

OC 24-69 Class Reunion: After-Action Report

On August 1, 1969, 161 men of 50th Company Infantry OCS graduated from the six-month Infantry OCS Course at Fort Benning, Georgia and parted ways. Some were able to stay in touch, at least for a while, although in the pre-email age this was difficult. The large majority scattered and set off on the rest of their lives. Through a remarkably successful search process, most have been found and have reconnected with each other. On October 18, 2017, fifty-three classmates, most of them with spouses, came together at the Hilton Garden Inn in Columbus, Georgia for the first 50th Company OCS reunion. The names of the attendees are attached as an Annex. Many who attended (and most of the spouses) didn't know what to expect, and some were skeptical that serious bonding would take place within a group that had, over the years, gone in so many different directions. They were wrong. It was a hugely successful event, both entertaining and, in many cases, heart-warming. Below is a brief chronicle of how things played out.

Wednesday, October 18th:

During the course of the afternoon, the group gathered at the Hilton Garden Inn. (Some had come early and played a round of golf at the Fort Benning Golf Course.) We checked in at the 50th Company welcome desk in a room across from the Azalea Room, a large, multipurpose space which served as the venue for all of our hotel events. Bill and Joy Thoroughgood and Mike and Robin Eberhardt were in charge of the welcoming committee. They welcomed not only the 50th Company men, but also their wives/significant others. The warm welcome set the tone for the whole reunion. Robin and Joy made it a point, to go straight to the wives to greet them and make them feel as much a part of the reunion as their husbands. Speaking from personal experience, it worked. My wife Kay had a wonderful time and felt very much a part of the "action."

While checking in, 50th Company classmates received a "Welcome Bag" containing a complete schedule; a list of attendees; a copy of the Kick-Off video produced by Scott Davis, and two name tags. One name tag had the name, home town, and a red or blue dot to indicate which bus we were to use. The other had the name, Platoon number, and a personal OCS graduation photo from 48 years ago. (My, we were handsome devils!). Later, spiral-bound copies of the reunion publication, "The Men of 50th Company OCS," were handed out. (Note: special thanks to Bruce Braden who covered the printing costs of book. Unfortunately, Bruce had prior commitments and could not attend the reunion, but sent his regards to the gathering.) A table was set up in the Azalea Room for memorabilia, but it soon filled up. A second, third, and fourth table had to be added. Lots of memories, there!

The 50th Company and guests gathered for the evening program at 6:30 (18:30 hours in military parlance). The 50th Company "Godfathers" (the Gang of Three who initiated the reunification effort) were recognized. Two of them, Mike Thornton and Paul Kochis, made welcoming remarks. The third, Ken Knudsen was scheduled to join them but had to back out of the reunion because of health considerations. Mike focused on thanking the many individuals who made the reunion possible, starting with the Recon Team members who managed to find over 90 percent of 50th Company's graduates; these included Mike, Paul and Ken themselves, and Don Tarr, Brian Walrath, Peter Nowlan, Lou Lallo, Brian Flora, Lin Zimmerman Clark Yokley, and Bob Winship, with special kudos for Sandy Carter and Jim Fields for their skilled and indefatigable sleuthing. Mike thanked the Reunion and Communications Team of Paul Kochis, Bill Yacola, Clark Yokley, Mike Eberhardt, and Bill Thoroughgood for their effort in turning the reunion from a "wouldn't it be great" wistful whim into a real-live and fantastic happening. He then thanked the Video and Stories team (Scott Davis, Brian Flora, Brian Walrath, and Mike Thornton) for their work in documenting "the way we were."

In his remarks, Paul commented on what a remarkable, diverse, and successful OCS class we were. We came to Fort Benning from all over the country (42 states). Few would have joined the military had it not been for the Vietnam War and the looming threat of the draft, but we performed our patriotic chore and joined the 50th Company formation. We bonded together, looked out for each other (“cooperate and graduate” was the mantra), and made it through a grueling six months of psychological and physical pressure. We came out of the process stronger and more resilient. He carefully checked off, one by one, the crazy array of career paths that we followed after OCS... but he failed to mention that we also had a career diplomat in our midst, to the great chagrin of said diplomat (and spouse, also a diplomat), who happens to be the chronicler of our reunion, which is why Paul’s “glaring omission” has been herein highlighted. ((Smiley Face))

Bill Yacola, the Reunion’s Sherpa-in-Chief and Emcee, reviewed the program, both for content and logistics. Scott Davis introduced his great Kick-Off Video that he produced by combining OCS photos with snippets from movies and songs of the era. It hit just the right note and gave us all a series of good chuckles. After that we got a bit (but just a bit) more serious. John Foote, a friend of Congressman Donald Beyer of Virginia, read a resolution that he (Congressman Beyer) had read on the floor of the House on October 12. The resolution, which appears in the Congressional Record, noted our reunion and recognized and honored the members of the 50th Company “for the sacrifices they made for our country.” (Note: John, Brian Walrath, and Bill Yacola worked with the Congressman in shaping the resolution’s theme and language.) Using a great Napa/California wine (a 2006 Cabernet) from a Jeroboam (monster bottle) donated by Paul Kochis, we began a round of toasts. We recognized and toasted our guest of honor, Barbara Smith, and shared memories of her deceased husband who, as the fearsome Captain Smith, had played such an important role for us during OCS. And we toasted the 50th Company camp follower/laundry ladies, the wives who came to Georgia and supported not only their husbands, but others in their Platoon, with laundry runs, moral support, and pogy bait. Here, here! And we toasted the men of 50th Company. Lastly, a 50th Company OCS reunion wouldn’t be a reunion without the incomparable Clarence Kugler reciting his famous lines from the unforgettable movie, *Three in the Attic*: “Man what a bummer, she could have been the daughter of Dagwood Bumstead!”

After the program we took our seats, more or less by Platoon, and made good use of the Cold Deli Sandwich Buffet (make-it-yourself) and Cash Bar. The evening was laced with shared memories, stories, visits to the Memorabilia Tables, and the renewal of old friendships. In the background, Scott’s CD played in a continuous loop. Gradually, the Men of 50th Company OCS wandered off to bed. They could even sleep between the sheets, with their wives. And no shock reveille the next morning.

Thursday, October 19th:

Thursday was spent at Fort Benning. But first we had breakfast. Over a well-attended and surprisingly tasty breakfast provided by the hotel, we used the opportunity to jawbone and catch up on each other’s lives. The two buses, coded blue and red, arrived punctually. All we had to do was match the color of the dot on our ID with the sign in the windshield. Each bus was “equipped” with an escort, a recently-graduated OCS candidate who could best be described as “being in Limbo.” It turns out that our escorts could not be commissioned until their Secret government clearance was completed, so they were hanging around Benning and doing such chores as doting on septuagenarian OCS survivors of a half-century ago. Several other candidates in the same category joined us during the morning program that show-cased OCS as it is today. Our candidates engaged us in conversation and answered our questions about the current OCS program. They were a great resource. We also learned from them that today’s candidates who choose Infantry as their Branch (a surprising number

do!) considered Airborne **and** Ranger Schools mandatory for a successful career as an Infantry Officer. Hooah!!!

LTC Chitty, the OCS Battalion Commander gave us a formal briefing (accompanied by rather dry Power Point charts, statistics, and time-lines). Once the formal lecture was done, we enjoyed a fantastic Q & A session with him. We peppered him with questions about the evolution of OCS and the reasons why it has taken a new direction. We found the session extremely interesting. Particularly impressive was when he answered one question with “I don’t know”. It takes some courage to do that and speaks well of the Army in general.

There is definitely a kinder, gentler OCS out there now, but for good reasons. The pressure is still there, but it no longer comes from sleep deprivation, screaming TACs, low-crawling through mud in the middle of the night, and Blue Mondays. Rather it comes from having to -- and wanting to -- excel in all aspects of the program. As Colonel Chitty explained it, they need to excel in order to be in a position to get their desired branch.

We then toured the current OCS area, including the PT course (some, but not all, of us can still accomplish a pull-up or two... our scribe got credit for one-half), the barracks, and the OCS DFAC (AKA “Mess Hall”). We also had an outdoor briefing from COL Harmon (Ret’d), the President of the OCS Alumni Association, on the organization’s activities, including annual reunions at Benning. They are in the process of establishing an OCS Hall of Fame on base and seemed interested in having a copy of “The Men of 50th Company OCS” for their collection.

We had a fun lunch in the Mess Hall with new OCS candidates who had been assigned to “mess” with us. They were recent graduates from four-year college programs (now mandatory for entering OCS) and were very new to the program. Many of us 50th Company grads enjoyed portraying “grizzled vets” from old-school OCS (that’s who we are, I guess!) and telling war stories to the next generation of OCS-trained Army Officers. (According to Colonel Chitty, about ten percent of Army officer intake presently comes from OCS.) The background and motivation of these young men (and women!), who were about to begin their twelve weeks of OCS training, were eye-opening. And the chow wasn’t all that bad.

After lunch, we headed off (on our Red/Blue buses with OCS Candidate escorts) to the temporary Armor Restoration Facility/Museum, which had been transferred from Fort Knox when the Armor Branch was moved to the “Maneuver Center of Excellence” (Huh?) at Fort Benning. They desperately need a permanent, multi-million dollar facility to house, restore, and preserve their extensive collection, but are currently making do with some old warehouses while awaiting funding. Rusting tanks and APCs are not everyone’s cup of tea, but we had an interesting visit, including a presentation from the facility’s Director. Besides, the experience of exploring a remarkable collection of armor dating back to WWI makes you realize how claustrophobic it must have been for the tankers to cram into their vehicles. Maybe sticking with the Queen of Battle stuff was the better branch option?

Before returning to the Hilton Inn for the reunion banquet, we enjoyed a windshield tour of Fort Benning. The tour included a drive-by of various firing ranges, the golf course, post housing, and, of course, the Airborne School’s towers and track (that we all had grown to know and love - NOT). It also gave us a chance to wander around the old OCS area and the barracks, where we spent a six-month chunk of our lives. Some of the buildings are in terrible shape and apparently slated for demolition. Some, including 50th Company’s, had been refurbished at some point and still look usable. We were also able to pay a visit to the War Dog Memorial on Sacrifice Field. Several 50th

Company members who left OCS attended Scout Dog School at Benning. This included David Francke who briefed us on the dog handler program.

At 5:00PM, we returned to Hilton Garden Inn, rested up a bit, then regrouped for the evening's events. The first order of business was the group photos. We had photos taken of the graduating class, one of the graduates and spouses/guests, and then platoon photos. The process took a bit longer than we had planned, as sleepy, post-nap 50th Company comrades kept filtering out of the hotel to join the photo op. We won't name names, but push-ups were required.

We re-entered the Azalea Room for the evening's events. We began on a serious note, with a 50th Company *Fallen Comrade Ceremony*. The purpose of this ceremony, which uses the symbolism of a "Missing Man Table," is to acknowledge the inability of our missing comrades to be with us in the celebrations we hold, and to honor their sacrifice for this country. The table is round -- to show our everlasting concern for our missing men. The tablecloth is white -- symbolizing the purity of their motives when answering the call to duty. The single red rose, displayed in a vase, reminds us of the life of each of the missing, and the loved ones and friends of these Americans who keep the faith, awaiting answers. A slice of lemon on the bread plate is to remind us of the bitter fate of those captured and missing in a foreign land. A pinch of salt symbolizes the tears endured by those missing and their families who seek answers. The Bible represents the strength gained through faith to sustain those lost from our country, founded as one nation under God. The glass is inverted -- to symbolize their inability to share this evening's toast. The chairs are empty -- they are for the missing.

We raised our glasses in a toast to honor America's POW/MIAs and to the success of our efforts to account for them. We especially remembered Jim DuPont and Tom Edgren, the two 50th Company members who lost their lives in combat in Vietnam, and we also remembered the twenty-two others who had passed away of other causes since graduation. After a moment of silence, a bugler from Fort Benning played Taps. Another soldier did a beautiful *a cappella* rendition of the National Anthem. Lastly, one of the Post Chaplains delivered an invocation.

The warm buffet dinner, dubbed "a Taste of the South," was delicious. Entrees included pulled pork, medallions of chicken, and wonderfully seasoned fried catfish that was to die for. Sides included potato salad, scalloped potatoes, and a nice corn casserole. For desert, we had a choice of pecan pie or bread pudding. No one left hungry! Dinner -- and the conversations and reflections that ensued (facilitated by a variety of libations) -- provided a perfect end to a memorable day for the men and spouses of 50th Company.

Friday, October 20th:

After another lively and well-attended breakfast, the buses with our OCS escorts showed up on time and took the group to an Army Ranger exercise area. The Ranger Training Group put on a "Rangers in Action" demonstration, which they do for honored guests (us), military VIPs, and for the families and friends of each class of graduating Rangers. The Ranger school is supposed to be two months long, but most participants are apparently "recycled," many more than once. Before the event, we had plenty of time to mingle with Rangers and their family members.

The Rangers put on an impressive, professional, and well-rehearsed performance that had us sitting on the edge of our seats. Basically, it showed Rangers doing what Rangers do. They blow stuff up. They jump and repel out of (and off) things (towers and helicopters, mostly); splash into water (a lot); zoom by in motor boats and helicopters; show squad level patrol techniques with the firepower of a whole company; and pound on each other in hand-to-gland combat, which they seem to enjoy. (They

are Rangers, after all.) All in all, it was a rip-roaring and entertaining program. From the bleachers you could smell the cordite and feel the spray from the bomb blasts in the water.

Then we were taken by bus to the National Infantry Museum. We were first led to the newly dedicated Global War on Terrorism Memorial next to the museum. The memorial consists of eight granite panels etched with the names of nearly 7,000 service members who have died since 9/11 in the Global War on Terrorism. Two concrete columns representing the Twin Towers hold up a 13-foot steel beam salvaged from the World Trade Center. Nine bronze statues representing a squad of infantry soldiers guard the monument, which has narrative panels chronicling the United States' longest war. It sits across the field from the now-retired mobile Vietnam Memorial Wall (The Wall that Heals), which had paid visits to over 200 U.S. cities and towns. Our program was as follows:

- 11:30-12:30PM: Sandwich lunch at the National Infantry Museum, with impromptu thankyou ceremonies staged by members of the Museum staff. Our docents presented each of us with a thankyou hug and a Vietnam War Veteran lapel pin. It was unexpected and very moving. Class/Platoon photos were distributed after lunch.
- 12:30-4:00PM: We were given an overview of the National Infantry Museum (its creation, activities, and mission), followed by a guided tour through infantry history, from the Revolution through the Vietnam era. There was also a guided tour through an outdoor "company street" featuring old WWII barracks from Fort Benning that had been rescued from demolition and made a part of the museum's holdings. We saw the sleeping quarters, (known as "four-minute barracks because that's how long they would take to burn down). Some of us were housed in them in Basic and AIT. In addition, we toured a vintage mess hall and one of the old style post chapels. A veritable trip down memory lane!
- 4:30PM: Arrival back at Hilton Garden Inn
- 4:30-5:15PM: Before most of us headed off toward our home towns, we held a "Closing Ceremony/Meeting" in the Azalea Room, chaired by Mike Thornton. The main points included:
 - Congratulations to all those who worked so hard to create such a memorable gathering, one that for many far exceeded expectations.
 - Bill Yacola pledged to send out a reunion survey to assess the participants' experiences at the reunion. Basically, what worked and what didn't?
 - There was general consensus in favor of a 2019 reunion to celebrate the 50th's 50th but no sense of a preferred venue or timing. Bill will ask for ideas for the 2019 reunion in his survey. Suggestions were also made that for the coming year, 2018, individuals should explore the idea of organizing smaller regional reunions.
 - John Foote will explore the costs and options for getting our October 12 Congressional Resolution formally printed.
 - The reunion fund will have a surplus of \$4,000 or so; the survey will also ask for suggestions on what to do with it.
 - John O'Shea mentioned that, starting in November, all honorably discharged veterans, no matter their branch of service, will be eligible to shop tax-free online at the Army & Air Force Exchange Service with the same discounts they enjoyed on-base while in the military. Google: "*Veterans Access to PX*" for how-to details.
 - There was also some discussion of how we could turn "The Men of 50th Company OCS" into a publication that would enjoy wider circulation. An expanded Stories Team will discuss this in a series of conference calls.

Then it was time for goodbyes and departures, although some 50th Company members stayed overnight and got together before leaving the next day. Personal Note: In my (and my spouse's) humble opinions, the reunion was a wonderful success. We came a bit skeptical, not knowing exactly what to expect, and I must admit that I recognized very few of my 50th Company classmates as we gathered on the first day. But the re-bonding was instantaneous and contagious and continued throughout. What a wonderful group of comrades and spouses, and what a well-thought-out and implemented event! We're already looking forward to 50th Co OCS Reunion, model 2019.

Annex One: Text of the October 12, 2017 resolution in the *Congressional Record* that recognizes the service and sacrifices made by the 50th Company OCS.

Annex Two: Names of those 50th Company classmates who were able to attend the October, 2017 reunion at Fort Benning.

Annex One

Congressional Record

INFANTRY OFFICER CANDIDATE SCHOOL CLASS OC 24-69

HON. DONALD S. BEYER, JR.
of Virginia in the House of Representatives
Thursday, October 12, 2017

Mr. Speaker, I rise today to honor a special group of Americans who are worthy of our recognition for the sacrifices they made for our country.

In October of this year, the surviving members of the 50th Company, Infantry Officer Candidate Schools Class OC 24-69 will have their first reunion at Fort Benning, Georgia, 48 years after pinning on the gold bars of Second Lieutenants. It was a time when the United States was still deeply mired in the Vietnam War.

The young men who made up the 50th Company came from 42 of our 50 states and represented all walk of life and ethnic heritages. Almost all of them had recently graduated from college, and were of an age at which most of their contemporaries were starting their careers, not facing military service and the rigors of war and sacrifice.

They were fully aware that the Vietnam War did not receive the near universal support that the country had offered the servicemen and women of World War II, in whose shadow they had grown up. The feelings of these men toward the war in Southeast Asia were as varied as those of their countrymen.

Nevertheless, they accepted the risks inherent in their decision to become Army officers. Despite their varied backgrounds and their support for, or opposition to, the Vietnam War, they shared more

important traits--a love of the United States of America, an abiding belief in democracy, and a devotion to duty no matter the consequences. They had all volunteered for the OCS.

Within a year of graduation, over half would receive orders for Vietnam. Two classmates made the ultimate sacrifice for our country--James DuPont from North Canton, Ohio and Thomas Edgren from Libertyville, Illinois. Many others were awarded the Purple Heart.

They all, no matter where they served, made sacrifices as previous generations who had served in the armed forces had sacrificed--separation from families, missed holidays, arduous and often dangerous work, and sometimes miserable living conditions. And sadly, for these men of the Vietnam era, their sacrifices were often met upon their return with indifference and even open hostility from a seemingly ungrateful country.

Some of these men made the military a career. But most were classic "citizen soldiers" who returned to civilian life once they had served. They raised families and became successful lawyers, doctors, ministers, teachers, government workers, farmers, and business men.

Over the years, most of the men of the 50th Company put their time in the service behind them. They lost contact with each other as other life issues took precedence. But through the efforts of a few determined classmates, plans were laid for this fall's reunion. They will gather again at Fort Benning, another generation of Americans who laid down their plowshares to pick up rifles, only to beat them back into plowshares when duty was honorably done.

At the reunion, these old comrades-in-arms will renew the bonds that were forged 48 years ago through the long marches in the brutal Georgia heat, the early morning runs in combat boots and rain, the countless pushups, and the brotherhood of blood and sweat of hard Army training. Now they will share their pride in having served.

I ask my colleagues to join me in pausing to reflect on the sacrifices made by these men and the millions of others they represent, and to extend to them our personal thanks and the thanks of our Country.

Annex Two

OCS Reunion – List of Attendees

Bill Adams 1st	George Hatfield 2nd	Larry Peterson 3rd
Doug Cannon 6th	Terry Hummel 6th	Joe Rausch 6th
Sandy Carter 5th	Don Huskins 6th	Steve Roeder 2nd
Don Cramer 3rd	John Jay 5th	Rod Seefeld 2nd
Scott Davis 5th	Clarence Kugler 2nd	William Snodgrass 2nd
David Doe 1st	Paul Kochis 2nd	Ron Stryker 6th
Brooks Doyle 4th	Louis Lallo 3rd	Ken Sutton 6th
Mike Dunn 4th	Stephen Layton 3rd	Kief Tackaberry 1stDon
Michael Eberhardt 2nd	John Lee 4th	Tarr 1st
John Fekety 5th	Gary List 1st	Mike Thornton 2nd
Brian Flora 4th	Mickey Metzler	Bill Thoroughgood 2nd
John Foote 6th	6thDarrell Moore 1st	Bob Tomes 3rd
David Francke 4th	John Morrissey 4th	Brian Walrath 2ndBob
Robert Fullmer	Richard Newcomer 6th	Winship 6th
5thMichael Gilpin 3rd	Peter Nowlan 2nd	Dennis Wolfard 5th
Bill Gist 4th	John O'Shea 2nd	Bill Yacola 2nd
Chuck Granner 3rd	Gary Pals 1st	Clark Yokely 6th
David Hanner 1st	Brooke Pearson 5th	Gary Zitlow 1st