1. I thank my friend and brother John Grega for those kind words of Introduction. I must admit that there were times during his Introduction that I thought I was getting an advance look at either my obituary or my funeral. John attended my wedding in August 1969, 1 week after we were commissioned, and he stayed with me for a few days after my wife died in 2008.).

I also thank the 2019 reunion committee for asking me to deliver my remarks tonight, even if those remarks are 5 years late. For those of you who may not be aware of the situation 5 years ago, I had been asked to deliver remarks then, too. Too bad that I managed to leave my speech in the hotel room in 2014, too far away to go back from the Officers’ Club and retrieve it. Public speaker’s Rule #1: “Don’t lose your voice.” Public speaker’s Rule #2: “Remember to bring your speech with you.” Five years ago, I was a Number 2. Tonight I can tell you that I have no memory whatsoever about what I said or how long I spoke while my speech lay on the bed in a binder in the hotel room. Tonight will be different.

I received two pieces of advice before tonight about my speech. My partner for the last 10 years, Eileen Hanley, whom some of you met at our first reunion, said that under no condition would I wear one of my University of Virginia 2019 NCAA Men’s National Basketball Championship T-shirts to our banquet. It would be inappropriate for me to be in a T-shirt while my comrades are in their dress blues and coats and ties. And yet, I discovered only last Thursday night, when I arrived at the hotel, just how much our reunion leader and hero Jim Wilson loves to see those UVA T-shirts, and loves to hear me talk about the 2019 UVA national champions.

So what is a man supposed to do in such a predicament? As luck would have it, the solution was right in front of me: I would not WEAR any of the T-shirts, as Eileen cautioned me, but instead I would BRING two of my favorites to show Jim Wilson and all of you what my friend Eileen had saved you from.

[Speaker displays two T-shirts. Audience laughter.]

Incidentally, Eileen was unable to attend tonight, but she asked me to remind you that she fell in love with 22-Hotel-69 at our first reunion in 2014, especially my friends Chuck Engelberger and John Grega. Married men both. Don’t ask, don’t tell.

My remarks tonight have 5 parts: [1] the Introduction, which you just heard; [2] How Did We Get Here? [3] Where Have All the Flowers Gone? (from 2014); [4] Collateral Damage; and [5] A Second Chance.

1. How did we get here?

We started being born in 1946. The nation started calling us Baby Boomers, and eventually called us Vietnam Era Baby Boomers. Some of us served in Vietnam, some of us did not, but we are all Vietnam Era survivors.

For 6 months in the Spring and Summer of 1969, we trained together and received commissions as 2nd Lieutenants on August 8.

Let’s go back a few years to January 20, 1961. I was 14 years old. It was 22 degrees Fahrenheit in Washington, D.C., the city where I was born. Our newly elected president chose to deliver his inaugural address without an overcoat. Among the many famous statements in his address was the following:

*Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.*

By 1967, we Baby Boomers had left behind Oz and the Yellow Brick Road. The bricks had turned as green as the jungle, and then as red as the blood of warriors on both sides.

The New York Times reported in 2017 that of all the tropes about the Vietnam War, one stands out far above the rest in American memory. It was the Baby Boomers’ war. By the spring of 1967, most American soldiers being killed in combat had been born in 1946 or after.

By 1975, when our participation in Vietnam’s 30-year war ended, those red bricks amounted to almost 60,000 of our brothers and sisters. They paid not just any price. They paid the ultimate price. And we built a national monument to honor their sacrifice. A monument whose names will last for the entire world to see long after we are gone.

1. WHERE HAVE ALL THE FLOWERS GONE?

[Speaker’s Note: The following section 3 has been copied directly from the 2014 speech that I was supposed to give 5 years ago. The rest of that speech has fallen on the cutting room floor and is, as they say, history. Ask Joe Tavares for a copy, if you insist. My 2019 speech is much better. Trust me.] Note change in Font size and bolding.

Do you remember how proud we were the day we received our commissions? You could feel that pride in the air. We had made it.

My father came up to me after the graduation ceremony and told me two things that I will always remember, to the end of my days:

First, he said “I have never in all my days seen a group of men in such fine physical shape as you guys are. There is not an ounce of fat on anyone, anywhere.” (Dad, if you could just see me now.) My father, who had served as a sergeant in Burma and India – in what is called the China-Burma-India Theater of World War II – was actually complimenting Jon Dawson and the Engineer Officer Candidate Regiment and the United States Army for what we had become. At that moment, we were more like brothers in arms than father and son. My brother, 8 years younger, and my son, now age 43, would never have that feeling.

The second thing that my father said to me was “Your grandfather would be proud of you.”

Strange comment, perhaps. A bittersweet comment, actually. Why did my father not say to me “I am proud of you?” The simple answer

is that his father, my grandfather, the farmer from Nebraska, did not say things like “I am proud of you.” My father’s father was not taught by his father to say such things to his sons. They were too busy trying to make it through the Great Depression. “We did not have two nickels to rub together,” my father would often say to his 5 children. Why should I expect my father to say things to me that his father did not say to him, or teach him to say?

“Your grandfather would be proud of you” was also a bittersweet comment that day, August 8,1969, because my grandfather had just died 52 days earlier, on June 22, 1969, complications from Alzheimer’s disease. Whether he knew it or not, my father was passing the torch to me, on OCS graduation day, from grandfather to son to grandson, a reminder about the importance of family and the unending, timeless nature of love.

Fast forward 30 years: it is now 1999 and my father is dying. With my baby sister’s concurrence, I ask the doctors to remove my father from his life support system. My mother and my brother were not able to make that decision. Dad passed away about 6 hours later, my sister by his side, around 2:00 in the morning.

A few days later I gave a eulogy at his funeral service. I talked about how proud I was of what he and his generation had done – the Greatest Generation, according to Tom Brokaw – and some of the enduring things my father had said and things he had taught me.

A few hours later, it was a Norman Rockwell moment at his gravesite. Knights of Columbus pallbearers were there with their bright red jackets, flowers all over the place, and my mother is sitting with my father’s American flag on her lap. No one expects a widow to say anything at her husband’s gravesite, but my mother was not known to be shy when it came to talking. Out of the blue, as it were, in a strong, firm voice, she said:

“As many of you know, my husband served in the Army in World War II, in the China-Burma-India Theater. I am very proud of him for his service.”

Now, you would think – you would think – that that would be the end of a wife’s comments at her husband’s gravesite. Wrong. You did not know my mother.

Without any hesitation or interruption, she said “And, as some of you may remember, our son Dennis served in the Army in Vietnam during the Vietnam War. And we are very proud of him.“

It took me a very long time tonight to get to the bottom line here, but the punch line for this part of my reunion comments is this:

When my father talked about a grandfather’s pride in his grandson, and my mother talked about her and my father’s pride in being the parents of a Vietnam era veteran, they were not talking about just me. They were talking about every single one of us in 22-Hotel-69. The Greatest Generation produced what Wikipedia calls the Vietnam era Baby Boomers, and our parents were proud of us, no matter what was happening on the battlefield, or off.

I thought you might want to know this before going home this weekend.

I had a dream about a year ago about this reunion. We were all sitting around, talking about the good old days, when who should walk in but Almighty God Himself. Saint Peter is with Him, carrying a very large book. On the cover it said The Book of Deeds and Misdeeds.

God says to us “I have good news for you. I am pleased that you chose to reunite. All of you are going to heaven. My only requirement is that, when you get to the Pearly Gates, you fill out one form and give it to St. Peter. The form has three questions: (1) What was the happiest year of your life? (2) What was the saddest year of your life? (3) Explain your answers.

In my dream. my answers were 1969, 2008, and “see above.”

(1) I started1969 as a private first class in Ft. Sill Oklahoma, with a fiancé in Alexandria, Virginia. I finished the year as a 2nd Lieutenant, married and assigned with a wife for 2 years in Heidelberg, Germany. In between, I went through the Jon Dawson Finishing School for Engineer Officer Wannabees. Like the Bryan Adams song says, “Those were the best days of my life.”

(2) After 2 years of courtship and 38 years of marriage, my wife died of cancer on June 1, 2008. I was devastated. I needed help from mental health professionals to deal with the loss. I lost 40 pounds in 6 months. I became a hermit. But I survived.

Do you remember the TV commercial “What’s in YOUR wallet?” My variation tonight is “What’s on your BUCKET LIST?” I only have two items.

1. Many, many, many years from now, someone in this room tonight could be the last man alive from 22-Hotel-69. Whether you are from the 1st Platoon or the 2nd Platoon, you will still have your red hat with the number 53 on it from our first reunion in the year 2014. That number represents the number of people in your platoon when you graduated in the Summer of ’69. I hope when you get to heaven that you have a clear mind and clear memories so that you can tell people what is was like to be in such good company so long ago. We will always be 22-Hotel-69. The other 52 of us will be waiting for you at the Gates. 2019 correction: make that 105 brothers waiting.
2. I would like to have at least one more reunion like this one before I am too old to travel. Or before I wake up dead. 2019 seems like a good bet – 50 years later and still ticking. Just tell me where to show up.
3. COLLATERAL DAMAGE

Collateral damage is any death, injury, or other damage inflicted on an unintended target. In American military terminology, it is used for the incidental killing of non-combatants or damage to non-combatant property during an attack on a legitimate military target.

One of the things we Vietnam Era Baby Boomers can be proud of is that we live in a country that remembers our service and builds memorials to our fallen brothers and sisters.

If tonight were to be my last opportunity to address 22-Hotel 69, what would I say? I would say simply “Remember the collateral damage that the war inflicted on all of us, both here and in Vietnam.”

When I think about our 60,000 comrades on the Vietnam memorial, I think about their 60,000 mothers. And their 60,000 fathers. And probably at least another 60,000 sisters and brothers. That adds up to 240,000 warriors and their immediate families. Almost a quarter of a million. Collateral damage.

And what about the Vietnamese? We came to help – but we also came to kill.

Ken Burns’ book about the Vietnam war says that there were an estimated 1 million South Vietnamese killed during the war. And an estimated 1 million North Vietnamese.

If the “winner” of that war would try to build a memorial wall with names of the fallen, like our country did, the wall would be over 2 miles long and would stretch from Arlington Cemetery to the U. S. Capitol. It would be more than 13 times the length of our memorial wall. Admittedly, those names would include non-combatant men, women and children, both North and South. Collateral damage.

One problem with building such a wall: at last count the Vietnamese government reports that there are approximately 300,000 Vietnamese missing and unaccounted for from the war.

My point is this: Company 22-Hotel-69 participated in the Vietnam era, one of the great military undertakings of the 20th century. The United States tried to support and maintain a foothold for democracy in Southeast Asia. Russia, China, and North Vietnam were determined to prevent such a foothold. An estimated 2 million Vietnamese died and almost 60,000 Americans died. When we think about the Vietnam wars, 1945-1975, we should think about all of them and the collateral damage inflicted on them and on us.

1. A SECOND CHANCE

One of the things I am most grateful to the reunion committee for is the chance to mention a few of the people who were instrumental in getting us together. Chuck Engleberger’s work 5 years ago was critical in planning and carrying out a very successful first reunion. This time, Jim Wilson and Kit Kitson were the spark that lit the NCAA National Basketball 22-Hotel-69 email contest. The winners of that contest were the University of Virginia and at least four 22-Hotel graduates: Gary Cochard, Joe Tavares, Dan Waterman – AND ME!!!

For those of you who could care less about college basketball, there is a point here I want to make that is related to our reunion. Let me share a very small history lesson with you by way of background. In 2018, the University of Virginia was one of four teams ranked No. 1 in the NCAA tournament. Its opponent in the very first game of the tournament was ranked No. 16. UVA ended up losing by 20 points, its worst loss of the season, and worst loss in years. While the nation watched, UVA made men’s college basketball history by being the only No. 1 NCAA men’s basketball team ever to lose to a No. 16 team. How embarrassing!

And yet, In 2019, the same UVA team with the same coach and most of the same players eventually won the whole tournament. It became the first time in college basketball history that a team went from losing to a 16th ranked team in the first round one year to winning the national championship the following year.

No one in this room will live to see that happen ever again.

Pay attention class, because here is the teaching point. The point is not about UVA or basketball tournaments and trophies and T-shirts and winning and losing. The point is about giving and getting a SECOND CHANCE. When we go to the Vietnam memorial, we should remember that we are honoring those whose sacrifice prevented them from getting a second chance to leave the war behind, if they chose, as we in this room tonight did. Think of everything we have done since 1969 – families, jobs, travel, vacations, communities, worship, reunions – and remember what they gave up for us and the Vietnamese.

It is good to have all of you come back. You make me feel younger than I am. I love you.

EPILOGUE: 50 years have passed. The Ft. Belvoir billets are gone, the classrooms are gone, the Regiment is gone, 20 of our classmates are gone, Vietnam as we knew it is gone. But the memories remain. 22-Hotel-69 will always be part of our Regiment’s immortal soul. And that is what we celebrate this weekend.