# Good evening to those of you who are here for the first time. And “welcome back” to those who were here 45 years ago.

I have a short story to tell you tonight – it takes only 15 minutes from start to finish. It is a happy story, mostly. It includes such amazing secrets as the man who went AWOL from 22-Hotel-69 OCS, and never got caught. You will hear about the couple that made love in a phone booth under the Lincoln Memorial. My short story includes places where great battles took place, here and abroad: Antietam, Fredericksburg, Gettysburg, Shiloh, and the Little Big Horn.

I will also tell you about a military post in North Vietnam near the Laotian border in a land far, far away. The French name for this post was “Big Frontier Administrative Center.” (Oh, those wacky French!) In Vietnamese, the place was called simply Dien Bien Phu. This was the place where, for the first time in world history, an Asian military force defeated a European military force. It was the place in North Vietnam that would eventually bring you and me to South Vietnam.

I was trained for almost 40 years in my federal government job to brief members of Congress and their staffs on complex issues, and to do so in not more than a quarter of an hour. After that amount of time, the average member of Congress, or his or her staff person, would begin to lose interest, look at their watch, roll their eyes, squirm, scratch and generally give you body language that says, “It is time for us all to go.” This was called “the 15 minute rule.”

The second of two rules I learned was is what we used to call the “3 Topic” rule. This meant that in the course of my 15 minutes, I could NOT talk about more than 3 key topics. If I dared to bring up more than 3 topics in the course of my briefing, those “not good things” started to happen, as I just mentioned: loss of interest, watch glancing, eye rolling, squirming, scratching, and that “time to go” look.

And so, tonight, I WILL adhere to the 15 minute rule, but I will also toss aside the 3 Topic rule. I will BOLDLY venture out onto the tree limb of **4 TOPICS**. For roughly 4 minutes each, I will talk about:

1. The Value of Our Time

2. The Pride We Have in Ourselves

3. The Legacy of 22-Hotel-69

4. Our Dreams and Our Bucket Lists

So let’s get started.

Oh, just a minute. I need to talk to the ladies for one (1) minute about this military jargon: what is it with this Platoon, Company, Brigade, and Regiment stuff?

Let me give you an example, using the tables here in the Castle Room:

1. A Platoon + Another Platoon = a Company (for example, “Hotel”)

2. A Company + Another Company = a Brigade

3. A Brigade + Another Brigade = a Regiment (for example, the U.S. Army Engineer Officer Candidate Regiment)

The reason that I talk about organizing and training and transporting and ordering Companies and Regiments around will become a little more clear a bit later when I talk about what happened to George Armstrong Custer and the 7th Cavalry at the Little Big Horn.

**Topic #1: The Value of Our Time**

Even if you offered me a million dollars, I could not tell you who it was that spoke at our OCS graduation in 1969, or what he talked about.

I can say the same thing about my college graduation in 1968, my high school graduation in 1964, and my graduation from 8th grade in 1960. I have NO recollection whatsoever.

But I DO remember the graduation speaker who spoke at my daughter’s high school graduation.

He looked out over the auditorium and said to those 17 and 18 year olds:

“What I am about to tell you, you will not believe me at first. More than likely, you might not even believe me for many years to come. But at some point in your life, you WILL believe. You will come to believe that the most important thing in your life is not how many fancy cars you have in your garage. Or how much money you have in the bank. Or how many friends you have. Not even how many years you have had a happy marriage. Or how many and how successful your children and grandchildren have become.

**You will finally realize that the most important thing in your life is TIME – precious, precious TIME.”**

How many times have we said to ourselves “I did not have enough time.” Or “I need more time.” Someday, there will be no more time for each of us. At least not here on earth.

**My point is that none of us have any idea about how much time we have left. If there is one thing we should be reminded of this reunion weekend, it is that time has, for the most part, been very, very good to us.**

In 1969, I was so excited about being commissioned and getting married the very next week that I forgot to thank all of you for helping me get through the OCS program. And I forgot to thank Jon Dawson for the way he led us through those grueling 6 months.

**So, tonight, I thank you for then, and I thank you for now.**

And I especially thank all of you for taking the time to come to our reunion. You have made me very, very happy.

**Topic #2: The Pride We Have in Ourselves**

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 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 long time tonight to get to the bottom line here, but the punchline 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 all 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.**

**Topic #3: The Legacy of 22-Hotel-69**

What could 22-Hotel-69 possibly have in common with the soldiers at Gettysburg or with Custer’s 7th Cavalry? Bear with me for a moment and you will see.

On January 3, 2006, my last day as a federal government employee, the boss of my boss came into my office while I was packing up 37 years worth of memorabilia, and he said to me:

“I thank you for your service to the American public and to American taxpayers. I do not have any advice to give you, because you have done pretty well without it up to this point. But I will leave you with a question to think about:

**“How do you want to be remembered?”**

And with that he shook my hand, wished me good luck, and walked away.

On July 3, 1863, General Robert E. Lee, Commander of the Army of Northern Virginia, ordered the only fresh troops that he had after 2 terrible days of bitter fighting in Gettysburg, to attack the Union forces that were dug in a mile away at a place called Cemetery Ridge. General Lee’s subordinate officer, General Longstreet, told General Lee that the attack would not work. Longstreet had over 13,000 troops under his command but he was convinced that the attack would fail, even if he had another 5,000 troops. And yet Lee ordered the attack. So began what history calls Pickett’s charge. Confederate troops fixed bayonets and marched shoulder to shoulder over a mile to Cemetery Ridge, many to their deaths. Out of over 13,000 troops who began that charge, only 252 soldiers ever made it to their objective. Longstreet was right. Most historians agree that Gettysburg was the beginning of the end for the Confederacy.

75 years – imagine, 75 years – over 2,000 Gettysburg veterans, North and South, came back to celebrate the battle. If you are interested, you can even buy a DVD of that 1938 event. It was the last time that there was such a gathering.

Fast forward to November 1941, less than 2 weeks before the Japanese attack on Pear Harbor. The American film industry releases a movie about George Armstrong Custer and the 7th Cavalry – They Died with Their Boots On. In the movie, George tells his junior officers

“I needn’t tell most of you that a Regiment is something more than just 600 disciplined fighting

men. ***Men die. But a Regiment lives on because a Regiment has an immortal soul of its own.”***

This weekend, 22-Hotel-69 celebrates the 45th anniversary of our birth. Where will **we** be in another 30 years from now,75 years from the beginning, like the troops from Gettysburg? What will our legacy be?

The billets are gone, the classrooms are gone, the Regiment 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.

**Topic #4: Our Dreams and Bucket Lists**

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, 2006, 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 with a wife 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.

A variation of the TV commercial could be “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 you have a clear mind and clear memories so that you can tell people what is was like to be in such good company. We will always be 22-Hotel-69. The other 52 of us will be waiting for you at the Gates.

(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.

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