

The “500th Night Celebration,” the 2008 Version.

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I attended the Class of 2009’s 500th Night Celebration this past weekend. I had been exchanging a few emails with Buddy Bucha. He was to give the keynote speech at the formal dinner which is now part of the 500th Night Celebration and he suggested to me that I might enjoy attending. I agreed and he arranged it for me. It was a most meaningful experience. To those of you who are not familiar with the background to the event our Class inaugurated back in Cow year I’ll go through the abbreviated version that Buddy gave during his speech to the Class of 2009. (I’ll have more to say about the speech in a moment.) Buddy and I were co-chairs of the Class “Hop and Activities Committee” for our four years. One night back in 1963, Mike Hudson, also on the Hop Committee, approached Buddy and asked if the Class could organize a dance. Mike, it seems, had met a girl whom he wanted to impress with his musical talents in the band he had put together. Buddy explained to him that there was no justification for a class function during junior year. After some reflection Mike came back to him and suggested a celebration of 500 days until graduation. Now, of course, this alone had a measure of credibility since the “100th Night” could be traced back to at least 1860. When Buddy asked Mike if he was sure of his count of the days, Mike said that his computation was “close enough.” Buddy, Mike and, as I recall, another classmate showed up in my room one day and presented the idea. You remember the excessive scope of our liberties and privileges back then. So we sat in my room and discussed how far “the system” could be pushed. Getting approval for the concept of a “500th Night” would be a challenge but we decided to ask for a dance to be held off-Post at the Bear Mountain Inn and in civilian clothes. We sort of smiled at each other while realizing the improbability of approval. I set aside the study of Mechanics and began working on the plan while Buddy began to sell the concept to the officer command structure. Buddy had the credibility and he and our Class and its leadership were well respected by the powers-that-be. I finished and submitted the ops plan and while on Christmas leave I received a letter dated December 24, 1963 from our Class sponsor, Col. Hamblen, telling me that the Superintendent and Commandant had just approved the plan.

That’s the historical background. Some of you who have spent time back at the Academy were aware of the situation but I didn’t find out until many years later that the “500th Night” had become an Academy tradition. The celebration has become a formal black-tie event and celebrated over an entire weekend. I learned more about how much the celebration had changed the night before the dinner/dance. I was standing in line at a small grocery store just outside the Academy gates in Highland Falls. An attractive young woman in civilian clothes was at the head of the line buying a significant supply of beer. Someone in line between us made a comment to her that it looked as if it was going to be a good party. She turned smiling broadly toward the person and said “Yeah, it’s a really big deal. It’s the 500th Night”! Her dialogue with the other person made it clear that she was a “cow.” Times, they are a changin. The dinner was held in the Mess Hall. The entire junior class attended since it is now a mandatory formation. The male cadets were in familiar full dress gray. I met a number of cadets wearing CIB’s, Bronze Stars and campaign ribbons that I regret I did not recognize but certainly respect. I had never seen the female formal cadet uniform and it was impressive. I do not have the vocabulary to adequately describe the outfit but it looked very smart, professional-military and, frankly, sexy. (Being now on Medicare I am allowed to make such observations and comments.) Interestingly, the cadets I spoke with expressed surprise that the “500th Night” concept was a mere 44 years old. There are so many traditions that their origins, I expect, become indistinguishable or often irrelevant. All the cadets and officers I spoke with were completely unaware of the origin of the 500th with our Class. We might, as a Class, consider some continuing

association with the celebration as a way of preserving Strength and Drive's identity as the creative force behind the tradition.

A good number of the cadets and their dates attended the dance at Eisenhower Hall following the dinner. One of rooms at Ike hall had a DJ who played a form of music unidentifiable by me for dancers enveloped by strobe lights and clouds of "smoke" generated from the stage. On a lower level a jazz band from the USMA Band was playing my kind of music. It seems that not all the juniors attended the dance since the "tradition" now includes off-post parties at Bear Mountain and, primarily, in New York City hotels. Some attending the dance later went on to these other venues as well. Times they are a changin.

The most significant part of the celebration was the address Buddy gave at the dinner. Everyone in attendance with whom I spoke afterwards, cadets and their parents, non-commissioned and commissioned officers and their spouses, grads and non-grads, expressed how deeply they were affected by his words. There is no way that I can do it justice by attempting to summarize the content or describe its impact. In my view, which I expressed to Buddy afterwards, his presentation was the second most inspiring speech I had ever heard expressing the values of West Point and the responsibilities of its graduates. I am asking the powers at the Academy that, if not already planned, the speech be transcribed. I know our Class would appreciate it and I am confident that the Class of 2009 would like to retain it. By the way, the other speech I referred to was also given in the Mess Hall though back in 1962.

This was my second 500th and since I had responsibilities during the inaugural, this was the first 500th that I enjoyed. I thoroughly enjoyed myself. As I walked to my car I diverted to the Plain. A light snow had fallen and continued as I walked. I don't know about you, but to me there is not a more beautiful or a more emotionally charged view of West Point than looking toward the barracks from a distance at night with the lights reflecting on and illuminating the snow all under the majesty of the Cadet Chapel. I didn't want to leave.

RWF