

# OC 24-69 2019 Class Reunion: After-Action Report

On August 1, 1969, 161 men of 50<sup>th</sup> Company Infantry OCS graduated from the rigorous six-month Infantry OCS Course at Fort Benning, Georgia. On October 18, 2017, fifty-three classmates came together in Columbus, Georgia for the first 50<sup>th</sup> Company OCS reunion. Despite some initial reservations and skepticism that we could really reconnect after not seeing each other for almost fifty years, we enjoyed a hugely successful event that was both entertaining and heart-warming. As the Benning reunion concluded, we determined that we must have another.

Two years later, on September 26, 2019, thirty-eight classmates, most of them 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 warm and genuine camaraderie among classmates and spouses, sparked by the bonds formed at the first reunion, became even stronger.

Washington DC was chosen because it would serve as an inspiring and interesting venue for our gathering. In early 2019 reunion planning began in earnest. An ad hoc Reunion Committee of around twenty classmates began to "meet" remotely through email, Facebook, and in regular conference calls presided over by Mike Thornton, who soon had us organized into three teams and kept us on task. Three classmates familiar with Washington (John O'Shea, John Foote, and Paul Kochis) formed a "Reunion Team" and began to think through and arrange a program that would give 50<sup>th</sup> Company an opportunity to remember and respect our common past. They also worked to provide an interesting and memorable reunion experience. Mike Eberhardt, Pete Nowlan, Ken Knudsen, and Bob Hines formed our "Communications Team" which kept the Reunion Committee and the rest of our classmates informed of developments and deliberations. Lastly, our "Stories Team" (Brian Flora, Scott Davis, Brian Walrath, and Mike Thornton) came up with an after-dinner program for the 50<sup>th</sup> Company's gala Reunion Banquet, held at the historic Army and Navy Club in Washington DC. The program reflected on how OCS had helped shape our lives.

Putting together a complex, multi-faceted reunion in a major city without a professional event planner is a daunting endeavor. But we did it! All the moving parts meshed flawlessly (well, almost) and we had an experience that none of us will ever forget. And we had fun. Below, for the record, is a brief description of how things unfolded through the eyes of the Company scribe and his friendly spouse.

## ***Thursday, September 26th:***

During the afternoon, classmates gathered at Hyatt Hotel, Washington DC/National Mall, within walking distance of the US Capitol. The Hyatt, despite a hidden third floor lobby and a quirky elevator system, was an excellent choice of hotels. The location was

great, service was good, and the rooms were first-rate. (It seemed a bit pricey, but the special reunion rate helped, and, what the heck, *everything* in Washington seems pricey!) We checked in at the 50<sup>th</sup> Company welcome desk in the hospitality room where we were greeted by members of the Reunion Team. We got our “Welcome Bags” with a complete reunion schedule; maps and other useful information; a list of attendees; a zip file copy of the reunion video produced by Scott Davis; and a name tag with a vintage OCS graduation photo from a half-century ago. (Handsome devils we were, and we haven’t changed a bit!). ((Note: My friendly spouse suggests, at least for the ladies, name tags with pins or lanyards instead of clips that are hard to attach and tend to fall off.)) For the rest of the afternoon we gathered in small groups to get reacquainted and make plans for dinner.

In the early evening we were taken by bus to the national Vietnam Memorial for a remembrance ceremony for classmates Tom Edgren and Jim DuPont, who lost their lives in Vietnam. It was a moving tribute, back-lit by a setting sun. Mike Thornton spoke on behalf of Jim DuPont, whose widow and sister were in attendance. Brooke Pearson gave remarks to help us remember Tom Edgren. Mike Eberhardt, the 50<sup>th</sup> Company Padre, offered prayers. We then proceed on foot to the Vietnam Memorial Wall and then the nearby Lincoln Memorial, where our tour guides answered questions and provided commentary. Classmates were then offered a guided bus tour by night of Washington’s beautiful monuments and memorials. The tour lasted until 10:30, but some of us less hearty septuagenarians took advantage of an earlier return to the Hyatt.

### ***Friday, September 27th:***

On Friday morning we enjoyed a tasty complimentary breakfast at the Hyatt. Classmates and spouses used the opportunity to renew acquaintances and make new friends. We then boarded our two buses, coded blue and red, and left for the National Cemetery. We spent some time viewing the exhibits in the Visitor’s Center and boarded our Arlington Cemetery Trolley for an hour-long and very informative narrated tour of the Cemetery’s highlights.

We were dropped off at the Memorial Amphitheatre at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, where we observed the iconic Changing of the Guard ceremony. Four classmates were then offered the honor of presenting a beautiful customized OC 24-69 wreath at the Tomb of the Unknowns. The two wreath presenters were Mike Thornton and John O’Shea, assisted by Scott Davis and Brian Flora. We returned to our hotel and had a mid-afternoon reception (with a light lunch) in a Hyatt hospitality room. Great conversations continued to flow.

Late in the afternoon we left from the Hyatt by bus for the Army and Navy Club on Washington’s Farragut Square, “*Where Traditions and Camaraderie Reign.*” One bus driver had been given the address of the wrong Army Navy Club (the one in Arlington, Virginia) and headed blithely across the Potomac River into Virginia in the teeth of

Washington's impenetrable rush hour traffic. Oops. When the driver found out what was happening, he did a veritable Houdini, cutting cross freeways and by-roads, careened back into DC across the Memorial Bridge (under repair and "closed to bus traffic"), and pulled up to the Club no more than a few minutes behind schedule.

We gathered on the main staircase for Platoon and 50<sup>th</sup> Company group photos, copies of which we received in almost real time. It was a very professional photographic effort, much appreciated by Company classmates because delays would have cut into our open bar pre-dinner happy hour in the Army and Navy Club "Parade" (ceremonial hall). We were able to self-lubricate with decorum (coat and tie was required at the Army and Navy Club). No one got out of line.

At 8:00, following welcoming remarks by John O'Shea, a blessing by in-house *Padre* Mike Eberhardt, and a toast to the 50<sup>th</sup> Company by Paul Kochis, dinner was served in the Army Navy Ball Room. Seating was by Platoon at round tables for eight to ten individuals. Service was rapid and impeccable, conversation was animated, and both menu options really hit the spot. Filet Mignon with truffle whipped potatoes for those of us into bloody red meat and Chicken Napoleon with portabella mushrooms for those who were not.

The hour-long evening program began around 9:00. Rather than bring in some sort of inspirational speaker from outside the Company, the Stories Team decided on a format that used *the words of dozens of classmates* who had reflected on what the OCS experience meant to them. We titled the presentation, "The Men of 50<sup>th</sup> Company Remember OCS." Brian Flora opened with a brief introduction, giving a personal account of how OCS had affected us in such areas as leadership, teamwork, physical and mental toughness, and resilience. Following his remarks, narrated statements by classmates were played that had been recorded under the direction of Scott Davis, while vintage photos of the speakers (OCS graduation photos) were shown on a large screen. The remarks were grouped loosely into five categories: "The OCS Experience in a Nutshell" (short, pithy remembrances); "Pride in Ourselves, our Platoon, and our Company"; "Oh, the Absurdity of It All" (There was plenty of that!); "Taking Care of Each Other: Cooperate and Graduate" (which was how many of us were able to survive the rigors of the program); and "Resistance! Ways We Got Back at the Captain and the TACs."

Then two videos, both edited by Scott Davis, were shown on the screen. The first was of a speech Bill Yacola's gave at a 2018 Ft. Benning ceremony where memorials were dedicated to ten OCS companies, including the 50<sup>th</sup>. Bill's speech featured a poignant "memories" poem by Brian Walrath, "A Company of Men," that related a conversation between a grandfather and his grandson about his experiences "in the war."

The second video was of Peter Nowlan at a televised a public gathering where he talked about his tour in Vietnam; he recounted his role as a MACV advisor who helped his Vietnamese unit react successfully to an ambush.

Lastly, for the capstone of the evening's program, John Foote introduced Ken Sutton who then recounted his epic mess hall face-off with Captain Smith. Ken's one-man skit, in classic deadpan, told how he turned the tables on the Captain in a way that even made him (CPT Smith) laugh. Ken's story was appropriately named "Messing with the Captain." (Pun intended.)

Mike Thornton made some brief final remarks, including thank-yous, and we were on the buses heading back to the Hyatt by 10:15. It was a memorable, moving, and entertaining evening.

### ***Saturday, September 28th:***

After another lively and well-attended breakfast, we made our own way to the U.S. Capitol. We gathered in the Capitol's huge Visitor Center. Somehow, everyone found each other and no one went missing. At the appointed time, we split into two groups, and were taken on a fascinating tour of the House and Senate. We were led by a Capitol guides called "Red Jackets," presumably because they wore red jackets, who provided excellent commentary. We broke for a leisurely lunch and lots of conversation in the large dining area in the Capitol's Visitor Center.

At 1:00 we were led through a long tunnel to the Library of Congress' Jefferson Building, so named because it contains much of what had been Thomas Jefferson's personal library. Jefferson, on learning of the burning of the Capitol by the British in 1814 and the destruction of the 3,000-volume Library of Congress collection, offered his personal library at "any price set by Congress." The total number of volumes received from him was 6,487, more than double the holdings that were lost in the fire of 1814. The rest of the afternoon was free for exploring Washington sites of your choice.

Classmates were then free to make dinner arrangements and did so around town. The Stories Team, for example, decided to dine together. We met at Clyde's in Chinatown for wonderful food and fellowship with the team that had put together a meaningful, introspective reflection of how OCS helped shape our lives. We were gratified at how our classmates had embraced the program, a serious reflection on our OCS experience with enough comic relief to make us giggle.

## ***Sunday, September 28th:***

The final breakfast was a time for goodbyes and departures, although some 50<sup>th</sup> Company classmates stayed on an extra day or two.

Personal Note: In my (and my spouse's) humble opinion, the reunion was another wonderful success. The re-connecting process that started at Benning continued in Washington, and the bonding became even stronger. What a wonderful group of comrades and spouses, and what a meaningful, well-thought-out and well-implemented event! Hats off to the Reunion Team!

**Annex One:** Remarks delivered by Mike Thornton, Brooke Pearson, and Mike Eberhardt during a remembrance ceremony at the Vietnam Memorial Wall on September 26, 2019. The ceremony honored Jim Dupont and Thomas Edgren, 50<sup>th</sup> Company OCS classmates who were killed in action during that war.

**Annex Two:** Names of those 50<sup>th</sup> Company OCS classmates who attended the September, 26 - 28, 2019 reunion in Washington DC.

***Brian Flora  
Oak Park, IL  
November 2019***

## **Annex One**

### **Remembrance of James Camil DuPont by Mike Thornton**

The first memory I have of Jim DuPont was early on in the OCS program, when he walked around the mess hall and shouted for all to hear; “Take a look at my haircut. This is how CPT Smith wants everyone’s haircut to look.” Now since Jimmy had blond hair, the buzz cut we all wore then made him look, well, bald. It was later that I got to know him personally, we talked often and he became my friend.

Jim DuPont died on September 18, 1970 while serving in Vietnam. At the time he was a platoon leader, as I was, with the First Cavalry Division. The enemy unit opposite us was the 33d North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regiment which had been pushed deep into Cambodia by the American incursion a few months earlier. Following that incursion, the NVA did not seek out units of the First Cav, but when they did encountered us, it was to distract us from something else, or most likely, to inflict casualties and then melt away into the jungle. That I recall the date and circumstance so well has made me a believer in the observation that, “The past is never dead, it is not even past.”

James Camil DuPont grew up in North Canton, Ohio the first child and only son of Henry and Mary Alice DuPont. Their second child, Jim’s younger sister, Jill, is with us tonight. In 1965, while still in college, Jim met and married Adele Kellogg who also has joined us tonight. Jim graduated from Otterbein College in Westerville, Ohio, in 1968. His father, who was “Hank” to everyone, had served in both North Africa and Italy during World War II. For Jim, and for many of us, military service was a requirement of citizenship.

After OCS, Jim was assigned to Ft. Lewis, WA as range officer in a Basic Training unit. He returned to Ft. Benning in April 1970 and joined myself and other OCS classmates in airborne school and then we all went on to the Army’s Jungle Training Center in the Panama Canal Zone.

When we departed Panama, after that two week course, we had to wait in the small terminal for the plane that would take us back to the States. Shortly after that plane arrived, and much to our surprise, the flight crew walked off the plane, through the terminal, out the doors and did not return for 12 hours. For that entire time, we made ourselves as comfortable as possible in a waiting area with squeaky, uncomfortable plastic seats. While we waited, Jim and I talked all night and into the next day. By the time the plane at last departed Panama, we had made plans for our lives after we came home. After Vietnam. After the Army.

I can still recall the outlines of the plans we made, and with the perspective that only age and experience can bring, I can assure you that success was highly unlikely. But that night and

that morning, a sunny optimism enveloped us, and we were sure we would not just succeed, but triumph.

In just a twinkling of the eye, in June 1970, we found ourselves together once again in Vietnam. Several of us from 50<sup>th</sup> Company, Jim, me, Ken Knudsen, and David Doe hung out together for several days at a reception center. We filled out forms, took orientation classes and waited for our “in-country” assignments. We had all decided to put the First Cavalry Division on our “dream sheets.” We thought it was great good luck when we were indeed assigned to the First Cav.

Then June became July and July became August. Since you came here tonight you know what happened next, so rather than revisit the shock and grief of September 1970, let me fast forward through nearly 50 years to today, to Washington, DC, in September 2019. Though all those years, most of my time on this earth, I have cherished Jim’s memory and I am both proud and grateful that he was my friend.

### **Remembrance of Thomas Gordon Edgren by Brooke Pearson**

October 4, 1945 was the auspicious day on which both Tom Edgren and I made our entrances into the world. Tom grew up with his parents and two older sisters in Libertyville, Illinois where, at Libertyville High, he sang, was the lead in a number of musicals, and managed the football team. Later, at the University of Wisconsin, he sang in the Glee Club and a barbershop quartet and rowed on the crew team.

Like so many of us, Tom entered the Army after graduating from college, signing up to become an officer and joining us in 50<sup>th</sup> Company at Fort Benning in February, 1969. According to one of his 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon classmates, Tom was "a dedicated, enthusiastic candidate, who often helped to pull along others who were struggling."

I first met Tom as we rehearsed Simon and Garfunkel's *Scarborough Fair* for our performance at our Intermediate Status (turning black) party in late April. Later, at Fort Hood, Texas, where as 4.2 mortar platoon leaders in mechanized infantry battalions in the same brigade we often trained together, I came to know Tom and respect his leadership and his commitment to the soldiers in his platoon. We became friends, and Tom joined Betty and me for many laughter filled dinners at our apartment in Copperas Cove. He was always positive and fun, his smile radiating good will and joy.

Tom arrived in Vietnam in early June, 1970. Less than two months in country and only several weeks as a platoon leader with the Americal Division in I Corps, Tom led his platoon off LZ Mary Ann as part of a company patrol on July 31<sup>st</sup>. I believe it was his first mission. On August 5<sup>th</sup>, the company was ambushed and suffered numerous casualties, including three or four from Tom's platoon. Three days later, on August 8<sup>th</sup>, it was ambushed again. Among the KIAs that day was our classmate Tom.

Here is what Jimmy Morrison, one of Tom's squad leaders in Vietnam, said about him:  
"Tom was exposed to more in eight days than a lot of us were exposed to in a year. This was most likely the worst four days we had and the sad thing is he was in charge so quickly that he did not have time to get his feet wet."

Jimmy had been in country eleven months and was trying to get out of the field, but, with mostly new guys in the platoon, Tom had told him that he needed him on this mission. After the August 5th ambush, Tom tried (unsuccessfully) to arrange for Jimmy to get out of the field by escorting the body of one of the platoon's KIAs back home. When his machine gunner was killed during the August 8th ambush, Tom picked up the gun and started firing, and that was when he was hit.

Jimmy Morrison again: "Once he realized on August 5th how it was, he tried to help get me out of the field and when on August 8th he was laying there waiting for a dust off, he called for me and told me he was sorry, that he did not understand, but he was doing his job and doing it to the best of his ability. I only knew him a short time, maybe fourteen days, but in that short time, he did two amazing unselfish things I would like his family to know about. He had a tough job and he was a HERO." (caps in Jimmy's email)

To leap into action as his men were under siege; to console one of his men as he (Tom) lay dying - these were actions that typified our friend and comrade.

Tom's sister, Sue Logan, relates that, when Tom was in college, he would occasionally show up for dinner. Her husband, Fred, was still a student at UW with a \$1,000 tuition bill while Sue was a new teacher making \$4,900 a year. In Sue's words, "Tom could really put away the food! He had no idea how tight our food budget was so after a couple of visits I clued him in. After that, he over killed with a whole bag of groceries - eggs, bacon, bread, etc. Jim Morrison's recollection of Tom in Vietnam reminded me of my memory. Tom might not have seen the big picture at first, but once he did, he would always try to rectify the situation."

To everything he did, Tom brought enthusiasm, joy, and dedication. I don't know what his goal in life was or what his plans for the future were, but I like to think of him as a teacher, whose warmth and smile and thoughtfulness, along with his voracious appetite for life and living would have delighted and inspired his students just as they did me.

Tom, we miss you and your big, beaming smile; we remember you and your infectious enthusiasm; we honor you and your selfless dedication. And we thank you, Tom, for being, albeit way too briefly, a part of our lives.



## **Prayer Offered by Michael Eberhardt**

Our God in Heaven, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God of mercy, peace and love, we gather on this day in this place to honor our brothers-in-arms whose lives were given in the service of their country. Although most of us did not plan this course for our lives, we followed the path we were called upon as a duty to our country. We found ourselves together as the 50th OCS Company, Fort Benning, Georgia, and we dedicated ourselves to the task given to us under the commission we earned. During this journey, we became more than comrades in uniform; we became friends, depending upon one another, supporting and encouraging one another.

Our call to duty led many of us into the fields of conflict in Vietnam. We were dedicated to the roles we were given with determination to do our best, with an understanding that the cost could be high. Today, we seek to honor Jim Dupont and Ton Edgren, who paid the highest price that military service can require. We seek to honor their commitment to the service of their country and to the contribution they made to our lives as brothers in uniform. We honor them for their personal loyalty to their fellow candidates during our months together and to their service upon being commissioned.

We pray this day for their family who continue to experience the sense of loss of Jim and Tom, whose names are written on this Wall. May they have felt Your presence of compassion through their sorrow over these past years, knowing that these men added to the quality of life and service of those who experienced with them the journey of the 50th Company OD 24-69. We honor these families for the service these men gave to their country and the friendship they gave to those of us gather here this day.

May our hope be grounded in Your eternal love and grace through Your Son, Jesus Christ and in the promise of a glorious life eternal through Him. Amen.

## Annex Two

### OCS 2019 Reunion – List of Attendees

Bob Brown (4<sup>th</sup> PLT) and Evelyn  
Doug Cannon (6<sup>th</sup> PLT) and Sally  
Don Cramer (3<sup>rd</sup> PLT)  
Scott Davis (5<sup>th</sup> PLT) and Liz  
Brooks Doyle (4<sup>th</sup> PLT) and Louann  
Mike Eberhardt (2<sup>nd</sup> PLT) and Robin  
Brian Flora (4<sup>th</sup> PLT) and Kay Kuhlman  
John Foote (6<sup>th</sup> PLT) and Rosamond  
David Francke (4<sup>th</sup> PLT) and Linda  
Robert Fullmer (5<sup>th</sup> PLT) and Judy  
Chuck Granner (3<sup>rd</sup> PLT) and Sherry  
Vernon Hartline (4<sup>th</sup> PLT) and Lynne  
Bob Hines (2<sup>nd</sup> PLT) and MaryAnn  
John Jay (5<sup>th</sup> PLT) and Linda  
Bill Knudsen (6<sup>th</sup> PLT)  
Paul Kochis (2<sup>nd</sup> PLT) and Amy  
Clarence Kugler (2<sup>nd</sup> PLT) and Allie  
Lou Lallo (3<sup>rd</sup> PLT) and Suzie Plecas  
Gary List (1<sup>st</sup> PLT) and Jill

Jeff MacLeod (6<sup>th</sup> PLT) and Linda  
Malcolm Metzler (6<sup>th</sup> PLT) and Ann  
Darrell Moore (1<sup>st</sup> PLT) and Esther  
John Morrissey (4<sup>th</sup> PLT) and Cyndy  
Richard Newcomer (6<sup>th</sup> PLT) and Monia  
Peter Nowlan (2<sup>nd</sup> PLT) and Kathy  
John O'Shea (2<sup>nd</sup> PLT) and Mary Ellen  
Brooke Pearson (5<sup>th</sup> PLT) and Betty  
Joe Rausch (6<sup>th</sup> PLT) and Jackie  
Rod Seefeld (2<sup>nd</sup> PLT) and Linda  
Bill Snodgrass (2<sup>nd</sup> PLT) and Debbie  
Ron Stryker (6<sup>th</sup> PLT) and Cheryl  
Ken Sutton (6<sup>th</sup> PLT) and Debbie  
Don Tarr (1<sup>st</sup> PLT) and Barbara  
Mike Thornton (2<sup>nd</sup> PLT) and Susan  
Bob Tomes (3<sup>rd</sup> PLT) and Barbara  
Brian Walrath (2<sup>nd</sup> PLT) and Dace  
Ed Wehner (6<sup>th</sup> PLT) and Mary  
Gary Zitlow (1<sup>st</sup> PLT) and Anne

#### **Guests:**

Ann Band (Guest of John and Linda Jay)  
Adele and John Baumgartner (Adele is the widow of Jim DuPont)  
Mary Beth Moran (Guest of Mike and Susan Thornton)  
Jill and Mike Ritter (Jill is the sister of Jim DuPont)