planners

**Treat your planners royally at the reunion**

*They have worked hard to make this happen*

*Often this is their only reward*

*It is the norm to comp the planner's room*

*Upgrade it if you can – make it a VIP room*

*Remember word of mouth – happy planners will never forget you!*

**Don't forget that the planner might not be the only VIP in attendance**

*He/she may not be the head of the reunion group*

*There may be some distinguished guests*

*The others don't need a comped room, but a bit of VIP treatment might not hurt*

## **RECAPPING** Everything So Far...

We have shown you

**WHO** is involved in the Military Reunions Market

**WHAT** that market consists of

**WHEN** military reunions take place

**WHERE** they are held

**WHY** you might be interested in the market, and

**HOW** you can succeed in pursuing it

So in closing...

# Here's to a Long and Happy Relationship!



# The End

