

A Different Kind of Reunion

Reunions I know well. They are part of the social fabric of Converse. But being invited as the banquet speaker for the 53rd reunion of the 199th Infantry “Redcatcher” Brigade, the unit in which I served in Vietnam War, was something new.

The group meets annually in popular locations around the country, in recent years from Reno to Gettysburg. I was asked last year for the Branson, Missouri reunion but I wasn’t available. This year was in Buffalo, New York. I was attracted by Niagara Falls and the novelty of the experience. But I had little idea what to expect.

The one thing I knew--the audience would be old, for the most part in their mid and late 70s and into their 80s. This combat brigade, organized specifically for the Vietnam War, arrived in country in December 1966, and formally deactivated in November 1970. Its entire four-year existence was in Vietnam. The bulk of the attendees had served in 1967-68 with only a few from 1970. I was one of the very last people to leave the unit, just before the brigade colors came home, so I had a perspective on the end days that no one else knew.

The large number of attendees, about 400, surprised me. I learned that it usually draws more. I don’t think it was the speaker; Buffalo wasn’t the most enticing location. The group has a year-round organization with committed leadership, a website, message board, company store, and active Facebook page. Most participants attend annually. I was one of maybe ten at their first Redcatcher Reunion.

Although some walking canes were evident, the group was not as broken down as I anticipated. The healthier veterans come to reunions. However, when Colorado Springs was recommended for a future reunion site, the president remarked that the high altitude might not be in the best interest of a group in which heart issues can be a concern. He noted that he had attended a rifle company reunion there and several members ended up in the hospital from altitude-related ailments.

With travel, hotels, banquets, and other events, these meetings are not inexpensive, so those in attendance have fared reasonably well in their post-Vietnam lives. Despite some media images to the contrary, this group represented the more accurate reflection of Vietnam vets, which studies document have for the most part led successful lives.

I speak a lot at civic clubs, but I’m not drawn to that type of camaraderie, or to veteran’s associations. I don’t bond well outside the academic domain. I have spoken in past years at the Center for the Study of the Vietnam War Conference in Texas. Beyond the scholars, these conventions attract some Vietnam vets with their uniforms, garb, and signs from five decades past that indicate they have not transcended the experience. No matter how bad their situation might have been, it was for some of them the most memorable thing that they had done in their lives. I am sympathetic but quite uncomfortable with that constituency.

I had assumed this reunion would entail resurrecting war stories in the bar. But academic conferences probably rank higher on this scale. The gathering wasn’t what I thought it would be.

It reminded me, in the best sense, of a large patriotic civic club complete with ceremony, corny jokes, a raffle, and a golf tournament. The biggest issue of the event was the discussion of where the next reunions would be held.

Although a fellow “Redcatcher,” I was an outlier. No surprise, I had not bonded with anyone in the war. There was not a single person in attendance that I knew in Vietnam, and only a few present from my years in country. As I depict in my Vietnam memoir, *Desk Warrior*, although engaged in combat, I was more of an observer and chronicler in country than a fellow warrior. My speech may have been more of a macro historical analysis of the brigade’s role during the war and my personal insights of the latter days of the unit than maybe expected or desired. My wife accuses me of being aloof in such situations. I retort that I’m a didactic academic, a teacher, and I still can command a room. I do wish that I had interacted more and ferreted out more personal stories for my classroom.

Our excursion to Niagara Falls was a fun day, and my wife and I enjoyed the evening river cruise buffet and other activities, but the Redcatcher Reunion likely will be a one-time occurrence. It was an interesting sociological insight for me, but it is not my kind of thing. Conversely, pun intended, the annual Converse reunion is my favorite event of each year. That is my bond.