

Veterans celebrate 40 year reunion on Independence Day

By Carol Lacer
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Chapman resident Ray Daisy celebrated this Independence Day with fellow veterans from the 137th Light Engineer Company who served with him at Fort Riley in 1966. About 65 veterans came from across the United States for the reunion, and the men and their families took part in Junction City's annual Sundown Salute parade.

"We had people from Alaska to Florida and from New Hampshire to California - from all four corners of the country and several in the middle. You name it, they were here," Daisy said.

The veterans began arriving in Junction City on July 1, and four days were spent reminiscing and renewing old friendships. They toured Camp Funston at Fort Riley where they had once resided, and found the barracks were no longer there. The group also toured Milford Dam.

In 1966, the Light Engineer Company helped construct Milford Reservoir. They were responsible for hauling in loads of dirt and rock to help build the dam. Another lake project that Daisy said the company was responsible for was the military marina that was once located at Wakefield.

"In the 1960s, the marina started out to be the gen-

eral's boat dock," Daisy said. "We built the jetty out there, carried in loads of white sand for them to beach their boats. After that was completed, we shipped out to Vietnam."

The unit was shipped out before the dam was completed and water flooded the valley. They never saw

Engineers was credited."

That was changed on Independence Day 2006 as Maj. Gen. Dennis Hardy, commanding general of the 24th Infantry Division and Fort Riley, praised the 137th Engineer Company for their work and sacrifices.

"General Hardy recognized the 137th for their

with it better than others. It was a bad time to come back," Daisy said.

At the parade, the crowds along the street stood up and clapped as the veterans from the 137th Engineer Co. approached.

"It was a good feeling," Daisy said. "The two guys holding the banner with me were pretty choked up. They had never had anybody do that for them, and never had that kind of recognition."

Daisy said the appreciation and recognition helped many of veterans find closure, and that serving in the Vietnam war had changed some of the soldiers.

"They were not the happy-go-lucky person they were when they came in," Daisy said.

Daisy said the reunion was planned because the time was right.

"It was time for the unit to get together and have closure and rekindle friendships that we had years ago. After four days of being with them, it was like we were never apart," Daisy said.

Of the 180 soldiers who were part of the company in 1966, nearly 30 were killed in action, which was one of the highest death rates of a service unit in Vietnam, according to Daisy. Over the years, another 30 lives have been lost among the company.

The group has made plans to meet again in 2010.



Former 137th Light Engineer Company members, (L-R) Ray Daisy, Chapman; James Amen, Colorado; and Melvin Gonnerman, Iowa, lead the way for their company as they walk in the Sundown Salute parade in Junction City on July 4th. The parade was one of the events for the 40th reunion for the unit (Photo by Carol Lacer)

their work's purpose fulfilled. Returning 40 years later, they saw Milford Dam in its completion and took pride in their part, but no credit had ever been given to the company, according to Daisy.

"We were never given credit for any of the work we did on the lake," Daisy said. "Only the Corps of

part in building the dam," Daisy said. "That helped a lot and gave some of the veterans closure."

Another change that was felt strongly among the veterans was the parade crowd's reception.

"When we came back to the US (in the 1960s), a lot were spit at or called baby killers. Some of us dealt