

2014 OCS at Fort Knox Reunion: After Reunion Report

The first ever reunion of the Officer Candidate School classes at Fort Knox, Kentucky during the Vietnam War Era was held October 9 – 12, 2014 in Louisville, Kentucky. Headquarters for the reunion was the Crowne Plaza Louisville Airport Hotel. One hundred seventy-three (173) former graduates from thirty-six (36) of the fifty-three (53) classes representing thirty-eight (38) states were in attendance. They were joined by three former company commanders, one non-OCS graduate Tac Officer, and one hundred fifteen (115) guests.

Registration began and the hospitality room opened at 1200 hours, Thursday, October 9. Our reunion planner, Premier Reunion Services, staffed the registration desk throughout the reunion and kept the hospitality room stocked with coffee, soft drinks, and snacks. Hugh Preacher of Class 27-67, John Moore of Class 25-67 and Dan Leifel of Class 23-67 organized and displayed, on four tables, the OCS related memorabilia brought or furnished by numerous graduates and company officer cadre. Items included Finley art work, OCS recruiting sign, 1967 tactical exercise book, unused intermediate party invitation, pin case, Forge the Thunderbolt unit crest, OCS brass, Fort Knox ash tray, headspace and timing gauge, F Troop Guidon, OCS beer stein, reproduction basic and intermediate OC helmet liner, original senior OC helmet liner, B Company CO Captain Terry Alger's helmet liner, OCS chair back cover, OC sweatshirt, Your Military Career booklet, binders listing the names of the graduates and company officer cadre who died of their wounds or were killed in Vietnam, and a copy of the *Inside the Turret* newspaper article written by Steven Strawbridge of Class 27-67 when the OC Brigade closed at the end of February 1968. Dick Holdcraft of Class 14-66, the first all Armor class, created a wonderful photo tribute to the three individuals in the class who were killed in Vietnam. The display items were a source of sober as well as humorous discussion. The Welcome Reception, with cash bar was held from 1700 to 1900 hours where Doug Burmester welcomed the reunion attendees. He was requested to announce the individual classes in attendance and those in each class attending as most of the graduates attending had not seen their classmates since they graduated at least forty-six years ago. Heavy hors d'oeuvres were provided and after the reception it was "dinner on your own" in the hotel restaurant or the local restaurants.

Friday, October 10 a buffet breakfast was served prior to the 0745 mount-up and 0800 departure for the Fort Knox Tour. Two hundred forty-two (242) individuals on five buses made the forty-five minute journey to Fort Knox. Originally Premier Reunion Services received approval for three buses for the tour but because of the high demand five were finally authorized and there were still some individuals who weren't able to go as there weren't any more buses in the Louisville area available. After a brief security check at the main gate where Mr. John Campbell from the Public Affairs Office met the busses and gave us a short preview of the planned activities, all five busses drove to the General George Patton Museum and Center of Leadership for final instructions. Here three of the five busses and their guides left for a windshield drive-by tour of the post. Unfortunately it was not possible to go inside any of the buildings that made up the former OC Brigade as they are now occupied by administrative units. The other two busloads stayed for a self-guided tour of the museum where some of his personal effects and memorabilia are displayed showing his legacy and accomplishments. You can take your own tour at www.generalspatton.org. Fort Knox is no longer The Home of Armor and the Armor School and the fort have experienced many changes since OCS days. Even with the changes there were still familiar landmarks and buildings that were recognizable. Boudinot and Gaffey Hall where much of the classroom instruction took place during OCS are still standing however their exteriors have been updated as have their interiors. The PT field behind Gaffey Hall is still there although it didn't look like it had much use. Driving around the fort brought back a lot of memories as evidenced by the increase of out bursts of excited talking, requests to the bus drivers to slow down so photos could be taken, and short stories being told followed by a lot of laughing. We had lunch in the large Main Dining Facility (no longer any Mess Halls in the

Army) and weren't required to sit at attention on the front six inches of the chairs while eating a square meal. We were able to put our greasy eyes on anyone we wanted to without fear of a Tac Officer hollering at us. The dining facility featured quite a variety of food including a short order section for hamburgers and fries, pizza, and main entries of marinated pork chops, stuffed bell peppers, potatoes, vegetables, a nice salad bar, two choices of soup, a dessert bar and a wide variety of beverages. Following lunch our tour continued with a nice slow drive around the former OC Brigade area. The red brick barracks that housed F Troop, D, B, E and C companies have been updated on the exterior and interior and some of their quadrangles have been converted to grassy areas. The dreaded attics now house HVAC equipment. The concrete buildings that housed A, G and H companies have also been updated on the exterior into modern looking college dorms. The swimming pool between F Troop and D Company that most of us never had the privilege to enjoy has been filled in and is now a parking lot. Most of the red brick barracks have been converted into office space for the various administrative units that now make Fort Knox home.

Even though the army tanks have left Fort Knox a United States Marine Corps Reserve tank element, Company E, 4th Tank Battalion with its wheeled and tracked vehicles are located there with M1 Abrams tanks. It's pretty ironic that the only tanks that can move, shoot and communicate at Fort Knox belong to the Marine Corps. The Marines welcomed us with a brief talk by the platoon sergeant and then allowed whoever wanted to climb in and on the tanks. It didn't take long for many of the former OC's to engulf the tanks mounting up and having their picture taken. More than a few of the spouses also found their way onto and in the tanks as well. Quite a sight all that was. Toward the end of our visit with the Marines one of the tanks was fired up and moved out from where it was parked on line. The whine of the turbine engine was so different from the engines in the M-48's and M-60's that most of us were familiar with. After the tank driver did a neutral steer and rotated the turret play time was over as it was time to head back to the hotel. It was good and yet sad to again see Fort Knox. Good as it brought back memories of the time spent there more than forty-six years ago and the friendships that were made that have lasted since that time as well as the new acquaintances made during at the reunion. Sad that the post no longer looks the same, there was no sound of tanks firing in the distance and no sound of spit shined black combat boots running in step in a column of twos.

Friday evening's activities started off with a social hour and cash bar at 1800 hours followed by a buffet dinner. Seating at the buffet was by class even though we didn't need the encouragement to do so. Following dinner each class was asked to stand and be recognized. There were three classes that had only one member present but their new found friends and fellow OC's helped them sound- off which made it appear that there were more individuals in the class present. The evening's program was a "story time" led by Jim Shapard, of Class 31-67, C1. He shared stories about the "latrine barbers" of C1 saving their customers a tremendous amount of time by not having to double-time to the barbershop at the other end of the brigade area. He also recounted the story of a non-graded problem during the running of Military Stakes. Seems that a certain Senior OC in the required uniform of the day, which included the yellow neck scarf, had to deal with pressure in his lower abdomen that increased the longer he ran. Being about a mile and a half from the end of the course the OC had to take the initiative to solve this critical problem. Ducking off the course and into a brush pile off the road where he found enough privacy he was able to be relieved of the problem, except for the preverbal paper work. Sacrificing his yellow scarf he successfully complete the course. After Jim's two stories the attendees were encouraged to tell stories of their adventures during OCS, and there was a steady stream of participants. Most were humorous, some were not and one even got a bit "preachy". There was no shortage of stories and it seemed like everyone enjoyed the exchange. Several graduates spoke about how OCS impacted the remainder of their lives, and even a few of the ladies shared their experiences and recollection of their husbands or boyfriends while they were in OCS

On Saturday there were two scheduled tours. Group A went first to the Louisville Slugger Museum and Factory. Here they were able to see how the famous Louisville Slugger bats are made from start to finish and view the interactive exhibits in the museum. OCS graduates were to receive a mini souvenir bat with the OCS at Ft. Knox reunion logo burned on the bat, however some miscommunication occurred and the bats had to be mailed by Premier Reunion Services at a later date. The group was able to help themselves to the regular mini souvenir bats however. After the tour the group headed for the historic Belle of Louisville for a three-hour Oktoberfest cruise up the Ohio River with live music and a German-style lunch. Group B left the hotel about an hour after Group A and also visited the Louisville Slugger Museum and Factory. After their tour they headed for Churchill Downs and the Kentucky Derby Museum. The tour provided some insight into life behind the scenes for trainers and jockeys. The museum houses over 20,000 race related artifacts and the Bolus Collection of newspaper articles, handwritten notes, photos and audio interviews documenting the history of the Kentucky Derby and Thoroughbred racing from 1875 to 1995. Lunch was at the Derby Café. The two tour groups returned to the hotel around 1530 hours where some of the graduates gathered for a discussion about a future reunion. It was decided to definitely have another all class reunion in 2016. A reunion committee would be formed to schedule and plan the event. The rest of the afternoon was free time prior to the social hour and photo session at 1700 hours.

The highlight of the reunion was Saturday evening. Premier Reunion Services said that almost everyone gathered in the hospitality room to have their individual photos taken for the reunion memory book. There was time to spare to enjoy the cocktail hour before the banquet. After the photo session and cocktail hour the attendees moved into the banquet room. Here Dan Leifel who emceed the banquet asked everyone to rise for the posting of the National Colors. A Color Guard from Fort Knox presented the colors after which the National Anthem was played followed by the Pledge of Allegiance. The invocation was given by Chaplain Malcolm Roberts, III COL US Army (Ret) of Class 1-68. This was followed by welcome remarks by Dan Leifel. Toasts by Dan Leifel, and Pete Manza, COL US Army (Ret) of Class 31-67 were made to the men and women who serve and have served in The Army of the United States of America, and to our former Cadre and TACs. Pete then conducted the following Missing Man Table ceremony.

“As you entered the dining area, you may have noticed a table at the front. It is reserved to honor our missing loved comrades. The empty place represents the men missing from our midst today. This Honor Ceremony symbolizes they are with us, here in spirit. The White Tablecloth symbolizes 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. The Folded Flag represents the country that they served. The Empty Glass is inverted to symbolize their inability to share the evening’s toast. The Chair is empty; they are missing.”

“You may be seated. I hope that at some time during the evening you will stop by and view the names of our brothers who are not with us tonight as listed on the Table of Honor, those graduates and cadre who gave their all in Vietnam and those who dismounted at Fiddler’s Green subsequent to the war.”

Dinner was then served. After dinner Dan introduced Doug Burmester the originator of The OCS at Fort Knox Project. Doug gave a brief history of The OCS at Fort Knox Project that was started in 1997 and what the events were that led him to search for individual graduates and how that grew into a listing of all the classes and all the graduates of the fifty-three classes from 1965 through 1968. Special thanks was given Charlie Titus of Class 13-67, Dan Leifel of Class 23-67, John Moore of Class 25-67, Hugh Preacher of Class 27-67 and Charles Stutzman of Class 2-68 who made up the core group of the project. Recognition and sincere thanks was given to the spouses of these five graduates for their support and patience they gave and endured that made the

work of the core group possible. Doug was then presented with two large autographed and framed signature boards in appreciation of all his work on the project.

Jim Shapard of Class 31-67 introduced former D1 and F2 Tac Officer and F Troop XO and CO Andrew E. "Ed" Fitch who gave a very entertaining talk on a routine day in the life of a Tac Officer with a good amount of humor interjected. From his perspective the Tac Officers who were OCS grads were harder on the OC's than the Tac Officers who were ROTC grads. Following Ed's remarks Dan Leifel introduced Claude Whittle of Class 25-66 who was retained as a Tac Officer for two F1 classes. Claude was asked to relate what it was like to go from a candidate to a Tac Officer, or going from The Prey to The Hunter. Even though he never thought of himself as prey and certainly never a hunter he barely noticed the transition. And after giving the prey/hunter concept some thought it was like turning a page in a good mystery novel. He mentioned that the mission of the OCS program was not so much to turn the candidates into officers but to eliminate those who should not have been there in the first place. The task of the Tac Officer was to put the candidate's character under pressure for as long as possible to un-mask an individual's true character. Claude closed his remarks by saying, "Character got you into the program, character got you through the program and character is what brought you here tonight".

Dan Leifel then gave the following closing remarks:

As we close these proceedings, we want to thank each of you for coming and, when I'm through talking, we will end the evening's planned activities. We owe a special thank you to the people of Premier Reunion Services for their excellent work in coordinating our get together.

Three graduates of OCS at Fort Knox were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for their extraordinary actions in Vietnam. Robert Poxon, Class 28-67 whose award was posthumous; Mike Sprayberry, Class 2-67, who we are especially honored to have with us tonight and Harold Fritz, Class 10-67 who has sent us the following special message.

"I regret as President of the Congressional Medal of Honor Society my commitments preclude my being able to attend this prestigious gathering of fellow warriors and their guests. Please pass on my sincere appreciation to all in attendance for their leadership, courage and sacrifice. We stepped up to be counted during a time when the Vietnam conflict was an unpopular war in the minds of many Americans. Each of us realized that our decisions in combat would directly affect the lives of the men under our command. We had the responsibility for bringing America's sons and daughters safely back to their loved ones. I am proud of each of my fellow classmates and hope that our paths may always cross on the trail of respect and camaraderie".

"With Respect and Admiration, Hal Fritz OCS Graduate"

We cannot leave this meeting without again remembering the "Vacant Chair", dedicated to those who are no longer with us, especially those who had been officer candidates or cadre and died as a result of their service in Vietnam.

In doing research for our book on OCS at Fort Knox, we learned about these men and we would like to share some of what we learned with you.

When they entered OCS, they were young. The oldest was born at the end of the Great Depression, the youngest soon after WWII. They grew up among veterans and had few illusions about the nature of war.

Every one of the candidates had been an enlisted man before OCS. Some had joined the Army in pursuit of adventure but most to find a job or in response to, or anticipation of, a letter from their "Friends and Neighbors". They knew the meaning of "KP", "guard duty", and "fire watch" and what it

is like to be at the bottom of the army totem pole. By the time they were at OCS, they also knew they had chosen a deadly, dangerous path.

They came from all parts of this great nation; from the Burroughs of New York to the plains of Nebraska. They came from the New England shore and the streets of L.A. They represent all social classes, from the wealthy to the very poor and their educational attainments varied from Ivy League college graduate to GED high school diploma.

None went through OCS with a note on his forehead saying, "I want to die in Vietnam" but we know 114 former OC's and four of our cadre did so. And that does not include those who started OCS, did not finish, but also made the ultimate sacrifice and who equally deserve our thoughts. In addition, many more suffered serious physical and emotional damage during their service, and that damage is no doubt one of the reasons some are not with us tonight.

None of them went through OCS without wondering whether the goal of commissioned service was worth the harassment, physical and emotional trials, hard work, and the process of learning about one's own limits. That was the test of OCS. Every one of them answered that question in the affirmative.

They understood that their task would be dangerous and could lead to an early death. They each knew that at the very least they faced a long separation from family and old friends. They knew that, as commissioned officers, they would be responsible for the lives of men who, but for the insignia on their collars, were their peers. Still, they assumed the responsibility and they did the job, to the best of their abilities.

They stepped forward when many of their generation were chanting "Hell no, we won't go!" Some might call their willingness to accept the obligation to serve "courage", but it is better to think of it as "character". These were men of character, assuming responsibility when they could have avoided it, when they could have let someone else do the job. Character is evidenced when someone does the right thing, even when no one is watching. Character, therefore, precedes heroism. Heroes are people of character whose extraordinary actions are noticed.

Some earned medals when they did extraordinary acts on the battlefield and survived. Some gave their lives to save others, the acts leading to their deaths unobserved. The rest would have done the same, not for medals but because it was the right thing to do. That is the true test of character.

None of us knew all the men we honor today, though each of us knew some of them. The memory of those I knew remains special to me.

I must confess that we didn't do much research on any of these individuals. We did not need to. As each of you know, they were just like we and we they. What was true of them is true of us.

The purpose of OCS was to turn men of character into military leaders. On behalf of all of us who were only OC's, we want to thank our cadre. You did your job, well.

In reading the story of Company E of the 506th Parachute Regiment during World War II, I ran across the remembrance of a veteran of that unit. In that remembrance, a young man asks his grandfather whether he was a "hero". The veteran looks at the young man and says, "No. But I served in a company of heroes".

I never did anything heroic and I know what the old soldier meant. I want to thank each of you for letting me be in your company. I feel blessed to have served in the company of the heroes you are and that of those we lost.

With the retirement of the Colors, these proceedings are closed. Thank you all for coming.

After the Colors were retired many individuals remained in the banquet room and the adjoining hallway saying their goodbyes. Sunday morning breakfast was the last official event of the reunion. Once again the classmates and cadre went their separate ways knowing that there will be another reunion in 2016.