

NOVEMBER 2009
SPECIAL REUNION EDITION



**A Memorial to the American Experience
In Vietnam**

"All included, none excluded"

REVETMENTS

The Official Journal of The Tan Son Nhut Association

The 2009 TSNA Reunion was held October 15—18, at the Mainstay Suites in Pigeon Forge, TN. Out of a total of about 100, there were 51 TSN Veterans in attendance, including the 37 shown below:



These veterans represented 26 states, from Oregon to Florida; California to Massachusetts, and many points in between!

We were warmly welcomed by the staff of Mainstay, and our stay there was certainly a pleasure. The Officers and Board of Directors of TSNA were treated as friends, and our technical desires and requests were certainly met with a Mainstay quality "Can Do"!

While we all wish that the weather had been better, and the traffic a little less intense, a good time was had by all.

The Hospitality Suite was the best since I have been a part of our reunions, and the kitchen allowed us to have a much easier time keeping up with the "goodies" available for all. As an example of the cooperative nature of the Mainstay, on Wednesday morning, as we realized we needed more tables in the Hospitality area, Mike, the General Sales Manager of the Mainstay, was right there setting up the necessary tables and chairs.

The other facilities available to us—at no additional cost by the way—certainly helped us have a successful slate of "symposiums", and the wonderful banquet facilities and food as well.

Please check out the following pages for pictures, articles, and letters regarding this wonderful time.

HOSPITALITY SUITE ACTIVITIES



FRIDAY'S BUS TOUR



FRIDAY AND SATURDAY MINI-SYMPOSIUM'S

We had mini-symposiums on both Friday and Saturday.

Our thanks to Charles Penley and Bob Laymon for their work regarding Tet; to Jo Anna Plunkett for her talk about the PTSD, and the VA; and to John Bessette for his Saturday afternoon session on the AC 47 "Spooky" gunships.

I'm sorry that I don't have any pictures to show you of these activities, but suffice it to say they were all well attended and well received by all. Audience participation was also a key part in the success of these activities, and we thank all of you who took part.



"But Charles, the color doesn't match!"



Trish and "Reunion Coordinator" George Plunkett

Guest Speaker Michael Thornton

By: Rich Carvell, 12th RITS
Director of Public Relations, TSNA

“Each of you is a hero,” Congressional Medal of Honor recipient Michael Thornton told members of a Vietnam Veterans organization Saturday night in a Pigeon Forge Reunion of the Tan Son Nhut Association.

In a speech to fellow Vietnam Veterans, Thornton, a retired Navy Lieutenant, outlined the details of the incident which led to the award of the MOH. The Reunion took place just a few days shy of the 37th anniversary of the war incident, which occurred on Oct. 31, 1972.

The award of the MOH to Lt. Thornton is unique for two reasons. First, Lt. Thornton was the last man to be awarded the MOH for action in Vietnam. And in the incident, the Navy SEAL saved the life of another Medal of Honor winner, Navy SEAL Tom Norris, something that has not happened in U.S. military history in more than 100 years.

In his speech to the Veterans, Thornton described Norris, who was his superior officer in the Navy, as “my best friend.” Norris was serious about this description of Norris, who was severely wounded in the attack near the demilitarized zone separating the two Vietnams, and his action just before the award ceremony in the White House shows just how serious he was.

Under heavy enemy fire, Thornton carried Norris and another South Vietnamese Navy man to safety. Thornton had originally been told on that beach, where he, Norris, and three South Vietnamese Navy men were under heavy enemy fire, that Norris was dead. But when he got to his commanding officer’s side, he found that was not true.

Thornton said an incoming shell exploded near them on the beach as Thornton tried to move Norris, and Norris looked up at him and whispered, “Mike, Buddy.”

So, Thornton carried his buddy into the water where the five members of the team stayed afloat for more than two hours, waiting for the U.S. Navy to pick them up.

Once aboard the USS Newport News, Thornton was told again by doctors, “He’ll (Norris) never live.” But Norris did ... after numerous surgeries and lengthy hospitalization.

And even though Norris was still hospitalized and still under treatment in Maryland when it came time for Richard Nixon to award the MOH to Thornton in 1973, Norris was present for that ceremony.

How did that happen? Thornton told the Vietnam Vets that he “kidnapped” his buddy from his hospital bed so that he could be at the White House ceremony.

While Thornton was put “on report” by the Surgeon General, and while everyone was wondering where Norris was (after all, he wasn’t in his hospital bed where the doctors said he should be), he showed up on television, standing in the White House behind the man who had saved his life on that beach near the DMZ in Vietnam.

“Is there anything I can do for you?” Lt. Thornton said President Nixon asked him.

“Yes,” the Lieutenant replied. “I wish you could cut this medal in half and give it to the man standing there behind me.” Norris received his Congressional Medal of Honor in 1976 from President Gerald Ford. It was awarded for saving the life of two downed pilots in enemy territory.

Thornton is driven, and he got that determination, he said, from his home life. The South Carolina native grew up with parents who taught him how to live right.

His father, he said, “...taught me how to be a man.”



Reunion 2009

By Harlan Hatfield

First of all let me give a big congratulation to the people who were responsible for putting the reunion together. It was outstanding and I won't even blame them for the rain, since it had followed me all the way from Amarillo Texas where it was freezing. But enough on that.

This was my second TSNA reunion, the first being in Dayton Ohio two years ago. Last year I had to pass it up as I had my 50th class reunion.

It was exciting to see how many first attendees there were. I think the one in 2007 there was about four including me. It shows how the association is growing.

It was great chatting with guys who had been there, especially during Tet. I guess I was very lucky having arrived at Tan Son Nhut on January 28th 1967, missing the December attack. Then leaving on January 25th 1969, so I missed all the action of TET. Well all except the battle of Tudu Street. Grin

The presentations made on Tet and Mini Tet were very informative, and I realized how lucky I was to have left early since they seemed to like our 1200 area to infiltrate. I do remember that perimeter road being just behind our latrine, within an easy stones throw from the French Cemetery.

But I believe the best part of the reunion was getting to meet Lt. Mike Thornton the Medal of Honor recipient. He is one of many heroes who stand out for their actions.

I'm looking forward to the reunion next year in San Antonio, where I started my Air Force career sometime last century.

Harlan N. Hatfield
460th AEMS PMEL

TSNA REUNION 09

By: Tony Tidwell

Hi Charles: I have waited a while to make this post. When I returned home I was so hyped up about meeting all the guys/gals at the reunion, not to mention the rush I was still undergoing from having met Lt. Thornton, I knew that I would sound all giddy and hero stricken.

Well, time certainly calmed me down, but not that much. I have been telling anyone that would listen about that bunch of lovely Veterans and their spouses, and of course the story of Thornton's mission.

To get to the point.

I want to offer my personal thanks to you, George Plunkett, Larry Fry, Johnny Jernigan, Bob Laymon, and all the rest who made that reunion such a wonderful event.

I take personal pleasure in saying that those three days will for ever be a part of my life. Those memories just seem to keep resonating in my mind. Seeing you and those others on that Thursday evening, what a wonderful feeling.

For more than thirty years I questioned my right to proclaim "I am a Vietnam Vet". No more. After spending that time with others who had walked the same trail and had many of the same memories, I can honestly say, without reservation of any kind, "I am proud to be a Vietnam Veteran", not that I wasn't already. My brothers, and the one sister, who lived that year, and in some cases, more than a year, on that distant soil, will always be a part of my "spiritual family". There were so many great stories told those nights, I dare not question our rights as Veterans to claim that honor.

[MORE](#) →

If it is the will of our wonderful Lord, we will be together next year to "chew the fat" some more. Hopefully, all will be healthy and able to make the trip to San Antonio.

After leaving the Mainstay on Sunday morning, I drove down to Cade's Cove. No need to tell you how beautiful that place is. My only regret is that I was not prepared to take more pictures. Without getting giddy here, I think that part of this great country is, without doubt, one of the most beautiful areas one could ever hope to see. The night before, there had been a light snow on the tops of some of the higher mountains and made a picture post card setting. Could not have asked for a better morning.

I am so proud to belong to an organization such as the TSNA. The love sharing was just simply heart wrenching. Every one there was so kind. Would have been wonderful if more had been able to be there, but life has a lot of twists and turns, so we can be thankful for those who were there.

Charles, I wish that you and I could have had more time to chat, but your attention was at a premium.

Now, I am beginning to ramble, so I will end this post with that wonderful greeting, "WELCOME HOME".

Later my Brother.

Thoughts from our Reunion Coordinator

All:

I am most appreciative of everyone's efforts that combined to make this year's reunion such an outstanding success. If it takes a village to raise a child, then it surely takes the entire BOD to hold such a great reunion.

The MainStay Suites was a perfect reunion venue, close to the Parkway, but located in a beautiful, quiet area. It's employees satisfied our every wish and whim - at no extra cost! Traffic to and from I-40 remains a major problem, but efforts to widen Route 66 from 2 lanes in each direction to 4 lanes are underway.

A real American hero, Mike Thornton regaled us with his story of rescuing Tom Norris. If ever a man filled a room with his presence, Mike surely does so.

The Bearden High School Color Guard performed their duties in an outstanding manner. Having their pictures taken with and receiving autographs from Mike Thornton will be an event that they will remember all of their lives.

As far as the 2010 reunion is concerned, I foresee an even larger and more exciting event. With Nguyen Van Thiet, Darrel Whitcomb, Mike Thornton AND Tom Norris scheduled to attend, the good people of San Antonio should flock to our base of operations.

RFP's from SAT area hotels/motels will be received soon and negotiations will then begin...

If you are planning to attend in 2010, book your flight as soon as possible. He who hesitates pays more.

Our 2009 membership retention rate hit 90% for the ten months ending in October. Many thanks to everyone who made this possible.

George Plunkett



SPECIAL REUNION 2009 CD

By Charles Penley
377th SPS
TSNA Webmaster

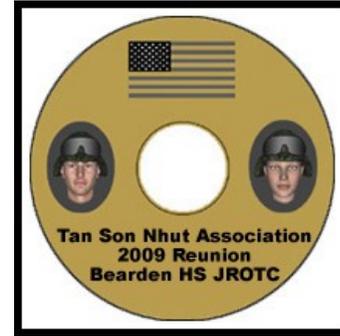
The Tan Son Nhut Association has presented the Bearden High School, JROTC Color Guard, a special CD made just for them.

It consists of numerous photographs of the JROTC performing their color guard duties and the meeting of Lt Michael E. Thornton, Medal Of Honor Recipient.

Michael is prominently mentioned in the book, "Rescue of Bat-21."

Each member of the color guard and their two advisors will receive an individual copy.

It is sure to be a "Keepsake."



2009 Reunion Banquet

A great Hawaiian Luau was served up by the caterer hired by the Mainstay Suites.



Following a time of gathering and fellowship, the Color Guard from Bearden High School "Presented the Colors", and were seated amongst various tables. I felt like a traffic cop as I was trying to get everyone seated so we could eat!



Other Banquet Activities:



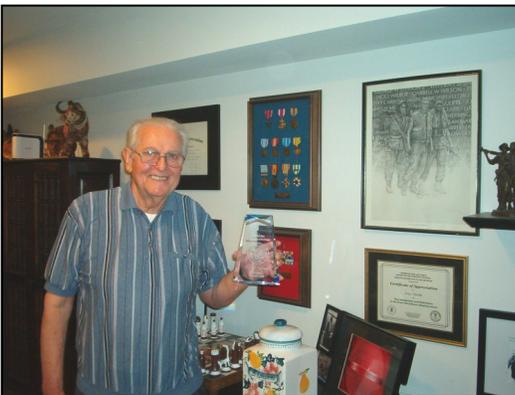
Johnnie and Sharon Jernigan, and Trish Plunkett present this year's Missing Man tribute.



Mike Thornton receives his Lifetime Member Certificate from TSNA VP Larry Fry



Lois Fry, Johnnie Jernigan, and George Plunkett receive their Tan Son Nhut Military Order of the Dragon awards



Jerry Norville was unable to be at the 2009 Reunion. TSNA Secretary Dale Bryan presented his TSN Military Order of the Dragon award to him on November 1, 2009



Emory Baston receives his 50/50 Cash award from Charles Penley and Bob Gales



Color Guard member Valleria Sucre gets an autograph from Mike Thornton



The Bearden High School JROTC Color Guard poses with Mike Thornton

{Photographs in this issue courtesy of Lois Fry, Sue Ellen Parker, and Rich Carvell}

TSNA President Bob Gales' Banquet Remarks and Prayer

Ladies and Gentlemen - Brothers and Sisters, and Guests -

Welcome to the 2009 Reunion and Education Conference of the Tan Son Nhut Association here in unusual Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, where the traffic along Route 441 is like rush hour in Los Angeles.

First, thank you to our Guest Speaker, Navy Lieutenant Mike Thornton, Recipient of the Medal of Honor, for honoring us with your presence here tonight. Also, thank you to the Bearden High School Navy ROTC Color Guard Cadets and advisor, as well as Staff Sergeant Malcolm Campbell of the Tennessee National Guard, for presenting our colors. Please stand and give us your name and school class.

My friends, as John Stuart Mill, a philosopher who lived from 1806 until 1873, once said, "War is an ugly thing, but not the ugliest of things. The decayed and degraded state of moral and patriotic feeling which thinks that nothing is worth war is much worse. The person who has nothing for which he is willing to fight, nothing which is more important than his own personal safety, is a miserable creature and has no chance of being free unless made and kept so by the exertions of better men than himself."

And as former President Ulysses S. Grant once said: "The art of war is simple enough. Find out where your enemy is. Get at him as soon as you can. Strike him as hard as you can, and keep moving on." Would that subsequent administrations of both political parties learn the lessons of Vietnam, rather than consigning those lessons to the shadow of unlearned history.

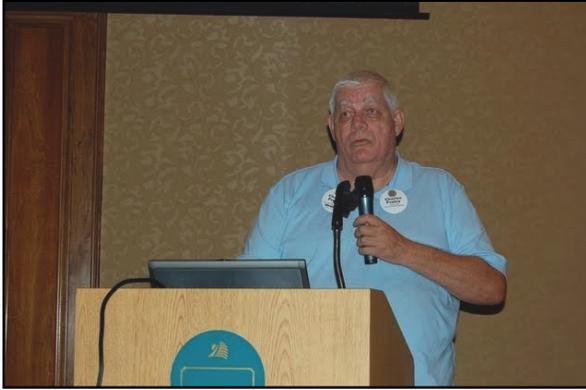
Please stand for our prayer:

Oh LORD—God of the Protestant, Catholic, and Jew—the light who guides mankind to everlasting salvation, and leads your dedicated and righteous warriors to victory over the apostates and terrorists on the fields of battle throughout the world; protect those already on those fields of battle who selflessly offer their lives to protect their comrades and defend our national security; alleviate the pain of those who have already sacrificed their bodies and souls in our behalf; free those who remain prisoners of the godless enemy; locate the remains of those heroes who have already paid the ultimate sacrifice and return them to us; and provide solace to our loved ones; and grant us all—the blessed warriors and their descendants and loved ones—serenity, tranquility, gratification, health, prosperity, and contentment.

Let us have a moment of silence for those brothers and sisters who had bravely served our great Nation in the uniforms of our armed services in battle, and who have passed away since our last reunion.

Thank you for the continuing fellowship of our brothers and sisters here tonight and for providing us with this wonderful bounty that we are about to share. Remember our dear colleague Dean Gard who was hospitalized only yesterday. And God Bless the United States of America. Amen."

Additional Pictures from the Tet and Mini-Tet Mini-Symposium's



Charles Penley



Bob Laymon



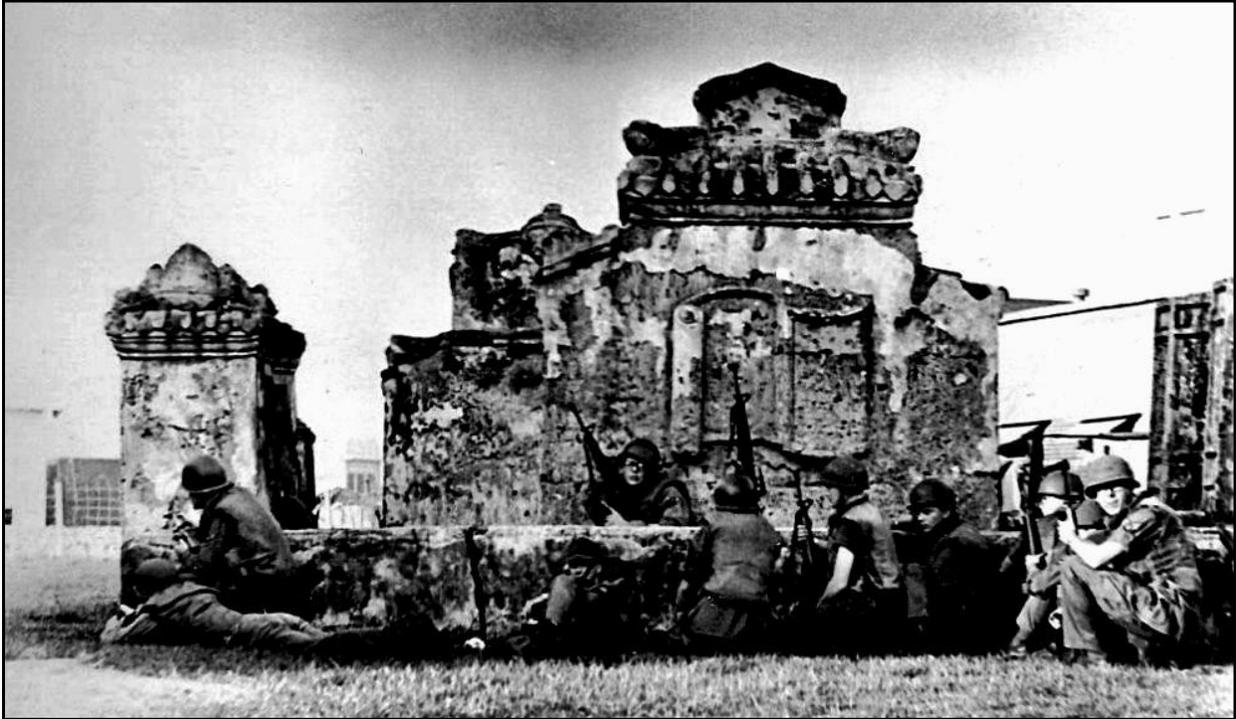
On the screen: Tet '68 Senior Ranking Officers



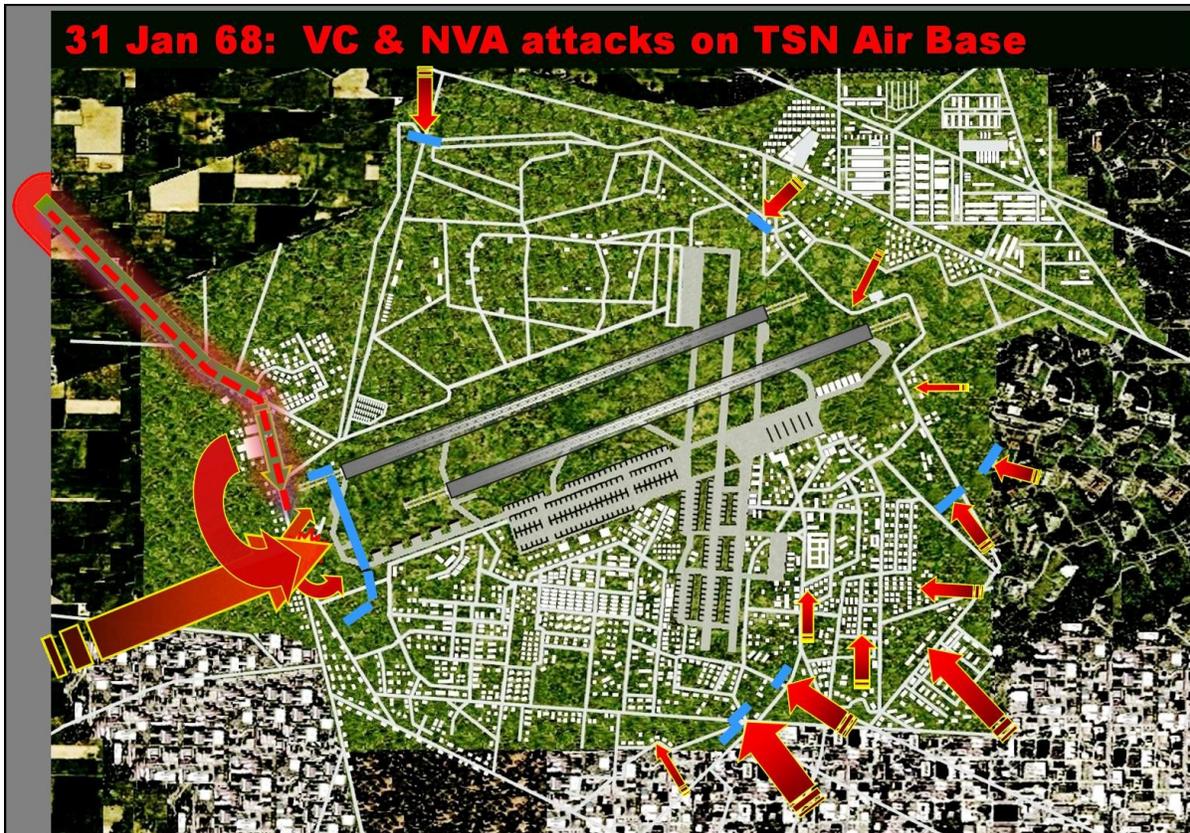
Tet '68 Attack Points (See Page 11 for larger map)



Jim Stewart relates his experiences during Tet



TSNA Member Dave Koopman and others helping defend TSN



31 Jan 68: VC & NVA attacks on TSN Air Base

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Life Membership: \$180.00



Harlan and Carolyn Hatfield pose with Mike Thornton



Bob Gales and Mike Thornton chat during the meal