

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 50th Company, Infantry Officer Candidate School Class OC 24-69, will have their first reunion at Fort Benning, Georgia, 48 years after they last parted ways. This class started with 224 members in January of 1969, and on August 1st of that year 161 newly commissioned Second Lieutenants, all but a handful of whom were Infantrymen, pinned on gold bars. It was a time when the United States was still deeply mired in the Vietnam War.

The young men who made up 50th Company came from 42 of our 50 states and represented all walks 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 soldiers, sailors, marines, airmen 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. At an extremely hard time in American life, they did not shirk responsibility, but rather chose to assume leadership. They volunteered.

Upon graduation, the new lieutenants were scattered across the United States, Korea and Europe on their first assignments. But within the next year, over half would receive orders for Vietnam. Two classmates made the ultimate sacrifice for our country – Thomas Edgren and James DuPont. Many others were awarded the Purple Heart for wounds received in battle.

But no matter where they served, they made sacrifices as previous generations who had served in the armed forces in both peace and war had sacrificed – they suffered separation from families, they missed holidays, they missed the birth of children and the loss of family. They engaged in arduous and often dangerous work, and sometimes were forced into miserable living conditions. And sadly, for these men of the Vietnam Era, men who chose duty and honor, 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. One became a general. But most were like Cincinnatus – classic “citizen soldiers” who returned to civilian life once they had served. They became successful lawyers, doctors, teachers, government workers, farmers and business men. They raised families and many are now exceedingly proud grandfathers.

Over the years, most of the graduates of 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, over 80% of the members of the Class have been found and plans were laid for this fall’s reunion. They will gather again at Fort Benning, where young college men were transformed into soldiers and leaders, 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, the tactical problems, the endless classes in small unit tactics, and brotherhood of blood and sweat that hard Army training demands, and that they shared in OCS. Now they will share their pride in having served, and, especially, in being Americans who did not turn away when the time came to face the right direction.

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