

OC 24-69: 2022 Gettysburg Reunion After-Action Report

Prepared by Brian Flora with Input from the Planning Group



Overview of OC 24-69's Reunion Process

On August 1, 1969, 161 men of 50th Company Infantry OCS (OC 24-69) graduated from the six-month long and very rigorous (i.e., "Old School") Infantry OCS Course at Fort Benning, Georgia, and parted ways. Some were able to stay in touch, at least for a while, but the large majority scattered and got on with the rest of their lives. Starting in 2015, through a persistent and remarkably successful internet-driven search effort, all but around twenty were found and encouraged to reconnect with their former 50th Company comrades.

The logical venue choice for a first reunion was **Fort Benning, Georgia**, the scene of the original OCS training “crime.” In October 2017, fifty-three classmates, most of whom came with spouses, gathered in Columbus, Georgia for the first OC 24-69 reunion. Fort Benning and its current OCS program rolled out the red carpet for us. Many who attended (and most of the spouses) didn’t know what to expect, and some were skeptical that serious bonding would take place among a group that had, over the past fifty years, gone in so many different directions. They were wrong. It was a hugely successful event, both entertaining and, in many cases, heart-warming. As the Benning reunion concluded, we determined that we must have another.

Two years later, in September 2019, thirty-eight classmates, most with spouses, came together in our nation’s Capital to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of our graduation from OCS, renew friendships, and to reflect on the role that OCS had played in shaping our lives. The bonds and warm and genuine camaraderie we established at the first reunion became even stronger. **Washington DC** was chosen because it would serve as an inspiring and dignified venue for our gathering.

For our third reunion, despite a year lost to the COVID plague, September 6, 2022 saw 50th Company’s classmates back in formation at the hallowed battlefield at **Gettysburg, Pennsylvania**. COVID be damned and full speed ahead. Thirty-five classmates signed up, but three, for various reasons, had to cancel at the last minute. Twenty-four spouses also attended. Spirits were high, and a wonderful time was had by all. By all accounts, those who attended considered Gettysburg as the “best” (in terms of 50th Company members bonding and social interaction) of our three reunions. The reunion program encouraged a more relaxed atmosphere with time built into the schedule for just chilling together and enjoying each other’s company.

Company Padre Mike Eberhardt noted that, “As we welcomed each other upon arrival, exchanged greetings and hugs, and continued to interact, I sensed something more personal. Although we remembered and celebrated who we were as the 50th Company, our conversations, our laughter, our remembrances reflected more of who we are now. What I heard throughout the conversations and chuckles was the celebration of friendships that have developed over a half-century. It was less about being 50th Company OCS and more about a bunch of guys and spouses enjoying one another's company and companionship. I wish to thank all who made this the most meaningful and memorable gathering that I've been a part of over these years. Your fellow Candidate, but more your friend, Mike Eberhardt.”

Editor’s Comment: Granted, our Gettysburg Reunion was the most fun and socially enjoyable of our reunions, but it was enabled and shaped by the efforts and experiences of the first two. I see the 50th Company OCS reunion pattern as a continuum. We should recognize how the Fort Benning and Washington reunions led directly to the marvelous success of our third in Gettysburg.

The **Benning Reunion** was existential. Without it, Washington and Gettysburg would never have happened. Think of the inspiration and drive shown by a handful of classmates who decided to launch a painstaking hunt for their long-lost 50th Company classmates. They were surprisingly successful in locating most of us (including too many who are no longer with us), and getting us to communicate with each other, share OCS stories and bios, and to interact via email, Facebook, and telephone. This enabled us to publish a chronicle of the company, “*The Men of 50th Company OCS.*” Kudos to the group who organized a fantastic and memorable reunion at Benning. They enabled us to reconnect and start re-bonding.

The **Washington DC Reunion** was a perfect segue, more official and dignified than the Benning experience. We built on our renewed friendships that had begun at Benning. We remembered our missing comrades at a moving sunset ceremony at the Vietnam Memorial and paid tribute with a wreath to our nation’s fallen soldiers at Arlington National Cemetery’s Tomb of the Unknowns. We also had a tour of the Senate, House of Representatives, and the Library of Congress. Our formal gala banquet at the elegant downtown Army-Navy Club was unforgettable. We reflected on how the OCS experience had helped shape us as individuals. It was an experience that none of us will ever forget, and it segued into our wonderful Gettysburg experience three years later. Hats off to those who organized our DC Reunion!

That Said, Here Is How Our Gettysburg Reunion Played Out:

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 6, 2022: ARRIVAL AND REGISTRATION

The 50th Company’s Reunion Registration table was staffed in the College Room, just across from the hotel check-in counter. Members of the Reunion Planning Team, accompanied by their spouses, welcomed new arrivals, answered questions, and handed out welcome packets with ID badges, reunion schedules, list of attendees, tourist information for the Gettysburg area, and lots of 50th Company bling. (Thank you Scott Davis!) In addition, Brian Walrath provided copies of his book, *Citizen Soldier: an Army Officer in Vietnam* to the classmates.

The College Room was open for informal meetings among reunion attendees. Snacks and beverages were provided, and classmates and spouses were encouraged to mix and engage with one another. The hotel “saloon” was open and inviting and saw good patronage from thirsty classmates. There was no formal group dinner on Tuesday, so attendees were asked to partner up with other classmates and make their own arrangements. This seems to have worked out well.

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 7, 2022: BATTLEFIELD BUS TOUR, THE GETTYSBURG MUSEUM, AND THE FILM/CYLORAMA

Note: all breakfasts at the hotel were part of the reunion package and intended to encourage interaction among classmates and spouses. Judging from how everyone mixed, mingled, and bonded each morning, this happened wonderfully.

We boarded our buses after breakfast and proceeded to the Gettysburg National Military Park to pick up our certified tour guides for the battlefield tour. Brian Walrath and Lou Lallo were our bus captains.

Interestingly, the Park is no longer managed by the National Park Service, but by *The Gettysburg Foundation*, a private non-profit philanthropic and educational organization that operates in partnership with the Park Service. Their certified guides were interesting, amazingly articulate and had great answers for all of our questions. Despite a persistent light rain, we had an informative and interesting two-hour tour of the Gettysburg Battlefield and then enjoyed our hotel provided box lunches together at the Lion's Pavilion in the Gettysburg Recreation Park. After lunch, we returned to the Battlefield Visitor Center for the historical film on the battle, experienced the awesome Cyclorama demonstration, and toured the magnificent battlefield museum. The buses brought us back to the hotel a little before 4:00 PM

WEDNESDAY BANQUET DINNER:

Since the sun was already well over the yardarm, cocktail hour began at 5:00. Before dinner, the group gathered on the Ballroom stage for group photos. We took photos of the classmates only, and then of the classmates with spouses and guests. We didn't do Platoon photos, but, for the record, the Second Platoon ruled! Their twelve members present represented 40 percent of our attendees. The 3rd Platoon came in second with seven members present.

We then returned to the ballroom for dinner. The seating was open, and the members of the Reunion Planning Group spread themselves out at different tables to encourage a good mixing of attendees.

The pre-dinner program included a hearty welcome to everyone from Lou Lallo (our trusty Reunion Planning Group Chair), who introduced the "Missing Man Table." We showed a moving five-minute "*Missing Man Table*" video, provided by Scott Davis, which helped us honor classmates who are no longer with us. Lou read the lengthening list of their names.

We introduced special guests, Bill Shade, LTC (Ret), and his wife, Dale, who are residents of Gettysburg. Bill serves as a Board Member of the OCS Alumni Association and graduated from the old "Brown Shoe OCS" 50th Company in 1960. We also recognized Paul Orr and his wife, Summer. Paul, a professional narrator has, "just for fun," narrated all our 50th Company videos. We designated him as an honorary member of 50th Company.

Lou proceeded with a round of Thank-Yous to the members of the Reunion Planning Committee, past and present. He presented paper weight mementos to Mike Eberhardt, Brian Flora, Bob Hines, Mike Thornton, Peter Nowlan, John Foote, and Scott Davis, with a special nod to Davis, Flora, Hines, and Walrath for their work on the Gettysburg gathering. Lou will be sending mementos to the six Planning Group members who were not present (Yokely, Knudsen, O'Shea, Yacola, Zimmerman, and Fields) who could not join us at Gettysburg.

Brian Walrath offered a 50th Company Toast that honored our wonderful 50th Company spouses. And 50th Company Padre, Mike Eberhardt, delivered the dinner's Invocation and Blessing. Right on schedule, a very tasty dinner was served. Entrée choices were either Filet Mignon or Parmesan Crusted Chicken.

The **Evening Program** consisted of 50th Company videos produced by our Videomeister, Scott Davis. These included a short address from Paul Orr, the narrator of all of our 50th Company Videos; the epic Ken Sutton mess hall face-off with Captain Smith, "*Messing with Captain Smith*;" a medley of 50th Company Videos; a wonderfully contrived email debate between Bob Hines and Scott Davis about who's not doing enough for the 50th Company website; and, finally, a showing of the last chapter (and very moving) Gettysburg tutorial video, "*The Day that Dixie Died*." It ended with (Thank you, Ken Burns!) Lincoln's Gettysburg address.

Lou made his closing remarks around 9:00 but encouraged everyone to continue socializing in the ballroom.

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 8, 2019: A "FREE" DAY

Thursday, by design, had no program or group meals scheduled, apart from a well-attended breakfast in the ballroom. Classmates were encouraged to partner up and hang out together, but there was no schedule. We had plenty of cars available, and those without "wheels" were told not to be shy about checking around and asking for rides.

During the day a few classmates revisited parts of the Battlefield which they had seen during the bus tour. Others visited downtown shops or other local tourist sites. Mike Thornton, Paul Kochis, David Doe; and John Morrissey drove out to Lancaster, PA to visit with classmate Ken Knudsen, who's been active in the 50th Company reunification effort from the beginning, but who is unable to attend large gatherings because of autoimmunity issues. Brian Flora organized a tour to the Eisenhower National Historic Site (the Gettysburg home and farm of President Eisenhower) for classmates and spouses who hadn't already seen the historic site. By all accounts, the 21 who came along were glad they did. And so on... A day spent hanging out together in various configurations endeavors and enjoying it.

Dinner arrangements were up to individual attendees, and, as far as we can determine, everyone found dinner partners. For its part, the Reunion Planning Committee and spouses dined together and enjoyed each other's company while savoring the good vibes that surrounded a successful reunion.

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, 2022: DEPARTURE

We gathered for our final breakfast in the ballroom. The conversation was lively and heartfelt, and a lot of comments focused on how we might get together for one more last reunion. The clear consensus was that we should try, so the Planning group will begin meeting again in October to explore options for another gathering.

Lou Lallo made brief closing remarks, thanking everyone for their participation in and contribution to the reunion. He wished everyone safe travels. Classmates and spouses said their good-byes, hugs were exchanged, and the ballroom slowly emptied.

Paul Kochis, who played such a major role in putting together the first two reunions, commented to the Planning Group: "So much effort, so much planning, so much dedication to an event for our comrades. The results were plainly evident at Gettysburg. The conversations that I had were rich. Not focused much on the distant past, but on more recent experiences and current impressions, on which there was interesting diversity. I am grateful for being able to attend."