

T E T ' 6 8 , I N C.

Richmond, Virginia

Annual Veterans Reunion

To Provide

Scholarships to Children of Vietnam Veterans

TET '68 was formed in 1986 by six veterans of the Vietnam conflict for the purpose of hosting a reunion in remembrance of the 1968 Tet Counter-Offensive of the Vietnam War--the Tet Counter-Offensive having been accredited as the biggest successful effort of the United States. Tet '68 was incorporated in 1986 as a 501(c)(19) charitable organization and became officially known as TET '68, Inc.

The group, though small, had high hopes and big dreams for a successful reunion of veterans; but at the same time, they wanted something "lasting" to come from the event. Thus, the "Scholarship Fund for Children of Vietnam Veterans" was created.

Since the organizers of the group lived in Richmond, Virginia, they met informally and began making plans to have the reunion in Richmond as close to the 20-year mark of the 1968 Tet Counter-Offensive as possible. Thus, the weekend of February 5, 6, and 7, 1988, was chosen for "the big event."

By mid-1987 plans were well under way for the reunion. Several of the original group had to drop out due to job changes, but others joined in with an interest to help, and plans continued with renewed momentum.

Trying to make all the various tasks come together was not an easy job. It took a lot of hard work and committed dedication on the part of each person involved. A commitment to seeing the reunion become a reality brought together a program of speakers, vendors, exhibitors, entertainers, military troops, security, hotel arrangements, meeting space, transportation--and most importantly, the Vietnam veterans. The tasks were numerous, and the group small, but the commitment was very evident.

As February 1988, approached, the group met every weekend and worked on tasks during the week to be able to report "task completed and on schedule" at the regular meeting on Saturday morning, often flowing over into lunch and Saturday afternoon.

Emotions and nerves ran high on February 5th. Would the reunion be a success? Would everything come together? Would the veterans come?

Friday evening was dedicated to a "Service of Remembrance" for those still not accounted for from the War in Southeast Asia. Candles were lit and balloons were released in memory and prayer for persons from Virginia still not accounted for. Tears were shed for those remembered. General and Mrs. William C. Westmoreland attended the service, and the General spoke to the audience.

On Saturday we were again very honored and proud to have General and Mrs. Westmoreland as our guests and featured speaker. General Westmoreland was introduced by Senator Charles S. "Chuck" Robb from Virginia. The veterans felt comfortable with General Westmoreland, and he felt comfortable around the veterans. After speaking he stayed around the meeting hall for a while to chat with the veterans and autograph shirts, hats, jackets--whatever was available.

We were also honored to have Chris Noel, who toured Vietnam with Bob Hope's Christmas show in 1965 and was later employed by Armed Forces Radio.

Other events included the Old Guard from Ft. Meyer, Virginia, military re-enactments, the 80th Division Army Band from Ft. Lee in Richmond, Virginia, and a presentation of state flags in a ceremony to

remember those still unaccounted for from each state and territory. A full day of activities culminated Saturday night with everyone dancing the evening away to the music of a live band, Tennie Chenault and the Country Rockers. Tennie Chenault played USO shows in Vietnam. During the evening, Chris Noel also once again entertained the "troops."

Upon evaluation of the 1988 Tet reunion weekend, everyone felt that the reunion was a success, everything did come together, and the veterans did come. Friends were reunited and new friends were made--lasting friendships. On Sunday morning, good-byes turned into, "I'll see you next year."

Needless to say, the small organizing group was elated with the success of their efforts--so much so, that they did decide to do it again the next year.

However, the work was not over when the weekend ended. There were still tasks to complete. Aside from paying the bills, the goal to provide scholarships to children of Vietnam veterans from the proceeds of the reunion had to become a reality. Upon evaluation, it was decided that four \$500 scholarships could be awarded. The rules to apply would be simple. The applicant should be a graduating high school senior and write an essay on "Freedom." Since the scholarships were to benefit children of Vietnam veterans, the rules would also require that a copy of the parent's DD-214 showing Vietnam service be submitted with the application. Getting the word out to potential recipients was not an easy task, but it was accomplished. Essays were received and graded anonymously on a scale of 1 to 10 by three independent judges.

With four scholarships now awarded from the first year, the group geared up once again and focused their attention on plans and notifying veterans that the second reunion would be held February 3, 4, and 5, 1989. Notifying veterans vet-by-vet takes a lot of time, so our mailings asked the veterans to help us by telling a friend and bringing them to the weekend activities. Over the next months, the group spent many hours sending out mailings, coordinating with the hotel, and participating in as many events as possible to raise funds to put on the reunion and to again give scholarships to children of Vietnam veterans. Attention also had to be focused on contacting speakers and coming up with another interesting program. Before we knew it, the dates for the second reunion were upon us.

Our Friday evening program to remember those still not accounted for from the war had been so successful the first year that we stuck with that idea again the second year.

On Saturday the program came together with Virginia's Lt. Governor L. Douglas Wilder, a Korean veteran and now Governor of Virginia, as the keynote speaker. Other speakers included Robert R. Wilson, author of Landing Zones, a book about Southern Vietnam veterans, Edward Crapol, a professor of history at the College of William and Mary who had been back to Vietnam, and Gregg Oehler, publisher of the new "Vietnam" magazine.

By Saturday evening another successful reunion weekend wound down with an evening of dancing and socializing, and meeting and making lasting new friendships.

With the second Tet '68 reunion over, the group began using the word "annual" to refer to the reunion and began work on the "3rd Annual Tet '68 Reunion."

While thinking third year, the group also had to think about scholarships to be awarded from the proceeds of the second reunion. Once again, the group went through the process of trying to notify as many high schools and possible recipients for the scholarships as possible.

As we were now thinking in terms of an annual event, the members of the group voted to award three scholarships and thus leave a little in funds to begin mailings for the next year. More high school seniors were reached and more applications were received, culminating in Tet '68 awarding three scholarships from the proceeds of the second reunion.

By the third year, we were really learning by our experiences--what to do and what not to do, what to change and what to add. Word was getting out that each year--the first weekend in February, there was a great Vietnam veterans reunion in Richmond, Virginia. We were growing; and, needless to say, that pleased everyone very much. The third Tet '68 reunion would take place February 2, 3, and 4, 1990.

The Friday evening service of remembrance had proved so successful that we decided to "stick with a good thing." It was a good way to begin the weekend; and, at the same time, it allowed everyone a moment to stop and remember those still not accounted for from the War in Southeast Asia.

For the third reunion, our program featured two recipients of the Congressional Medal of Honor, Sammy L. Davis, United States Army, 9th Infantry Division, from the Vietnam War and Colonel Carl L. Sitter, United States Marines (Ret.), from the Korean War.

We were also pleased to have two ministers, Rev. Edward Bishop, Navy Chaplain at Khe Sanh, and Rev. Robert Floyd, Army Chaplain, 173rd Airborne, to speak about their experiences during and after the Vietnam War.

The dance on Saturday evening has also become a tradition in which everyone joins in--and joins hands--with friends and family.

Immediately after a reunion weekend, the group always meets to evaluate funds and decide on the number of scholarships to be given. After the third reunion, the procedure was the same--get the word out to graduating high school seniors, receive the essays, have them judged, notify the schools before graduation, and notify the successful recipients. From the proceeds of the third reunion, six scholarships were awarded. We were also very excited when we received 124 essays that year.

Still excited from a successful third reunion, receiving 124 essays, and awarding six scholarships, the group began plans for the 4th Annual Tet '68 Reunion to be held February 1, 2, and 3, 1991.

The service of remembrance on Friday evening took on a new look for the fourth reunion with the attendance of the troops from Ft. Lee, Virginia, displaying the flag from each of the 50 states and the territories. Candles were lit and a balloon was released as the number still unaccounted for from each state was called out as the flag was dipped in reverence. Since the War in the Persian Gulf was going on, the service proved even more significant and moving as words were spoken to an audience who not only had on their minds those still unaccounted for the War in Southeast Asia, but also our military fighting in the War in the Persian Gulf.

It has become a tradition to begin our program on Saturday with the Highland Springs High School Jr. ROTC Color Guard presenting the colors with Lisa Wassa, the daughter of one of the Tet members, leading everyone in the Pledge of Allegiance.

The program on Saturday was--in a way--a navy program. Guests included Captain F.R. "Rick" Hauck, an astronaut with three space missions to his credit and a former Vietnam veteran and navy pilot, and Commander George T. Coker, navy pilot and ex-prisoner of war in Vietnam for almost seven years. We also had a Marine, Jack Ernest of Welcome Home Ministries speak on his trips back to Vietnam since the war ended. J. Thomas Burch, Jr. from the National Vietnam Veterans Coalition also spoke on his recent trip to Russia.

After a most enjoyable day, the evening was spent rocking 'n rolling to "My Uncle's Old Army Buddies" playing songs of the 60's. Each year the "circle of friendship" is formed as everyone joins in and dances as one--in unity with those who care and have come to be their friends.

Sunday mornings are always a bit informal with talks and sharing of experiences. Another tradition which has been established over the years and which everyone shows interest is hearing Lt. Col. David F. Gray, still active duty Air Force and former POW in Vietnam, speak of his experiences as a prisoner-of-war. Each year everyone looks forward to hearing the next "chapter" of David's story.

The good-byes are never easy as we wish everyone a safe trip home, give them a big hug, and tell them that we'll see them next year, if not before. Many of these people who have become our friends have been to all four reunions, and we count on them to come back and bring their friends and family with them, so that not only the reunion grows, but our friendships grow as well.

Tet '68 is so proud to be able to award eight scholarships this year from the proceeds of our 1991 reunion.

In the four years since the first reunion in 1988, over 300 essays have been received and 21 scholarships of \$500 each have been awarded to help the children of Vietnam veterans to further their educational goals and dreams. The goal of the Tet '68 group to award scholarships has become a reality each year. As these students are working to realize their dreams, we also work all year to make our dream come true. We get such satisfaction and joy out of going whenever possible to the high school recognition services and personally awarding the scholarship from Tet '68. We are proud to have awarded \$10,500 in scholarships in just four short years.

Each year during the reunion weekend we remind everyone of our purpose by having displays about the scholarship program and information available for everyone as to how the scholarships can be received. But, we go a step further by inviting the recipients from the previous year to attend the weekend events and share their essay with the group during the program. This gives everyone the opportunity to see where the proceeds from the reunion are going. It also gives the veterans and students the opportunity to meet and talk--to educate each other. Everyone seems to enjoy this exchange and in many cases, the audience has been quite moved and impressed by the essays written by these young people.

Plans are now under way for the 5th Annual Tet '68 Reunion. Through dedication and hard work, and a belief that what we are doing is good, the workers of Tet '68 will continue to host an annual reunion for Vietnam veterans and will continue to award scholarships to the children of Vietnam veterans.