

**A Remembrance of Our Fallen Classmates
West Point, Class of 1968
Washington, DC June 9, 2013**

Commemoration Address by John Benson

Welcome family members, classmates and friends.

Thank you for joining us today to honor the twenty members of our West Point Class of 1968 whose names are engraved on this memorial Wall; to remember their heroism and consider the legacies their lives taught us.

It is appropriate that we also pay tribute to the 58,252 men and women whose names share this sacred space with our classmates. Each one of them was someone's loved one. Each one was a life lost in its youth or prime. Some were family members, others were friends we knew, a number were soldiers we followed or led; all are deserving of our accolades.

We pause this morning to remember the classmates we lost there – your husband, brother or son – your father, friend or favorite relative. Maybe he was your roommate, company-mate . . . or even a companion when walking the area. Each one of us has an enduring memory of these young men. Memories that are a mixture of sorrow, pride, and at times, even laughter.

More than four decades have passed since, one by one, we heard of their deaths, yet the grief and terrible sense of loss has not diminished. It has bound us to them and remains close to the surface of our emotions.

The depth of that connection was superbly depicted in “Bond of Brothers”, the painting by Paul Martin III that commemorated our 30-year reunion. In that moving work, the image of West Point is seen through the names of our classmates, brought together as if they shared a single panel of the Wall and as if they spoke in unison those guiding words: Duty, Honor, Country. Those words are the very fabric of the legacies our classmates have passed on to us.

Their legacies remind us of the Biblical refrain: “Teach with your life.” They certainly did so, heroically and selflessly. Because of their sacrifices, most of the men they led survived to enjoy the fruits of full lives our classmates would never know.

They lived the Cadet Prayer. They chose the harder right instead of a path that could have been easier. They knew what price that might entail. That is honor and integrity in its purest form.

Their loss reminds us that service to Country is a privilege not a burden. Despite an era of public criticism and social unrest, they remained true to their convictions and steadfast in their devotion to duty and love of country, a love that led them to the forefront of unselfish service.

As you see by the names listed on the right panel in the program, almost twice as many classmates have passed away from causes other than the Vietnam War, and our names will surely follow. That should energize us to make the best use of the time we have left.

We were young together and stood together and served together. We did not come home together. They have gone before us teaching us with their lives. We can honor their memories by the positive lessons that our lives teach others. We owe this to them.

Thank you and may God bless each of you.